Track 2.d Introduction: Power and Politics in Design for Transition

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Power and Politics in Design for Transition

This track sought to contribute to design's potential to shift, redirect and transform power relations to achieve sustainability. We sought to direct attention to the political potential in and politics of transition design with a focus on the many ways that power flows through the systems in which design operates. Our intention was to address, directly, the commentary from the DRS2018 track on Designing for Transitions, which noted that authors had tended to "stay on the safe and perhaps conventional side" of the subject. Instead, we hoped that the papers in this track would address "'politicised issues such as migration, decoloniality, the politics of climate change mitigation… and other complex and controversial problems" (Boehnert *et al.* 2018) that must be considered in planning and implementation of ongoing sustainability transitions. The politics of design transitions remains marginal in design research. With our call, we hoped to receive contributions that problematised design's current roles and conceptualised new roles for design in the context of sustainability transitions to attend to issues related to how power is and should be dealt with.

The five papers selected for this track respond to this call with an eclectic understanding of Transition Design, also known as Design for Sustainability Transitions. They reflect the broad span for design research as it starts to engage with subjects that have previously been the domain of social sciences. Ranging in scope from a systems level description of a project for the Dutch Government, to an individual's reflection of their practice as a zero-waste designer, these papers describe alternative models of expanded design practice for transitions. The authors also describe tools and methods for designers working in the area of transitions such as action research, ethnography, experience mapping, journey mapping, personas, focus group workshops, user research for the re-organisation of socio-ecological and politico-economic relationships to shift power relations, with a sustainability focus. The authors explore strategies for navigating the politics of design for sustainability transitions on a variety of scales with diverse strategies.

Sofia Bosch Gomez and Hajira Qazi presented **"The Disconnect Between Design Practice and Political Interests: The Need for a Long-Term Political Engagement as Design Practice"** which reflects on the gap between the importance that politics plays in designers' lives, and their willingness to be overtly political in their work. Bosch Gomez and Qazi view political participation by designers as having "untapped potential… to facilitate and be involved in a transition towards more inclusive and equitable socio-political systems." Arguing that designers already possess many of the skills needed to design for systems-level political change, the authors contend that "Designers' expertise lies in materializing imaginaries—bridging what we know, what the present is and what it ought to be—in order to enable new futures and possibilities." However, design for political change is clearly absent from most design programmes. To address this absence, the authors introduce a workshop framework and tool that enables design students to recognize their political agency and become comfortable with the notion of using design to influence political change.

Rebecca Anne Price's **"In Pursuit of Design-led Transitions"** describes a transition design project in the food sector run by the Dutch Government to promote sustainable daily cooking habits. Reflecting on methodological developments within design-led innovation, Price introduces 'timing' and 'velocity' as conceptual foundations for transitions, with the aim of designing to dismantle 'lock-ins' in socio-technical systems on predominantly large-scale systems. Using a S-curve model to describe growth in relation to time, Price reflects on how this informs ideas on velocity of change (gradual or abrupt). The paper includes theoretical implications of transitions analysed through the lenses of timing and velocity. As the most technocratic of the five papers, this work assumes that particular moments can be identified as "windows of opportunity" with particular velocities of transition: e.g. creative destruction, robust coexistence, illusion of resilience, robust resilience, in ways that are heavily abstracted from social and political contexts in which this project is situated. Whether or not this abstraction obscures the political complexities of particular problems with models (that might not always be as robust as we would like) is an ongoing subject for debate. Nevertheless, Price's assertion that design endeavours in the contexts of transitions should go beyond disruption, radicalism and new perspectives to focus consciously on destabilising and restabilising socio-technical systems enables reflection on the politics of these destabilising and restabilising efforts.

Also using a large-scale and systemic approach Maaike van Selm and Ingrid Mulder's paper is **"On transforming transition design: from promise to practice"** analyses and translates concepts from "Transition Design" and then proposes an integration of Transition Design with the Systemic Design Toolkit (Namahn, 2016; Vandenbroeck *et al.* 2016)). The authors aim to support the development of practice, based on the claim that few actual cases labelled Transition Design are described in academic literature. Distinguishing between what they see as three different phases – design research, design interventions and design practice for transition, they discuss opportunities for further development to address current practical challenges and limitations, pointing to potential resources and methods from fields such as strategic design. In doing so, they find the last phase to be the least developed, and especially methods for monitoring and steering to be missing. Their suggestion that there may be relevant lessons to learn from lean start-up methodology for example opens up for discussions on how to balance the urgent need to act with the need to observe and reflect.

