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Designing (for) transitions and transformations: Imagination, climate futures, and everyday lives

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Editorial: Designing (for) transitions and transformations: Imagination, climate futures, and everyday lives

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Abstract: The theme track 'Designing (for) Transitions and Transformations: Imagination, Climate Futures, and Everyday Lives' at DRS 2024 includes 21 papers covering a wide range of approaches to design's role in transformative change in the pursuit of sustainable, just and resilient futures. In this editorial, we present a variety of perspectives from conveners of this track in which we highlight what we each found interesting or noteworthy about the papers we read and how these affected our position towards the design, transitions and transformations field, but also the wider trends and calls for further work or different directions. Moreover, we reflect on our own perspectives on this emerging landscape, questioning how each of us uses design/transition methodologies in our own work, why we find these useful and which topics or themes we focus on.

Keywords: transition design; climate futures; transformations; imagination

1. Introduction

The urgency of crises in planetary health—climate, biodiversity loss, inequality, and others—has made design's role in transformative change ever-more important in the pursuit of sustainable, just and resilient futures. Arising from distinct disciplinary traditions within

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academia, the fields of design, futures, transitions, sustainability science and allied approaches (with their own norms, frameworks, and methods) are increasingly converging. Emerging from this space are new configurations and integrations, especially in practical applications where policymakers, communities, businesses, and new forms of organisation are engaging with the challenges we face—often situated and local, but interdependent within the complex systems of society and the environment.

In design research, approaches such as transition design (Irwin et al, 2015) feed into a fertile landscape where futures studies, speculative and critical design, pluriversality (Leitão et al, 2021), imagination infrastructuring, justice (design justice, climate justice, just transitions), more-than-human and nature-inclusive perspectives (e.g. Veselova et al, 2022), emotions in transitions (e.g. Lindström et al, 2021), alternative economics, regenerative design, non- and decolonial perspectives (e.g. Juri et al, 2021), feminist perspectives, design education (and futures literacy), and many other lenses on transformative change are overlapping, creating a new space for exchange and exploration. The 21 papers accepted for this track at DRS 2024 demonstrate the variety within the field.

Navigating this dynamic landscape can feel like a challenging endeavour due to the amount of emerging possibilities. The number of approaches, methods, perspectives and disciplines that meet in this space is both exciting as well as overwhelming and comes with uncertainty about what belongs here and what doesn't. Transitions and transformations are defined and used in many different ways and we all seem to work from different perspectives and incorporate different disciplines into our approaches, even though most of them are design-oriented or use design as a basis. In the middle of this diversity seems to be a common pursuit: to uncover the intersections where design, transitions and transformations meet.

This track aims to help this emergent community discover each other and cross-pollinate—enabling new connections, collaborations and learnings, and a first step towards building a DRS Special Interest Group. In this editorial, we present a variety of perspectives from conveners of this track in which we highlight what we each found interesting or noteworthy about the papers we read and how these affected our position towards the design, transitions and transformations field, but also the wider trends and calls for further work or different directions. Moreover, we reflect on our own perspectives on this emerging landscape, questioning how each of us uses design/transition methodologies in our own work, why we find these useful and which topics or themes we focus on.

2. Perspectives on designing for transition & transformation

İdil Gaziulusoy

As a long-term researcher at the intersections of transformative sustainability science, transitions and design research, I was pleasantly surprised to realise how the conversation in design scholarship identifying as or with sustainability transformations & transitions has exponentially grown since DRS2018 which was held in Limerick and hosted the very first

track on the topic chaired by Johanna Boehnert, Dan Lockton and Ingrid Mulder (2018). After the submission deadline passed for DRS2024 and the track chairs were informed about the submissions targeting their track, we as the chairs of the Designing for Transitions and Transformations track, were both cheering and feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of submissions (86), of which 21 were eventually accepted following a long and rigorous evaluation process. I had the chance to review five of these papers during this process and read through all those accepted.

