

Towards a Sustainable Present: Urgency and Agency in Transition Design

- Eduardo Staszowski, Lara Penin, Andrew Moon
The Parsons DESIS Lab¹, New York City

Transition – [n] ‘the process of changing from one state or condition to another’– is taken up by the symposium convenors as a ‘new’ disciplinary design practice. The heuristic approach affords vision, a theory of change, and a mindset and posture aimed at long-term societal transition toward more sustainable futures.² The purpose of this position paper is to prompt discussion on the margins of this welcomed innovation. It is to enliven interest in its ‘future’ oriented dimensions in light of ‘present’ crisis and their demand for action *now*. We take as our cue ongoing work in the Parsons DESIS Lab that addresses the need for sustainable futures as a design practice that is both ‘urgent’ and committed to instilling ‘agency’ at every level of intervention.

Urgency – [n] ‘importance, requiring swift action’ – should occupy how the designer thinks and works in any movement toward ‘transition.’ By this we argue that the risk posed by Transition Design is that it performs a temporal movement forward leaving behind present crisis. There is a tension at play with this intervention, between the innovation of design pedagogy and practice and the present crisis in social and natural ecosystems that is its *reference*.³ Is there a lag between innovation in design thinking on the one hand and design methods that cultivate solutions to crisis in the present? Is epistemological innovation at a distance from practical engagement? In response, we argue for a more nuanced attention to the *now*. We ask, how can Transition Design be taken up in ways that fold back onto the present, that is, how can the provocation to *transition* not be one that moves toward a sustainable future, but rather *designs* sustainable futures as a present concern?

Bruno Latour has written that with the advent of the anthropocene ‘we’ (designers & social scientists) are confronted with the question of “urgency and political relevance.”⁴ What is design’s political relevance to the present? In a localized setting, The NYC Panel on Climate Change *just* released findings that underscore “the urgency of not only mitigating [human] contributions to climate

¹ See: <http://www.newschool.edu/desis>

² CMU ‘Transition Design Provocation’ (2015), p.2, 5.

³ Ibid, 2.

⁴ Bruno Latour, “Anthropology at the time of the Anthropocene”, *AAA Distinguished Lecture*. Dec. 2014.

change, but adapting the city to its risks.”⁵ How might Transition Design be equipped to respond to present concerns and the need for adaptation as a way of designing a sustainable future – otherwise, to take from Latour, is our political relevance at stake? If we accept that climate change is already here then is Transition Design imbued with a sense of absolute urgency for taking action? How does Transition Design foreground these temporal realities of the *now*?

Agency – [n] ‘action, especially such as to produce a particular effect’ –, we argue, is how design enables action on crisis *now*. Agency is what empowers the present to *transition* to sustainable futures. We raise two concerns: first, how can designers be received in ways that validate and give mandate to their practice and intervention? Does ‘design’ in Transition Design acknowledge that in reality design has very limited capacity to change the course of major decision making processes – e.g. who ‘grants’ the designer the access, the right, the resources, legitimacy and authority to intervene? What has to *transition* in the present to afford design the *agency* to practice at all levels of intervention? Second, how can design not only ensure its own agency, but intervene in ways that engender and distribute *agency* among multiple actors?⁶ How can design imbed agency with communities, organizations, and infrastructures so that these actors can respond and adapt to contingencies and uncertain effects in ecological, social, and urban environment as they emerge? How can Transition Design take up theories of the actor and agency in the social sciences as one way to underscore the importance of knowledge outside design?⁷

Transitions to urgency/agency – The Parsons DESIS Lab have developed three recent initiatives that utilize ‘urgency’ and ‘agency’ as conceptual tools to provoke innovation in pedagogy and practice for the *now*.

The initiative, *Amplifying Creative Communities*, convened during 2009-2013 provided a platform to expand community initiatives that promote *agency* through positive ways of living and working. The aspect of *urgency* contained in *Amplify* relates to finding models in the present that can inform the future as the possible alternatives for larger scale adoption. *Amplify* was based on the notion that models for ‘transition’, in terms of lifestyles and behavior, are to be found in society today, located in the stories of individuals and groups who have created social innovations. It took form as an invisible incubator embedded within three boroughs of New York City (Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx), with a pre-

