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Dennis Doordan

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Professional skills and local engagement: the challenge of Transition Design

Dennis Doordan

School of Architecture, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on two challenges that Transition Design poses for design educators: teaching appropriate skill sets and promoting professional identities. University-based degree programs in design are expected to prepare graduates for professional careers providing students with the skill sets and the habits of minds required to secure jobs in a commercial, market driven milieu. We must ask: Are these actually the skills and habits we should be teaching in order to promote Transition Design? The second challenge involves working through the implications of localism. Inherent in Transition Design is the belief that it involves a type of social engagement that frames projects within the context of long-term visions tailored to specific places and experiences. In contrast, design curricula at most universities have a cosmopolitan flavor often at odds with an appreciation of local situations and values. So the question emerges: how can we educate people to recognize what it means to be local and to be stakeholders in the environmental and social well-being of a place. I argue that Transition Design will ultimately force us to examine what it means to act locally in order to contribute to the stewardship of place and community.

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Transition Design is a concept that offers hope and raises important questions about the nature of design and the role of designers in the twenty-first century. Confronted with a global condition characterized by ominous environmental, economic, and social problems, Transition Design offers hope for a viable way forward based on strategies for acting that value holistic thinking, community building, co-design, and intervention on multiple scales. Transition Design promises to open up a conceptual space in which it is possible to promote the alignment of values, resources, and people in ways that promote environmental and social well-being. At the same time, to name something is to claim for it a distinctive identity or status and the proponents of Transition Design face unavoidable questions. What distinguishes Transition Design from social design, service design, sustainable design, or any number of other forms of design identified with their own qualifying adjective and claims? From a political perspective, commonly cited features of Transition Design such as

mutual learning and co-design evoke the liberal ideal of social-democratic electoral politics and benign cultural pluralism. The nature of the problems confronting global communities, according to some, demands action at a pace and cost incompatible with the slow, patient methods implicit in phrases like community building, co-design, and micro-interventions. Even transition advocates like Rob Hopkins acknowledge the inadequacy of hope alone. In his *Transition Companion*, Hopkins offers the following ‘cheerful disclaimer’:

Transition is not a known quantity. We truly don't know if Transition will work. It is a social experiment on a massive scale. (2011, 17)

In this paper I want to focus on just two ‘challenges’ that Transition Design poses for the design community: appropriate skill sets and professional identities. At this point I offer my own cheerful disclaimer: I make no claim that my concerns in this paper constitute a comprehensive or critical set of issues and concerns for Transition Design. Instead, they reflect the conversations I have been engaged with recently in my dual capacities as a design educator in a professional degree program and as an academic administrator.

In the United States, university-based degree programs in design are considered professional degree programs. Design programs are expected to prepare graduates for professional careers and thus be responsive to needs and developments in various design professions. This means providing students with the skill sets and the habits of minds (along with the attendant knowledge base) associated with different design disciplines.

As a generalization, one can argue that design curricula focus on developing the following skill sets:

- Visualization skills (conceptual sketching, descriptive drawing).
- Modeling skills (rapid prototyping based on a design process involving multiple iterations).
- Analytical skills (the ability to observe and analyze people, artifacts, and situations in order to understand existing conditions and project preferred experiences).
- Communication skills (understanding the way messages are generated and received).

As designers and design educators shed the romantic image of designers as artistic personalities applying their artistry to industrial products, observers began to explore how designers go about the process of thinking about what it is they do: design. Design thinking became the subject of scholarly inquiry and popular interest. In an often-cited study published in 2008, Kamil Michlewski described five dimensions of design attitude:

- Consolidation of multidimensional meanings;
- Creating, bringing to life;
- Embracing discontinuity;
- Engaging polysensorial aesthetics;
- Engaging personal and commercial empathy.

I cite Michlewski not to validate or privilege his treatment of the topic as superior to any others, but simply to support my claim that design thinking is now widely recognized as a serious subject capable of rigorous study.

