

# Design Research Agenda for Sustainability

## *An open and collaborative program / Draft 1 – 12.7.08*

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### Proposal

This *Design Research Agenda* presents some statements, some emerging issues and some promising design research fields and directions for sustainability.

It has two main goals: (1) to outline and progressively consolidate a shared framework for a multiplicity of research activities on design research for sustainability. (2) To trigger new autonomous research programs that will enlarge and or re-orient the present framework in order to give more coherent programs and more effective results.

Design researchers who agree with this proposal should orient their on-going activities, or start new ones, in such a way that they can enrich these emerging issues with visions, proposals, tools and reflections.

Doing so, they will participate in the development of an open and collaborative design research program and, most importantly, in the realization of an articulated but convergent set of visions and proposals (and of the ideas and tools necessary to better understand and implement them).

### This document

The process where this document comes from started with the organization of the Changing the Change Conference (and the debates that took place between several involved researchers to prepare it) and continued in the discussions and the co-creation activities that took place during the this same conference.

Its possible future evolution will depend, first of all, on the commitment of the conference participants who will agree with its spirit and its present proposals, and moving from here, to all the other design researchers who will also agree with them.

In conclusion, *this document is a draft, and it will remain a draft*: an open artifact to be integrated by the free collaboration of whoever will accept its spirit and the simple rule it proposes.

**Structure.** The document is organized in 4 sections:

- *Background statements.* They are some general ideas to be shared by who intends participate in this co-creation process.
- *Emerging issues.* They are research themes that, at this stage of the process, appear to be potentially relevant to orient a variety of existing or future research programs.
- *Rules of the game.* They are some simple rules to be followed to participate to this initiative.
- *Basic concepts.* It introduces some working definitions, needed to start a conversation in-between the community. In the future, these working definitions could be up-graded and new concepts could be added.

## Background statements

*Background statements are some general ideas to be shared by who intends participate in this program co-creation process.*

**Sustainability must be the meta-objective of every possible design research activity.**

**Sustainability here is intended as a systemic change to be promoted at the local and global scale. It will be obtained through a wide social learning process, re-orienting the present unsustainable transformations towards a sustainable knowledge society.**

**Design research has to feed the social learning process towards sustainability with the needed design knowledge. That is, with visions, proposals, tools and reflections to enable different actors to collaborate and to move concrete steps towards a sustainable knowledge society.**

## Emerging Issues

*Emerging issues are research themes that, at this stage of the process, appear to be potentially relevant to orient a variety of existing or future design research programs*

**The following ones are the results of the “Emerging issues” exercise that took place during the *Changing the Change* conference (10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> July 2008). Each one of the six proposed *research lines* integrates several topics proposed during the first two days of the same conference and has been discussed in one of its dedicated sessions the last day. The *specific topics* indicated for each one of these research lines is an open list that in the future will be implemented and, if necessary, re-oriented.**

### **1. Ways of living**

How to generate radical changes in everyday life, orienting them to visions of sustainable life styles? How to promote sustainable qualities, sharing knowledge across geographical distances, cultural differences and disciplinary barriers? How to develop scenarios and convivial tools, through community generation and activation?

#### **1.1 Physical and social commons and sustainable qualities.**

Understanding the “commons”: from the physical ones (such as air, water, landscape), to the social ones (such as lively neighbourhood, public spaces, sense of community, perception of safety, social knowledge), to the new ones (such as internet and open knowledge). What makes them exist (what is their “glue”). The people and community recognition of the commons in the definition of a sustainable wellbeing; what media and design can do. How to design solutions capable of generating or re-generating the commons.

#### **1.2 Active and collaborative behaviors and the ecology of time.**

Understanding “sustainable wellbeing”: individual vs. collaborative; passive vs. active. Sharing different local knowledge. The sense of personal balance as harmony and contentment. The sense of community as communication, protection, participation, recreation, identity, freedom and generosity. A new sense of time, with the re-discovery of *slowness* as a desirable component, permitting attention to the important things in life.

## **2. Ways of producing**

How to promote models of production and consumption based on a sustainable use of physical and social local resources? How craftsmanship, traditional productions and advanced technologies can merge and collaborate in the perspective of a sustainable, distributed knowledge economy?

### **2.1 Distributed economies and symbiotic production.**

Understanding “*distributed systems*”: from computing to power generation, from manufacturing to the whole economy. Distributed systems and system resilience. Distributed systems, democracy and power shift. Connecting people, places and things: distributed systems and the convergence with the p2p and open source movements.

### **2.2 Local development in the global society.**

Understanding “*the local*”: local identities and cosmopolitan culture; local economies in an interdependent world. How to design the collective local wisdom. Craftsmanship valorization and regeneration. Sustainable tourism and community-based tourism. Local and seasonal food and new food networks. The “Slow food model” and its applicability in other fields. The design role in local and regional development.

## **3. Ways of designing**

How can designers become agents for sustainability in a society where more and more people have to take design decisions? What are design’s conceptual and practical tools in an interconnected world where different (i.e. non-western) narratives are emerging? What is the role of schools and universities in this new context?

### **3.1 Designing networks and forming new professional designers.**

Understanding the new *designer role*: designers as connectors and facilitators, as quality producers, as visualizers and visionaries, as future builders (or co-producers). Designers as promoters of new business models. Designers as catalyzers of change.

### **3.2 Design knowledge and design education.**

Understanding the new *design nature* and developing a new *cultural background*: from products to services and systems, from individual activity to collaboration. New designing networks and new learning networks. Changes in the education priorities and methods. Design for sustainability in design schools. Different education strategies: to introduce sustainability as a meta-theme for all the courses, or to organize specific courses on design for sustainability.

## **Rules of the game**

*Rules of the game are the simple rules to be followed to participate to this program co-creation process. They are:*

- To share the background statements and basic concepts’ working definitions.
- To enter in the digital platform (that will be prepared) the description of their research projects (and, when available, of their results) following a format and keywords system (that will be provided)
- To enter in the platform comments on other research projects, in the spirit of promoting the dialogue between different points of view and the convergence towards the realization of a more coherent large picture.

## Basic concepts working definitions

*What follows is a first list of working definitions needed to facilitate the conversation among the researchers involved in this program co-creation process.*

***Sustainable society:*** a society where all the people and the communities have the same possibilities to live well (that is, to be what they want to be and do what they want to do) in a sustainable way. That is, maintaining their environmental footprint in the limits of the ecosystems resilience, and regenerating the quality of the physical and social commons.

***Design for sustainability:*** everything design can do to facilitate the social learning process towards a sustainable society. That is, to sustain promising social and technological innovations and to re-orient existing drivers of change towards sustainability.

***Design research:*** an activity aiming at producing knowledge useful to those who design: *design knowledge* that designer and non-designer (individuals, communities, institutions, companies) can use in their processes of designing and co-designing.

***Design knowledge:*** a set of *visions, proposals, tools* and *reflections*: to stimulate and steer strategic discussions, to be applied in a variety of specific projects, to help understand what we are doing or could do. This knowledge has to be *explicit* (to be clearly expressed by whoever produces it), *discussable* (to permit the exchange of opinions among many interested interlocutors), *transferrable* (to be applicable by other designers) and *accumulable* (to form a reservoir of design knowledge that could be the starting point for producing further knowledge by other researchers).