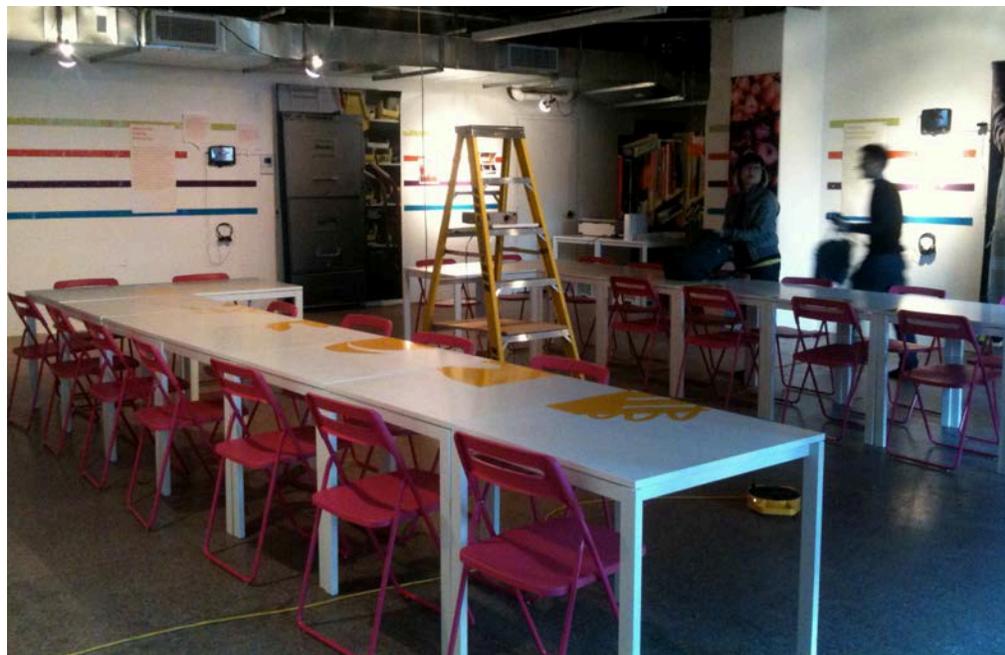
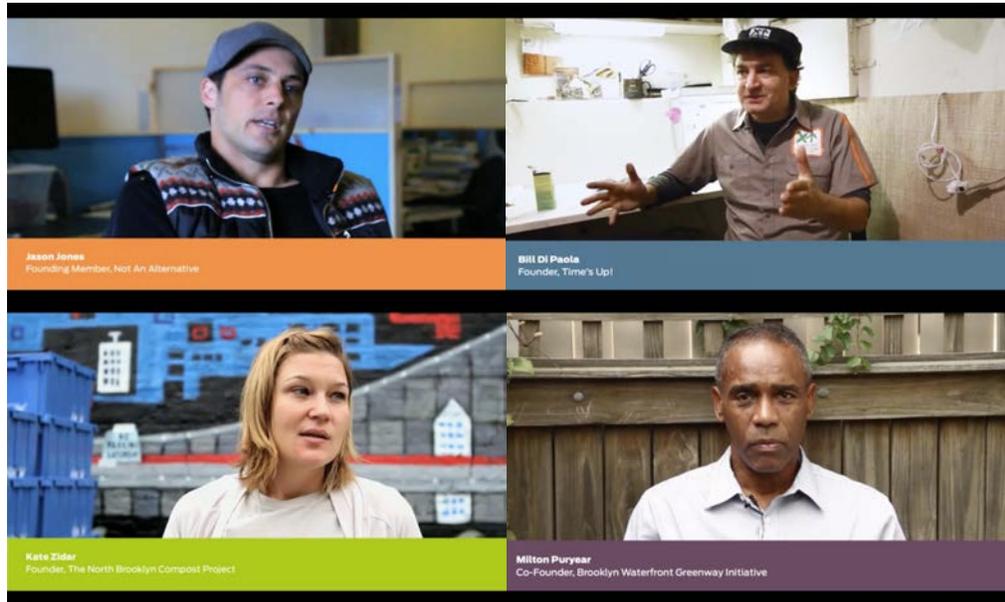
⁵ Radley Horton, Daniel Bader et al. “New York City Panel on Climate Change - 2015 Report Chapter 1: Climate Change Observations and Projections”. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*. 16 February 2015.

⁶ Peter Redfield, “Microworlds and Humanitarian design.” *University of North Carolina*, 2013.

⁷ CMU ‘Transition Design Provocation’, p.3.

run launch in São Paulo, Brazil. By embedding collaborative initiatives that promoted new and sustainable lifestyles, this initiative aimed to inspire individuals and communities by linking individual choices and collective actions to establish more desirable, sustainable urban centers. The project was structured around contextual ethnographic research, video-documentation, community-centric exhibitions and temporary community-based design studios.

