

Personal, political, professional: a practice in transition.

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It is widely agreed that in order to contribute to transitions towards sustainability, design and its practitioners must also transition. This paper presents findings from the first two years of transition in my design practice. The paper explores what has been required of me personally, politically, and professionally, and draws on projects from my PhD. Using a critical pragmatism to examine my practice's transition from 'making greener things' towards 'design for transitions', the paper explores how slower approaches such as transition design and autonomous design can extend the political reach of a design practice and discusses how this transpires.

Keywords: sustainability transitions, design for transitions, transformation, designer politics, power

INTRODUCTION

Humanity has exceeded multiple planetary boundaries (IPCC, 2018) and it is increasingly evident that significant changes are on the horizon. Whether these changes are by choice or by force depends upon immediate and collective actions being taken to mitigate climate change. Design is uniquely positioned to contribute to managed processes of societal change, and to make change desirable (Boehnert, 2018; Fry, 2009). In order to do so, design itself must change—from a practice entangled with the economic pursuits of business, to one that is focussed on transitions toward more just and sustainable ways of being in the world. As part of this endeavour designers will need to craft rich narratives for sustainable futures (Lockton & Candy, 2018) and these visions will reimagine everyday life. This permits designers to consider how their daily labour could be redirected as design for transitions; but in this reimagining of everyday life, consideration must also be given to what work/labour for non-designers looks like in transitions towards sustainable futures (White, 2015). Visions of a sustainable everyday will require a granularity that allows rich interpretations of how these possible futures might function, particularly if they are to offer viable alternatives to the dominant neo-liberal narrative in the West. This paper explores the practice of transition design and reflects on the first two years of a research-led, practice-based transition.

A design practice in transition is many things at once, often making it ill-defined and impeding the clarity of its brand narrative. These in-between times can be challenging due to the ever-present tension from blending the old practice and the new. The sometimes-paradoxical mix can result in a practice that feels at odds with itself; doing commercial work can feel 'wrong' but conversely it helps fund the transition work that feels 'right'. This paper discusses these tensions, the navigation of pain points, and the personal,

political and professional commitments I have made as a practitioner while transitioning my design practice from a commercially focussed sustainable design practice of ‘making greener things’, towards a practice that designs for transitions.

The reflections presented are lensed by a critical pragmatism which Forester (2013) describes as ‘an analytic and practical approach that attends to [both] process and outcome, that challenges us to listen critically to appreciate multiple forms of knowledge’ (Forester, 2013, p. 19). Thinking is also underpinned by theories of change, power, social practices, consumption, and complexity, as well as data collected as part of a larger PhD research project. It should be acknowledged that this paper and my broader transition have been influenced by supervisory guidance provided through my PhD. The projects referenced in this paper are part of this PhD and my Australian-based design practice. Due to the temporal nature of transition design most of these projects are ongoing, and likely to continue for years to come. The ‘unfinishedness’ in transition design case studies poses a relative challenge in their presentation, so perhaps (at least for this paper, if not for transitions as a whole) the discussion of case studies is better thought of in a continuing sense, as case studying.

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE COMMITMENT TO A PRACTICE-BASED TRANSITION

Transition design literature argues for an altered mindset and posture in designers, shifting the designer from a competitive space into a cooperative one (Irwin et al., 2015). This appears to be a crucial step for practicing transition design, which is highly collaborative in its approach. Drawing heavily on participatory processes such as co-design, ethnography and facilitated stakeholder engagement, transition designers also benefit from personal virtues such as deep listening, patience, generosity, flexibility, empathy and resilience (Irwin, 2015, p. 23). In Escobar’s descriptions of autonomous design, these collaborative processes are described as existential or ‘life’s work’ (Escobar, 2018 p. 184-185). They are performed by designers embedded within communities who facilitate space for the co-definition of problems and the co-design of solutions that meet communal visions for the future (Escobar, 2018 p. 184-185; d’Anjou, 2015). Both autonomous design and transition design are reliant on collaborative processes for their success, and require an understanding of power dynamics (Boehnert, 2018; Escobar, 2018; Lukes, 2005) and of the power relations present in group dynamics (Dahle, 2018; Gee, 2011) in order to practice with sufficiency (Avelino, 2016; Dahle, 2018; Willis, 2015). Reflection on literature discussing power and behaviour dynamics brought with it a greater sense of my own power and privilege, and the role this is playing in re-forming my identity as an empowered designer is significant. My PhD research exploring consumption and waste catalysed further change and empowerment. Adopting a zero waste lifestyle formed part of a personal ethico-political stand against consumerism (see figure 1)—a change that became more meaningful after its extension into my practice. In making the commitment to transition my practice and refocus its outcomes in line with this, the immediate question of ‘how?’ came to the fore. Decelerating consumption is not a principal concern for the design industry or its symbiotic partner-in-crime, business, so how can a designer perform the work needed for a post-capitalist society if practicing design is currently made financially viable through its active participation in a consumer society? What sacrifices must precede the rewards that could follow?