I am observing a design research track that is not only growing but also consolidating and starting to develop its own voice (more precisely, a plurality of voices) with references to but no longer dominated by its multiple parent disciplines and their research traditions. Perhaps we can officially upgrade design research for/in transitions and transformations from "emerging" to "developing". What I would like to see more is engagement with theories of change, particularly those from within complexity and systems sciences, big history and metafutures, and theories from myriad disciplines that deal with the evolution of individuals, societies and civilisations so that what we as a research community putting forward is not incrementally changing the world but facilitating the required deep transformations.

Alma Leora Culén

In times of deepening insecurity about the future, politicians, regulators, and lawmakers focus on finding solutions at the top levels of the systems they work within. However, transition design recognizes the tension between meaningful changes taking place as top-down directives and mobilizing people at the grassroots level to imagine and jointly design a more desirable future. Transition designers engage in participatory processes to empower communities and stakeholders to co-create solutions that reflect their values, social needs, planetary needs, and a variety of aspirations. Yet, the urgency surrounding global challenges can sometimes impede the democratic processes inherent in designing for transitions. Just as democracy faces increasing erosion under the pressure of various crises, the democratic ethos of design can also suffer. However, this challenge presents an opportunity for designers to focus on innovating design approaches, tools, and processes. They must look into how to navigate this tension, balancing the need for rapid action with designing for democratic values such as inclusivity, deliberation, plurality, tolerance, and empowerment.

By embracing deep democracy principles (Green, 1999; Mindell, 2008) and championing design-led approaches, transition design can mitigate the erosion of democratic processes in the face of the current tsunami of top-down sustainability regulations (Sustainability Regulation Outlook 2024) that are forthcoming in Europe and expected to affect work of designers, industries, and ultimately individuals. In the time before the regulations become fact, design-led efforts can foster spaces for dialogue, collaboration, and collective visioning toward transforming, for example, industry. One of the papers in our track (Berger et al., 2024) describes the initial effort of the French consortium to help industrial partners envision and align their goals within planetary boundaries and work within environmentally and socially safe boundaries. In doing so, transition design plays a crucial role in revitalizing

democracy in design and broader societal contexts, where the need for free and voluntary choices that can inspire others and inclusive, participatory decision-making has never been greater.

Ida Nilstad Pettersen

Faced with climate and nature crises there is no shortage of challenges to address, and the need for change is urgent. Design holds an interesting position as both central to the systems that need to be transformed and potential contributor to processes of change. The track on design for transitions and transformations aimed to bring contributions drawing on different traditions and approaches together, to enable connection, exchange, and learning. In the following are two examples that contribute in different ways.

Work on circular economy, which in many contexts has become central to transformation of production and consumption systems, is an area where design contributions are relevant and there for example is a need for bringing in critical perspectives and for further engagement with social and justice-related issues. Presenting findings from a master's project, Keprdová et al. (2024) address gendered aspects of transitioning to circular consumption, focusing on the experiences of residents in Denmark and Southern Sweden. They point to how design can have a role to play in addressing such topics, but find, through interviews with design practitioners, that their opportunity to do so in practice varies. The article thus also touches upon discussions about the agency, role, and limitations of design, and the relation between design practices and the systems of which they are part.

Pschetz et al. (2024) take another approach. Drawing on design-based approaches and working across disciplines in an experimental setting, the authors explore time and temporality in relations between humans and other-than-humans, a topic highly relevant to design for transitions and transformations. Doing so they thus also contribute to an active,emerging area where scholars and practitioners explore what it might imply to de-centre humans in design. Challenging Western understandings, Pschetz et al. (2024) seek to reveal and reframe relations between humans' and other species' times and connect interventions to the concept of care, drawing on and discussing concepts developed in an interdisciplinary workshop.

These and other articles submitted to this track demonstrate high interest in the need for transitions and transformations research and practice, and engage with issues pertinent to this area, such as implications for everyday life, justice, temporality, multispecies entanglements and the need for new understandings and practices, as well as what suitable settings are for work on transformative change.

