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## Three reflections on the Transition Design Symposium provocations

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### Reflection 1

Transition Design provides an approach to designing committed to ‘long horizons of time and visions of sustainable futures.’ This is crucial. There is no argument with the need for such an approach. At the same time, there is also a need for a kind of design that is connected to *short horizons of time* and *implementations of a sustainable present*. Is this a part of Transition Design? Let us imagine that it is – what might that look like and how does it relate to business?

One productive starting point is the work of Gibson-Graham and colleagues and their ideas of post-capitalism (see Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013). For some, post-capitalism is an awkward term. Has capitalism ended? If so, where and when? No, post-capitalism does not signal an end to capitalism so much as it points to a change in capitalism. For Gibson-Graham, post-capitalism is a way of labeling and characterizing a range of markets, labor practices, and worker subjectivities that operate entangled with, but not wholly subsumed by, primary markets and labor practices. Examples span foraging and gleaning to migrant labor to various forms of un- or semi-documented and regulated care. Post-capitalism produces informal and community economies. These economies sometimes run within existing economies, sometimes in parallel, sometimes they are a gray market, sometimes altogether legal, or in some cases simply unaccounted for.

What a perspective like post-capitalism provides design generally, and Transition Design specifically, is an alternative in the present. Are these informal community economies sustainable? Perhaps. Are they scalable? Yes and no. What is important is that they exist and they are workable, and thus they provide the opportunity to explore how one might design for and within them as an alternative to typical market economies. Indeed, in some locales, informal economies are the standard. Broadly then, informal community economies can be considered as both prototypes themselves as well as contexts in which we might design prototypes for alternative economic models. In the process, this also provides the opportunity to consider what the relationship of Transition Design is to business.

The challenge of considering the role of Transition Design to business is opening up design's perception of what 'business' is or might be and fully engaging 'business' as a site and subject of design. I would argue that design usually treats business as a given. Or rather, it is almost as if designers treat business as a black box: something that we know exists but that we are not quite sure of how it works. In some cases, designers may try to engage business, to re-design business, but frankly there are few examples of this resulting in anything really inventive (the same is true of the relationship of design to government). Part of the problem is that when designers talk of business they mean companies and corporations. What is needed instead is more informed and robust understanding of the multiplicity of ways that value is created and circulated within diverse economic systems. If we want to understand how the black box of business works, we need to understand how economics works. We need to understand that there are different economic models, even different models of capitalism. So to answer the question 'How does Transition Design related to business' we need to ask 'What kind of business in what kind of economic system?'

It seems unlikely that we will soon see a viable alternative to capitalism. But we may see a splinting of capitalism into new forms, some of which may be more predatory, some of which may be less predatory, some of which may even be just. Perhaps what Transition Design can do is to provide examples of ways of working to support new modes of 'doing business.' It is important to do this in the present, as well as providing visions and means for the future. From these experiments in the present we can learn what works and what does not. We can prototype, evaluate, and judge design interventions in the moment, so that as we look toward shaping a future, we might do so with a bit more assuredness.

Along the way we, as designers, must move beyond engaging with 'business' to engage with economics, in both practice and theory. To this day I find it shocking that more design students do not read Marx. Not because I expect designers to be Marxists, but because I expect designers to have a sense of the range of possibilities that they might design with and for. To only understand business as we experience it second hand through Silicon Valley or Wall Street is akin to only understanding government as we experience it through Washington DC. Both are perspectives that limit the courses of action designers might take. It is not that Transition Design (or any design) should embrace or reject capitalism or socialism or communism, but designers should understand the pluralism within and across these systems, as a range of opportunities for action.

## Reflection 2

In reading the provocation, I was struck by this claim:

By corollary, Transition Design involves a type of social engagement and community organizing that goes deeper and beyond co-design and participatory design, and situates projects and initiatives within the context of long-term visions for specific places and ecosystems.

How, I thought, does this go deeper and beyond contemporary co-design and participatory design? In fact, within those fields there are significant considerations and contributions to many of the themes that seem to motivate Transition Design. In addition, perhaps more so than any other field of design, contemporary co-design and participatory design have forged scholarly bridges to other disciplines, notably the broad field of Science and Technology Studies. Through that ongoing bridge building there is a lively exchange of ideas and methods, resulting in the development of both fields independently, and we are beginning to

nourish a cadre of scholars that are truly engaging in sophisticated interdisciplinary scholarship on topics at the intersection of design, technology, politics, and futures.

On reflection, the statement made a bit more sense, or at least I was able to think of it in a way that made sense to me. Of all of the domains to look to for guidance, contemporary co-design and participatory design offer the most potential. The shortcoming is not with the fields themselves. Yes, there are issues and limitations but there is something more. The problem is that design itself, as it is currently practiced and studied, is simply too limited to be of value to the notion of transition. Even when design is future oriented (and it usually is), the future is limited and the role of design in that future is as a prop. This is, in and of itself, not a problem. Props are important. They are needed for narrative and for action. But what is being called for here is more than props. What is being called for here is engagement and organizing.

Organizing is a practice. One can be 'an organizer' and do 'organizing.' That practice is different from design. Could design contribute to the practices of organizing? Certainly. We can find examples of that ranging from work in social movement to public health. Is design itself a form or mode of organizing? I might like it to be, but for the most part, I think not.