What I am calling the skill sets and the habits of mind central to design – the presumed desiderata for professional success – have been refined over a long period time. Those of us involved in the oversight of university education tend to claim that teaching these skills sets and developing these habits of mind will prepare students for entering the profession, i.e.

they will be able to get a job. Let us not forget that whatever else we are doing as university educators, all the major stakeholders in higher education expect, at a minimum, that we are preparing the next generation to get a good job. So we have honed these skills and habits with that in mind, which means we have trained designers for jobs in a commercial, market driven, for-profit milieu. This is the world of free enterprise and global capitalism. This is not the world Transition Designers necessarily seek to salvage. The question therefore looms before us: Are these actually the skills and habits we should be teaching to promote Transition Design?

At the University of Notre Dame where I teach, we have tentatively answered 'yes' in the particular context of social design. With a very strong institutional culture at Notre Dame oriented to service ('turning learning to service' is a phrase one hears often at my institution), there is a great deal of enthusiasm among students and faculty in the design program for what is commonly described as social design (in the sense that Victor and Sylvia Margolin (2002) define this term.) One of my colleagues, Robert Sedlack, has been leading a team of design students in a project addressing xenophobia targeted at refugee communities in South Africa¹. The particulars of why South Africa need not concern us here; they involve a unique set of links between my university and human rights groups in South Africa. Instead, I cite this as an example of a social design project within a university course. An argument that we have made to university administrators, parents, and visitors to the program is that the skill sets we teach and the habits of mind we nurture at Notre Dame prepare the student for a professional career in the commercial world and support action in the social realm. These skills and habits of mind work in two worlds. We maintain that the young designer who went to Johannesburg, South Africa, as a senior will be able to go to Benton Harbor, Michigan, after graduation and get a job at the Whirlpool Corporation if that is the path they choose to travel.

The design program at Notre Dame is small in size, and the number of students able to participate in the South Africa project smaller still, so our ability to make evidence-backed statements about the compatibility of skill sets for commercial and social design is limited (although I can tell you that Whirlpool does hire our graduates). If, however, Carnegie Mellon University pursues Transition Design as an important part of a design education at CMU, it is in a position to test and evaluate the claim I made earlier: that certain things we teach can be put to use in multiple arenas. This, I suggest, would be a valuable contribution to design education and help the academy understand the nature and possibility of professional education.

The second challenge I foresee in inserting Transition Design into existing design programs involves working through the implications of localism. Much of the literature I have read and the conversations I have been a part of call for a holistic approach to thinking about the kinds of transitions we as a global community need to be making in the decades ahead. The appeal of systems theory as a vehicle for conceptualizing the behavior of large wholes is obvious. But equally emphatic, it seems to me, is the argument that we should begin our efforts at the local level. Transition Design works from the bottom-up not from the top-down. Gideon Kossoff (2011) makes a clear distinction between top-down and bottom-up models of holism and warns us of the dangers intrinsic to the former. As you work through the implications of a bottom-up approach, it becomes clear that Transition Design tends to favor local initiatives that are place specific. Rob Hopkins (2011, 13) describes Transition as 'a global network of self-organising initiatives.' It is important to recognize that such 'initiatives' are local by definition and that this is the privileged scale of intervention. Inherent in the fledgling

practice of Transition Design is the belief that it involves a type of social engagement and community organizing that goes beyond the ad hoc nature of co-design to frame projects within the context of long-term visions that are tailored to specific places and experiences.

The student body at my university includes students from all 50 states and approximately 100 foreign countries; no doubt the student body at Carnegie Mellon is equally global in composition. The student communities we teach are by definition transitory and their involvement with the local communities is superficial and primarily economic in nature. The design curricula of most big national universities in the United States have a very cosmopolitan flavor. This is a cosmopolitanism that certainly resonates with the profession milieu of design, but may not actually prepare our students for the type of engagement called for by advocates for Transition Design. So, I pose the question: How do we prepare transition designers to not just think globally and act locally but in fact to be local designers?

