

# Resilience in a Convivial Society

## Some Possible Innovations, Activities and Opportunities for Design

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### Abstract

Much is changing in the world; our society, economy, attitude to ecology and our way of living is being redefined. In this, design will and must redefine itself to remain relevant and of value.

This paper will explore the values of resilience (Ward & Dixon 2007) and conviviality (Illich 1973) for designing in a society in transformation. It will, furthermore, seek to determine the role of the Designer as Citizen (Margolin 2008) working in the flow of our changing society. It will propose, as an innovative context for designing, the notion of the experienced environment as a way to re-connect these values. It will propose the prospect of a more holistic attitude in the designer of empathy, humility and respect when engaged in design activities with a wider audience than that currently experienced by our profession.

In manifesting and discussing these values and their related contexts the paper will draw upon analysis and reflection of recently completed projects where these issues are being explored through tangible design engagements with community and society.

Furthermore, this paper will propose an outline of some evolved coherent elements of a new educational approach; the intention being to add to the wider debate in enabling significant potential for growth and adaption for design activity thereby creating value, of an innovative nature, in designing for transformation in and with our changing society and also encouraging the creation of new opportunities for design and the potential for the designer as citizen.

**KEYWORDS:** citizen designer, resilience, conviviality, flow, experienced environment

### The Paper

#### **A Changing Role and Challenge for Design and Designers**

Contemporary society is exploring how we should live. Given this we should be exploring how we should design.

In bringing together the values of resilience and conviviality as a foundation on which to build a new role for designers and designing in a society in transformation and the resulting hypothesis

of a Citizen designer working in the flow of the experienced environment will, by nature, require a re-definition of the context in which design takes place and a reconstruction of the skills and attitudes of those designers working in such domains.

In this we should understand, respect and reinforce what designers are “good at” and consider a realignment of this to a changed purpose of design. It would seem not too disrespectful to assume that as designers we have, hard wired, within us the overwhelming desire to not just theorise but also to take action, we are comfortable with change and for things to be in flux. By this I mean thinking about something enough to be able to, with reasonable certainty, go out and try it and by doing so gain knowledge to re-think and refine it. We may then think therefore of design as a flow, if you will, where one iteration informs the other which again informs the other towards that which is increasingly tangible and useful in the context of that which it is being created. Furthermore, we are used to relying on intuition and impulse, learning in the flow of action, acting within the flow of living, able to easily construct maps, journeys, multiple scenarios and to tell stories. These seem to construct attributes of, perhaps unique, value in being a productive citizen in and for being a designer in a society in transformation. Designers, for the most part it seems, have the innate attitudes and skills to do good.

Lest our ego’s run away with us it remains important, not least when working with others, to remember that designers can’t change the world but can be a part of the world that is changing and that “designers must work in this world rather than about or upon it” (Wodiczko 1999).

### **Some Contexts and Definitions of the Component Parts of this Paper; Resilience, Conviviality, the Citizen Designer, the Experienced Environment and Designing in the Flow of Living**

**Resilience:** Resilience is the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change. In a resilient system, individual nodes – like people, companies, communities and even whole countries are able to draw on support and resources from elsewhere, but they’re also self sufficient enough to provide for their essential needs in an emergency. (Homer-Dixon 2006). A resilient system is adaptable and diverse. It has some redundancy built in. A resilient perspective acknowledges that change is constant and prediction difficult in a complex, dynamic world. Resilience thinking is a new lens for looking at the natural world we are embedded in and the man made world we have imposed upon it. (Ward, 2007)

**Conviviality:** Ivan Illich maintains that conviviality involves 'autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment'. In convivial institutions (and the societies they make up) modern technologies serve 'politically interrelated individuals rather than managers'. Such institutions are characterized by 'their vocation of service to society, by spontaneous use of and voluntary participation in them by all members of society". (Illich 1973)

**The Citizen Designer:** In introducing the concept of the citizen designer Victor Margolin is seeing the designer as having three possible ways of using their competences in society. The first is by designing, that is making things, as producer. The second is by articulating a critique of prevailing cultural conditions that elucidates the effect of design on society; and the third is by direct political engagement. (Margolin 2006)

**The Built and Natural Environment:** The built environment is that which we, as a society, have constructed solely for our own benefit and refers to the human-made surroundings that provide the setting for human activity. It may be described as a field of application in which design acts. In essence the built environment may be identified as a man-made landscape. The natural environment, on the other hand encompasses all living and non-living things occurring naturally on Earth or some region thereof. The natural environment can be distinguished thus: Complete ecological units that function as natural systems without massive human intervention, including all vegetation, microorganisms, soil, rocks atmosphere and natural phenomena that

occur within their boundaries and universal natural resources and physical phenomena such as air, water and climate, as well as energy, radiation, electric charge, and magnetism not originating from human activity. The natural environment is contrasted with the built environment that comprises of components that are strongly influenced by humans. (Source: modified from Wikipedia)