Marysol Ortega Pallanez

The current landscape of designing for transitions and transformations features participatory and situated design approaches that integrate creative practices to trace paths toward the sustainment of life. Some of this track's contributions echo this trend, demonstrating a

commitment to engaging local communities meaningfully, moving beyond mere instrumentalization of insights for design solutions/interventions. For instance, Neal Ragnar Haslem and Jan Hendrik Brueggemeier (2024) explore public pedagogy and transition design by reactivating vintage letterpress machines, inviting participants in Melbourne, Australia, to craft folios expressing their everyday lives in their local community. In their work, playful experimentation transforms the letterpress an "obsolete" machine—technologically and economically speaking—into a lively community hub and shows a more plural canvas for worldmaking among memories, craft, intergenerational relationships, and a place in transition.

Michelle Miller and Alexander Baumber (2024) asked "What roles can transition design play in enabling transitions?" probing a purpose-oriented lens into design capabilities in socioecological transformations as creators, integrators, and sense-makers. Their analysis deepens our understanding of the multifaceted contributions of design in transition work. Their discussion also subtly raises questions for further inquiry into issues related to power dynamics and designer positionality—a persistent challenge within our field. The need for further work to critically examine power, politics, and positionality, aligns with ongoing critiques in participatory design and futures studies (see for instance Busch & Palmås, 2023; Harrington et al., 2019; Mazé, 2019), urging a more intentional, attentional, and robust reflection on the myriad impacts of our designing on socioecological systems. Thus, there is a need for clearer articulations of the conditions in which we design, as well as the positions we occupy within the communities we engage.

In my work, I address these critiques by emphasizing relational and situated practices that prioritize the sustainment and healing of our ecological and social fabrics. I focus on fostering creative autonomy within excluded dwellers in urban contexts, often excluded in development-driven narratives. By incorporating practices of crafting together, such as embroidery, I make space for people to actively reshape their cities. In my approach, I engage in relational reflexivity, a reflexivity-with, in my relationships with the local communities I engage. This emphasizes the significance of people's existence in relation to each other, the place, and its conditions, and the impetus to change exclusionary and damaging conditions to instead support healing and sustain living.

As designers, we must confront and rigorously examine our positionalities, politics, and the power structures within which we work. We must strive to not only propose but also attend deeply to transformational narratives and how those direct the trajectory of design practices. This involves a broader application of design approaches that transcend traditional problem-solving paradigms and embrace a multiplicity of moves to address the complex socioecological damages of our times.

Joanna Boehnert

Transition design foregrounds an ecological paradigm shift in ways that distinguishes it from previous design practices (Saha & Nusem 2024). The organising question in this track was: "How is design research responding to our planet's ecological crisis?" (Coops et al 2023). A

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Transition Design Special Issue on ecological literacy is about to be published (Irwin & Di Bella 2024). This collection of papers pushes strongly in this direction. While numerous intellectual movements make claims about paradigm shifts of various types, the ecological paradigm is the mother of all paradigm transitions. The ecological context enables other paradigms to exist. Our collective futures depend on putting an end to the ecology denying assumptions of modernity. Understanding ourselves as ecologically embedded and relationally entangled changes priorities and practices in design. It informs approaches to design that have radical transformative potential.

Since counter forces attempt to appropriate all significant attempts to transform the profitable drivers of the polycrisis, an ecological transition is by no means assured. Robust critique is necessary. Ideas such as entanglement, systems, post-human, complexity, transition, etc. all have interpretations that can undermine the directional change in design we hope to make possible. Bringing the ecological into design theory and practice is no small endeavour. Designing for transitions requires not only new design ideas, approaches, and methods but expanded boundaries of concern and communities that build solidarities. The social sciences and humanities inform this work (Saha & Nusem 2024). We also learn from movements with their practices for social change (Boehnert 2023). Since the language of sustainability is used by institutions and actors reproducing the seemingly unlimited eco-social violence of modernity, ecologically oriented designers need to navigate sustainability delay (Boehnert & Dewberry 2024).

