

# 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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Torino, 10th - 11th - 12th July 2008

Organised by Co-ordination of Italian Design Research Doctorates with  
Conference of Italian Design Faculty Deans and Programme Heads.

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## CO-DESIGNING A SUSTAINABLE CULTURE OF LIFE

### Designing research methods for sustainable change

#### Abstract

Our 'culture of life'<sup>1</sup> has become un-sustainable, jeopardising our future and the inhabitability of our world. We need tools for change, methods for co-designing a sustainable 'culture of life'. Design has an important role to play in developing sustainable change. The process of design is about ascertaining 'what next' hence the field of design has methods to offer research into sustainable change. This paper will trace the design process of developing design-led research methods within a community setting. The community chosen for this preliminary design work is the rural town of Tumut; a forestry town in the Murry-Darling Basin, on the northern edge of Kosciusko National Park, South-West New South Wales, Australia.

Currently the process of designing for change often follows a model (see *Figure 1*) where the 'expert' is employed to insert innovation into current practice. This frequently leads to a disordering process culminating either in changed practice or in cycling back to either re-designing the innovation or reverting to current practice.

Designing for sustainable change requires a fundamental shift in the practice of everyday life. This kind of change has not yet gained the momentum needed to divert our socio-environmental crisis. We need new models of designing for change that enables 'co-design' by all actors in the system of the everyday. One such model could be created through the manipulation of the above 'expert' model, transforming it into a 'co-design' model (See *Figure 2*) by swapping 'disorder' and 'innovation'. In this case the specialist becomes a facilitator (rather than expert) in enabling design towards changed practice that would engage all (community, business, specialist and so on)<sup>2</sup> in the process of sustainable change. The purpose of starting with 'disorder' is to implement a break with current practice allowing people to see their everyday practices from a new perspective and thus able to imagine change. Then, through harnessing the creative energy of the community in imagining change, people can be enabled within the design process to develop innovations<sup>3</sup> leading to changed practice towards a sustainable 'culture of life'.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Culture of Life' is an interconnected system of the natural, artificial and conceptual that supports our everyday practices.

<sup>2</sup> Brown identifies different knowledges associated with these various actors as individual, local, specialist, strategic and holistic (2007, p.31). Each of which have a part to play in sustainability projects.

<sup>3</sup> As documented in Maase and Dorst, *Co-Creation: A way to reach sustainable social innovation?*, immersing participants in the creative process has a greater opportunity of gaining the community support needed for a successful project "a real user buy-in for the design solution" (2006, p.296)

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In order to develop such a model for co-designing sustainable everyday practices we need tools that 'enable design to operate within change and influence its direction'. Such tools are already emerging from within the design field in the form of design-led methods such as cultural probes (examples of which include projects by Gaver et.al., 1999, Ivey et.al, 2007 and Hielsher et.al, 2007), game format (such as the Interactive Institute project *Underdogs & Superheroes*, Mazé and Jacobs, 2003) and scenario building (such as the *Sustainable Everyday: Scenarios of Urban Life* project, Manzini and Jégou, 2003). These existing design-led methods form the foundation from which the methods for a 'co-design' model can be developed.

This paper is based on a project working towards design-led research methods for sustainable development, of use not only to the field of design and other disciplines researching sustainability but also for developing collaborative and trans-disciplinary sustainability research projects. The objective of the project is to design a set of methods (utilising existing design-led methods) that fit into the design process. In so doing the project aims to design a method that effectively enables a co-design process for developing changes towards a sustainable 'culture of life'. To develop methods that enable design from within the system of everyday practice this initial design phase also needs to be immersed within a community context. Hence the project will initiate the design of these methods in the context of the community of Tumut.

This paper will document the context, design and preliminary stages of the project, concluding with some early findings on designing methods for sustainable change from the Tumut study.

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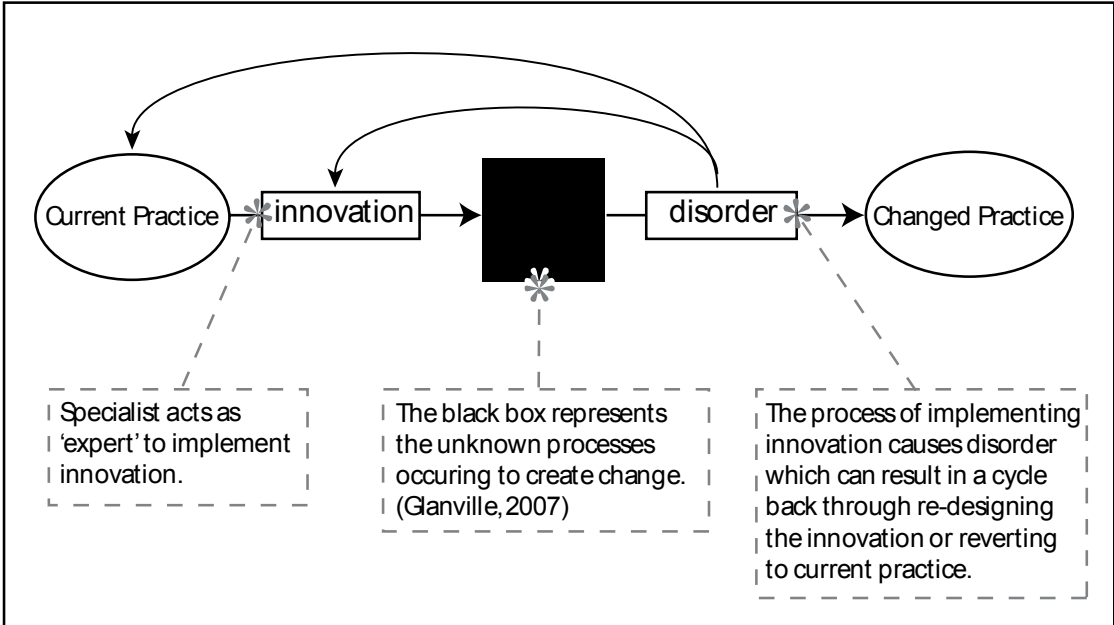


