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# Antinomies in Systemic Design: Dilemmas, paradoxical tensions, and Werner Ulrich

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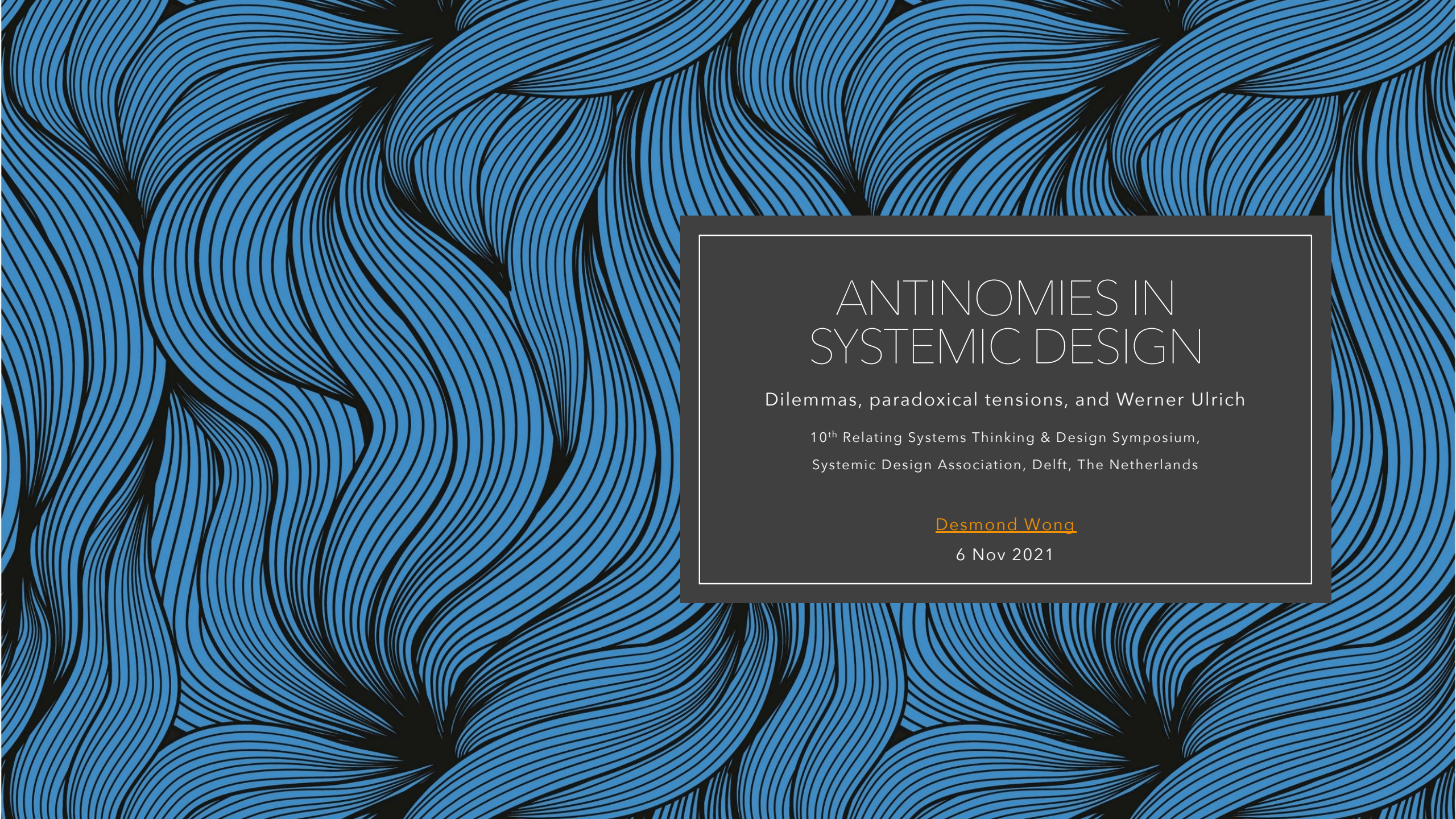


