

# 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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## TOOLS

### Design Activism as a Tool for Creating New Urban Narratives

Designers, architects, artists and urban planners have been implicated in the development of cities in ways that stress the primacy of consumption. This has either been through their co-option into pre-existing economic systems or through their direct contributions. Part of this process has been in the development of place-marketing initiatives. The development of city-brands has acted as a way of fabricating a narrative for a place in order to distinguish it within global networks and flows of capital and promote inward investment. As part of this process, the symbolic capital of creative workers may be appropriated in order to lend credence to this 'storytelling'.

What can designers do in order to alter the trajectory of this narrative building? How can creative practitioners contest and even provide alternative systems and thinking to place-marketing orthodoxies?

The setting for this paper is a city that has undergone considerable economic success that has left its social and economic structure deeply divided between a booming commercial centre and a deprived rim. However, the growing economic crises of 2007-8 have called the orthodoxies that have supported the centre into question. Meanwhile the longer-term planning for the city – taking into account foreseen environmental, social and economic exigencies – implies a new role for that rim.

This paper reports on the real-life and on-going activities of an alliance of artists, designers, architects and community activists in the development of both a campaign and practical measures to open up the imagination of how a large, complex city might act on its present and view its future. This alliance is broadly dedicated to the development and diffusion of a counter-narrative of urban identity that contests current orthodoxies but also provides new models and ideas for the everyday life of the city. The paper critically reviews the organisational processes that sustain and develop the work of this alliance and the digital and spatial infrastructures that it exploits. It highlights the ordinary processes in the maintenance of collective endeavour by like-minded, design activists who are at the same time working in demanding professional circumstances. It also reviews the ways by which shared visions are fostered. By focusing on processual measures across a community, the possibilities of design activism, both as practical action but also as political agency, are discussed.