We are not going to change the demographics of our institutions; nor am I suggesting we need to do so. But we should begin to think about how we can educate people to recognize what it means to be *local*, how to recognize the dimensions of the local context, how to be a stakeholder in the environmental and social well-being of a place. After three or four years as a member of a university community, should not students at our institutions know something about the environmental and social communities they are part of? Should not they have learned something about how to identify the distinguishing features of the place they inhabit? I believe this issue of local knowledge is important. Ideally, once our students have learned *how to learn* about a place, that learning experience should endure and equip them to discern the constituent features of places and communities they will inhabit later.

There are many different critiques of the environmental, economic, and social conditions we find ourselves in today. A profound philosophical critique of the status quo argues that the way we live today, the things we surround ourselves with and the networks needed to produce these things, blinds us to the real costs and the real consequences of the way we live (for more on this topic see Doordan 2013). One could argue that we are not as blind as some critics suggest and that efforts, for example, to promote Transition Design are evidence of a growing sense that 'something' needs to change. Nonetheless, a sense of alienation and loss is palpable if we stop and listen. Approaches to life and design that reject the pervasive material culture of distraction and alienation go by a variety of names. The one I will employ here is *presencing*. I borrow the term from John Ehrenfeld (2008) who describes the concept in his book *Sustainability by Design*.

Presencing is an experience in which awareness of the worldly context of the action shows itself to the actor ... What follows from the presencing process is not only an embodied strategic act ... as the actor begins to recognize that care is involved, rather than some utilitarian motivation, he or she may experience a sense of Being that is normally absent. (156)

Ehrenfeld's discussion of design and its potential contribution to the concept of presencing is useful in the context of Transition Design. I believe that Transition Design will ultimately force us to examine what it means to act locally and to learn about place in order to contribute to the stewardship of place and community.

Why this appeal to reflect on what is involved in the concept of 'local'? Because to be local without being truly engaged, I argue, is futile. To be local is to invest oneself, to care. It seems that one of the promises implicit in the concept of Transition Design is the promise of empowerment. Design can be employed to empower local populations to support the efforts of groups of concerned individuals to evolve into self-aware communities, to grow

from a collection of economic interests into a community of stakeholders. Communities come to an authentic and deep awareness of themselves as a community and of their condition through the recognition of common experiences and values, the exchange of uncommon experiences and the acknowledgement of different values, through listening quietly as well as speaking clearly, through conversation. I use the word ‘conversation’ here in a public and political rather than personal and intimate sense. Designers have a great deal to contribute to the art and science of conversation.²

With this in mind I offer two final observations, the first by the American conservationist and nature writer Aldo Leopold on the conservation and managements of natural environments; the second by the Swiss architect Peter Zumthor speaking on the design of the built environment.

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise. Leopold (1966, 262) I carefully observe the concrete appearance of the world, and in my buildings I try to enhance what seems valuable, to correct what is disturbing, and to create anew what we feel is missing. (Zumthor 1998, 24)

Both suggest a way to approach situations that begins with posing questions: What is beautiful and needs to be preserved? What is broken and needs to be fixed? These are the types of questions that initiate conversations among stakeholders. Conversations will shape communities committed to action. By whatever name it is called, design will shape the application of values and resources to the opportunities such communities discover.

Notes

1. For more on the Notre Dame projects see: Together+Awarded \$50,000 to Combat Xenophobia in South Africa <http://al.nd.edu/news/33641-together-awarded-50000-to-combat-xenophobiain-south-africa/> and Notre Dame Design Students Bring South Africa together to Fight Xenophobia <http://al.nd.edu/news/30892-notre-dame-design-students-bring-south-africa-together-to-fight-xenophobia/>
2. For an overview of conversation as a design strategy and a discussion of the distinction between communication and conversation, see Dubberly and Pangaro (2009, 22–28).

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