# ANTINOMIES IN SYSTEMIC DESIGN

## Dilemmas, paradoxical tensions, and Werner Ulrich

10th Relating Systems Thinking & Design Symposium,

Systemic Design Association, Delft, The Netherlands

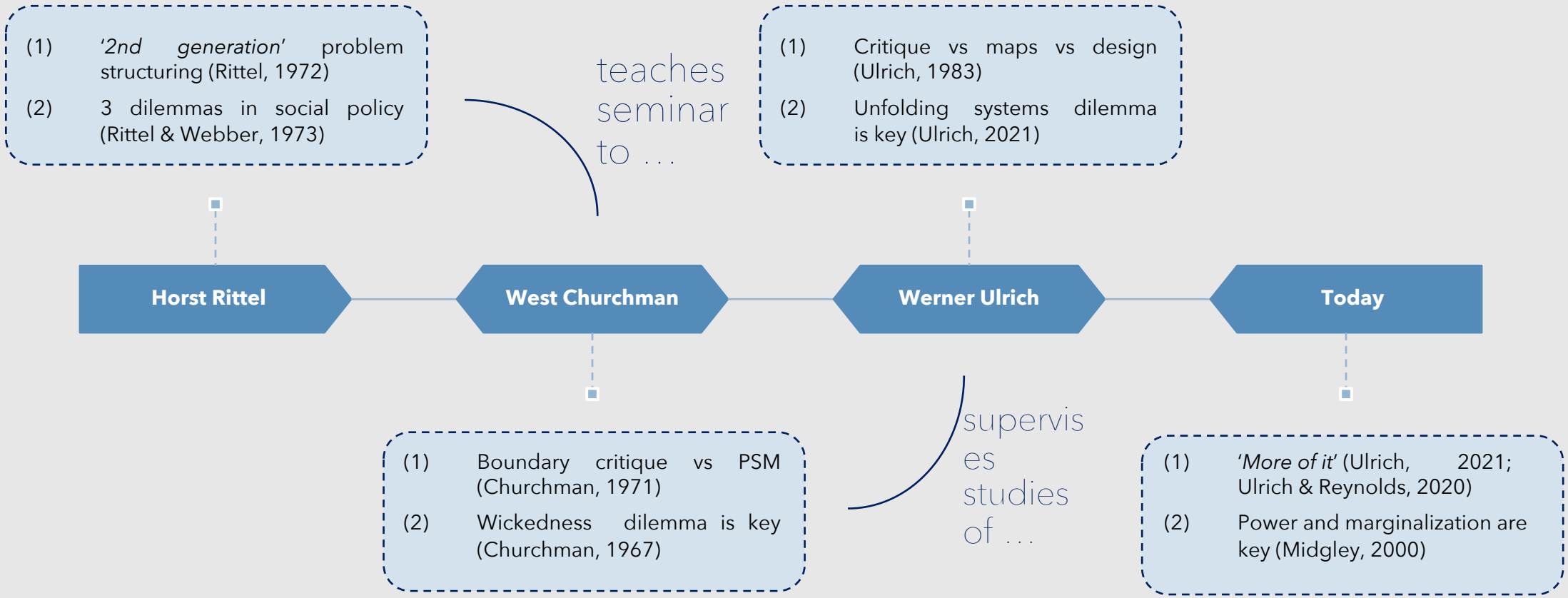
Desmond Wong

6 Nov 2021

# DILEMMAS IN SOCIAL POLICY

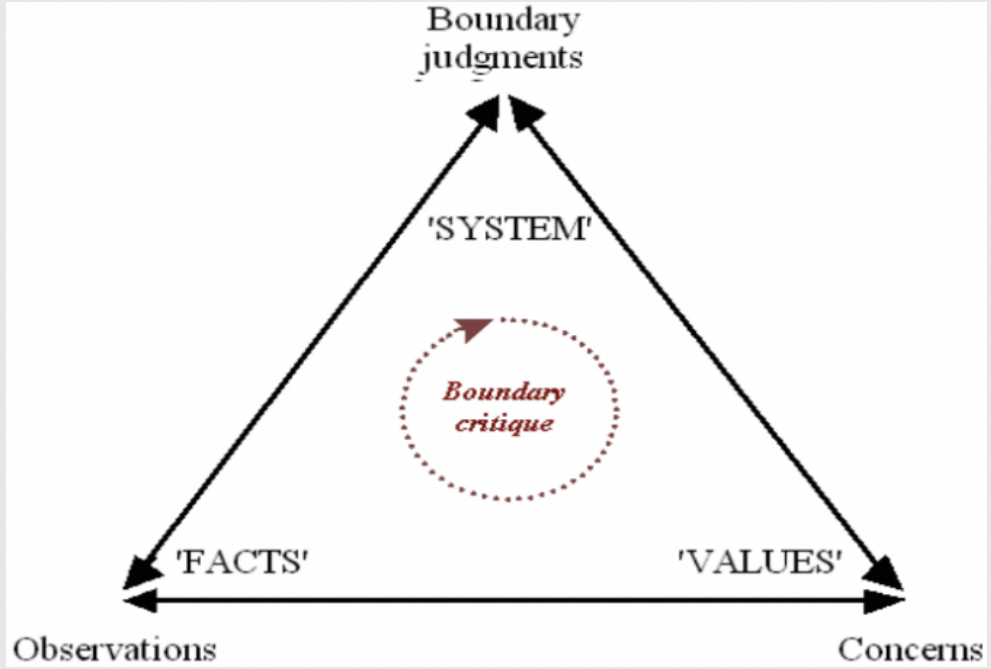
When one man's freedom fighting is another man's terrorism

