Transition Design Seminar II

51702 + 51946 | *Spring 2015* | *Monday, Wednesday* | *10:00 - 11:20* | *MM215*

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…the forceful emergence of transition discourses and proposals in multiple sites of academic and activist life over the past decade is one of the most revealing and anticipatory signs of our times. This emergence is a reflection of both the steady worsening of planetary ecological and social life conditions and of the inability of established policy and knowledge institutions to imagine ways out of such crisis conditions. Shared by most transition discourses is the contention that we need to step out of existing instiutional and epistemic boundaries if we truly want to envision the worlds and practices capable of bringing about the significant transformations seen as needed. The project seeks to develop a particular approach to such a contention, based on a set of concepts derived from both trends in the academy and in social-political life.

— **Arturo Escobar**

Transition theory draws upon concepts and models of human behavior, social structures, and technological systems that span diverse disciplines and areas of study, including sociology, management, science, technology, social studies, and philosophy. It is rooted in a recognition of the significance of systems and an appreciation for the ability of systems thinking to conceptualize and model complex patterns of behavior…thinking about transition this way is appealing for several reasons. It recognizes the fallacy of the silver bullet—that is, the dream of a singular solution that can leverage complex systems. It offers a way to conceptualize socio-technical change that can accommodate multiple perspectives. It aims to be participatory and draw contributors from across the social spectrum and emphasizes the processes of knowledge creation and sharing.

— **Dennis P. Doordan**

Clearly, this is not dependent solely on a solitary designer who skillfully puts together technical elements in a given design. It involves, in addition, a more diverse activity in which the design space is continually cocreated through anticipations, theories, and imaginations of what can be or what is possible in our language, social order, and technological world.

— **Kalle Lyytinen**

A huge amount of creativity is emerging as citizens figure out new ways to meet their daily life needs—from clothing and food, to shelter, care, and learning. At a local level, these efforts are clustering in a wide variety of social micro-economies in which people share skills, time, and resources. There's an emphasis on collaboration and sharing; on person-to-person interactions; on the care and maintenance of existing assets. The main driver of this growing wave of social activity is necessity. Design for sustainability, it is turning out, is not about designers telling other people how to live. It's about the cocreation of tools and enabling platforms that make it easier for people to share resources—such as energy, matter, time, skills, software, space or food. Developing grand visions for futuristic new systems is an important part of the mix—but so, too, is nurturing a continuous wave of small adjustments.

— **John Thackara**

Introduction/Context

Transition Design acknowledges that we are living in 'transitional times' and takes as its central premise the need for societal transition to more sustainable futures and the contention that design has a key role to play in these transitions. There is a need for a kind of designing that is connected to long horizons of time and compelling visions of sustainable futures based upon new knowledge and skill sets.

In the past, there have been many attempts to leverage design as an agent for positive social change, but few of these have articulated how to undertake and lead/catalyze such change. Nor have they identified/incorporated the areas of knowledge and investigation required to do so. Transition Design is complementary to and borrows from myriad other design approaches (such as design for service and social innovation), but is distinct in several ways and therefore generates a corresponding body of new skillsets. All of these can deepen and enhance designing within shorter horizons of time and more mainstream contexts. Transition Design:

· Uses living systems theory as both an approach to understanding wicked problems and designing solutions to address them.

· Develops design solutions that protect and restore both social and natural ecosystems through the creation of mutually beneficial relationships between people, the things they do and make and the natural environment.

· Sees everyday life and lifestyles as the most important/fundamental context for design.

· Advocates place-based, but globally networked solutions.

· Designs solutions for short, medium and long horizons of time and all levels of scale of everyday life.

· Looks for emergent possibilities within problem contexts and amplifies grassroots solutions already underway.

· Links existing solutions together so that they can function as steps in a larger transition vision.

· Distinguishes between 'wants/desires' and genuine needs and bases solutions on maximizing satisfiers for the widest range of needs.

· Sees the designer's own mindset and posture as an essential component of transition designing.

· Calls for the reintegration and recontextualization of diverse transdisciplinary knowledge.

The idea of and need for transition is central to a variety of current discourses concerned with how change manifests and how it can be initiated/directed (in ecosystems, organizations, communities/societies, economies and even individuals). These approaches inspired the term 'Transition Design'and it is informed by knowledge outside design such as science, philosophy, psychology, social science, anthropology and the humanities in order to gain a deeper understanding of how to design for change/transition in complex systems.