It would seem to be reasonable here to argue that most current design practice involves the designing within and for the built environment and by doing so risks the potential of isolating our biological selves from the natural environment. We are undeniably a part of the biosphere and the biosphere is undeniably a part of us. We do, however, exist primarily within the built environment. If you are in doubt of this, map your journey from waking up to getting to your place of work. You will find that, for most of us, everything you have contact with except the air that we breathe and the light that falls upon us (even these are sometimes attenuated) is in the built environment and very little is natural. So what we may assume from this is that something is missing in the way we design and also what we design. We can see through our daily experience that we are conditioned by the built environment but experience our daily lives biologically emotionally and spiritually; in other words more naturally.

**The Experienced Environment:** The experienced environment is that in which we lead our daily lives and it is one that is neither completely built nor completely natural. It is one in which the experience of living within it is continuously evolving and flowing where experiences may be consistently improvised and ad-hoc. For example, consider having breakfast. In our current built environment we consider and design breakfast as a set of distinct and independent elements; the toaster, the bread, the electricity, the plate and so forth. But when we experience breakfast we experience it as a multidimensional flow in which all the constituent parts contribute to that which means breakfast and, interestingly, each breakfast is different, unique and individual. This example may be applied to all experience that may be the subjected to design. So, in this construct, we would wish to design in the experience being experienced rather than for an event into which a set of things have to separately designed and imposed.

**Designing in the Flow of Living:** If we would agree that it would seem natural to accept flow as the natural state in which design may usefully operate then how may we go about designing in this way? The proposition here is that we may enact design whilst firmly attached to the flow of living our daily lives and that designing in this context would be fundamentally experiential. We would be, after all, primarily designing with people as the audience and in doing so fully conscious of our obligations and responsibilities to them. We would need to intentionally work empathically, respectfully and with humility. This approach may leadus to some interesting contexts and specifications to design within.

Designers may possibly therefore be more able to situate their designing within the flow of living our lives within our changing environment: ecologically, societal and economically. From this perspective designers may well be able to better understand that their actions could have better purpose and place functionally, emotionally and spiritually. In this we could thereby consider the artefacts, services and sytems with live with and by, not as fixed consumables but more as enablers of the experience of life within a meaningful flow of living. (Grout 2009)

In re-constructing design and the designer in this manner we may create considerable opportunity for designing in a transforming society. When brought together these elements apparently have the potential to further afford a meaningfully transformed role for design and designing. Developing the idea of the citizen designer and the experienced environment in concert may also afford a context in which working in this world rather than on or about it opens up the opportunity for a more ethical, moral and philosophical meaning to designing with a social sensibility. A potentially more holistic society and community constructed upon resilience and conviviality could afford the designer the opportunity to act with more value when working in the flow of the experienced environment.

In this, conventional design moves towards the larger themes of society and ecology in the context of designing for the human experience. It would seek to move design from discipline specific towards holistic, from relative certainty towards better best guessing, from the designer as individual towards the designer as co-participant and from standard of living towards quality of life. (Grout & Gornick 2008)

### **Illustrative Projects, Workshops and Speculations**

**1) Designing Environments for Life:** Between September and December 2009 we enacted a programme of four workshops on the theme of designing environments for life at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Glasgow. The programme involved some 52 participants.

Outline: Art and design, anthropology and architecture are among a range of disciplines that aim to understand how people perceive and shape the world around them. However, they have traditionally pursued this aim by different means. There is scope for combining these means. The overall aim of the programme was to establish the scope, relevance and potential applicability of research in a field formed through the convergence of approaches not only in art and design, anthropology and architecture but also in subjects ranging from archaeology to engineering and including arts, design and architectural practices, government and the public sector, business, industry and environmental organisations.

In discussions of environmental change, two different meanings of 'environment' are commonly confused. The first conveys the phenomenal world of our immediate experience. In the second sense, by contrast, the environment is understood as a physical world whose reality is given independently of our experience of it. For most people, the environment of everyday life is understood in the first sense. Yet it is the second that predominates. For the disciplines of art and design, anthropology and architecture, caught between these contrary understandings this poses an acute challenge. Meeting the challenge calls for new ways of combining technological expertise with the wisdom of inhabitants in the common project of designing environments for life.