# 1-minute history



# 1-minute concepts

## The analytic-synthetic distinction




## The critique and '*ontological*' distance

2nd set of boundaries

1st set of boundaries

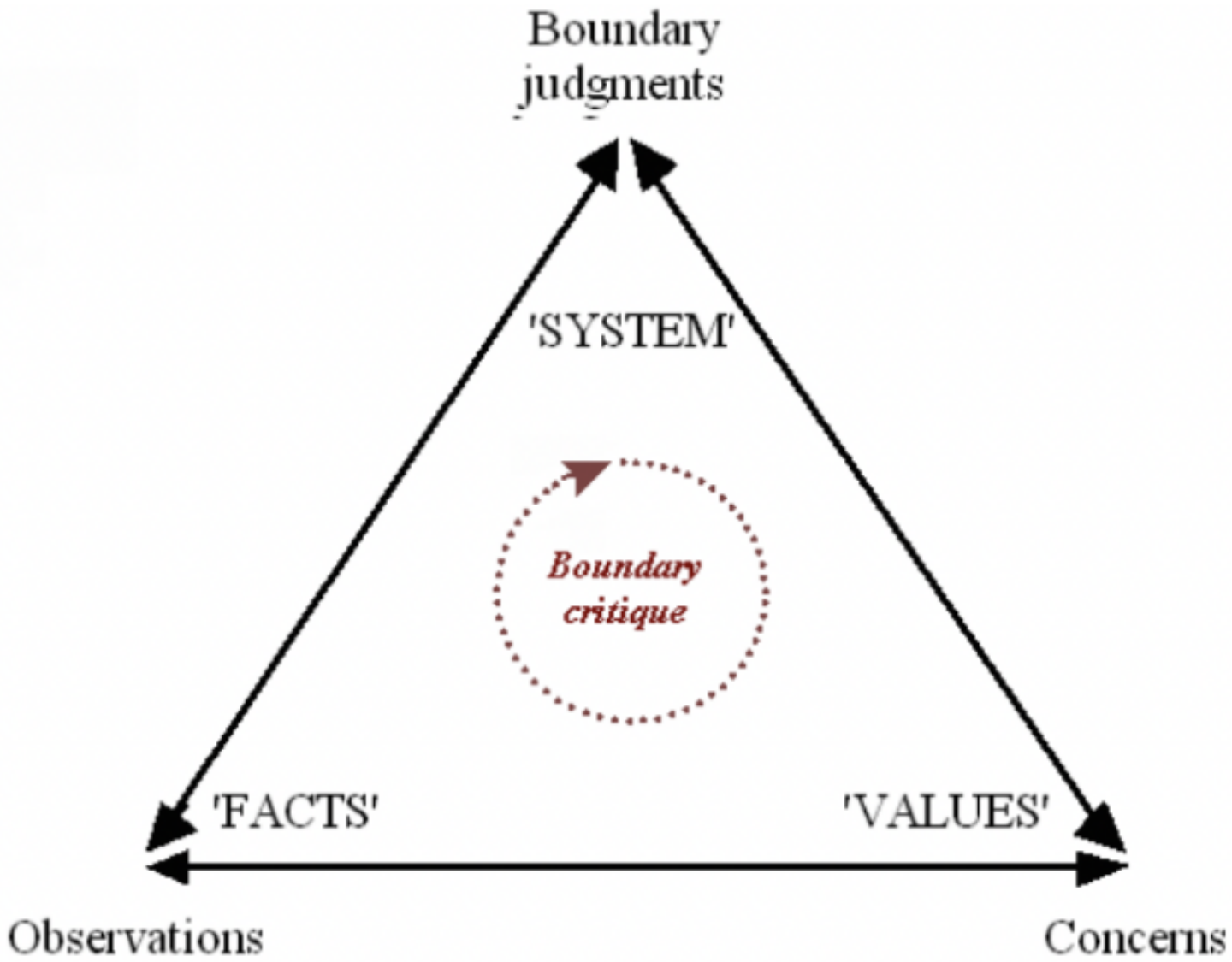
| Sources | *Stakeholders* | *Stakes* | *Stakeholdering issues* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Motivation* | 2. Beneficiary? | 1. Purpose? | 3. Measure of improvement? | **People involved** |
| *Control* | 5. Decision maker? | 4. Resources? | 6. Decision environment? | |
| *Knowledge* | 8. Expert? | 7. Expertise? | 9. Guarantor? | |
| *Legitimacy* | 11. Witness? | 10. Emancipation? | 12. Worldview? | **People affected** |