There is a complicated tension that arises from a disconnect between personal empowerment and professional actions. Sub-conscious responses to this tension could present as cognitive dissonance, leading to denial and a subsequent action paralysis (Boehnert, 2018 p. 135-142). Deeper cognisance of this tension can put designers in a double-bind. Double-bind theory stems from social psychology; it describes how schizophrenic symptoms can result from no-win situations, where complex and contradictory messages prevent action (Bateson et al., 1956). Designers can experience a double-bind when they view sustainability as simultaneously necessary and impossible in the context of their design brief. The resulting action paralysis can lead to design’s equivalent of business-as-usual—an aesthetically pleasing range of unsustainable design outcomes. In contrast, a designer who transforms their relationships to ecology and the problems that threaten it becomes empowered to politicise their approach. Deeper engagement with problems and contexts through transformative and epistemic learning can create a kind of stickiness to

theories presented in the literature which can forge pathways to action (Sterling, 2011). This shift from knowing into doing activates the ethico-political designer. This awakening can illuminate the sustainable potential in a brief, in turn loosening the double-bind causing action paralysis. It would appear that the rich experiences that formulated my transformation have sparked a mindset and posture shift which in turn facilitated the emergence of transition within my design practice. An ethico-political commitment fostered a praxis that catalysed a powerful practice-based transition—from designing ‘greener things’ towards designing against consumption through the practice of autonomous design and transition design.

FIGURE 1: DAILY LITTER COLLECTION AS PART OF THE POLITICAL ACTION AGAINST WASTE AND THE LANDFILL WASTE PRODUCED DURING THE FIRST TWO YEARS OF MY ZERO WASTE TRANSITION



Design Against Consumption: The Intersection of Personal and Practice Transitions

It is widely understood that the problems of consumption and waste are connected, but less frequently recognised that both are accelerated and reinforced by design (Jackson, 2006; Thorpe 2012). Like so many of the sustainability problems we face, the problems of consumption and waste are also structural in nature, and the design industry's technical approaches—including designing ‘greener things’—tend to reinforce rather than resolve these problems. Approaches such as cradle-to-cradle design (Braungart & McDonough, 2010) present valuable changes to the use and circulation of materials as part of a circular economy, but simultaneously fail to address design's acceleration of consumption (Boetzkes, 2016). Cradle-to-cradle aims to make ‘good’ things but its myopic consideration of design as an accelerant of consumption results in a default position of “making consumerism ‘better’” (Thorpe, 2010 p. 15). A case in point is compostable single use plastics. This intervention ‘improves’ the materials of single use items but reinforces the culture of convenience and disposability underlying this waste stream. Furthermore, compostable plastics reinforce other wicked problems such as monoculture farming, decreased soil health, biodiversity loss and declining pollinator numbers. This well-intended solution demonstrates how complex sustainability problems are, how critical designers must be in our approach to technofixes, and how deeper relational thinking is required from designers working in this space.

Mapping processes in transition design (see examples in figures 2 and 3) are part of the framework's ‘new ways of designing’ (Irwin et al., 2015) which practice critical thinking and systems thinking. Pattern sensing during the analysis of complex data practices relational thinking (Dahle, 2018). These mapping processes and thinking techniques provide valuable insights into the approaches that might be needed in order to design against consumption, and when combined with theories of change such as socio-technical regime theory (Geels, 2002; Geels & Schot, 2010), designers can analyse historical shifts in social norms and gain insights for possible future transitions. Figure two (above) analyses consumption's history as a