<http://www.amplifyingcreativecommunities.org>



A second initiative, *Public & Collaborative* launched during 2012 was created to investigate the role design can play in building pathways between government and people. Within this framework we have been working on projects with different New York City public agencies, to create programs to inspire civil servants, educate design students, and inform the public and the design community about government processes and practices. There is *urgency* for the work of designers in the public sector to not simply be a provider of enhanced existing service structures or to maintain current social practices, but rather to be given the *agency* to play a more transformative and political role.⁸ The premise here was to introduce ideas and models inspired by *Amplify's* research into the public sector by proposing the following question: how do government policies and services change when people are considered part of the solution—i.e., when people become the *agents* in the process of conceiving and delivering public services? This led us to ask, how can we incorporate sustainable behaviors (e.g. collaborative mindsets) as components of public services? And, what are the possible mechanisms that would allow for partnerships between citizens interested in promoting or adopting sustainable lifestyles and the public sector (e.g. through specific service provisions such as housing and education)?⁹

Proposals were presented to agency staff that emphasized social innovations outside existing service structures, however, what we found was that the designers often lacked the ‘epistemological authority’, that is, the *agency*, to convey the validity of their ideas to governmental partners. Both designers and policy makers are expected to demonstrate particular forms of expertise; but paradoxically such demonstrations of expertise can actually prevent the very real work required by the designer to translate policy intentions into political realities.¹⁰

<http://www.nyc.pubcollab.org>

⁸ Eduardo Staszowski, Scott Brown, Ben Winter. “Reflections on Designing for Social Innovation in the Public Sector: A Case Study in New York City”. 2013

⁹ See: <http://nyc.pubcollab.org/portfolio/public-collaborative>

¹⁰ Ibid



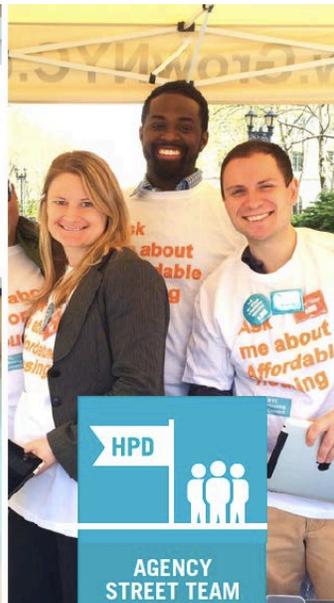


**HYPERLOCAL
MARKETING**





**HOUSING
AMBASSADORS**





**AGENCY
STREET TEAM**

The final initiative we will introduce, *Public Innovation Places*, refers to the development of experimental sites and labs that create design-based solutions for *urgent* public problems (i.e. affordable housing, education, healthcare, etc.). The initiative brings together a variety of actors, both public and private, with a diverse array of skill sets and expertise to convene on a set of issues of public concern. As an exercise in designing what these places normatively could look like, in the fall of 2013 we launched ‘The NYC Office of Public Imagination’ as part of the Transdisciplinary Design MFA curriculum. The Office aimed to enhance community *agency* in finding voice for community concerns in the Lower East Side of Manhattan.¹¹

What we found was that experiments such as this open two symmetrical opportunities. One is the possibility for bottom-up social innovations to move faster in their trajectory from the first ‘heroic’ stage (when social inventions are still prototypes) to the following stages when more mature enterprises are created and, if necessary, when enabling products and services are conceived and enhanced. The other opportunity is for public agencies to meet with people and other organizations and experiment together with new policies and governance tools. One of the major lessons of this research is that the *agency* for designers to act as credible participants is one, which must be carved out; it is a role that must be imagined anew. Another striking observation we made during this initiative was that students were quick in devising ‘interventions’ such as programs and services, yet struggled to capture the complexity of relationships present in the public sphere. This hindered their ability to imagine and think systemically in terms of governance models and a broader integration of their service ideas into the new organizational structures.¹² Within these experimental places it is possible to trigger and support positive loops between bottom-up initiatives and public agencies’ innovations and, therefore, to promote the complex systemic innovations that today are *urgently* needed.

11 See: <http://nyc.pubcollab.org/public-innovation-places>

12 Lara Penin, Eduardo Staszowski, Scott Brown. “Teaching the next generation of transdisciplinary thinkers and practitioners of design-based public and social innovation “ (Forthcoming).