# 1-minute pragmatist

- Systematic way to work with '*question marks*' (*antinomies*)
- Finding purpose and paths, w/o de-emphasizing people
- Action and change that's effective, legitimate, meaningful
- Situated in systemic design's history and concepts
- Not to mention, free!

# BOUNDARY CRITIQUE

When '*what matters*' may not seem so clear




# #1 The systems dilemma

How far from reality? Again, '*ontological*' distance.

The philosophical analogy is disclosure (*critique*) vs correspondence (*maps*) vs coherence (*design*).

Let's look at reference systems, the '*systems*' of systemic design.

2nd set of boundaries →

1st set of boundaries ↓

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# #2
# The heuristic dilemma

Positive or negative? Again, *a priori* within the analytic-synthetic distinction.

What we do, feel, or think already contains elements of maps and design (*+ve*).

Let's make the critique (*-ve*) tacit.

| Boundary issues | Root issues | Main questions | Specified prompts |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Sources of motivation** | What are the motivating factors? | Whom do we want to serve? | Primary clients? |
| | | | Secondary clients? |
| | | | Whom can't we realistically serve although ideally we would? |
| | | What do we want to achieve? | Primary aims? |
| | | | Secondary aims? |
| | | | Unrealistic aims? |
| | | What should be our measure of improvement? | Quantitative measure(s) of improvement? |
| | | | Qualitative aspects of improvement? |
| **Sources of control** | Who's in control? | Whom do we want to decide? | Those able to stop us |
| | | | Those able to change or redefine our measures of improvement |
| | | | Those already in control of resources |
| | | What resources do we aim to have available? | Financial |
| | | | Material |
| | | | Political/social |
| | | | Other |
| | | What conditions of success should rightly be controlled by third parties? | Public sector authorities |
| | | | Private sector organisations |
| | | | Individual stakeholders not involved |
| | | | Nature/chance |
| **Sources of knowledge** | What information and skills are relevant? | Whom do we want to contribute their experience and expertise? | Indispensable experts |
| | | | Desirable experts |
| | | | Impossible experts |
| | | | Undesirable experts |
| | | What information and skills do we want them to contribute? | Ordinary experience |
| | | | Professional know-how |
| | | | Professional skills |
| | | | Other |
| | | Where should we look for some guarantee of success? | True guarantors |
| | | | False guarantors |
| | | | Doubtful/potential guarantors |
| **Sources of legitimacy** | What stakeholders should be considered? | Whom do we want to voice the concern s of those not involved? | Those affected but not involved |
| | | | Those concerned but not directly affected |
| | | | Those normally without voice (future generations, non-human nature etc.) |
| | | What do we want to do to emancipate stakeholders from our premises and promises? | In terms of rights |
| | | | In terms of compensation |
| | | | Other |
| | | What worldview do we | Privileged view |

# #3
# The people dilemma

Why or who? A really original contribution.

We can look vertically (*why*) and horizontally (*who*), or in numerical order.

Let's prize context ('*systems*'), to be sensitive to the facts and values that matter.