Fig. 1: The 'expert' model for implementing change. In this model the specialist acts as expert to design for innovation towards change. This model has not been effective in creating the momentum needed for fundamental changes towards a sustainable 'culture of life'.

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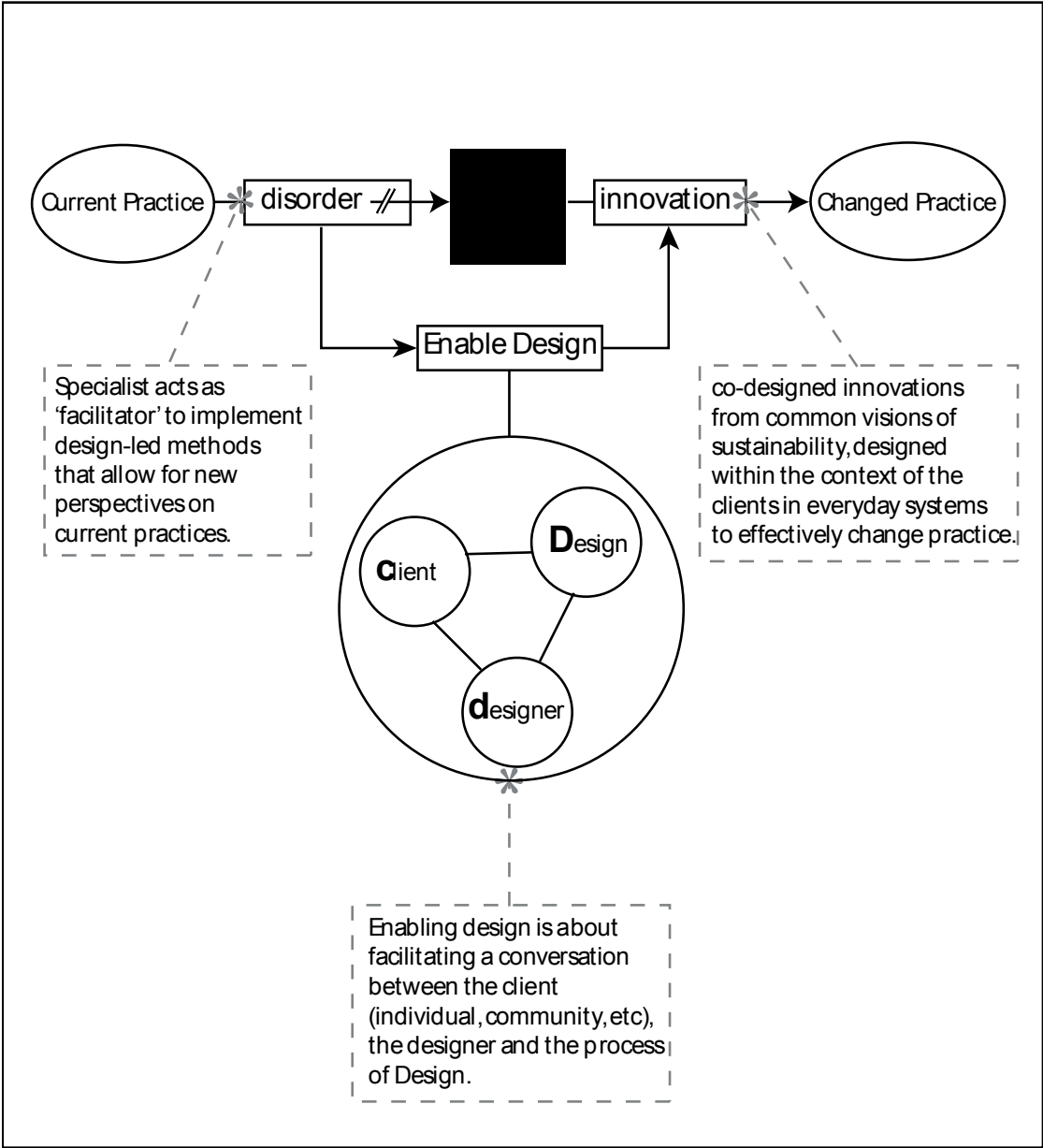


Fig. 2: The 'co-design' model for enabling design towards sustainable change. This is an example of a model that has potential for engaging all in the design of changes in everyday practice towards a sustainable 'culture of life'.

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