

Multiplicity Through the Multi-Level Perspective in Design for Transitions

This short paper acts as a provocation for the role of the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) in Design for Transitions. It explores Design for Transitions as a practice of assemblage, in which multiplicity (a key enabler of this complexity-led approach) is realised through a kind of “stickiness” that the MLP provides. The paper presents a number of ways in which multiplicity is engaged, with particular attention paid to the role of knowledge through theoretical multiplicity. This focus aims to demonstrate the wide range of theoretical knowledge that is frequently applied through, within, or around the MLP in order to make sense of systems-oriented design. The paper briefly attends to the way this multiplicity compounds in actions, where knowledge is applied through multiple levels, stages, contexts, actors, scales, actions and outcomes. This initial provocation serves to seed an idea that is being nurtured and expanded through continuing research.

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The Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) (Geels 2002) offers a framework for understanding the dynamics of transitions across the micro-meso-macro (niche-regime-landscape) levels of a system. Transition studies explore this (primarily) through historical perspectives on transitions in socio-technical systems, and the MLP is common across the field. In design, the MLP is applied in overlapping and complementary design approaches to transitions. Used for “wicked problem” mapping in Transition Design (Irwin et al 2022), for mapping, analysis and ideation for transition-pathways and action-ecosystems in Design for Transitions (DFT) (Wallace 2019, 2021; Wallace et al. 2024) and is integrated with four design innovation stages in Design for Sustainability Transitions (Gaziulusoy 2019; Gaziulusoy and Brezet 2015). My adaptation of MLP theory responds to gaps in application, where complex, influential thinking patterns (people’s mindsets, attitudes, values, beliefs) are easily overlooked, and where nature is easily “side-lined” in the absence of an explicit place-based living systems context (Wallace 2019; 2021). Adding “ecology” and “mentalité” levels to complement the MLP’s niche-regime-landscape provides people and place as sites of transition, bringing a complexity-led situatedness to the MLP’s use within design.

My MLP-based tools have been applied within and responded to multiple contexts, including transitions to circular economies (Wallace 2019), regional food security (Wallace 2021), disciplinary transitions to increased equity, diversity and inclusion (Davis et al. 2022), and Higher Education Institution transitions (Wallace et al. 2024). Each re-contextualisation responds to the need for place-based, strategic, contextualised and coordinated action. The mentalité and ecology levels are scaffolded by explicit temporal perspectives (historical evolution, current conditions, multiple possible futures), offering strategic temporality to the design of multi-level, multi-stage interventions. This is described by Fry (2020) as “designing in the medium of time” and integrates ontological designing (Willis 2006) to critically engage with the ways designing for transitions recursively reshapes how we are in the world (Tonkinwise 2023).

DFT demands competencies that are enabled through an assemblage approach, in which collections of elements (people, places, theories, and so on) create a kind of “relational resonance” and, in doing so, enable dynamic responses to a context as it unfolds (Nail 2017). Elements are not a collection of parts, nor a whole, but rather a “multiplicity” (in Deleuze and Guattarian terms) that can mix and remix in plural ways (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). The dynamism and

relationality of this multiplicity could also be understood through Barad's (2007) notion of "intra-actions" that describes emergence through entanglements with an onto-ethico-epistemological inseparability. DFT assemblages are filled with these entanglements (e.g., power, change, people, place), and the multiplicity's resonance enables critical, pragmatic action. While there is more to unpack here than this paper's short format allows, "multi-level-ness" and "multi-stage-ness" offer initial jumping-off points for exploring multiplicity and the MLP in DFT.

2 MULTIPLICITY AND ASSEMBLAGE

The multiplicity concept derives from Deleuze and Guattari's expressions of assemblage, in which elements of an assemblage are held together by something that sits in the "in-between" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). This paper proposes that the MLP provides this "in-between" as a kind of "stickiness" that activates possibilities for action by offering a theoretical spine for the complex/chaotic "multi-mess" of DFT to hang from. As a "borrowed" theory from beyond design, the MLP is underutilised; it provides a means for mapping transition dynamics across time horizons but could be used more critically to strategically inform interventions. This paper theorises MLP for design and proposes its structure as this central "sticky" element in DFT assemblages. This should not be confused with "pluralism" (despite a co-existence of different elements), nor merely "multiple" (despite the many elements). "Multiplicity" (and the MLP's "sticky in-between-ness") properly account for the dynamic way elements of an assemblage mix, match and resonate to enable more and different actions (see Fig. 1).

