

# Design in Transition, Transition Design

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## Abstract

The Transition is driven everywhere by a myriad of people from all sorts of backgrounds, professions and skills. Designers and design in itself is also contributing to it. To characterise design led contributions to the transition is that Transition Design is emerging within the design community. This paper kickstarts a new research line on the topic in the local research group, and aims to gather current research and considered field practice on Transition Design to create a general characterisation of it regarding purpose, goal, design object, role, process and tools. From it, Transition Design is outlined as a collective design agency.

**Keywords:** Transition Design, Transition, design agency.

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## Why now, what for?

Transition Design<sup>1</sup> is emerging as the least reaction of design community to the collective consciousness of the planetary unsustainably consequences of dominant lifestyles. These consequences are grouped simplistically around two dimensions: the over-depletion of resources and the social inequalities needed to maintain it<sup>2</sup>. Transition Design aims “to cultivate lifestyles and forms of everyday life” beyond the dominant ones.

## What does Transition Design designs?

To characterise Transition Design in relation to other design practices, one can place it in what is known as the orders of design:

- Communication (graphic design, editorial, etc),
- Product (product design, industrial design, etc),
- Environments (Interior design, architecture, etc),
- Personal Interactions (UX–UI, service design, etc)
- System Interactions (policy design, system design, industrial ecology, etc)

This orders and the categorisation of design fields is proposed after Tonkinwise<sup>3</sup>. These categories are by no means strict but blurred. What seems useful thought, is to relate design practices to their objects of design, and put them in some sort of order.

Arguably all design practices sensible to the sustainability challenge outlined above operating in the three first orders are known as ecodesign or Design for Sustainability<sup>4</sup>. It could also be argued that design practices sensible to the sustainability challenge operating on the 4th order are known as Design for Social Innovation<sup>5</sup>. In this study Transition Design is proposed as the practice of design sensible to the sustainability challenge operating in the 5th order, system interactions, that is, relationships among stakeholders.

It is really important to underline the blurred nature of this categorisation. Thus, despite the working characterisation presented from now on in this paper for Transition Design as operating in the 5th order, several characteristics are seen widely in use in the 4th order, and affecting and of relevance for the rest of orders.

Its been also lately highlighted the role of design in shaping what could be considered meta–design objects, or orders. In one hand there is the *paradigm* or worldview governing decisions of people, and in the other the *lifestyles* or meaningful activities conducted. Shifting paradigms is considered to be the most powerful effect to drive change towards transitioned lifestyles, and is based on timeless work of systems theorist Donella Meadows on leverage points to intervene and drive change in a system<sup>6</sup>. With this in mind is that a new design paradigm is proposed for designers to embody themselves and in their objects designed<sup>7</sup>.

Understanding the interconnected, interdependent nature of reality
Placing an emphasis on cooperation and relationship
Acknowledging/respecting the intrinsic nature of all life forms
Developing the ability to think in long horizons of time
Understanding the principles of self-organisation and emergence
Understanding the power of limits
Acknowledgment that ignorance is part of the human condition
Acknowledgment of the limits and consequences of science and technology
Embracing a new educational model that acknowledges the challenges of 'transitional times' and is based upon co-learning and re-skilling

*Irwin's proposed emerging design paradigm*

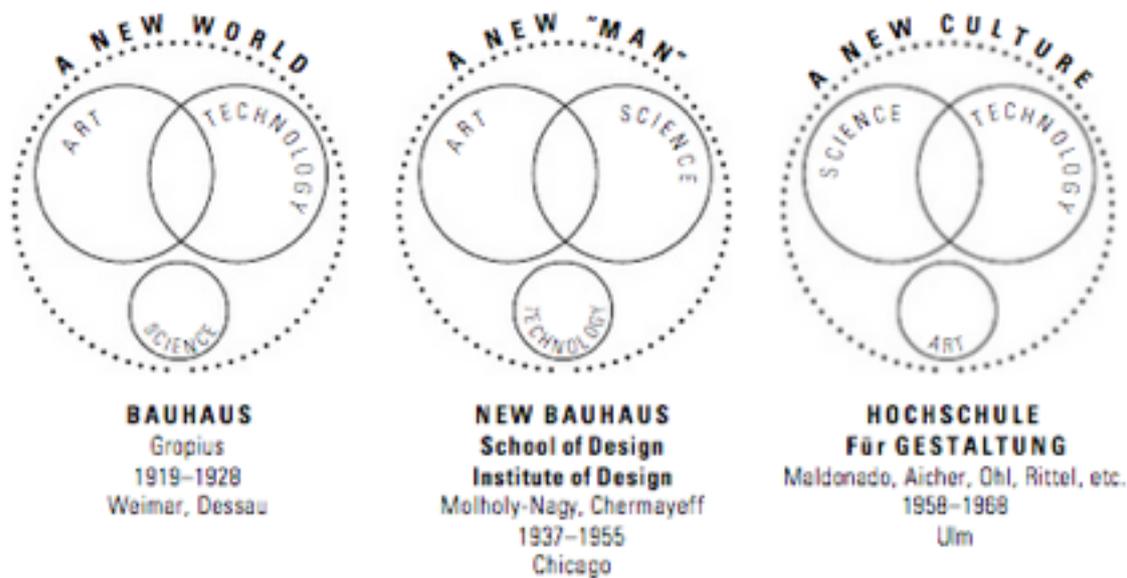
In the other hand, it is considered that *lifestyles* in itself could be also understood as a meta-design object. This understanding of lifestyles as the indirect object been shaped by the design practice is also been expressed as design being in the 'consequence business'<sup>8</sup>.

