

Transition Lenses: Perspectives on futures, models and agency

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Abstract

This paper explores certain dimensions of designers' roles within transition design, in particular, the nature of imagined futures and visions, models of human behaviour, mindsets and human agency. These are aspects drawn from the provocations offered to Transition Design symposium participants, but the paper also responds to, and builds on, issues raised by contributors to the special issue of *Design Philosophy Papers* (Vol 13, No 1) arising from a previous symposium.

Transition design and futures

It's a curious phenomenon of linguistic ambiguity—of which I'm not knowledgeable enough to know the correct name—that phrases such as *transition design* can be interpreted in multiple different senses. Among others, it could be 'the design of transition', 'designing *for* transition' (DiSalvo, 2015, p.54), or it could be an imperative: 'you had better transition (the subject of) design (or else)!'; verbing weirds language, as they say (Watterson, 1993). But, actually, this last sense is quite useful; if I understand the emerging mission of transition design (Irwin et al, 2015), it is also about transitioning 'design' itself to something different, through educating a new generation of designers with different assumptions and mindsets, with the abilities, motivation, and vision to "facilitat[e] social change toward[s] more sustainable futures" (Tonkinwise, 2015, p.85).

What would it mean to transition (as a verb) design (as a noun)? One approach could be to teach, and present, the practice of design as being less about solving assumed static problems, and more about

understanding complexity, understanding what agency is possible within the systems we are in, and speculating in an informed way about how things could be different. It would recognise that design which adopts a singular, linear vision of 'the future', and future human behaviour, does not deal adequately with the complexities of humanity, culture and society, let alone our place within the ecological systems of the planet.

Thus, design needs to tackle 'the future' in a more nuanced and exploratory way, not the conventional approach of "trying to pin the future down" in Dunne & Raby's words (2013, p.2), but adopting the mantle of offering at once both propositions and statements, 'This?' and 'This!' as Dilnot (2015) puts it. Design could be treated as "a conversation for action... [about] what to conserve and what to change, a conversation about what we value" (Dubberly & Pangaro, 2015, p.74). This would be a plural field, a flowering of alternatives which opens up discussion of, and provides examples—and potentially even 'patterns' for—different futures, with different voices, humble in its certainty, but confident in its challenge to existing paradigms.

Both design and sustainability are about futures—bringing into being a world where humanity and other forms of life will "flourish on the planet forever" (Ehrenfeld, 2008, p.6) or where we can 'go about our daily affairs... [knowing] that our activities as civilised beings are expanding our future options and improving our current situation' (Sterling, 2005, p44). Design might be one of the mechanisms by

which much of our current predicament has come about (Papanek, 1971), but perhaps ‘the future with a future for “us” can only be reached by design’ (Fry, 2015, p8).¹

There are lots of trite things one can say about futures, and ‘the future’. But some which, if true, are fairly fundamental, and yet somehow easy to forget, are the notions that:

- i) there is no ‘future’, as if it were a destination at which we arrive collectively, any more than the same ‘tomorrow’ exists when the clock strikes midnight;
- ii) even if we think about ‘future’ as ‘a state we are continuously transitioning towards’, this is again something that is an ongoing, perpetual (but not smooth) process in which that ‘next state’ is itself changing, rather than something fixed to arrive at;
- iii) even taking the concept of ‘future-as-a-state-we-are-continuously-transitioning-towards’ as useful, there is no more one future for all of us, than there is, experientially, one present, or one past.

And yet, the power of *imagined future(s)*, the imagined state(s)-that-we-are-transitioning-to, is immense. They motivate, inspire, horrify, provoke action, set people on political careers and secure venture capital funding. They may be presented as desirable futures, undesirable warnings, somewhere in between, or not given an explicit intended valence by their authors. They may become self-fulfilling, or worm their way into our collective minds to become staple, if not

¹ It is worth contrasting alternatives in which humanity does not survive – and reflecting on what they might mean for design. For example, Wiener (1954, p.40): “In a very real sense we are shipwrecked passengers on a doomed planet. Yet even in a shipwreck, human decencies and human values do not necessarily vanish, and we must make the most of them. We shall go down, but let it be in a manner to which we may look forward as worthy of our dignity.” As Tonkinwise (2015, p.86) points out, the global sustainability crises are “slow motion crashes”.

stable, tropes in our culture. The act of presenting, or proposing, one future of the infinite that could have been proposed immediately makes it into an object, a thing to address. Many of these imagined futures have (traditionally) come from literature, and, in the last century, film, rather than design; as Dunne & Raby (2013, p.189) point out, as the field has developed, speculative design proposals are often “closer to literature than social science”.

One tension here, then, is perhaps also a fairly basic one: should transition design, in aiming to produce “more compelling future-oriented visions... to inform and inspire projects in the present” (Irwin et al, 2015, p.8), be only about creating ‘desirable’ visions, ‘preferred situations’ (Simon, 1969)?² Or should it also aim to provide critical “complicated pleasure” in Dunne & Raby’s (2013, p.189) term, “highlight[ing] dilemmas and trade-offs between imperfect alternatives”, or explicitly provoking agonism or revealing hegemony (DiSalvo, 2012), instead of only suggesting ways to transition to more sustainable states of being, for society and the planet? Should transition design be “about doing politics, attempting to give voice to the powerless and celebrating the notion that there are different social productions of nature that are possible?” (White, 2015, p.43); should the “compelling future-oriented visions” extrapolate from current examples of novel (I hesitate to say ‘best’, because that misses the point) practice at a community level, locally situated and emergent, but globally relevant, such as the initiatives of the Transition movement?