This collection of papers describes theories and practices of designing for transitions in a wide range of contexts thereby demonstrating the versatility of the core ideas. Papers offer insights at the intersection of disciplines. A good example is Van der Bijl-Brouwer et al's (2024) paper on systemic design reasoning describing reasoning and principles to advance a system-shifting design practice. The paper "Preferable, Contextual and Sustainable… Climate Futures for Ecological Citizens" (Phillips et al 2024) includes rich illustrative summaries to help readers imagine how projects using digital technologies, participative methods, and design futuring might be replicated locally.

There is also room for improvement. Research on the intersection of digital and sustainability needs to consider the ecological impact of digital infrastructure. Some papers are situated in a social design and speculative design space and less informed by ecological theories and associated practice. With this track we explore how transitions can be more thorough by moving away from the assumptions and structures reproducing unsustainability.

Anja Overdiek

Reading the submissions for the theme track was a little like finding different pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, not knowing how to put them together (searching even if they belong to one puzzle). I read interesting work in designing for behavioural change, change in local communities towards more democracy and inclusion, and papers challenging a Western

focus on sociotechnical systems. The red thread of this is certainly 'designing for change', but this can be done by many ways of designing.

Transitions are so complex, emergent and long-range phenomena that we as design researchers still have a hard time to wrap our concepts and practices around them. Of course, transition design, 'design for sustainability transformations' and participatory design's engagement in transforming local communities are three rich sources to draw from. It surprised me that not many papers were building on this tradition. But then again, I have not read all submissions and this might be a case of selection bias. In any case, the huge number of submissions demonstrated that there is a need for developing a jigsaw puzzle together and I am very happy to be part of this endeavour.

What I intend to bring in is work of the past seven years related to multi-stakeholder collaborations and experimentation towards systemic changes, and particularly the role of designers in this. In the Netherlands we have come to call this field 'Systemic Co-design'. It draws from practice-based research and relates systemic orientation to participatory design. Recently, I have been inspired by system-shifting design (Drew et al., 2022; Leadbeater & Winhall, 2020), scaling literacy (Mulder, et al., 2022, Lake et al., 2022), and reflection on systemic design practice (Zifkovic, 2018; Birney, 2021) , work that uses concepts from transition studies and systems thinking, and builds frameworks from practice.

Relating design theory (even more) to practice (and what designers actually seem to do to accelerate transformation and transitions) is a path which is maybe evident for someone like me, coming from Applied Sciences. But this is what I'd like to bring to the table of co-creating new images which could form the pictures for one jigsaw puzzle called "Designing for Transitions and Transformations".

Femke Coops

As an early career researcher navigating the complex terrain of designing for transitions and transformations, I vividly recall the presence of both overwhelm and fascination that accompanied my immersion into this emerging field. The plurality of perspectives presented so many possibilities, and yet there also seemed to be overlap, interconnectedness and shared principles between the different approaches. The process of figuring out the intersections and differences helped me understand the value of different approaches in different contexts. Every transition or transformation process is inherently unpredictable and unique in terms of steps, elements and outcomes. The diverse sets of elements different approaches propose, taking for example Transition Design (Irwin et al., 2015) or Transforming Practices (Hummels, 2021), provide researchers and practitioners with a rich toolbox of strategies and interventions which can be tailored to specific contextual circumstances.

Beyond proposing approaches, scholars such as Friis et al. (2024) advocate for positing design principles as versatile instruments for fostering community engagement, nurturing collective imagination, and integrating feminist praxis within collaborative spaces. Drawing

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from their experiences in organizing feminist hackathons, they challenge existing norms of innovation spaces, advocating for the co-creation of feminist imaginaries as a means of subverting traditional power dynamics and fostering inclusivity. Challenging design's role within processes of transitions and transformations offers a fertile ground for reimagining and redirecting its trajectory towards sustainability. Neidhardt-Mokoena & Wiltse (2024) propose the concept of metabolic design museums as spaces for unpacking design's involvement in urgencies. By questioning the prevailing paradigm of design museums as holders of static typologies and isolated artifacts, they illustrate how design museums should offer spaces that allow for continuous reflection and the recognition that design is ontological. Interesting here is the lens of not only inventing the new but also focusing on transforming the 'old'. Breaking down existing structures is an important element of designing for transitions and transformations, even though it is often overlooked. We need to critically reflect on existing structures, cultures and practices and think about how we can break down, phase out and design-away (Tonkinwise, 2014) those that are not sustainable anymore. Paying attention to these processes of phase-out and letting go and creating (physical) spaces to engage with the emotional dynamics that are part of them is an important lens to consider when working in the field of sustainability transitions as designers. Thus, exploring how to design spaces where we can learn to let go, express emotions and be vulnerable in transitions and transformations (Coops et al., 2024).

