

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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Clare Brass[clare.brass@seedfoundation.org.uk]
SEED Foundation, UK

DESIGN FOR SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ENTERPRISE

We have been engaged in academic and tactical research about design and sustainability for many years, initially focussing on environmental issues related to product design but slowly moving towards the consideration of systems and services as raw materials, and how design might be applied to change the way people do things. Practical applications of our research explored the intertwined nature of social and environmental issues. It is this approach that we believe needs to be introduced into mainstream design activity.

Recent work for the Design Council enabled us to triangulate this broad practical experience with anecdotal evidence from a cross section of the design industry as well as current literary and academic thinking, aligning our experience and current design thinking with new political goals, to understand what steps the design industry needs to take in order to meet sustainable development targets. In order to do this we examined political strategies such as “Securing the Future” – the UK government’s sustainable development strategy, “I Will if You Will” (Sustainable Development Commission), Brundtland Report, Cox Review, Stern Review, etc. and gathered direct evidence from academics and professionals in the design community.

Much relevant research in the design world has focussed on environmental sustainability and production and consumption issues. While looking at life cycle analysis is important, this approach fails to recognise the connection between environmental and social issues, and does not enable the designer to consider the infrastructure that supports them, the behaviour of the people who use them or the systems that put them to work. Furthermore, design’s most common application is currently in the private sector, where it is particularly difficult for designers to incorporate sustainability into their work if clients are not demanding it through the brief.

Some enlightened pockets of academic design research have for some time understood that real change can only happen with infrastructural and social intervention. Increasingly this recognises that sustainability is above all a social issue, and we must address relationships rather than focus on isolated objects. However for the vast majority of designers it is still very difficult to put this into practice through their everyday activities. To achieve this, the design system itself needs to undergo a profound change. Designers need to be versed in matters of business and enterprise to identify their professional opportunities in these social and environmental challenges.

Applying design to public services, non-profit sector and social enterprises enables a move away from private sector. Our premise is that problems are opportunities, and equipping the design sector to think more entrepreneurially and across disciplines would unleash design’s benefits on a whole range of social and environmental problems. Helping designers to be more entrepreneurial about their practice and develop new skills to design systems and services along with strong business models to support them, will enable them to apply the power of design to these sectors.

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We believe that effective and lasting changes for sustainable development require the coordinated action of business, the public sector and civil society. Our research suggests that all these groups want to change, but that no sector of society wants to act in isolation. Design can tap into the desires of all these groups, understand their connected problems and develop new systems and tools that will enable them to more successfully and enjoyably collaborate.

Our proposal

In the UK, one third of all food bought is thrown away. An estimated 3% of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions come from biodegradable material in landfill. Strict targets will soon force local authorities to reduce the volume of biodegradable waste sent to landfill.

Addressing the current system for separating/collecting domestic and commercial food waste, our proposal means to demonstrate that an environmental problem can drive a profitable enterprise and create a network of social benefits in the process. Our project is a combination of products and services that will inform and engage the public and facilitate the introduction of a new way of dealing with biodegradable waste. The tangible manifestations of the project are the touch-points that are opportunities to better engage all user groups in this new scenario. Beyond this, our design work is equally focused on systems of collection and delivery. For this we are in the process of identifying the various stakeholders and the benefits each can derive from a new operative model, the financial drivers, and practical and emotional pressure points that will enable this new system to be both popular and profitable.

Our intention is for this to be a blueprint that can be easily rolled-out across many different communities.