social practice by adapting Geel's (2002, 2011) multi-level perspective (MLP). It presents a narrative for the impact of the economic paradigm embedded in neo-liberal capitalism and reveals how a combination of changes made to production, manufacture and sale at the landscape (slow-moving) and niche (fast-moving) levels of a society can influence the everyday social practices that make up the norms of consumption, use and disposal at the regime level (stable-centre). Combining insights from mapping the MLP with Meadows' leverage points for system intervention (Meadows, 1999) provides a deeper understanding how and where structural change might be possible. This informs visions and backcasting, where ideation of design interventions starts in a future position and works back to the present (Lockton & Candy, 2018; Irwin et al., 2015). Mapping has been used in my practice for ideation (mind maps) research and prototyping (system/journey/experience mapping) but transition design's approach to mapping and analysis spanning wicked problems/interconnections, stakeholders, and their visions, is a 'new way of designing' within my practice (Irwin et al., 2015). These mapping processes have enriched the collaborative approaches being undertaken, illuminating previously unheard perspectives and creating a richer and more dynamic understanding of the problems to be solved. Using collaborative mapping and ethnographic data collection techniques in considerations of the consumption and waste problem has revealed cultural differences in people's relations between consumption and waste. Project analysis for *Rethink Rubbish* reveals culturally visible virtues of respect and responsibility appear to cultivate low waste behaviours more easily, and point to underlying values of care and compassion. Use of design interventions to awaken these values and encourage these virtues has been a key consideration in this project.

FIGURE 2: MAKING IDEOLOGIES AND MINDSETS VISIBLE IN THE MLP: DRAFT MAP OF SOCIAL PRACTICES IN CONSUMPTION AS PART OF THE RETHINK RUBBISH PROJECT FOR MY PHD

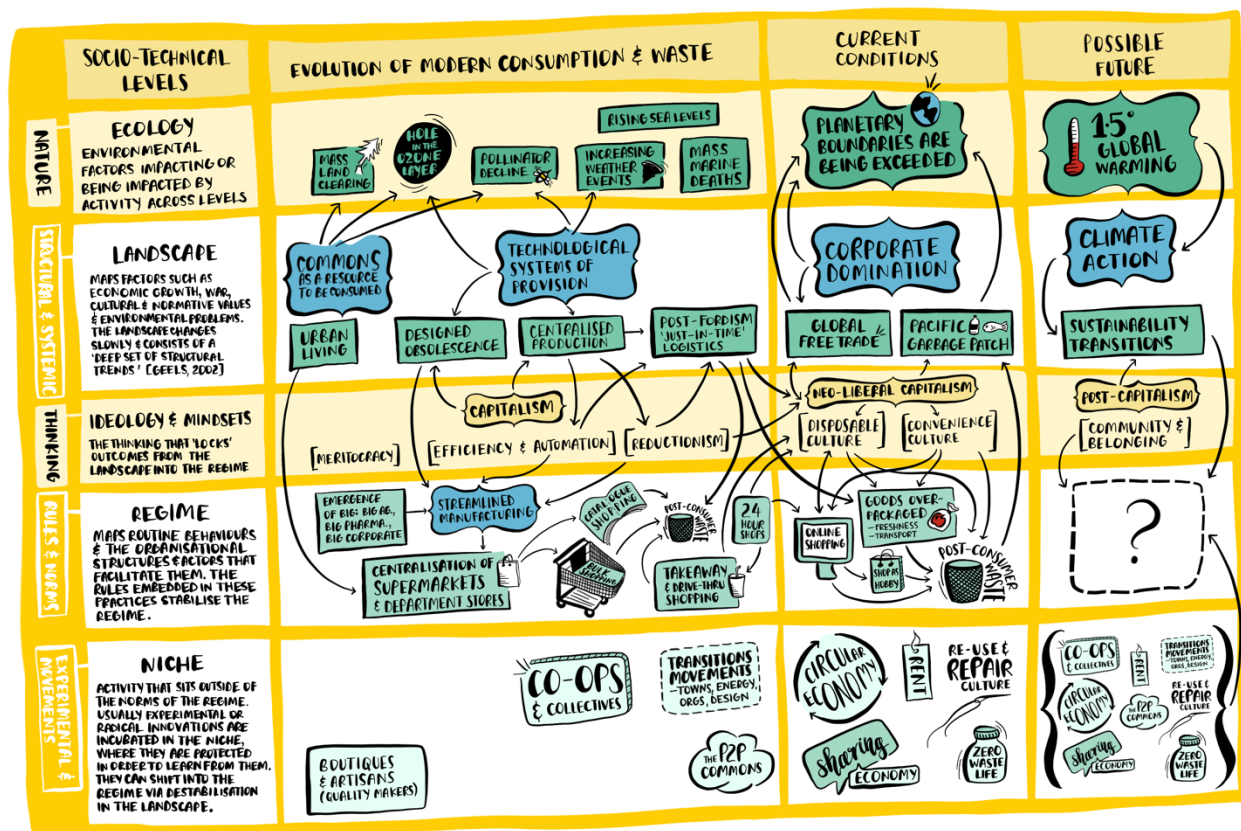
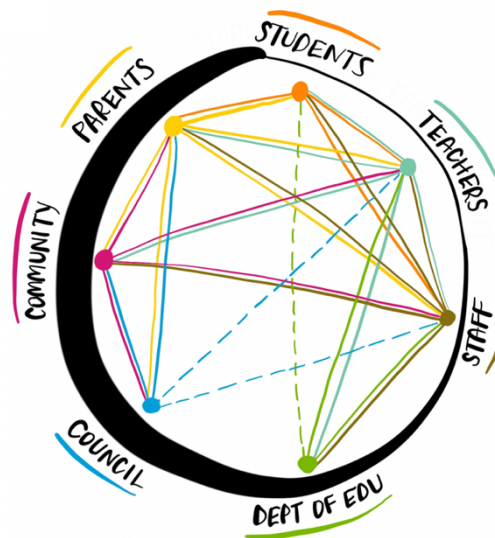