We use a heuristic model to characterize four different but interrelated and mutually influencing areas of Transition Design. These areas are **1)** Vision; **2)** Theories of Change; **3)** Mindset & Posture; **4)** New Ways of Designing.

Course Overview

This course aims to familiarize graduate and doctoral students with the concept of 'transition' and 'transition theory,' which can now be found within many fields, disciplines and grassroots movements. It also introduces a new field of design research, study and practice: Transition Design. This proposes design-led transition toward more sustainable futures.

Through a wide range of readings and follow-up discussion, students will be encouraged to explore these concepts and invited to contribute to this growing body of thought and action. They will also be encouraged to develop the ability to envision long-term, sustainable futures as a tool for informing design in the present and near future.
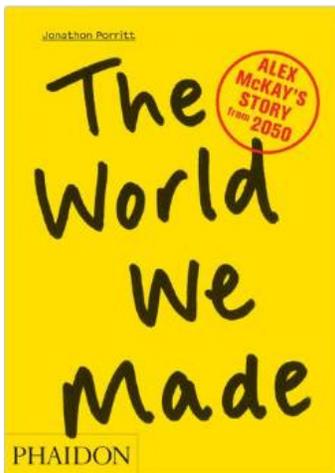
Course Text

Please purchase a copy of Jonathan Porritt's book *The World We Made: Alex McKay's Story from 2015*, 2013. Phaidon Press Inc., New York.

Course Objectives/Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course students should demonstrate:

1. A familiarity with a range of transdisciplinary discourses regarding change/transition within complex systems. An understanding of how knowledge, concepts and theories outside the field of design are relevant to informing new, more responsible/appropriate approaches to design.

2. Familiarity with the range of large, 'wicked' problems confronting society in the 21st century (climate change, pollution, growing gap between rich/poor, terrorism, loss of biodiversity, etc.). The ability to identify their roots and map/visualize their interconnections and interdependencies. Understanding of how these wicked problems form the greater context for almost all design problems and solutions.

3. An understanding of the dynamics at work within living systems (emergent properties, self-organization, network dynamics, systems level relationships etc.) and how these 'systems dynamics' can be leveraged in designing for and within complex social and natural systems.

4. Familiarity with a range of approaches to 'future-casting' and future-based scenarios. An understanding of the importance of thinking in long horizons of time in order to inform the design of short, mid *and* long-term solutions at *multiple levels of scale*.

5. Familiarity with the ways in which pre-industrial societies lived and designed relatively sustainably 'in place' for generations. Familiarity with global/local concepts such as cosmopolitan localism as a strategy for transition design.

6. Familiarity with the concept of everyday life and the reconception of lifestyles as a strategy for sustainable design. Understanding of Max-Neef's theory of needs as an aspect of transition design.

7. Understanding of the concept of worldview and its influence on design and designers and an understanding of the characteristics of a holistic/ecological worldview.

8. Familiarty with a range of discourses, approaches and theories related to the acquisition of collaborative skills, more mindful approaches to design and the concept of 'designer as catalyst for change'.

Course Structure

Readings/Discussions: 65% of final grade

This is a seminar-based course. You will be provided with several readings each week intended to inform in-class discussions on a wide range of topics related to transition design. This seminar attempts to present many perspectives from many different fields and therefore each week you will be asked to read exceperts from multiple articles, books and online sources. The seminar will require you to spend about 2 hours in reading in preparation for the following class.

You are expected to read all assigned material, make notes, and conduct additional research when necessary to support your argument/discussion. Your active and informed participation in the class is a significant part of your grade.

Assignments: 25% of final grade

There are 3 assignments in the seminar: 1 individual excercise and two group-based projects; Assignment 1 is a group-based, visual 'mapping' project assigned as the end of the second class = 10%. The second assignment will be given on April 13th and is completed individually = 5%. The final group project comprises the final 2-1/2 weeks of the course = 10%.

The group assignments will require you to collaborate with 3-4 other people, undertake research outside class and present results to the class. In both there will be a 360 degree review (you will review your team mates) that will be incorporated into your individual assignment grade.

Detailed assignment sheets will be provided on the day the assignments are given and the final projects will be uploaded to the class blog.

Course Blog: 10% of final grade

The blog will be an important part of this course and a place where the class discussions can continue and comments and reflections about the assignments can be added. It will also contribute to a growing body of research and writing about Transition Design. Your active participation is encouraged.