We can perhaps see experiments in the present – whether framed as speculative design, provocations, or practical, local, social innovation projects – as pragmatic thought experiments for transition design, in the sense of “contemporary society [being] seen as a huge future-building laboratory” (Manzini, 2015, p.58). These “alternatives in the

² Of course, this is on one level problematic in the ‘preferred for whom?’ sense, as Scupelli (2015) points out, but there is also the fundamental question of whether we know what a ‘sustainable’ society would look like, to transition towards.

present” (DiSalvo, 2015, p.51) can be, in a sense, *experiential futures*, not just presented as visions, but perhaps even possible to inhabit. The idea of ‘living labs’ (e.g. Keyson et al, 2016) not primarily as venues for testing new technologies, but for studying changes in social practice in everyday life (Scott et al, 2012) or even through enacting new political or social structures, is a tantalising one for transition design. ‘Prototype districts’, perhaps enabled at a city scale (e.g. Mexico City’s Laboratorio para la Ciudad (Gómez-Mont, 2016), in Eindhoven (Jain, 2015), or many Finnish examples described by Hill (2012)) could act as iteratively refined, liveable examples for a future ‘pattern language’ for transition, recognising the specifics of local contexts and needs (Doordan, 2015).

Plural visions, behavioural models and mindsets

‘An interventionist is a man struggling to make his model of man come true.’
(Argyris and Schön, 1974, p.28)

Practically, it may be that, as Hardin (1985) put it, “you cannot do only one thing”. Any kind of proposal or narrative put into the world changes it, whether the designer or author intended it to be a vision of a preferred future or not (compare “1984 was not supposed to be an instruction manual!” (e.g. Reddit, 2015)). By reifying certain ideas, embodying certain assumptions and not giving a voice to others, design becomes a form of *prediction* about the future which can be self-fulfilling: design to some extent ‘creates’ the future which it predicts (whether it claims to do so or not). A system designed around a presupposition of a singular, linear vision or narrative of the future perhaps ends up bringing it into being: if we design for a presumed economic or political model, we probably end up thinking within the constraints of that model: as Kossoff (2015, p.25) considers, “[o]ur hopes and politics are largely the result of a given framework”.

This suggests that to avoid this, transition design needs to emphasise complexity rather than shy away from it, to make it very clear that what is proposed are possibilities, and—perhaps—we may then benefit from the very same effect, by enabling multiple ways of doing things to flourish. Just as we now have both William Gibson’s ‘unevenly distributed’ pockets of ‘the future’ (NPR, 1999) alongside—and interacting with—pockets of ‘the past’, it is likely that next year, or in fifty years, we will also have an unevenly distributed, complex reality for humanity. We must abandon the concept of a singular ‘now’, devoid of history and histories, and the same for everyone, which means that the popular device of the ‘futures cone’ (e.g. Bland & Westlake, 2013), while useful for opening up our vision, is politically and socially reductive, and potentially obscures important issues about the ‘present’, and what has come before, even as it seeks to provoke plurality in future thinking.

Many visions of sustainable futures assume large-scale changes in human behaviour and social practices, and design will be part of this: as Tonkinwise (2015, p.86) puts it, “[t]he ways in which designs influence how people act, making certain activities and their associated product ecologies inertial, are central to explaining how our societies are so unsustainable—just as they are crucial to shifting our societies out of current crises”.

However, the current field of design for behaviour change, behavioural design, and design for sustainable behaviour—in which I have been working now for the last decade (Lockton et al, 2010; 2013)—is arguably bound up with assumptions and determinism (Lockton, 2012), often embodying, even if not consciously, a singular vision for future human behaviour (Brynjarsdóttir et al, 2012), predicated on a normative vision of ‘streamlined’ people as engineered entities acting in predictable, specified ways. People are essentially considered to be components in a system, with known properties, which, if made legible

(Scott, 1999) to the system's controller³, whether algorithmic or human (Dutson et al, 2015), can be treated as 'solved'. We are seeing this reductiveness applied in visions of our everyday domestic life (Fantini van Ditmar & Lockton, 2016), our health (Whitson, 2015), 'smart' cities (Galik, 2016) and in the workplace (Moore & Robinson, 2015)—which can all be read as attempts at aligning the behaviour of populations with a particular model of 'best practice', both biopolitical and ideological. As Ranner et al (2016, p.1) put it, "in drafting a normal, everything else is treated as defective." But as reflective, thoughtful, engaged designers, we must challenge this, and open up more pluralistic approaches.⁴

