

Prologue Cuaderno 157 Transition Design [Special Issue]

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Abstract: Transition Design is an emerging, transdisciplinary area of research, study and practice aimed at addressing systemic (wicked) problems and thereby catalyzing societal transitions toward more sustainable, equitable and desirable long-term futures. It recognizes that such problems are always interconnected, and addressing them requires systems level change (that is, the reconfiguration of socio-technical-ecological systems). While this is a long-term endeavor, it requires incremental, systemic interventions in the present at multiple levels of scale. The necessity for systems level change is increasingly being recognized by practitioners, academics and activists, making Transition Design and other approaches to systems change ever more relevant. In various ways, all the papers in this volume explore how to bring this about, recognizing that it is a transdisciplinary, long term, place-based project that needs to engage marginalized and disenfranchised stakeholders, and weaves together theory and practice and academic and non-academic forms of knowledge.

Keywords: Transition Design - Wicked Problems - Systems change - Sustainability transitions

[Abstracts in spanish and portuguese at pages 18-19]

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Design into their problem solving approaches. Terry holds an MFA in Design from the Allgemeine Kunstgewerbeschule in Basel, Switzerland, an MSc in Holistic Science from Schumacher College/Plymouth University, U.K. and an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from Emily Carr University, Vancouver, Canada.

Prologue

Transition Design is an emerging, transdisciplinary field aimed at addressing complex (wicked) problems that manifest in culture and place-specific ways. These problems, that range from climate change and biodiversity loss to institutional racism, from access to healthy food to isolation of the elderly, are interconnected and interdependent and adversely affect every aspect of modern life. Addressing systemic problems (and in the process transitioning towards societies that are more sustainable, equitable and desirable) requires systems level change –change that is coordinated across multiple societal sectors at multiple levels of scale over long arcs of time, rather than change that is piecemeal, siloed and isolated and operates within short-term time horizons.

Systemic change will require a complete reconfiguration of the socio-technical-ecological systems in which our lives are embedded. This reconfiguration will unfold in years or decades-long transitions, as a result of both incremental and sudden, radical shifts. Incremental, systemic interventions in the present inch us towards ‘tipping points’ (or, in the language of complexity theory, ‘phase changes’) at which point large scale systemic transformations can happen with great rapidity.

This is the second Cuaderno 157 volume of papers on Transition Design or ‘Design for Transitions’ (Irwin and Di Bella, 2017-Cuaderno 73). Since the first volume in 2017, there has been a significant development in our collective awareness that many problems are systemic and therefore require systemic solutions. For example, the call for “systems change, not climate change” among climate activists, has become quite common in Europe and North America. The Covid pandemic, which revealed many interrelated, systemic problems (in particular, racism and inequity as well as problematic healthcare infrastructure) has intensified interest in approaches aimed at systemic change, including Transition Design, the subject of this special issue.

Papers included in the Cuaderno 73 volume on Transition Design were fairly evenly distributed within the four mutually influencing areas of the Transition Design framework: theories of change, visions, mindset and posture and new ways of designing (*See figure 1*). This framework brought together many discourses outside the field of design that take a systems view of social and ecological problems. Since its inception, this framework has been used to orient research and teaching, with the notion that theories of change, visions, and mindset and posture would eventually inform and shape ‘new ways of designing’.

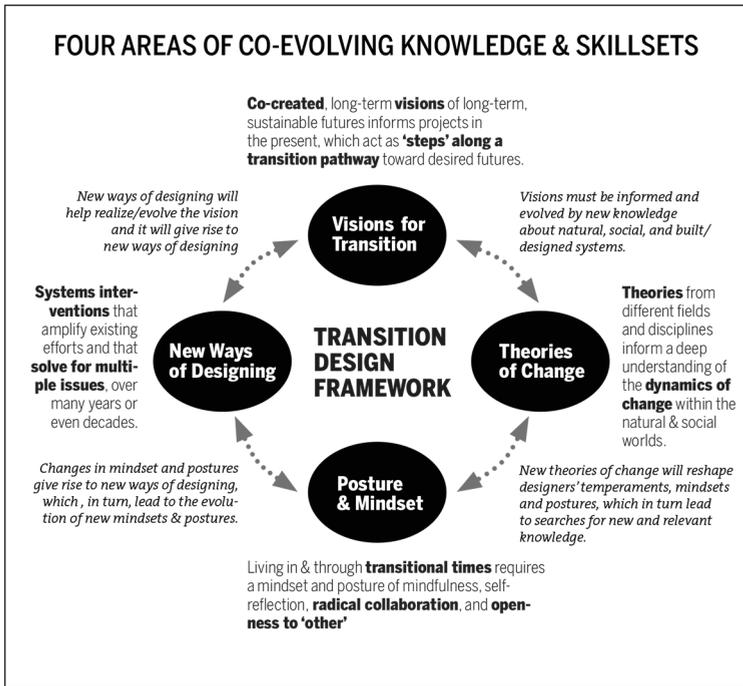


Figure 1. Transition Design Framework.