My expanded uses of the MLP in DFT projects revealed it can offer more than a view of system and transition dynamics. For design it serves as a theory of change that also provides a "sticky" structure for critical, designerly, systems thinking and doing; enabling participatory explorations of the complex interdependencies of systemic problems alongside possible actions.

3 MULTIPLICITY AND THE MLP

Reflecting on my previous work on DFT projects has revealed the various purposes of the MLP:

- Identification of leverage points: the MLP structure provides scaffolding for explorations of levers of change at each "level" of the system, enabling better articulations of a project's theory of change

- Data analysis: the MLP structure facilitates analysis of complex and multi-layered datasets, noted as particularly helpful for data generated through plural processes with different objectives, where datasets were structured (sometimes invisibly) by the MLP, or where data "lives" in a level that is influenced by other levels (e.g., social practices are normalised and stabilised by the rules of the regime, but behaviours relative to practices are influenced by complex thinking patterns in the mentalité)
- Ideating and communicating interventions: ideating action through the MLP and communicating interventions in an action-ecosystem underpinned by the MLP makes strategy and coordination between actions explicit
- Systems storytelling and visualising complex systems dynamics: the MLP can provide a basic narrative structure (levels) and visual language (shapes and arrows) for communicating the dynamics of transitions
- Measurement of interventions and their impact: the MLP can also provide some working criteria for monitoring and measuring the efficacy of interventions in action ecosystems, or within transition pathways (e.g., observing a critical mass of interventions forming a niche-regime)

The following sections provide more detail on the elements of DFT assemblage as a Multiplicity Framework.