**How does it understand its object of design?**

The call (sustainability challenge), goal (alternative lifestyles) and design object (systems of stakeholders' interactions), all have something in common: complexity. The high degree of relationships among factors affecting the context of design and the non-linearity of those relationships (where elsewhere useful 'cause-effect' mental frame is not effective), is why Transition Design understand its context of design as the one characterised by the Wicked Problems<sup>9</sup>. Thus, discards the 'problem-solution' mental frame, and defines its object of design as 'conditions of existing system – desired conditions of the system'<sup>10</sup>.

**What is it's role?**

Looking the historical trajectory of design's role in society, Findeli's outlined the following purposes for the three main design schools of thought; a new world, a new 'man' and a new culture<sup>10</sup>. Each purpose design served articulated a different reorganisation between the three main souls or capabilities all designers embody (or at least could strive to), those are; Science (e.g. *to know* the system to intervene on) Art (e.g. *to create* ideals of desired system conditions) and Technology (e.g. *to make* the necessary interventions or artefacts supporting interventions into system conditions).



*Findeli's historical revision of design's capabilities and purpose*

Findeli continues and proposes a new purpose for design to serve, the project. The project, argues, is nothing predefined, leaving discussions to morals and ethics. What it does, thought, is to challenge the *passive* historical roles of design, as an aesthetic resource and later as problem solver or problem re-framer lately, and outlines an empowered designer integrating all capabilities and *acting as a creative change agent* at the purpose of a project.

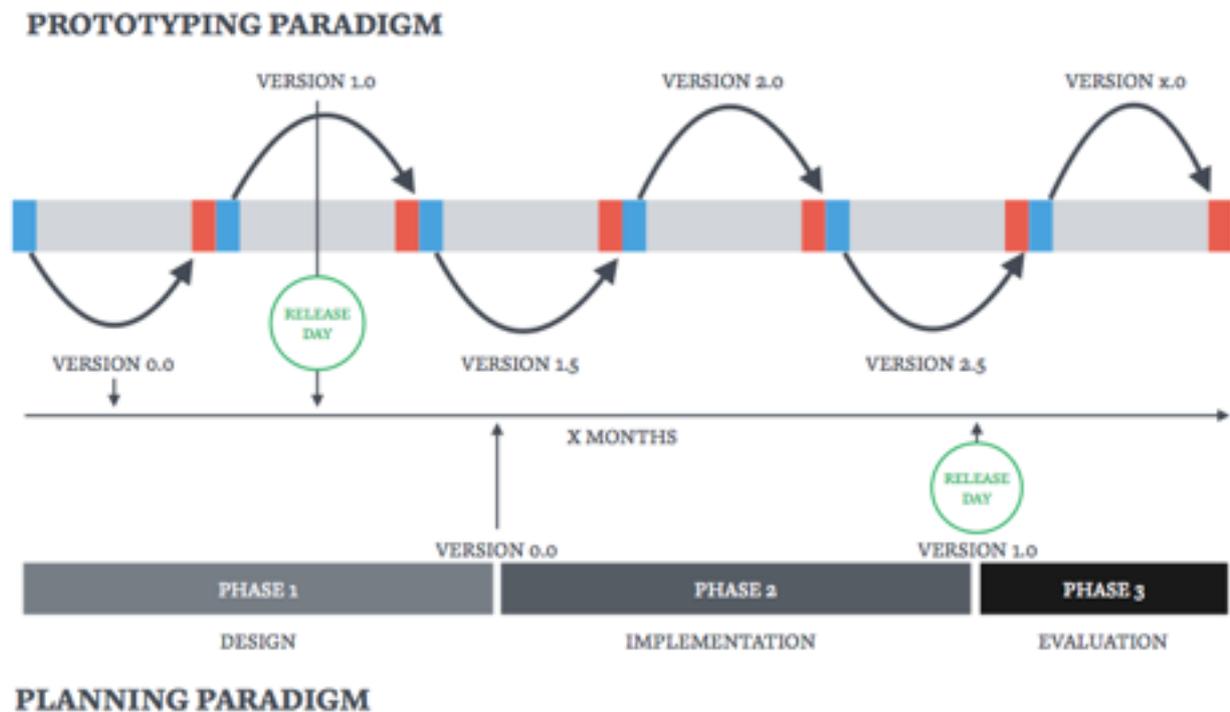


*Findeli's proposal of design's current dimensions' relationship and purpose*

This view of the design process as integral, *perceiving, creating and making* or what Manzini's defines as *critical sense, creativity and practical sense*, fits with the observed practice of Transition Design, where usually emancipated collectives, like Transition Towns<sup>11</sup> or Cooperativa Integral Catalana<sup>12</sup>, take action towards a defined project, in this case, the Transition.