In contrast to the systems-level perspective of the previous papers, Niki Wallace describes the first two years of her PhD exploring design against consumption in "**The Personal, political, professional: a practice in transition".** This work starts from the premise that "in order to contribute to transitions towards sustainability, both practitioners and design itself must also transition." Wallace describes (and illustrates) her own personal awakening as a process of transition. In this auto-ethnographic study Wallace details changes in her practice and perspective and introduces some of the key theoretical concepts that inform her personal, political, professional transitions. Writing about the role of the double bind in design for sustainable transitions, for example, Wallace contributes a passage worth quoting at length:

> double-bind theory stems from social psychology; it describes how schizophrenic symptoms can result from no-win situations, where complex and contradictory messages prevent action (Bateson *et al.*, 1956). Designers can experience a double-bind when they view sustainability as simultaneously necessary and impossible in the context of their design brief. The resulting action paralysis can lead to design's equivalent of business-as-usual—an aesthetically pleasing range of unsustainable design outcomes. In contrast, a designer who transforms their relationships to ecology and the problems that threaten it becomes empowered to politicise their approach.

In bringing attention to the notion of the double bind in a transition design context, Wallace offers an expansion of the transition designer's conceptual vocabulary, joining other 'soft systems' concepts such as wicked problems (Rittel & Webber 1973), visual representations of systemic relationships (Boehnert 2018a, 2018b), and 'knots' (Lockton 2018) which can help designers better represent power structures, conflicts, and tensions inherent in the systems in which design operates. Working back and forth from theory to personal reflections, as pointed out by one of the anonymous reviewers, Wallace's "research stands out for its honesty and sincerity... an excellent example of incorporation of theory and practice containing both scientific rigor and artistic creativity." Although striving for a zero-waste lifestyle is not on its own an innovative or novel practice, it nonetheless relates to an important and topical transition context that can be studied at the level of the individual in sufficient depth. Wallace's account of her personal journey, thanks to its rigour and theorisation, opens up a series of rich discussion threads for designers to look into the mirror and reflect on the politics of their practice both at individual and professional-collective dimensions.

Finally, the paper **"The influence of design thinking tools on NGO accountability"** by Ledia Andrawes, Adela J McMurray and Gerda Gemser considers two case studies of the use of Design Thinking as an approach for increasing the prominence of beneficiary-centred accountability within NGOs working with humanitarian aid. With the goal of stimulating and increasing accountability, two real world projects (the first focussing on maternal, newborn and child health in Ghana, the second on humanitarian action in Lebanon) demonstrate the value of empathy felt individually by aid decision makers, as opposed to external accounts from the donor's perspective. This is powerfully reflected in a quote in the paper from an aid worker involved in the research: "I felt frustrated for them, I could see what was happening to them and it just pissed me off. It touched me, I had empathy for people who are in many ways unlike me, and in many ways just like me – it definitely increased the accountability I felt towards them." Using personas and journey maps as tools to enable those on the donor side of aid projects to understand the experience of those on the recipient side, this project brings design thinking methods to development practice and development studies with design thinking.

These papers have all contributed to emergent field of Transition Design in ways that emphasis the political dimension of change-making by design. In our view, transition design is inherently political. As an expanded conception of design, it necessarily draws on cross-disciplinary debates from ecological, feminist, post-humanist and decolonial theory to inform sociotechnical systems-oriented design practice at all scales. Where transition design advocates a design-led social transition to more sustainable futures (Irwin 2015) it has sought to do so by developing inclusive theory to enable ethical and justice-oriented design as a means to address the reproduction of social injustices by design. Moving away from traditional user-centred design to more participatory paradigms, transition design situates the user in the context of larger socio-political (Irwin *et al.* 2015; Gaziulusoy 2018; Gaziulusoy & Erdoğan Öztekin 2018) and ecological systems (Boehnert 2018c). With this perspective, transition design integrates system innovations and transitions theories, social practice theory and sustainability science (Irwin *et al.* 2015). It builds on the approaches of Design for Sustainability, Service Design and Design for Social Innovation (Irwin 2015) to enable new visions for sustainable futures (Irwin *et al.* 2015; Lockton & Candy 2018). It engages with the disciplines that describe human relationships in society and the environment such as anthropology, sociology, politics, environmental sciences, science and technology studies, etc. in ways that help designers incorporate the interests of diverse groups of people (Escobar 2018) to make more inclusive, just and sustainable worlds by design.

In conclusion, we note a distinction in design debates between those who see our current situation as a set of severe intersecting crises or even 'emergencies' (following most recently the Extinction Rebellion and a growing number of cities, councils and universities responding to the movement's call to declare 'climate emergencies' at various scales: institutional, local, regional and state level) – and those whose call to action (if there is a call to action at all) is formulated within the limitations of current politico-economic systems. Where addressing eco-social problems requires challenging currently existing values, socio-economic structures and systems, depoliticised design discourses undermine the potential for systemic design responses to the most challenging contemporary problems. This conflict between the urgency to act and the desire to continue to only slowly change design is evident spaces such as heated debates on the PhD Design List and the public statement published by the Decolonising Design Group (Ansari *et al.* 2016). Those intent on disrupting and transforming design practices responsible for reproducing unsustainable design (and the ideas that buttress these practices) continue to face political and structural obstacles as design and design research all too often remains tightly focused on insular and instrumental outcomes.

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