Value: Undoubtedly, the principal value of the programme lay in the opportunities it created for developing academic constructs among the participants, many of whom discovered new common interests. As the list of some 41 potential outputs from the programme showed, these meetings have led to collaborations in both research and teaching. The outputs are diverse and encompass; public lectures, public exhibitions, academic papers, artworks, direct input into education and teaching, influencing research, influencing community and practice projects. (IAS 2009)

Affordance: What these workshops and the resulting collaborations has allowed is to begin to consolidate and further theoretically contextualise the ideas of designing for resilience in a convivial society and the development of the citizen designer under the purview of a broad and rigorous international academic community situated between the theory and action.

Manifesto: In moving from the theoretical (intangible) to the practical (tangible) a useful first step would be the construction of a guiding manifesto from which various constructs moving towards the functionally useful could be visualised. Designing Environments for Life:

- Environments are inherently variable
  - Design should enhance the flexibility of inhabitants to respond to these variations with foresight and imagination
  - The impulse of life is to keep on going. Design unfolds within constantly transforming life conditions and should open up pathways for creative improvisation
- (IAS 2009)

Speculation: From this we may begin to draw some characteristics for designers wishing to become citizen designers working in a resilient and convivial society:

- A highly developed antennae for the changes in our economy, technology and society
- A willingness to challenge and transform outdated traditional design roles
- An ability to generate a rich field of opportunities for the development of design within our changing society
- A strong belief in and skills for working across disciplines
- A desire and ability to use design in a more holistic and co-participative framework
- Long-term ambitions for world wide economic and social transformation and improvement (Grout & Gornick 2008 – updated)

## **2) The Low Carbon Living Project, Kinsale Energy Descent Plan and the Transition**

**Movement :** Designers, by nature, have a strong motivation to test hunches in reality and in the real world, gathering feedback, gaining insights and modifying further action. These would seem to be useful elements in developing the Citizen Designer.

Low Carbon Living Project: The project engaged with the flow of our changing environment and attitudes and design opportunities concerning peak oil and energy descent.

Outline: In embarking on a design project concerning peak oil, energy descent and global warming with any confidence it would be wise to relate it to known good practice. The Kinsale Energy Descent Plan (Kinsale 2005) was primarily a permaculture project which looked at living resiliently post oil and was the precursor for the Transition movement (Transition Network) which, starting in Totnes, Devon has grown in stature as a community based movement throughout the UK and beyond. It is developing robust models of engagement with the issue of living well in a society in change.

In 2008 we ran a short pilot project in Totnes, together with students and staff from Plymouth University, Les Ateliers Paris, HDK Göteborg and the Glasgow School of Art to explore how we might transform design to work with these and consequently similar types of emerging communities. (Transforming the Future). From this grew the Low Carbon Living project enacted by Year 3 Students in the Product Design Department at The Glasgow School of Art between November and December 2009. We set out to begin to understand and to take steps in how we may both creatively engage with and take action in this issue, both as designers and as citizens. (Low-Carbon-Living)

Aims:

- To understand, explore and visualise social, cultural and design opportunities that will arise in the shift to a post-fossil fuel society
- Bring an awareness to our country and community about how design and designers may act in a transition towards a post fossil fuel society

Objectives:

- To research, form and communicate a perspective on what the post-fossil fuel society may look like in transition to 2029
- To identify opportunities for new social, cultural, technological, economic and design opportunities in the transition to a post-fossil fuel society
- To create outline scenarios visualising potential organisational and/or individual activities within these opportunities
- To develop tools by which to do so that work with an audience not from a design background

Value: The project was short, just 18 days. What it did was to both open up the issue and give some perspectives on how it may be possible to build a body of knowledge, map it and draw out opportunities to design from. In essence the project produced:

- An understanding of how we may begin to act as Citizen Designers
- A philosophical construct of how we may go about such issues as designers from both an educational and practice based perspective
- The ability to discover, map and tag complex information and visually communicate this to a

broad audience

- Construct tools which allow issues and problems to be framed simply and then used in conjunction with tagged information to draw down interconnections and potential design activity
- A methodology of constructing short storyboards to visualise the opportunity for the benefit of the person(s) engaging with the design activity

Affordance: The resulting tools and methods created during the project have the potential and advantage of being able to be used by people not from a design background. It is intended that the generated material that is able to be continuously updated and informed by a wide range of people involved in the presenting issue. The project explored the potential of an open ended way of working in the flow of our changing environment. It created the beginnings of how design may be of value in a transforming society living resiliently and convivially and opens up potentiality a role for the citizen designer.

### **3) Audi Design Foundation Sustain our Nation Competition and Designing for Social**

**Enterprise:** In 2010, Masters students from the Glasgow School of Art won The Audi Design Foundation Competition, Sustain our Nation. The outcome serves as an example of designing in the flow of resolving the fragmentation of community with increasingly disaffected and disenfranchised citizens.