FIGURE 3: MAPPING STAKEHOLDER GROUP CONNECTIONS, FROM THE RETHINK RUBBISH PROJECT AS PART OF MY PHD



Designing against consumption is perhaps most challenging because post-capitalist narratives are absent from the bulk of Western society, yet it is evident that a compelling narrative for sustainable futures is required to enact transitions (Eisenstein, 2013; Irwin et al., 2015; Monbiot, 2016;). Looking to indigenous cultures and the Global South provides valuable insights into the power of community-based narratives (Escobar, 2018); these cooperative narratives are vastly different to the competitive narratives so prevalent in the West that accelerate consumption by encouraging a growth mentality. Notably, a very different relationship to consumption and waste is also prevalent where communal narratives are more dominant (Escobar, 2018). This most likely arises from deeper ecological connections providing satisfaction separately from consumption; these connections tend to be more prevalent in indigenous and communal cultures. There is much that can be learned from the Global South and indigenous perspectives when crafting new narratives during visioning exercises, particularly when developing the more granular details of a possible sustainable future. This is informing possible future narratives for *Flourishing Fleurieu*, an emergent transitions project in South Australia's Fleurieu Peninsula that is exploring this farming region's struggle with food security.

The 'Everydayness' of the Problems Being Approached in Transitions

Situating sustainability problems in the everyday also provides a granularity to our understanding of wicked problems (Kossoff, 2011; Kossoff et al., 2015). The aforementioned example of single use plastics points to this 'everydayness' in the consumption and waste problems. Mapping these complex problems provides richer understandings of the complicated interwoven network of practices that hold consumer culture in place. There is a significant aspect to consumption that is socially constructed (Baudrillard, 1998; Jackson, 2006; Thorpe, 2012) but the 'everydayness' of contemporary consumption also operates outside of this construct. Baudrillard's (1998) suggestion that consumption is narcissistically driven by the desire to signify success or be perceived in a particular way is challenged by contemporary settings, where needs are satisfied through daily practices coupled with consumption (Manzini, 2006; Manzini & Walker 2008). This 'everydayness' defies Baudrillard's arguments of socially constructed signification, hierarchy, or status—aspects that are far more prevalent in conspicuous consumption than in the consumption of everyday items such as a bar of soap or a sandwich.

Consumption is often analysed as an economic or social function, and it has been argued that design acts like a glue that binds the economics and sociology of consumption together (Wallace, 2018). Analysing

consumption with design's binding ability in mind provides some clarity on the impact of daily practices and reveals new possibilities for design interventions. Mapping the problem of consumption through daily practices reveals its all-encompassing nature; acts of consumption surround how we eat, how we bathe, how we communicate, how we transport ourselves and so on. There is an everydayness to the problem, and the coupling of practices with goods and services presents an opportunity to redesign consumption by detaching it from everyday practices. This is also recognised in Kossoff's 'Domains of the Everyday', where he identifies everyday practices as the locus for more sustainable modes of living (Kossoff, 2011). Changing the culture of our everyday practices—for example shifting from a disposable culture to a reusable culture—could dramatically reduce the impact of everyday consumption.

