

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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TRANSITION TOWNS & DESIGN

Systems thinking for One Planet Living™

We have no alternative but to learn to live within the natural imperatives of the ecosystem. One Planet Living™ is the goal and the sooner we can make it happen the better. How can design participate in this change? The primary tool in this transition is systems thinking, a conceptual process necessary for reconfiguration of the systems that are presently entirely unsustainable. Design has the potential to communicate systems thinking and help embed new cognitive facilities into public consciousness. Design can communicate integrated thinking and is useful towards visualizing & instigating transition. Still, this vision of design is still largely unrealized. The notion of design itself must change. Design must embrace its ability to facilitate change. Unless this change happens design will be superfluous to the most basic challenges we now face. Features of a new design paradigm that can change the change are the democratization & the dematerialization of design. Both are obvious in the Transition Towns process that will be the topic of this paper.

Transition Towns is a community design initiative for mitigation and adaptation to post-peak oil and climate change. The Transition Towns process facilitates re-localization. Here communities organize to meet environmental challenges directly. Transition Towns is a movement that started in South West England in 2005. The Transition Town phenomenon has been extraordinarily popular and there are now 36 towns, cities or areas that have Transition Town movements active. A Transition Town is a space that has initiated a community design process mapping 'energy descent', a timetabled strategy for weaning the locality off fossil fuels. The Transition Town process creates agency and encourages practical action. The movement is a result of communities concerned with the lack of systemic plans comprehensive enough to respond to what they perceive as the threats ahead.

Transition Towns is design activism led by non-designers. The professional design community would be clever to take notice. The Transition Towns methodology is inspired by permaculture design, a design philosophy for working with Nature in building systems to support human existence. Permaculture has a number of guiding principles that help it take account of existing systems and plan in complexity. It encourages strategies that contribute resilience and stability to ecosystems and other systems alike. This awareness of systemic and ecological principles engages a holistic approach to design. It is indicative of a new paradigm informed by ecological literacy. Ecological literacy is an understanding of natural systems as well as an awareness of how a society must interface with these systems to be sustainable. This kind of systems thinking will change how designers work, but it requires an interdisciplinary approach to education, research and practice in design.

Transition Towns is a sign of the radical democratization of design. Still designers are also needed in this process. Design can help people organize and create networks. Design can help people feel connected with others. Designers can help audiences see and understand the bigger picture and how individuals fit into this picture. The skills to build cohesion, focus and to communicate new agendas are

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needed in the transition process and design has the skill set to do this. The question is: do designers themselves see enough of the bigger picture to want to engage? Designers could be of great value to the transition - if they decide to chart new territory.

Big picture thinking dramatically changes design priorities. Once One Planet Living™ become commonplace design will be forced to change. When sustainability is given a more rigorous definition and ecological literacy is embedded into design education, designers will need to take account of existing systems and plan in complexity. Design strategies will contribute resilience and stability to ecosystems and other systems alike (rather than distract us from the systems that support life). An awareness of environmental imperatives will necessarily change design. Designers will no longer be capable of feigning innocence in an era with a challenge as great as climate change and resource depletion. The sooner we learn these basic principles the better. Design motivates action and our actions have implications; like it or not - designers are implicit.

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