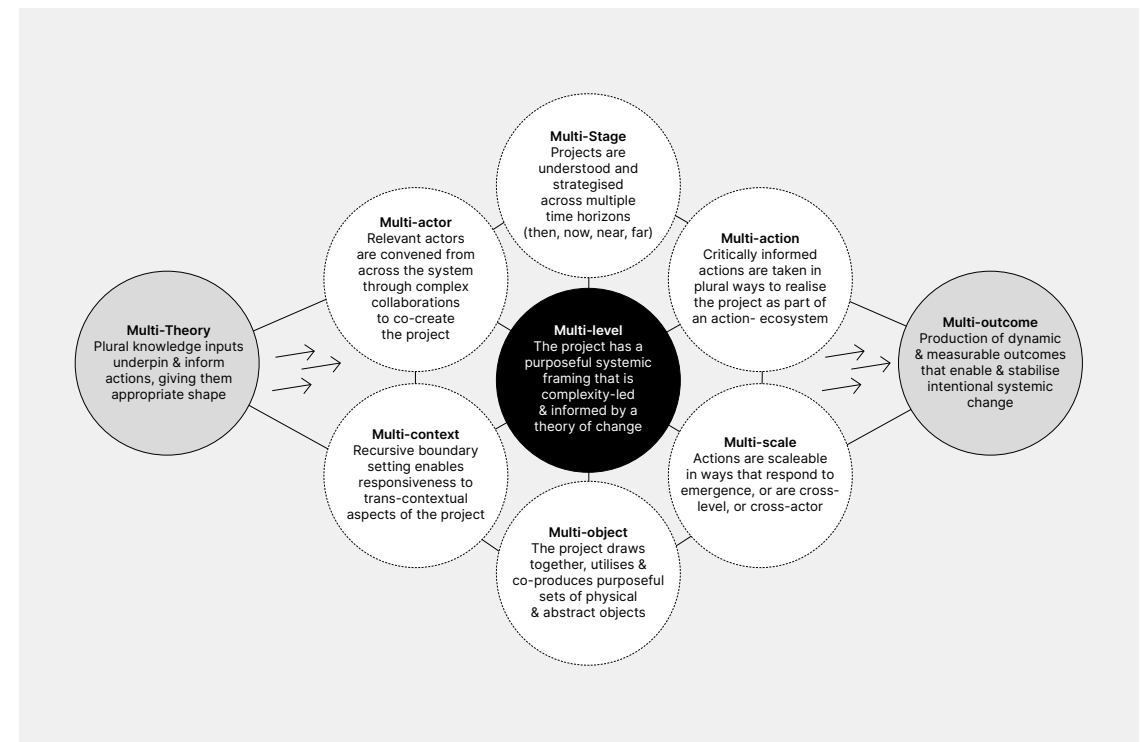


Fig 1. Multiplicity Framework, Niki Wallace, 2025

3.1 Multi-theory

DFT’s transdisciplinary nature demands contextual knowledge of problem spaces, informed by other knowledge and theories. Knowledge of how to act benefits from ecological and economic literacy, critical engagement with social theories, systems thinking and doing, and justice and relationality (Boehnert 2018; Escobar 2018; Willis 2015). The MLP benefits from use in conjunction with other theories that extend the MLP’s “bird’s-eye view”, to better understand how more granular change is unfolding “on the ground”. By synthesising insights drawn through multiple theories, the MLP provides a backdrop against which different ontological lenses can interrogate beyond problems and actions to understand particular dynamics (Geels and Schot 2007; Geels 2010). In my previous projects, a “blended assemblage” approach enabled synthesis through the MLP, using a range of theories, assembled critically for their contextual relevance within each project. Table 1 and Figures 2-4 present multi-theory assemblages with the MLP as a “sticky spine”.

Underpinning design actions with multiple knowledge inputs is crucial for DFT work to be effective. Table 1 demonstrates the theoretical multiplicity needed to inform action in DFT, where complex, systems-oriented design processes necessitate different lenses through which designers make sense of observed patterns they design with/against. Without this, the risk of reinforcing the problems in which we seek to intervene is too high, and the ontological consequences of this risk are too significant. Multiplicity in DFT assembles knowledge inputs as a kind of ontological risk buffer.

Assemblages reflect the contextual nature of knowledge inputs. In Figures 2-4, three multi-theory assemblages illustrate how the MLP provides a “stickiness” amidst contextually relevant knowledge inputs.

3.2 Multi-context

The MLP and DFT have transcontextual aspects in that they occupy and affect multiple contexts in simultaneous/plural ways (Bateson 2022). The MLP levels present overlapping contexts in which other theories are applied for sensemaking (e.g., social practice theory is applied to practices enacted in the regime or disrupted in the niche, which occur in the home, workplace, neighbourhood and so on, as seen in eating, which spans all these contexts). Similarly, DFT actions can adopt this same MLP structure (e.g., a living lab in the niche might be embedded in an institution and host pop-up events in public/community spaces to experiment with a practice that is part of everyday life in the home, which is situated in the regime).

Theory	Key literature for DFT	Purpose within DFT	Discipline
X-Curve	Hebinck et al. 2002	To observe the dynamic between innovation and exnovation in transitions. To track/monitor progress in transition “arcs”.	Transition Studies
Social Practice Theory	Shove et al. 2012 Hargreaves et al. 2012 Keller et al. 2022 Kuijer 2017	For attending to social minutiae and designing interventions in social practices that aim to shift practice norms in the regime. Using social practices as units of design.	Social Sciences
Complex Adaptive Systems Leadership	Zivkovic 2015 Lindberg and Schneider 2012	For attending to social systems (particularly communities), emergence and systems where actors have agency to self-organise and adapt to embrace/resist change. For monitoring systemic interventions as action-ecosystems.	Systems and Complexity Sciences
General and Living Systems Theories	Macy 1991 Meadows 1997, 2008 Bateson 1972 Mang and Reed 2012 Orr 2002	For baseline understandings of system dynamics. For attending to living systems, through ecological literacy that understands potential impacts on nature and how to amplify regenerative actions.	Systems and Complexity Sciences
Futures and Strategic Foresight	Dunne and Raby 2024 Dator et al. 2013 Furtado 2024	To frame processes that speculate about other possible futures.	Future Studies
Power	Avelino 2017 Lukes 2005 Akama 2015	For attending to structural and social power relations both in the more abstract form, e.g., in problem mapping, but also more concretely in participatory processes	Social Sciences
Values and framing	Allee 2008 Holmes et al 2012	For attending to the complexity in the mentalité, where the ways people think and feel about things influence their behaviour in the regime.	Social Sciences
Capabilities, needs and satisfiers	Sen 1993 Max-Neef 2017	To better understand the enablers and disablers of people, meeting their needs through regenerative and restorative means.	Social Sciences
Relationality and Justice	Plumwood 2005 Escobar 2018 Yunkaporta 2019 Kimmerer 2013 Costanza-Chock 2020	To structure care into the work, nurture relationships in generative and decolonial ways, attend to the grief of letting go as part of exnovation in transitions and enact justice through transitions.	Indigenous Knowledge, Social Sciences and Design

Table 1. Multiplicity theories to complement the MLP in design.