This is recognised within transition design—Irwin et al (2015, p.8) criticise the "modernist pitfall of the imposition of static images of a rigid future"—but from the point of view of educating designers to think differently, an important aspect of engaging with the issue is to be consciously reflective on, and critical of, the *models* of human behaviour and human nature which are being employed (Lockton et al, 2012; Tonkinwise, 2015): assumptions about people, how they (will) live, how they (will) make decisions, and what (will) motivate and persuade them to do things differently. *All* design is modelling

3 In a cybernetic sense, this is inherently about reducing variety (Conant & Ashby, 1970) and attempting either to simplify the complexity of human action, or simply to ignore it (Greenfield's (2013) "willed blindness"). I would argue (not here), that while transition design already makes good use of 'systems thinking', "provid[ing] a set of heuristics for seeing the world in synchronic, visual and diagrammatic ways... [and] provid[ing] designers with a means of abstracting from the messy complexities of socio-political world" (White, 2015, p.40), there are aspects of an explicitly cybernetic approach, such as understanding of circularity, the practical implications of requisite variety (Beer, 1974), a second order epistemology, and the concept of design-as-conversation (Dubberly & Pangaro, 2015) which can offer much more for transition design, perhaps even enabling "a heuristic for understanding power and politics" (White, 2015, p.42).

4 People's lives are not just there to be made 'legible' to authorities (or indeed to corporations); and yet, as we will see, legibility of the *system*, of policy and politics, could be something that can work from the other direction—to empower transition and change by the people.

(Alexander, 1964; Dubberly & Pangaro, 2007); every technology embodies a hypothesis about human behaviour (Greenfield, 2013); and designers cannot escape having a model of humans (Froehlich et al, 2010). But approaches which enable a pluralistic treatment of futures, in combination with being explicit about the assumptions being made, can help to open up, and explore variety and complexity in human behaviour and potentially unanticipated side-effects (Ranner et al, 2016).

The idea of *mindset*, as a core area of transition design (Irwin et al, 2015), is related, since changing the way designers think about the future, themselves, their agency, their role, is interwoven with changing the models of humanity which are espoused. There are, as Willis (2015, p.70) puts it "heavy investments, not least psychological, in keeping things as they are", and those psychological investments need something quite persuasive to break them, perhaps "induct[ion] into understanding theories of power, social structure and social change, and the like" (Willis, 2015, p.73).

Equally though, design can change the way that *the public* (recognised as diverse) thinks about and imagines futures. Whether Dunne & Raby's "social dreaming" or something more explicitly about (exploring and) changing mental models (Gutman, 1993), and facilitating recognition of agency within those changed understandings of futures, setting this as a goal could have great value as part of transition design. After all, the power of the Transition movement, in many ways, has been to enable, through living demonstration, changed mindsets about the possibilities of the future and the agency that groups of people working together locally can have.

Agency for transition

Agency is important, both the agency that designers believe they have to change things, and the agency which design can enable in others:

“the basis for action in the world—to assist the process of transition to a sustainable society” (Kossoff, 2015, p.26). Design affects both *what* people do, and what people perceive they *can* do. It also, over time, affects how we think, and how we understand the world that we are part of, both individually and together as a society. White (2015, p.44) asks whether transition design can be “about unleashing human agency to facilitate a different and political (not natural) making of nature?”

I have written elsewhere (Lockton, 2015) how ‘designing agency’, as part of transition design or otherwise, could be the end stage in a sequence of design research and practice, progressing (transitioning?) from understanding to action.

The first stage may involve using design tools to *understand the world* as it is (for example, ethnography or contextual enquiry, or how systems are operating in everyday life); the second involves *understanding people’s understanding of the world* (exploring mental models, imaginaries and mindsets); the third, using design to *help people understand the world* differently, perhaps through making systems, power structures, and relationships legible (Moles, 1986) and comprehensible in new ways; the fourth, using design to *help people understand their agency in the world*, might respond to transition design’s “need [for] a strategy for politicizing people” (Willis, 2015, p.73); while the final stage, of *helping people use their agency*, is about design for behaviour change, but from the other way around—helping people to change the behaviour of the systems we are in. That might include designed interventions focused on “re-designing patterns of ownership and control” (White, 2015, p.49), or other practical ways in which people can intervene in, and change, the ways that the world operates. Within a transition design context which recognises the diversity of contexts, different techniques would be effective at different stages. Some design work would be investigatory research, some practical, some speculative or critical. Some would give us tools

for understanding and learning, some tools for doing, some provocations for reflection.

However, transition designers need not just humility about their ability to enact change within a complex world, but recognition that their decisions, of what to model, what to measure, and what possibilities are considered, are themselves being influenced by their positions within the system and the history of their previous actions. There are no detached observers: what a designer seeks to ‘control’ inevitably ends up controlling his or her actions, in turn, just as a thermostat ‘controlling’ the temperature of a room is in turn controlled by the room temperature it leads to (Glanville, 1995). In this sense, *perceived* agency is perhaps valuable in itself, as a way of “facilitating social change toward[s] more sustainable futures” (Tonkinwise, 2015, p.85), since so much of what we do is bound up with what we believe is possible—which is why the power of imagined futures, the imagined states-that-we-are-transitioning-to, can be so important for transition design.

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