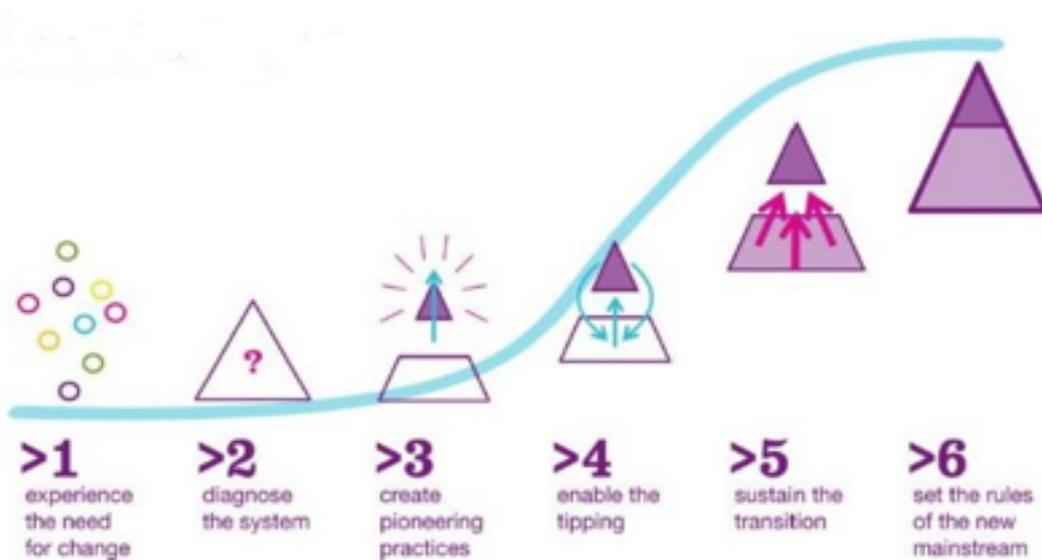
### How does it work?

The design process of Transition Design, keeping in mind the 'existing – desired conditions of the system' approach, is an involved design process, where design happens in the field, in the context to be designed<sup>10</sup>. The approach is observed to be taking on the scientific research trend on contextual laboratories, that living labs are also an expression of<sup>13</sup>. Reos Partners<sup>14</sup>, one of the dedicated organisations aiding communities, institutions or organisations in the transition, names its design process as Social Lab<sup>15</sup>.



*Reos Partners' Social Lab process*

A general approach, in common with practice and theory developed in Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability (4th order), is the one looking to leverage existing capabilities in the system<sup>5</sup>. A good example of it is the Forum's For the Future<sup>16</sup>'s systemic innovation approach, another organisation pioneering the practice of helping others to transition.



### *Forum for the Future's systemic innovation<sup>17</sup>*

There other emergent characteristics, a key one is the experimental nature of the design process, a trial and error approach with commonalities with the former contextual laboratory approach of social sciences. This lack of planning (or new version of it?) creates a tension in traditional design, as even semantically design is sometimes understood as some sort of fore-sight<sup>18</sup>. Thus it seems the importance or remained relevance of this traditional design quality is in this context at the generation and visualisation of compelling long term visions, complementing it with this emergent trend of shorter trial and error cycles on how to get there.

Regarding tools, as 3D models help designers in Product's order of design, Transition Design supports its practices with tools such as the phenomenological method outlined first by Goethe<sup>19</sup>, easing the understanding of the system of stakeholder's nature, the Living Systems Principles<sup>20</sup>, guiding the definition of resilient and creative relationships among the stakeholders, or the aforementioned Leverage Points, outlining places to keep the change going with the desired system conditions.

### **Who Transition Designs?**

Some examples of creative change agents have been given before. Though, it seems pertinent to make some distinctions, as the ones embodying the system before an after the intervention, like Transition Towns or Cooperativa Integral Catalana, and those who join during the change crisis as experts of such process, Reos Partners or Forum for the Future.

Among the many people participating on the creative change process to alternative lifestyles, if we look at professional profiles there can be process facilitators, experts on a given field of knowledge e.g. ethnography, ecology, conflict resolutions, etc, experts on a given issue of relevance e.g. fishing, cryptocurrencies, health, etc, coders, designers, makers, representatives of the organisations involved, individual people, representatives of an species, etc.

Finally, given the complex nature of who takes part in the change process and the perception that design is widening its presence in society, it seems fitting thus to characterise **Transition Design** less in a person but **as a collective design agency** with roughly the characteristics described above of purpose, goal, design object, role, process and tools.

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