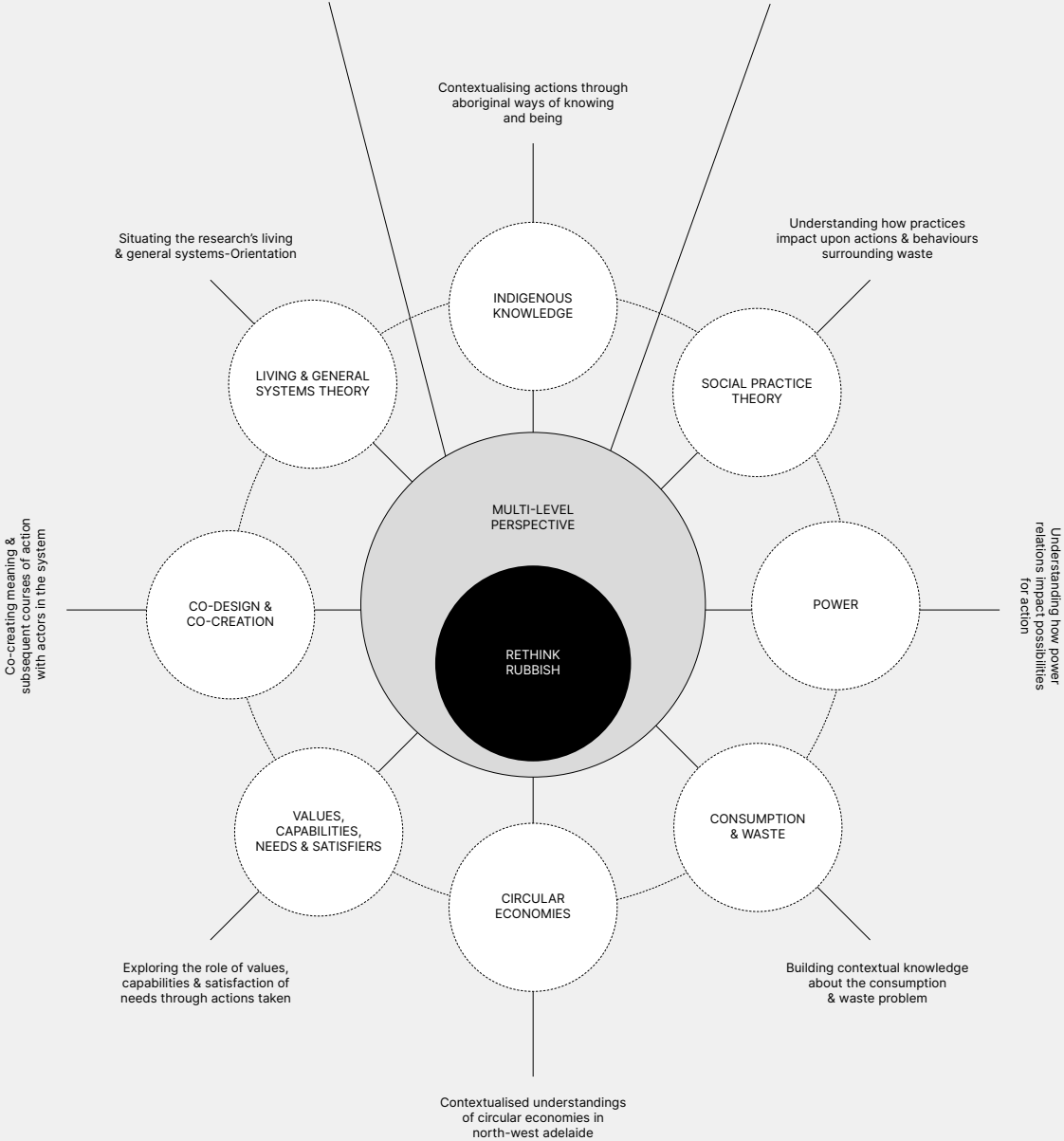
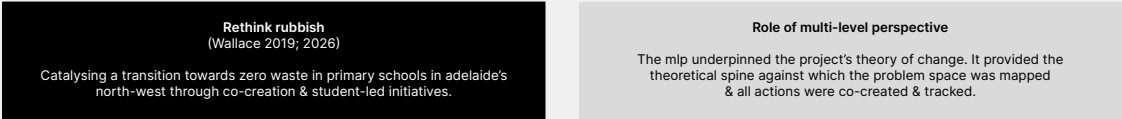