Engagement is a process and condition. One can become engaged – in an issue, a topic, to a person. Designed things can spur us to engagement and then support that engagement over time. Designers can be engaged. Indeed, I fully agree that for Transition Design to be viable, designers must be engaged. But what is the model of that engagement? Where are examples that we might point to? I will suggest that in-house design is an interesting model to consider here: the designer who works for a single client, usually a corporation, for years, maybe even for decades. Consider the designer at General Motors (yes, I realize the irony in the example for Transition Design). He/she develops an understanding of both the product and the company of time, an understanding that, in the best of circumstances, is it as much about the history and dynamics of the culture of the organization as it is about the changes in markets and materials. This is an engagement.

What Transition Design needs – frankly what any variant of so-called social design needs – is this kind of engagement. From it comes knowledge, relationships, and skills that are almost impossible to achieve otherwise. Change takes time. Why would we not expect that designing for change would also take time?

There are other models of engagement that may be more appropriate and desirable than the model of the in-house designer (particularly the designer at General Motors). Action research comes to mind. But action-research *is* research, and not all designers want to be researchers as well.

These models present challenges. First and foremost, they present challenges in pedagogy. How do you construct a design education around engagement? How do you provide the learning experiences that give insight into what it means to be engaged with something for years (not merely a semester), so that a given context or eco-system might actually come to be known well enough to act *with* it, as engagement enables and dictates? Second, they present professional challenges in the form of risks. Engagement does not necessarily produce a significant body of work. After working with a community for a year, or five years, what is there to show? How do we come to appreciate the relational work of design? Finally, there is the challenge of the identity of the designer. The engaged designer's identity as a designer may be weaker due to their engagement (this is at times the case for the engaged researcher as well). Are we, as design educators, journal editors, and other disciplinarians of

the field willing to accept and even embrace a less-defined design identity? Are we willing to take that on ourselves?

### Reflection 3

In her work studying modern science, specifically physics, Isabelle Stengers has called into question our common understanding of disciplines and fields as distinct units. What she proposes is that the practice of a science is in fact an ecology of practices (Stengers 2013). To understand physics as a particular practice of science it is necessary to understand physics in relation to the myriad other practices that it draws upon in order to make doing physics possible and to make the knowledge of physical have meaning. This might include obvious relations to other practices such as mathematics. It also includes relations to less obvious practices, such as optics, and electrical engineering that structures the work of physics through machines and systems, or astronomy and chemistry that discover or invent new conditions that require the work of physics to be revisited. As ecologies, these practices need to be understood relationally, as they influence one another.

Stengers is just one approach to practices. In fact, there is a broad field of practice theory that has value to design, some, such as the work of Elizabeth Shove, with direct relation to design (and to Transition Design through her work on practices of sustainability) (Shove, Pantzer, and Watson 2012; Shove and Walker 2007). Given that these papers are meant for discussion, I am going to skip the literature review of practice theory, and only say that it is worth looking into, both for design generally and with regard to transition.

What I would like to propose is that we consider Transition as a practice, one aspect of which is Design; or to put it another way, Transition is a practice, and within its ecology of practices is also Design. Why do this? Surely this is simply making things more complicated? Perhaps it is. But I am concerned that the phrase Transition Design separates out design as something distinctive and in the process also draws attention away from the myriad of practices other than design needed to undertake and achieve transition (at this point it is probably obvious that I have a troubled relationship with the discipline of Design). After all, will not we also need Transition Biology, Transition Chemistry, Transition Engineering, Transition Computer Science, Transition Economics, and Transition Policy?

Throughout the various documents on Transition Design there is generous reference to many other fields. It is clear from reading these documents that there is no claim that Design is going to 'go it alone' with regards to the endeavor of transition. That is laudable. That is precisely the kind of perspective that is needed. Moreover, there is also reference to the fact that *within* Design we must take a pluralistic approach to transition. It is not that Transition Design does away with Service Design, Interaction Design, Communication Design, or Product Design.

So, why not simply refer to this as Transition?

We might – we probably should – say that we are designing *for* transition. In this way, Transition Design might be akin to redirective practice (Fry 2007, 2009) Casting transition as a purpose or a value is strong and bold claim. It designates the ends of design as something very specific, something that is issue-oriented and something that can cohere together designers and others.

So I want to end with opening the questions: What is the meaning of the word 'design' in Transition Design? and Why is 'Design' needed in this phrase? This is *not* to imply that design

is without meaning or unnecessary; it is simply to prompt us in this meeting of designers, design researchers, design studies scholars, and design educators, to ask what we intend with this word that is so dear to all of us.

Perhaps the answer is simple. Perhaps the answer is that Transition Design is important to reflect back on the field of professional Design itself. I do understand the need for calling out Transition Design within existing traditional domains of design (such as design schools the AIGA, the ISDA, IASDR, etc.). There is a need to differentiate the methods and techniques and perhaps values and purposes of designing for transition from the standard fare of the destructive hyper-capitalist agenda that permeates, if not defines, the majority of contemporary professional design education and practice. I would argue, however, that distinction within Design needs to be made more clearly and more boldly.

Asking these questions, then, is not meant to reduce the importance of design to the endeavor of transition. To reiterate, I believe that design is an essential component in transition. But it is also only one of many practices that are needed in an ecology of Transition. What might be needed most at this moment is to understand how the practices of design fit with the other practices that make up this ecology. What are productive engagements with between design and biology, economics, chemistry, and policy? What might design contribute to those practices that *in turn* contribute to the endeavor of transition? How does design as a practice (not as a discipline) give shape to those other practices in this ecology, and how must it change in order not only to fit but also to contribute to the thriving of the ecology of practices that must be Transition?

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