The Project: The competition challenge was to create a sustainable social enterprise. The students identified that in order to create something truly sustainable, the community had to be a fundamental part of the process and that the students would have to be trusted in the community. To gain credibility with the community they created an overarching project team; GetGo Glasgow, having identified the Wyndford in The North of Glasgow as a suitable community to work with they then developed, with identified community champions, a robust co-design process bringing innovative ways of thinking and doing to the domain of social enterprise design.

With the community and through the co-development of engagement and enablement tools there was developed three initial projects which were pitched to the Audi judging panel, and the project Green Gorillaz (GG) eventually won bringing £20,000 of investment into the community for its implementation and development.

With the recent closure of the primary schools the community lacked focus. GG aims redress this by the creation, within and by the community, of a network of interest groups. GG will provide resources whereby community members can express their interests and take action in the changes they would like to see in the community. Through the creation of these interest groups, such as a food group, sports group, reading group, etc, GG also aims to bridge the generational gap. Shared interests will link the generations and engender lasting relationships. Through peer ownership and accountability there is expected to be a strengthened community spirit and a growth of sustainable skills thereby engendering a more resilient and convivial environment for the community as a whole.

Green Gorillaz is designed to be owned and run completely by and within the community. This is how it will operate: Every month funding will be available for smaller projects and three times a year there will be a large “Dragon’s Den” style event where groups can present their ideas for larger projects and those selected by the community will win the funds necessary to take them forward. Half the funding provided by Sustain Our Nation will be assigned to such project funding and will be spread over the next four years of operation. The other half of the funding will be assigned to seeking further funding streams and a long-term engagement with the GSA to further assist the community in the development of the project, thereby affording a greater learning for the school concerning the nature of social design and the role of the citizen designer.

Value: In this project much has been learnt about the role of the designer in developing social enterprise and not least that:

- Community champions are essential
- Trust is imperative
- Consistent engagement over the long term must become the norm
- Presumption and assumption have no place in the citizen designers vocabulary
- Empathy, humility and respect are traits to be cherished when working with people in their own communities

Affordance: It is expected that this evolving model of social design will have significant potential for growth and adaption in designing for resilience in a convivial society, has special value in designing for transformation in our changing society and opens up new roles for the citizen designer.

Note: Audi assisted us in writing up the project as a creative commons resource. It is available at: [www.getgoglasgow.co.uk](http://www.getgoglasgow.co.uk)

## **Reflection**

These projects have had considerable value in evolving the idea of how one might begin to create citizen designers able to work in resilient and convivial societies. They are by no means perfect but one could propose that that is also the nature of living in the flow of life. You live; you learn. On reflection it may be said that these activities have extended current best practice in their approach and their usefulness to those that will use them. I would suggest that we would not have achieved these results had we followed traditional design methodology that presumes that there is a problem to be solved and that the resulting solution is fixed. The experienced environment in which we undoubtedly live and these types of design activities are not fixed; it is in flow and it is in that very flow that design activity can and should be most useful.

As our society changes what we are designing does. Certainly there is much contemporary discussion on how we should live but less so currently on how we should design. These projects, in some small way, begin to find ways in which we may answer this and reveal innovative opportunities for design, designing and the teaching of design. The exciting thing being revealed is that being a designer in this way is always going to be open ended as new opportunities for design unfold within constantly transforming life conditions opening up unexpected pathways for creative improvisation and innovation.

## **Further Activities; The Designers Point of View, Intuition and Embedding Designers**

On reflection there is a sense in these projects that we maybe designing designers out and that would be inevitable if design were not to revalue itself. In these types of projects the designer has become quite neutral and perhaps too much so. There are some further designerly qualities that it would be good not to lose if they can be also be transformed to serve well in these activities.

Two that come to mind are the designers individual point of view and intuition. Both are of value when thinking of new synergies and connections and both need transforming to move design and designing from an exclusive activity to an inclusive one. What would be of value here is to reassess these through the lens of the emerging Citizen Designer and to revalue how we bring these designerly qualities to bear in acting with humility and respect whilst being empathically proactive.

To explore this we are now running projects where we are embedding students, over time, in social enterprises and exploring how their engagement affords these designerly qualities to be of value. What we are looking towards is that, in acting within this construct of design, how may the designer acting on their intuition and particular point of view

develop the construct of a citizen designer further. The results have been, thus far, encouraging and are revealing a potential for design in the further development of social enterprise and the role it plays in the regeneration and sustainment of community both within an urban and a rural landscape.

Thus we have hope for design, designers and designing acting for the greater good and with demonstrable value within a convivial and resilient society.

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