Fig. 2. Rethink Rubbish Multi-theory assemblage, Niki Wallace 2025.

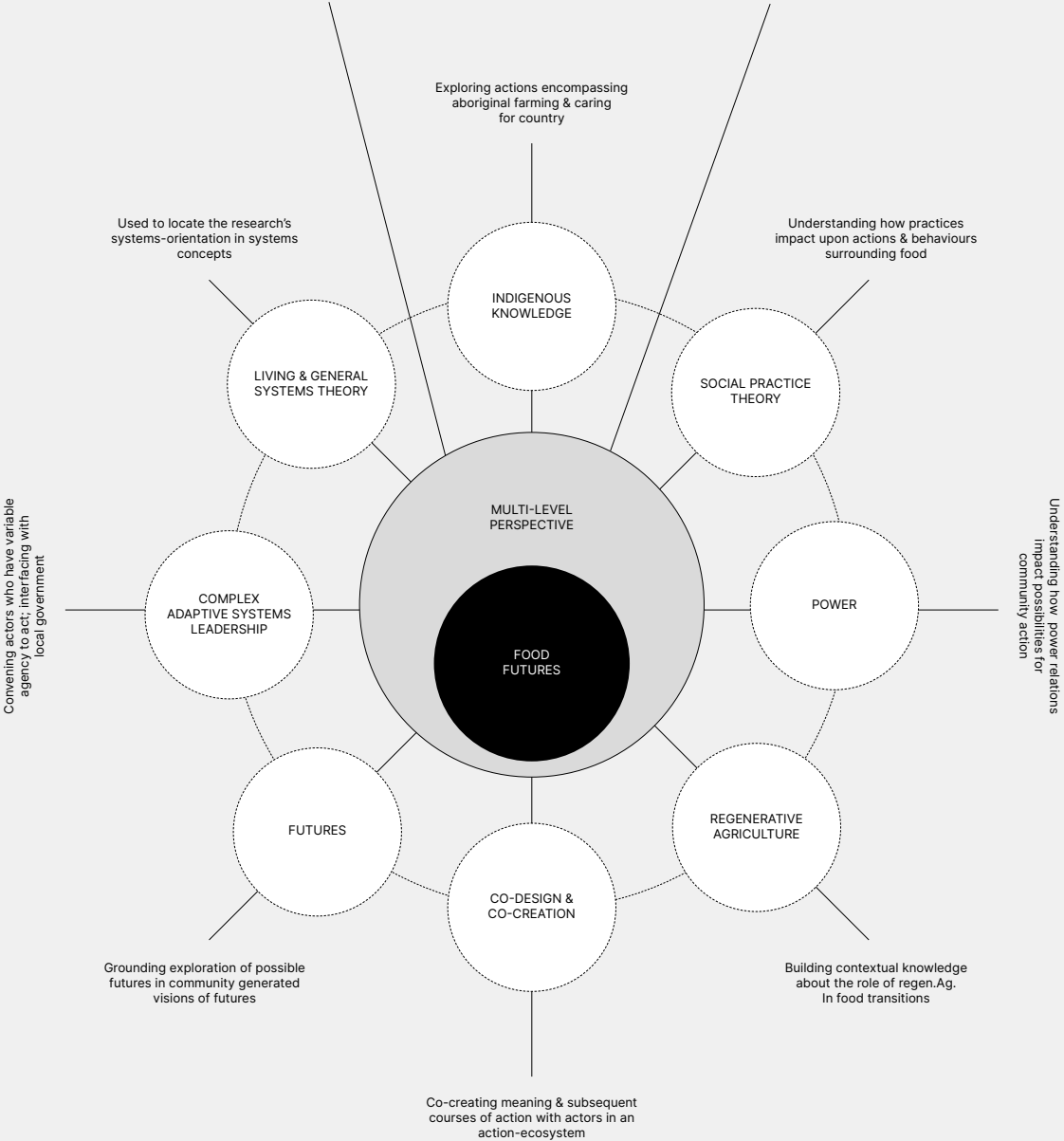
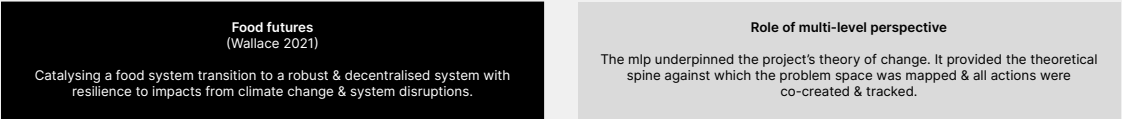