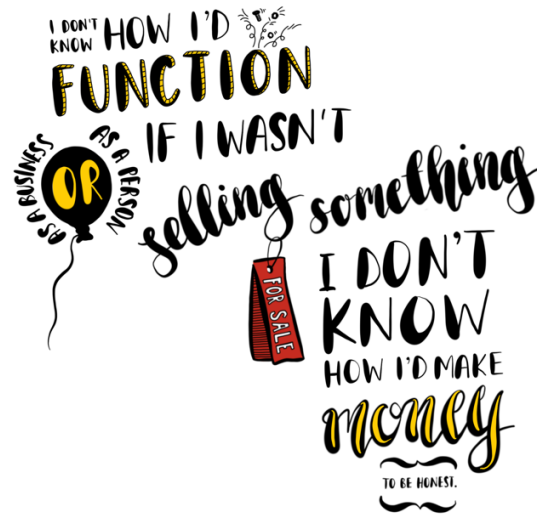
My personal transition to a zero waste lifestyle provides a lived experience that informs how I design interventions to the problems of consumption and waste. But moreover, its political endeavour has become an ethical guide for decision making in my practice. It is evident that the ongoing transformation of my daily practices continues to inform and facilitate the larger transition taking place in my design practice in what Escobar (2018) might describe as an 'onto-ethico-epistemic' political endeavour; it is existential in nature and as such cannot be neatly compartmentalised into personal or professional boxes, despite the attempt in this paper to do so.

POLITICAL SHIFTS: FROM DESIGNER-CONSUMER TO DESIGNER-TRANSFORMED

Political activation is a necessary part of transitioning, and politics are interwoven throughout design for transitions, however in this paper I posit the political quite intentionally between the personal and the professional, as a metaphorical bridge that connects one to the other. Literature from Boehnert (2018), Escobar (2018), and Fry (2011) discusses the politics of design as being a crucial component of design for sustainable futures, and reflection on several design projects from my PhD reveals the role of politics in empowering the praxis of sustainable transitions. I would argue that designers lacking political drive could be more inclined to live one way (sustainably) and work another (unsustainably), whereas a politically active and empowered designer holds greater potential to drive change through their work as a result of their personal values and beliefs. Furthermore, an inability for designers to recognise their political power subsequently limits their agency, and perceptions of power relations in the client-designer relationship can impede action. Recognising that action takes many forms, initially political acts in practice may take a verbal form (conversational/critical questioning) before being realised through a designer's work. The introduction of challenging concepts such as post-capitalist design can be limited in commercial practice (Boehnert, 2018); managing detachment from the economic priorities of the design industry could be key in the political activation required for transitions in design practice.

In his critical essay, *Edugraphology*, Papanek (1999) argues that designers are trained as consumers and I have called these designers 'designer-consumers'. I would further argue that while a designer-consumer can make anything desirable, they lack the required knowledge to design against consumption (see Figure 4). An education steeped in consumerism precedes emergence into an industry that requires the acceleration of consumption. Industry experience then reinforces the designer-consumer mentality, and the feedback loop between industry and institutions reinforces the designer-consumer approach in education. Following this argument, if the designer-consumer designs for consumption, what kind of designer designs against it? Designing against consumption can create a double bind for designers with a consumer mindset, rather it is what I call the 'designer-transformer' who performs in this space. Education in post-capitalist design is still lacking (and barely exists outside of a PhD) however deep engagement with theories of consumption, power, change and social practices leads to an expanded understanding of the culpability and capability of design. I propose that commitments made to shift daily practices, ways of thinking and approaches to design are all political acts that play a necessary role in a practice's transition, and combined can prompt more intentional moves towards transition design projects that lead to the emergence of the designer-transformer.

FIGURE 4: EXCERPT FROM A PRACTITIONER INTERVIEW CONDUCTED AS PART OF MY PHD RESEARCH



PROFESSIONAL: THE ONGOING PROCESS OF TRANSITIONING AND LEARNING

The *Rethink Rubbish* project emerged from my zero waste transition, and in collaboration with primary school teachers explores a scaling up of a small and personal zero waste approach into classroom settings. This project drew insights from an earlier (failed) attempt at a disruptive/transition design project, *Encore*, that aimed to create a circular and sharing economy through a subscription service for fashion accessories. Whilst it was a great project to participate in, on reflection I was just a greener shade of designer-consumer and had not transformed enough as a practitioner to sufficiently contribute. The project was also impeded by street closures impacting its brick and mortar location, and timing-related setbacks that affected participant recruitment. Greater agility in reading the project and the participants and adjusting the approach accordingly would have been beneficial, but ultimately, I believe the collaborative team tried to do too much too soon. We did not allow ourselves flexibility when we needed it, and perhaps as a group we did not understand the role that time plays in projects of this nature. I cannot help but wonder what would have happened had we explored this project with greater temporal-flexibility in mind? This was a significant learning opportunity in designing behaviour change as a slow process rather than a fast one. As my transition continues, I recognise how critical temporality is in designing interventions for transitions as opposed to standalone projects for pre-determined design briefs. Transitions involve shifting gears and what works in the fast-paced world of commercial design does not always translate into the slower pace of transitions.

