

Changing the change

Design Visions, Proposals and Tools

An international conference on the role and potential of design research in the transition towards sustainability

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DESIGNER AS AGENT OF CHANGE

A Vision for Catalyzing Rapid Change

Abstract

The design field is undergoing a paradigm shift. Research indicates that the centroid of the design profession is moving away from the design of artifacts towards addressing abstract issues.

The nature of design briefs, the sphere of project influence, size of projects, changes in customer base as well as the employee profile at leading design companies clearly supports the above thesis of a paradigm shift in the field. For many professionals, traditional design activities (such as industrial design, mechanical design), have yielded to “design thinking” which is being directed towards a different set of problems such as organizational transformation, defining new markets, and corporate strategy.[1] Due to increased demand for innovation, corporations have been leveraging designers for their fundamentally different approach [2] to defining problems and solutions. In addition, business schools around the world are looking to embed design in their curricula. Designers are increasingly assuming the role described by Findeli [3] as being one of the stakeholders in a multi-stakeholder system undergoing transformation.

This paradigm shift when held up against the back-drop of critical issues such as sustainability and social inequity, prompts the question *“How can designers make the most optimal impact in bringing about rapid change related to increasingly complex problems?”*

In response to this question, Stanford has established a new entity, the “Design for Change” lab. In this lab, “research *through* design” is conducted in three areas i) Sustainability ii) Technology Futures iii) Dynamics of Change. Along with the designer being one stakeholder among many in a dynamic system, the lab aims to change the identity of the designer from a “maker of artifacts” to that of an “agent of change”.

One might ask, what is novel or notable about another design lab? While many inter-disciplinary institutes have been created, the design field with its ability to catalyze polarity between disciplines has yet to be leveraged in creating new types of collaborations between disciplines in the sciences and the humanities.

The configuration of the Design for Change lab creates a novel precedence through the combination of the following values:

- a. **A new “inter-disciplinary”:** Combine *processes* of different fields such as design and economics to deliver new tools and processes. For example, disciplines such as sociology, that are primarily structured towards *characterizing* phenomena are now asked to help create new tools that are proactive in nature, helping create seeding functions of emergent behaviour

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- b. **Strategic collaboration of entities:** Combining strategic entities such as universities, industries, non-profit organizations, policy groups, venture capital, and government bodies to structure and generate *new methodologies and heuristics* [4] for collaboration and implementation of ideas
- c. **Filter for large scale impact:** A set of filters that require projects to be directed towards specific geographies, where scale, impact, and rate of change are critical parameters.
- d. **Global Network:** The lab has a global network, meaning active collaborations around the world allowing cultural diversity and focus on projects of global relevance.
- e. **Transfer functions:** Derive the transfer functions between research and wide scale application through new tools generated the given nature of projects

This paper will detail scenarios and implications of the existence of a body with this specific charter located in a university, the types of problems it is likely to address and categories of solutions that are possible.

References

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