The intention that more applied 'new ways of designing' would be developed by the accrual of knowledge in the other three areas of the framework has been validated by recent applied projects and initiatives within CMU and by colleagues around the world working in the area of 'Design for transitions'. This emerging, applied approach is reflected in the papers in this volume of Cuaderno 157, which still draw extensively on early transition design theory. In this way, the Transition Design framework continues to be useful in curating knowledge and deepening the inquiry into the areas of 'visions', 'theories of change', and 'mindset and posture'. We hope that as Transition Design evolves, the symbiotic relationship between the theoretical and applied approaches will continue, as it continues to evolve into a transdisciplinary field of problem solving and long-term transition strategies. It is important to spotlight the ongoing and developing dialogue within the field of Transition Design, between the English and Spanish speaking worlds. For several years interest in Transition Design has been particularly high among Spanish speakers. We attribute this, to a large extent to our now years-long partnership with the University of Palermo and Daniela V. Di Bella and our first collaboration of the Cuaderno 73 issue on Transition

Design. People from Spanish speaking countries represent a large proportion of Transition Design researchers and workshop participants. As discussed in one of the papers in this volume, there is now a very successful bilingual, Spanish-English, podcast, ‘Design in Transition/Diseño en Transición’ (Bosch Gomez, Ortega Pallanez, Juri and Dorn, 2020-present) and three of the papers in this volume have been written in Spanish (*although they are also available in English, upon request to the editors of this volume*). This exchange between Spanish and English educators, researchers and practitioners working in the area of Transition Design has shaped Transition Design’s evolution in many important ways and is an example of how approaches like this can evolve in ways that amplify voices, cultural perspectives and wisdom from the global south and other areas.

We would like to thank all of our colleagues and fellow researchers who contributed to this volume. We would especially like to thank Daniela V. Di Bella and the University of Palermo for this second opportunity to collaborate in bringing together recent contributions to the Transition Design discourse, and also Sofía Bosch Gómez for her invaluable assistance in this project.

Contributions in this volume

Focusing on the mindset and posture area of the Transition Design framework, **Chapman and Chapman** argue that monolithic and static world views are often responsible for resistance to change. Such worldviews function as armoring in which self-reinforcing knowledge and experience are crystalized. Information which contradicts this “*mirage of coherence and surety*” is excluded, and with it the openness and willingness to change. They argue that worldviews themselves must be ‘transitioned’ as much as any other socio-technical-ecological system. To this end, the authors propose a process, based on an analogy derived from product care, through which worldviews are “*maintained*”, “*re-stored*” and “*upgraded*”.

Sides, Carey, Dorn and Theriault focus on the theories of change (TOC) area of the Transition Design framework and note that while TOCs are present in any intervention, they often take the form of “*myriad hidden assumptions*” and “*biases*”. These must be surfaced and articulated in order to ensure that efforts at systems change do not reinforce problematic and existing power dynamics. To do this, the authors propose a framework of “*situate*”, “*reframe*” and “*intervene*,” with each step giving rise to many focused questions regarding proposals for systems interventions. They argue that this will ensure that *any* change is grounded in multiple perspectives and experiences, particularly those of marginalized and disenfranchised stakeholders.

Bosch Gómez, Ortega Pallanez and Dorn discuss their bilingual (Spanish and English) podcast project, ‘Design in Transition/Diseño en Transición’, which they founded and developed in collaboration with others. They argue that the podcast format is particularly well suited to Transition Design, and is itself a systems intervention. The fluidity, dynamism and spontaneity that this format allows, its encouragement of “*listening, speech... oral exchange [and] auditory artistry*”, and the possibilities it opens up for research and

learning that is relational, embodied, transdisciplinary and decentralized, challenge the rigidity of format and power dynamics that often characterize academic research and writing.

Pierson-Brown argues that Transition Design can be used to develop a systemic understanding of the complex problem of ‘cancel culture’ as it manifests in academia. She contends that cancel culture is neither “*good or bad*,” and uses the Multi-Level Perspective Framework (a tool used in Transition Design for mapping the historical emergence of complex problems) as a way of understanding cancel culture as a response to problems that remain unresolved. Her investigation is aimed at broadening the range of possible responses by administrators to ‘cancellations’. She argues that focusing on the misconduct of individuals (‘cancelling’ them), is likely to result in an institution’s failure to engage with the actual systemic (wicked) problems of which cancel culture is a symptom.

Irwin and Kossoff discuss an applied Transition Design approach that emerged out of a series of online educational and research workshops held between 2019 and 2021 involving several hundred participants from five countries. The approach involves framing a wicked problem within a radically large spatio-temporal problem frame and developing systems interventions, in six steps. Each step corresponds to a question that must be addressed in order to develop a systemic understanding of it. Workshop participants: 1) map the wicked problem; 2) map relations among the stakeholders connected to it; 3) map the historic evolution of the problem; 4) co-create long-term future visions; 5) design for a decades-long transition; and 6) design ecologies of systems interventions at multiple levels of scale.