Rethink Rubbish began with the aim to transition a school to zero waste through a series of workshops that explored the problems of consumption and waste through a number of experiential provocations (see Figure 5). The insights from each workshop informed approaches for the next cycle of activity, and a flexible approach to the workshop facilitation permitted greater responsiveness to the needs of the group at hand. Creating co-learning opportunities between class groups provided a dynamic way of communicating the zero waste transition to younger students, who responded well to learning from their peers. This also appeared to validate the project in their minds; one student remarked how the change seemed more achievable once they saw proof of another class's success. With *Encore's* lessons front of mind, bolstering the workshops with a significant allocation of open time also created space for student consultation and emergent projects.

Rethink Rubbish explores big change achieved through small actions, and the endeavour to address student behaviours around consumption and waste was more successful in some classes than others. Some students believed their individual behaviours were the key, some teachers felt that their classroom's

proximity to the garden made a difference, and the data collected on the use of the zero waste jars suggests that those classrooms with an activated teacher/student who championed change were the most successful at minimising their waste. For the duration of 2018 all classes used a zero waste jar to keep their landfill waste visible, but there is still more work to be done to culturally embed this change. The project timeline has recently been extended and new possibilities have emerged from this additional time. A revised vision for the project shifts the school's aim from 'zero waste transition' to 'state leader in sustainability', and new projects are emerging that explore how connections to the curriculum could foster the continued teaching of sustainable life skills.

FIGURE 5: EXPERIENTIAL PROVOCATIONS AND EMERGENT PROJECTS, FROM THE RETHINK RUBBISH PROJECT AS PART OF MY PHD



One such project aims to shift students from consumers to contributors by building connections between the classroom, the garden and the canteen. Each class will plan, plant and prepare a meal for their peers, they will serve it to them and will later be in receipt of a meal that is planned, planted, prepared and served to them by another class group. The project draws connections back to the curriculum through traditional lessons such as maths, economics, biology and life sciences all of which are contextualised in the garden and kitchen, and in the process, students will also learn sustainable life skills around food production and preparation while practicing reciprocity, cooperation, planning and project management. Student participation in experiential sustainability learning nurtures values of respect and care that could lead to lifelong pro-environmental behaviours (Holmes et al., 2011; Stern et al., 1999).

Throughout the *Rethink Rubbish* project I have used my voice and design authorship for political ends, and in turn my practice has continued to transition. I would argue that the project is an emergent outcome of my transition to zero waste and conscious consumption, and feedback from teachers and students

revealed their belief that my behaviours inspired their transition. Being embedded in the school community and engaging with students regularly permitted greater transparency in my own behaviours, which unbeknownst to me were being carefully observed by the students. One student commented that she knew I really meant what I said because I always wore the same pair of earrings, the same sneakers and carried the same bag. To her, this was testament that I had been honest in communicating my own consumption habits. The project's success hinging on my own transformation is subjective, but upon reflection on the feedback from participants, I could argue that my demonstration of a zero waste lifestyle provided additional leadership for the changes occurring in the school. I posit that these findings show how a political shift from designer-consumer to designer-transformed can influence outcomes. Furthermore, this project's close ties to theory and its highly collaborative approaches have been key to the workshops' success, and to the identification of emergent projects that can help achieve the school's future vision.

Locating Transitions in Practice

Transition design is still largely academic and practice is in its infancy, particularly in Australia. In the US one well documented approach is underway, *Transition Ojai*; a (former) joint venture between Carnegie Mellon University and FlipLabs that aims to build a community's resilience to climate change (Hamilton, 2018; Irwin, 2018). Much like *Rethink Rubbish* and *Flourishing Fleurieu*, the *Transition Ojai* project has benefitted from incubation in academia and practice and is now being managed by FlipLabs. Conversations with designers attempting to practice transition design reveal how it is emerging in their work, and how distinct the challenges can be for employees. Designer-employees wanting to redirect their daily labour towards transition design could start by verbalising the need for transitions and by asking critical questions of their employers and peers. Power dynamics can play a significant role in stifling authorship in workplaces, and one designer's demand for greater criticality in the work and workplace reveals their practice of transition design faces a class-struggle. Idea counterpower is evident in research they conducted that interrogates how the company's product might be reinforcing marginalisation of minority groups. A kind of economic counterpower is evidenced in another designer's negotiation of mandatory time for transition design as part of their design agency employment contract. Another practitioner interviewed as part of my PhD research is still navigating the 'how', and feels they need further knowledge/training before their practice can truly activate. These stories reveal a practice is slowly surfacing outside of academia, and signify practitioners' commitments to making space for transitions, a curatorial process I believe has been key in my practice.