Fig 3. Food Futures Multi-theory assemblage, Niki Wallace 2025.

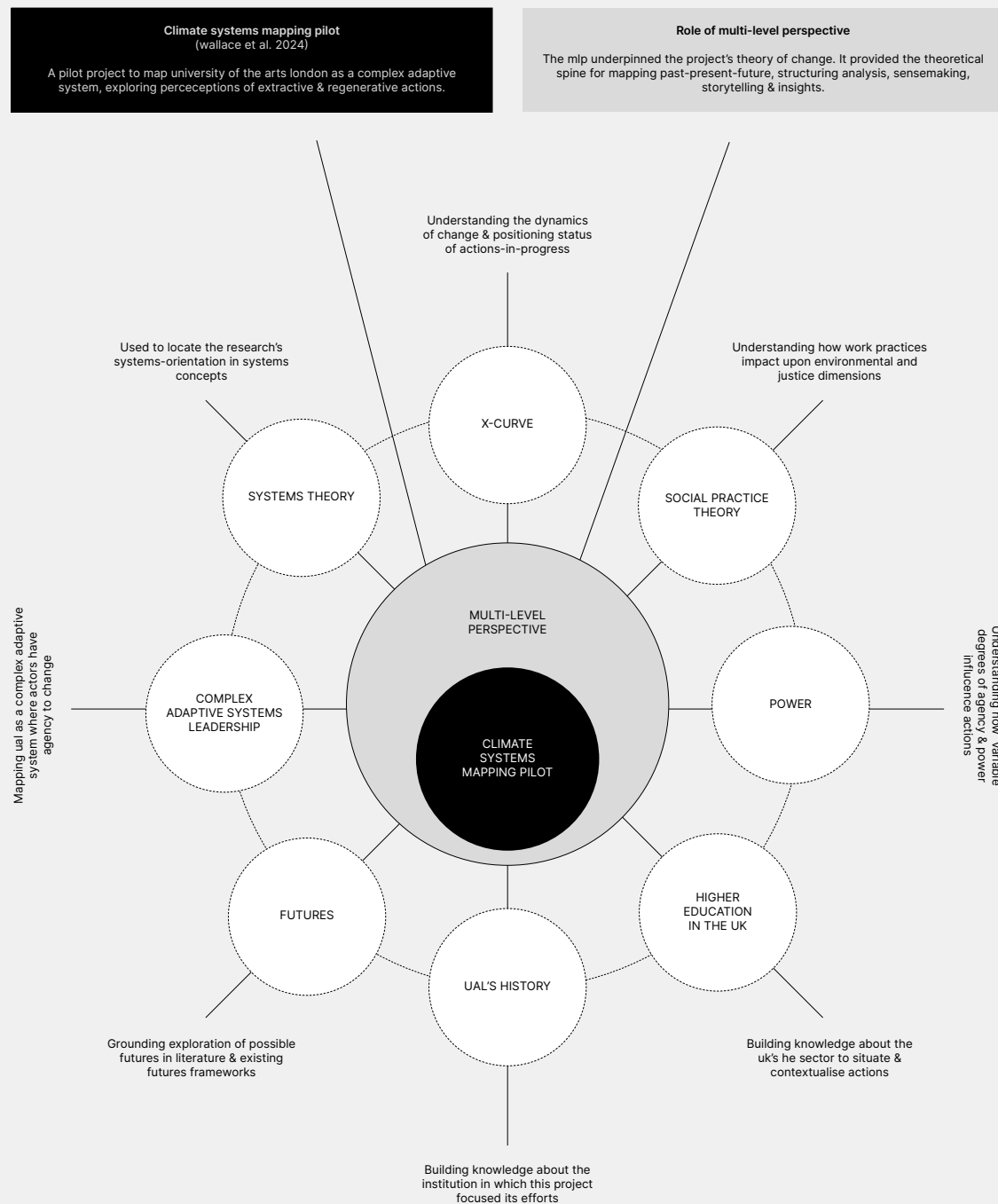


Fig. 4. Climate Systems Mapping Pilot, Multi-theory assemblage, Niki Wallace, 2025.

3.3 Multi-actor

DFT is a multi-actor approach that convenes the complex arrangements of human/more-than-human, organisations, communities and other entities to participate in and collaborate on group processes (Azadegan and Dooley 2021). The MLP provides its “in-between” structure for designers to understand the roles and relations between actors and to increase the visibility of the actors, supporting their self-organisation. In DFT, relationships between actors are explicit and experiential. Participation is high and demands an attentiveness to boundary-spanning, translation, care (and more). Designers act as intermediaries, organising and convening participants, proactively mediating group dynamics and navigating power differentials. This demands relational skills and knowledge that also draw on the multiplicity of theories from

3.4 Multi-scale

Complex collaboration occurs across levels and sub-systems; i.e., different parts of an action-ecosystem engage in different scopes of work that have some level of coordination within the action-ecosystem (see, for example, Zivkovic 2017). E.g., small-scale community experiments are complemented by larger-scale work with a municipality. Multi-scale approaches, when informed and tasked to do so, can amplify justice in plural and coordinated ways that permit the scaling out (replicating) and scaling up (structuring) of justice as part of transitions.

3.5 Multi-object

DFT assemblages gather, use and make objects that enable different processes and actions. Objects enable DFT actions and can be tangible (e.g., artefacts) or abstract (e.g., experiences). Objects relate across an assemblage (to other objects and to other aspects of the assemblage) to create a resonance that would not otherwise be possible. In this sense, assembling objects is a critical process; they serve a clear purpose within research, design or implementation.

3.6 Multi-action