Dan Lockton

It was heartening to see what a large number—and variety—of submissions we received for this track, and also a reminder of how broadly we drew the lines around the topic. The benefit of a call for papers such as this is that it allows people who find some resonance between their work or approach, and the way the topics of the call are described, to explore that resonance, but also be confronted by the resonances that others find—which might be quite different to one's own expectations (and perhaps discordant).

In the papers in this track, we see the development of new concepts, terminologies, and ways of thinking about design and transitions (Rigobello & Evans, 2024; Ballie & Bruce, 2024; Özçetin & Redström, 2024; Botter et al, 2024; Phillips et al, 2024; Yu, 2024); we see methods, workshop formats, and new kinds of practical activities and frameworks (Friis et al, 2024; van der Bijl-Brouwer et al, 2024; Pschetz et al, 2024; McVeigh-Schultz, 2024); and we see exploration of, and application of frameworks to, particular sites and contexts of transition, from catering services to museums, agriculture to artificial reefs, and the circular economy to the built environment (Hajiamiri et al, 2024; Berger et al, 2024; Haslem & Brueggemeier, 2024; Neidhart-Mokoena & Wiltse, 2024; Plavina et al, 2024; Miller & Baumber, 2024; Keprdová et al, 2024; Hummel, 2024).

In an era when it seems like so much in higher education is deeply unsuited to the challenges ahead (and indeed with us right now), I am especially interested to see research addressing universities themselves, including Wallace et al's (2024) work on their own

institution's climate action and justice commitments, Escario-Chust et al's (2024) development of a new educational model, and Hesselgren et al's (2024) redesign of student housing (among other things). From my own perspective, where I am increasingly focusing on imagination in the context of climate crisis (e.g. Lockton & Coops, 2024), and how design methods for co-investigation (Lockton, 2023) and re-imagining can help bring about—perhaps prefigure—some new ways of thinking and living, I am inspired practically by ideas such as Ballie & Bruce's (2024) 'design imaginariums', Phillips et al's (2024) 'ecological citizenship', Pschetz et al's (2024) 'temporal ecologies', and (also with a time element) Özçetin & Redström's (2024) 'programmatic time travel', while also finding some useful situation in theory via Yu's (2024) notions of how futuring fits within transition design itself.

One thing that design researchers often do is a form of bricolage (Yee & Bremner, 2011), drawing from many ideas and methods, from many different disciplines, and using what we see fit. A topic as vast and hyperobject-like (Morton, 2013) as planetary crisis clearly cannot be addressed meaningfully from only one disciplinary perspective, or at only one scale. In my work as the 'design' academic team member in some interdisciplinary projects arising from the Centre for Unusual Collaborations here in the Netherlands (e.g. Lockton et al, 2023; 2024), I have repeatedly seen how—while a whole slew of interdisciplinary fields are emerging around transitions, sustainability, and society—design researchers are already deeply into these multiple perspectives, in terms of our general willingness to integrate and be inspired by ideas from all over. It can be naïve, and not always effective, but I can't help but believe that multiple lenses and a bigger vocabulary are valuable as a starting point. I think I speak on behalf of my fellow track chairs when I say that we very much look forward to the further development of this field in the years ahead.

3. Acknowledgements

Thank you for the generous contributions of all the reviewers who helped us provide extensive feedback to authors. Thank you also to the authors who acknowledged the work performed by reviewers and organisers—it helps. We ask you to please pass it on when you are in a position to review and make judgments on other people's work in advancing design for sustainable transitions. Designing for transitions depends on sharing best practice, conversations, collaborations, and solidarity as we transition away from dysfunctional paradigms.

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