Curating space

What takes place in a transitioning practice could be described as a process of curation. In an art gallery curation involves careful planning and consideration of the interactions between works that share space, and the process bears similarities here. Creating space for the work of transition design to inhabit leads to the old practice becoming enveloped by the new. In this sense, transition design is less an adjoining camp to existing practice and more like a circle that is drawn around a practice, with consideration to what exists inside. Within its boundary live a number of things, each requiring space and attention to flourish. As the curation in my practice focusses on transition design this aspect of the practice will thrive, and in the process the old practice will recede. As with systemic change, transition design does not 'negate the old, but [rather it] contains and supersedes it' (Eisenstein, 2013 p. 38), and this notion of enveloping the old better communicates the changes taking place (see Figure 6).

Curating this space has involved a process of letting go: of some clients, some projects, some thinking, however in doing so there has been no disciplinary divorce as such. Practicing design for transitions does not negate my practice of communication or interaction design, rather it utilises my knowledge of both. It envelopes them, and changes how I think about them; their power is harnessed as part of design for transitions which continues to redirect their focus. Communication design as a redirected practice can make sustainable futures desirable (Boehnert, 2018; Fry, 2009) and post-capitalist applications of interaction design could support transitions (Tonkinwise, 2014). Eventually these redirected practices of communication and interaction design will simply form part of my practice of design for transitions,

superseding their original modes of practice. As this transformation continues, it is anticipated that a reliance on stabilisation funding from commercial projects will decrease as funding for community-based transition design increases.

FIGURE 6: CURATING SPACE FOR TRANSITION DESIGN BY ENVELOPING THE OLD WITH THE NEW: THIS DRAFT MODELLING CONCEPT IS BEING EXPLORED WITHIN MY PHD RESEARCH AS AN APPROACH TO MANAGING TRANSITIONS IN PRACTICE.



The funding balancing-act is currently being explored through *Flourishing Fleurieu*, where a number of local circular economy food and farming innovation projects form part of the vision for this community. The short-term aim is to open a food hub that is supported by region-specific social enterprises that can decrease the food hub's reliance on funding through grants. Curation has permitted space for this exploration to occur in the hopes that documenting this community-based work may also provide valuable insights into financing transitions.

During curation the focus of a practice is changed by intentionally seeking out projects with transition-potential. A set of determining factors help guide the decision-making process, and the more closely aligned to sustainable futures the better. In my practice I remain open to standalone design projects for financial stabilisation, however I am more cognisant of what these projects are and how they might contribute more broadly to transitions. For example, designing a series of handbooks about self-care and activating change for changemakers is a standalone communication design project for a cause-client that feels conceptually linked to the work I am doing in transitions. An interaction design project that aids in architectural specification of materials feels less linked to transitions, yet it has been redirected from a series of unsustainable printed manuals to an agile digital product to increase accuracy in published data, and its profits help fund community-based work within my practice. Furthermore, conversations about the transition-potential of this large organisation have started. Despite the latter project's commercial face, it is

part of the transition, primarily because I have asked for it to be. Open communication with current and potential clients and collaborators facilitates larger conversations about transitions, and these form an important part of this curation process. Without such discussions the transition-potential in a project or an organisation remains speculative.

Transition design is slow and patient work (Irwin, 2018) and there is an art to saying no in favour of the slow. The curation process is likely altered by a number of different factors from one practice to the next and a number of tensions arise from it, many of which appear to be financial and/or ethical. Striking a balance can be a challenge in itself and curating the transition in an established practice takes time, but open conversations permit qualification of the possibilities, from this comes a more informed process of curation.

Tensions in the Existential Practice of Design for Transitions

Navigating the pain points in a practice's transition can be challenging, and there are obvious tensions between the need for financial security and the desire for utopia. But there is no pardon for design on matters of sustainability, and these tensions must be managed in order to practice design for transitions. Practitioners who are driven by deadlines and budgets in commercial practice may struggle with the ambiguity of design for transitions, in which projects tend to be emergent and often have imperceptible end-points. Patience, resilience and determination are required to comfortably experience the temporality of design for transitions. What follows is a discussion of four pain points that have been navigated during the first two years of transition: the process of sacrifice, the structural and financial changes made to the practice to support the ongoing transition, the transitioning professional identity, and the critical boldness required in briefing.