DFT generates action-ecosystems, and its designerly processes are also multi-action. Both forms of action benefit from the “in-between” provided by the MLP. The MLP informs designerly actions, including mapping, analysis, identifying leverage points, visioning/backcasting, strategising, co-creating interventions and pathways, and systems storytelling. Action-ecosystems underpinned by the MLP have a structure for measuring dynamically unfolding change. MLP-Action-ecosystems are multi-level, multi-stage, multi-theory, multi-context, multi-actor, multi-object and multi-scale, and in “multi-action” we see

the multiplicity compounding to demonstrate why assemblage enables DFT as a complexity-led approach.

3.7 *Multi-outcome*

In being multi-action (and the other multiple “multis” embedded within), DFT is also multi-outcome and again, benefits from the MLP’s “in-between-ness”. The plural nature of action-ecosystems produces multiple outputs that serve multiple purposes or affect change in multiple ways across the MLP’s levels. This can be seen through the x-Curve (Hebinck et al. 2022), where outcomes arise from phasing out unsustainable activity (exnovation) and phasing in regenerative activity (innovation), thereby producing multi-outcome dynamics.

4 CONCLUSION

This paper proposes that Design for Transitions is a practice of assemblage that draws together different elements that inform and enable action as a “multiplicity”. It argues that the MLP provides an “in-between-stickiness” that creates resonance between its elements and enables action. The paper outlines how this occurs in DFT as “multiplicity through activity” that is multi-level, multi-stage, multi-context, multi-actor, multi-scale, multi-object, multi-action and multi-outcome. It also provides an early articulation of multiplicity in DFT, which is being expanded through ongoing research into DFT assemblages for systemic interventions and the MLP’s role in shaping these actions.

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Niki’s research and practice focus on design’s role in transitions with a particular interest in complex collaboration and the design of systemic interventions that attend to justice in processes of change. Niki is an AHRC Innovation Scholar in partnership with the Design Council and a reader in Design for Transitions at the University of the Arts London.

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Barbers, Shamans and Designers:
Deontological Transitions Beyond Capitalism

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