Von Flittner, Gaziulusoy, Nielsen and Marttila describe three case studies (two games and one design ‘sprint’ project) that were developed by Hellon, an international design consultancy, to work with a cross section of stakeholders (that included citizens, business leaders and policy makers from different government ministries) to co-envision a range of desirable, sustainable everyday futures, and negotiate the “*complexity of systemic change processes*”. Participants in each project framed sustainability transitions using visual artifacts to facilitate systemic thinking. They applied transdisciplinary, academic methods and tools in practical contexts to generate multi-faceted, near and long-term future narratives and recommendations for clients. Many of the results were incorporated into an important government strategy document entitled “Opportunities for Finland Report.”

Onafuwa and Patel ask how visioning and futuring can include those who have historically been excluded from “*worldmaking*”, in particular black and indigenous people. How, they ask, can visioning activities help surface the suppressed narratives of BIPOC communities? The authors facilitated a series of Seattle (USA) based workshops in which community leaders addressed these questions from a local perspective in relation to the wicked problem of The Extractive Economy. Participants mapped this problem using the Transition Design approach, speculated about the transition towards a regenerative economy, proposed multi scalar ‘ecologies of interventions,’ and generated a collective vision statement.

Cowart and Maione argue that if Transition Design is to catalyze systems-level change, it needs to engage with the specific question of how, over the long-term, entire industries can be transitioned. This question was explored with student groups in relation to the

fashion industry, which usually operates within very short/limited time horizons and is therefore implicated in a multitude of wicked problems. Using a methodology that incorporated elements of ‘play’, students explored both desirable as well as undesirable futures for the industry. The authors conclude that this approach fosters useful speculation about “alignments” and “disagreements” between current and future stakeholders and can encourage a more empathetic approach to the design of ecologies of material and non-material interventions.

Juri and Zurbriggen discuss the development of their SARAS Transition Lab a collaborative space in which wicked problems can be addressed within more appropriate contexts. This is achieved through the integration of multiple types of knowledge and ways of thinking (academic and non-academic), particularly different approaches to systems change, such as Transition Design. They argue that despite the challenge of multiple stakeholders with conflicting perspectives, goals and values, a “*pluriversal orientation*” is necessary in order for SARAS to become a space for the development of “*solidarity, reciprocity and sustainability*”.

In their paper, **Sanabria Zepeda and Santana Castellón** write about their engagement in the development of a new Museum of Environmental Science in Guadalajara, Mexico. They argue that museums should be “*agents of change*,” offering programs that improve the social fabric and quality of life of local communities. In particular, the new Guadalajara Museum aspires to educate local citizens about the ecosystem in which the city is embedded. Sanabria and Santana discuss how a series of 2020 workshops in Transition Design (led by a team from Carnegie Mellon University) enabled them to identify a list of wicked problems with which the Museum might engage, which in turn led to the generation of thirty nine potential projects that are relevant to the museum’s mission.

References

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Resumen: El Diseño para la transición es un área emergente y transdisciplinaria de investigación, estudio y práctica destinada a abordar problemas sistémicos (perversos) y, por lo tanto, catalizar las transiciones sociales hacia futuros a largo plazo más sostenibles, equitativos y deseables. Reconoce que tales problemas siempre están interconectados, y

abordarlos requiere un cambio de nivel de sistemas (es decir, la reconfiguración de los sistemas socio-técnico-ecológicos). Si bien este es un esfuerzo a largo plazo, requiere intervenciones sistémicas incrementales en el presente en múltiples niveles de escala. Los profesionales, académicos y activistas reconocen cada vez más la necesidad de un cambio a nivel de sistemas, lo que hace que el Diseño para la Transición y otros enfoques del cambio de sistemas sean cada vez más relevantes. De diversas maneras, todos los artículos de este volumen exploran cómo lograr esto, reconociendo que se trata de un proyecto transdisciplinario, a largo plazo y basado en el lugar que necesita involucrar a las partes interesadas marginadas y privadas de sus derechos, que entretenga la teoría y la práctica, lo académico y formas no académicas de conocimiento.

Palabras clave: Diseño para la transición - Problemas perversos - Cambio de sistemas - Transiciones hacia la sostenibilidad.

Resumo: O Design de Transição é uma área emergente e transdisciplinar de pesquisa, estudo e prática que visa abordar problemas sistêmicos (perversos) e, assim, catalisar transições sociais em direção a futuros de longo prazo mais sustentáveis, equitativos e desejáveis. Ele reconhece que tais problemas estão sempre interconectados, e abordá-los requer uma mudança no nível dos sistemas (isto é, a reconfiguração dos sistemas sócio-técnico-ecológicos). Embora seja um empreendimento de longo prazo, ele requer intervenções incrementais e sistêmicas no presente, em vários níveis de escala. A necessidade de mudança no nível dos sistemas está sendo cada vez mais reconhecida por profissionais, acadêmicos e ativistas, tornando o Design de Transição e outras abordagens para a mudança de sistemas cada vez mais relevantes. De várias maneiras, todos os documentos neste volume exploram como fazer isso, reconhecendo que é um projeto transdisciplinar, de longo prazo e local que precisa envolver as partes interessadas marginalizadas e privadas de direitos, e tece teoria e prática e acadêmica e não -formas acadêmicas de conhecimento.

Palavras chave: Projeto de transição - problemas complexos - mudança de sistemas - transições de sustentabilidade