Sacrifice by design—a commitment to change

To transition a practice is to design a necessary process of sacrifice, the first part of which is making a commitment to change. This process will differ from practice to practice, what remains constant is the eventual need to say no to 'defuturing' projects. Should suggestions of alternative approaches, redirections or strategies for change be deemed unachievable, earnest consideration of the divestment of labour must begin. Every practice in transition will likely experience the need to say no—sometimes to the kinds of projects that may have historically defined them—in order to create space for the kinds of projects that will define them in the future. It is in this metaphoric space that a designer becomes empowered and enabled. Projects do not exist in this space, rather it is open and held, filled only with possibility. If this process of sacrifice is not designed it can feel unmanageable as it may involve letting go of clients, projects, or both, and with this can come a sense of loss or grief. If the process of sacrifice is designed by the practitioner making the sacrifices then it can be managed, chosen and performed in ways that create the necessary space for transition design. Feeling some sense of control over the process can help alleviate any sense of pain, loss or grief.

The pressure of 'slow' on regular cash flow

The economic argument is one of the loudest, and I must acknowledge several privileges that have reduced risk exposure in my practice. Throughout the duration of my PhD (corollary my practice's transition) I have been in receipt of a scholarship stipend that has provided a safety net of sorts. Slower transition design projects have been pursued securely, in-part from the knowledge that this stipend would cover some of my living expenses. This PhD research has also facilitated the pursuit of theoretical and practical knowledge needed to perform transitions, including increased eco-literacy and an understanding of economic possibilities within ecological contexts. Further to this, I have also run a sustainable design practice for more than a decade, and my clients are (for the most part) aware of my politics, which I believe has made some of my conversations about transition design easier. The misaligned few were sacrificed in order to create space.

Whilst these privileges have reduced my risk and exposure, there are still financial implications to transition design that I have had to consider. The longer delivery window requires a different approach to invoicing and payment cycles as monthly invoicing is not always applicable, and milestone invoicing can

leave long lean periods between invoices. What has made this process financially manageable has been the ongoing development of standalone projects as outlined in earlier discussions on curating space. Continued work in the ‘greener things’ space has provided financial stabilisation, however this work is being done with a curatorial approach to ensure it is transition design that thrives in the practice ongoing. At times these stabilising steps can feel like a step backwards, but maintaining a focus on developing standalone projects that are connected to future visions or that have transition-potential makes this process less discouraging.

Working in transitions requires an openness to change within your own practice structures, particularly during transitional periods, and developing flexible working arrangements has increased the agility of my practice as a business. This has included the combined use of co-working spaces and a home-based studio to reduce premise-related financial commitments and engaging in more flexible working relationships with sole-practitioners/consultants rather than having employees with fixed expenses. Nurturing long term collaborative relationships with other practitioners also opens up opportunities to expose them to transition design and provides the agility needed for team-kairos (Greek for the right thing at the right time). This is building a network of transition-savvy designers around me, facilitating strategic workflow management, and creating time for development of transition design projects while overseeing standalone projects.

The professional identity in flux

Transitioning a practice also leads to a transitioning professional identity, and the pressure to present the right kind of professional narrative can be all encompassing. The digital landscape of professional social media such as LinkedIn, Medium, Behance and other similar sites demand a biography that presents a clear narrative of our work. In these settings, professional standing is often tied to completion—a body of work rather than work in progress, having transitioned rather than being in transition. Resilience and humility are required in order to be transparently in flux in this professional narrative.

Bravery in briefing

Design’s co-dependency on Business can impact decision making, and without addressing the financial commitments of a practice (limiting employee ‘mouths to feed’, reducing overheads et cetera) this co-dependency could lead to saying yes to projects that infringe on the space allocated to transition design. Saying yes is a design industry habit, and the underlying aims of a pre-determined industry brief are rarely redirected. To break the habit of saying yes, critical questioning must sit bravely between a brief and the response to it. This criticality and the possibility of saying no to a brief must become a conscious practice. Like any change in habits this can pose challenges, and in this instance, those challenges often have financial implications (hence the concept of sacrifice raised earlier). The concern of financial commitment looms large for many practitioners, and if ever there was an argument for a smaller practice base with increased agility this is it. The importance of criticality cannot be understated; critical questioning, challenging the desired outcomes of briefs and engaging in conscious deliberation over the suitability of a brief can change the power dynamics of the client-designer relationship. This bold political act requires empowerment, but brave designers will reap the rewards of curated space for the work of transition design and a relocation of power in relation to client-fed projects.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed several aspects of transition: a personal, political and professional transformation, transitioning a practice while exploring transition design projects, and an overview of four accompanying tensions that arise from this process. It has presented a case for curating space, designing a process of sacrifice, for allocating adequate time to transitions and for being open to business structure changes that can increase a practice’s agility and make financial sacrifices manageable. Moreover, it reveals the existential nature of design for transitions, demonstrating the important role that personal and political transformations can play in the process of transitioning a design practice.

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