Expectations

You will receive letter grades on your 3 assignments as well as a mid-term grade based upon your first assignment, in-class participation, contributions to the blog and attendance.

- **Attendance**
  Regular, prompt attendance is required for a passing grade. Please notify the instructors or TA if you anticipate an absence. You are allowed 2 absences. Your letter grade will drop after 2 absences and 5 or more absences will result in a failing grade.

- **Class Participation**
  Active participation in class discussions and critiques is required for a passing grade as is a clear familiarity with the assigned reading material and quality of your discussion/insights.

- **Blog**

  Continuing discussionions online, suggesting new lines of arguments/themes and adding comments to uploaded assignments will also count as part of your participation in this course. The objective is to make the blog a vital conversation on the topic of Transition Design.

- **Quality of Work on Assignments**

  This includes the quality, relevance and innovation of your work on project assignments, ability to follow directions and ability to meet project objectives and deadlines. All written work will be evaluated on quality/originality of thinking, correct grammar and spelling. Copying or paraphrasing directly from any article, whether analog or digital is not permitted and is considered to be plagarism by the university (see the last page of this syllabus for university policy).

- **Group collaboration**

  You will be evaluated on the quality of interactions with your fellow team members via a '360' review process. Each student will be evaluated by their team members at the end of each group assignment as part of the final grade.

- **Protocol and Etiquette**

  This class is based upon the quality of enagement/focus and discussion among members of the class. For this reason we ask that you:

  Please do not have cell phones out *at any time* during this class; no phoning, emailing, texting, tweeting, or other non-class related digital interactions

  Please do not work on other assignments during this class

  There is no food or drink permitted in the distance-learning classroom other than water (sorry)

Instructor Participation

This course was co-developed by Terry Irwin, Cameron Tonkinwise and Gideon Kossoff. Terry is the teacher of record, however Gideon Kossoff will be present for many of the classes and will act as a second point of faculty contact. Cameron Tonkinwise will offer several lectures along with outside guests who are noted in the class schedule. Jessica Weeden is the course TA and will be responsible for disseminating readings, help to facilitate discussions and will create a course blog and administer it.

The best way to contact us with questions is via email.

TRANSITION DESIGN FRAMEWORK

A vision for the transition to a sustainable society is needed. It calls for the reconception of entire lifestyles that are human scale, place-based but globally connected in their exchange of technology, information and culture. It calls for communities to be in a symbiotic relationship with their ecosystem.

Vision for Transition

Theories of Change

New Ways of Designing

Posture & Mindset

New ways of designing will help realize the vision but will also change/evolve it. As the vision evolves, new ways of designing will continue to be developed.

The transition to a sustainable society will require new ways of designing that are characterized by:

· Sensitivity to 'design for initial conditions'
· Placed-based, context-based design
· Systems approach: design for next level up or down
· Network & alliance building
· Transdisciplinary and co-design processes
· Understanding of materiality & its role in built world
· Design that amplifies grassroots efforts
· Beta, error-friendly approach to designing

The vision of the transition to a sustainable society will require new knowledge about natural, social, and built/designed systems. This new knowledge will, in turn, evolve the vision.

Ideas, theories, & methodologies from many varied fields and disciplines inform a deep understanding of the dynamics of change in the natural and social worlds.

· Lliving systems principles
· Max-Neef's theory of needs
· Socio Technical regime theory
· Post normal science theory
· Metis (indigenous, place-based knowledge)
· Critiques of everyday life
· Alternative economies and politics
· Radical holism; lessons from anarchism
· The 'commons' and shareability

Changes in mindset, posture and temperament will give rise to new ways of designing. As new design approaches evolve, designers' temperaments and postures will continue to change.

A new theory of change will reshape designers' temperaments, mindsets and postures. And, these 'new ways of being' in the world will motivate the search for new, more relevant knowldege.

Living in & thru transitional times requires a mindset and posture of openess, mindfulness, a willingness to collaborate, and 'optimistic grumpiness'

· Shifting values: cooperation over competition, self-sufficiency, deep respect and advocacy for 'other' (cultures, species etc.)
· Understanding and embracing transdisciplinarity
· Ability to design within uncertainty, ambiguity, chaos and contradiction
· A committed sense of urgency (grumpiness) along with optimisim in the ability to change

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transition_design