2nd set of boundaries →

1st set of boundaries ↓

| Sources | *Stakeholders* | *Stakes* | *Stakeholdering issues* | |
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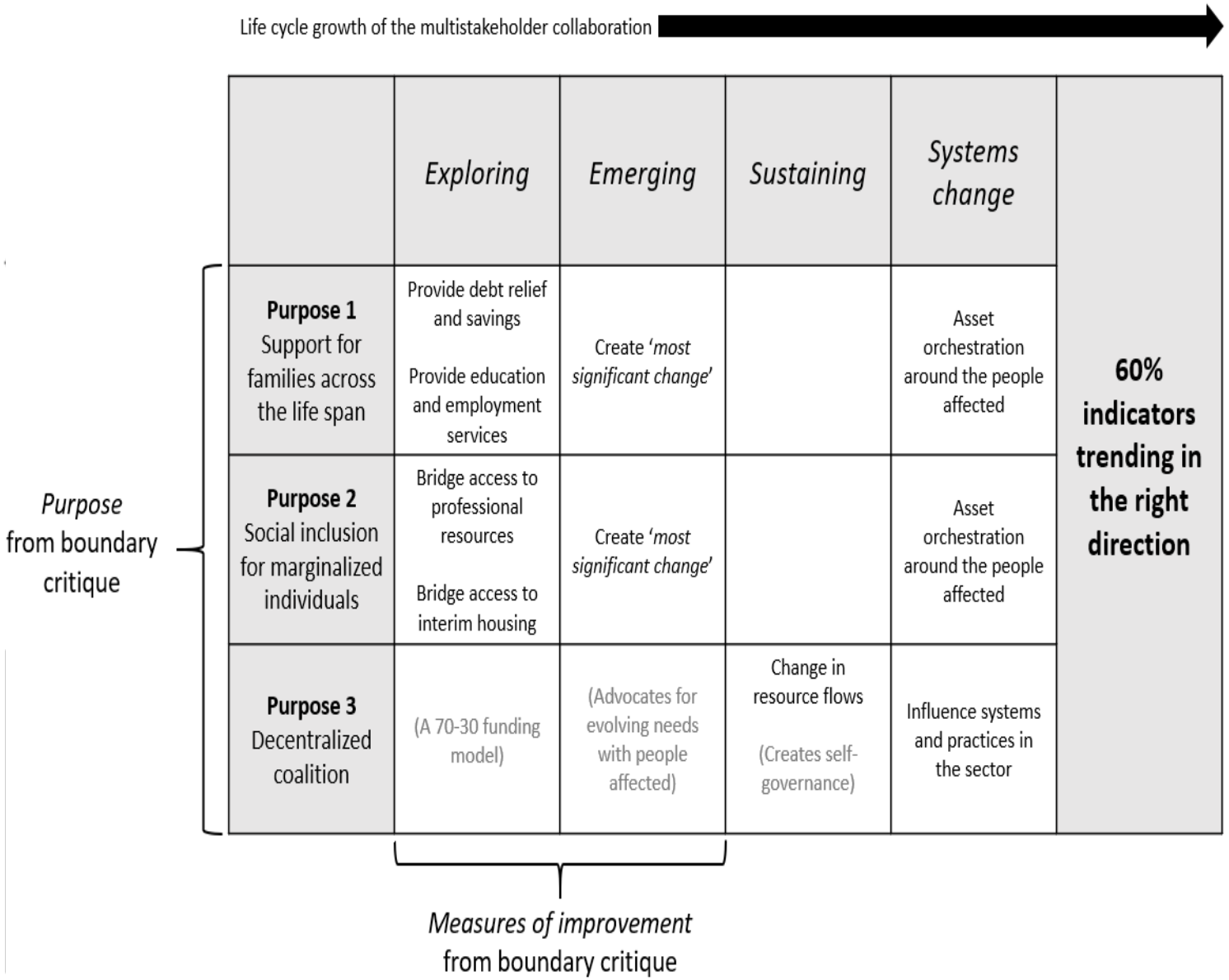
# #4
# The nudge dilemma

When is exclusion necessary and legitimate? There are no answers yet.

People come and go and can change (Gregory et al., 2020). They are also not '*rational*'.

What should governance and *ongoing* critique look like?




# My design case (which failed)

Legitimacy and guarantors for real? The iterative process.

Harmful alliances "expressed in '*asides*' … defending their own … whilst disregarding the views of others … [w/o] commitment to the Project" (Midgley, 2000, p.342).

# CLOSING REFLECTIONS

When thinking about the '*wise hand*' and the future

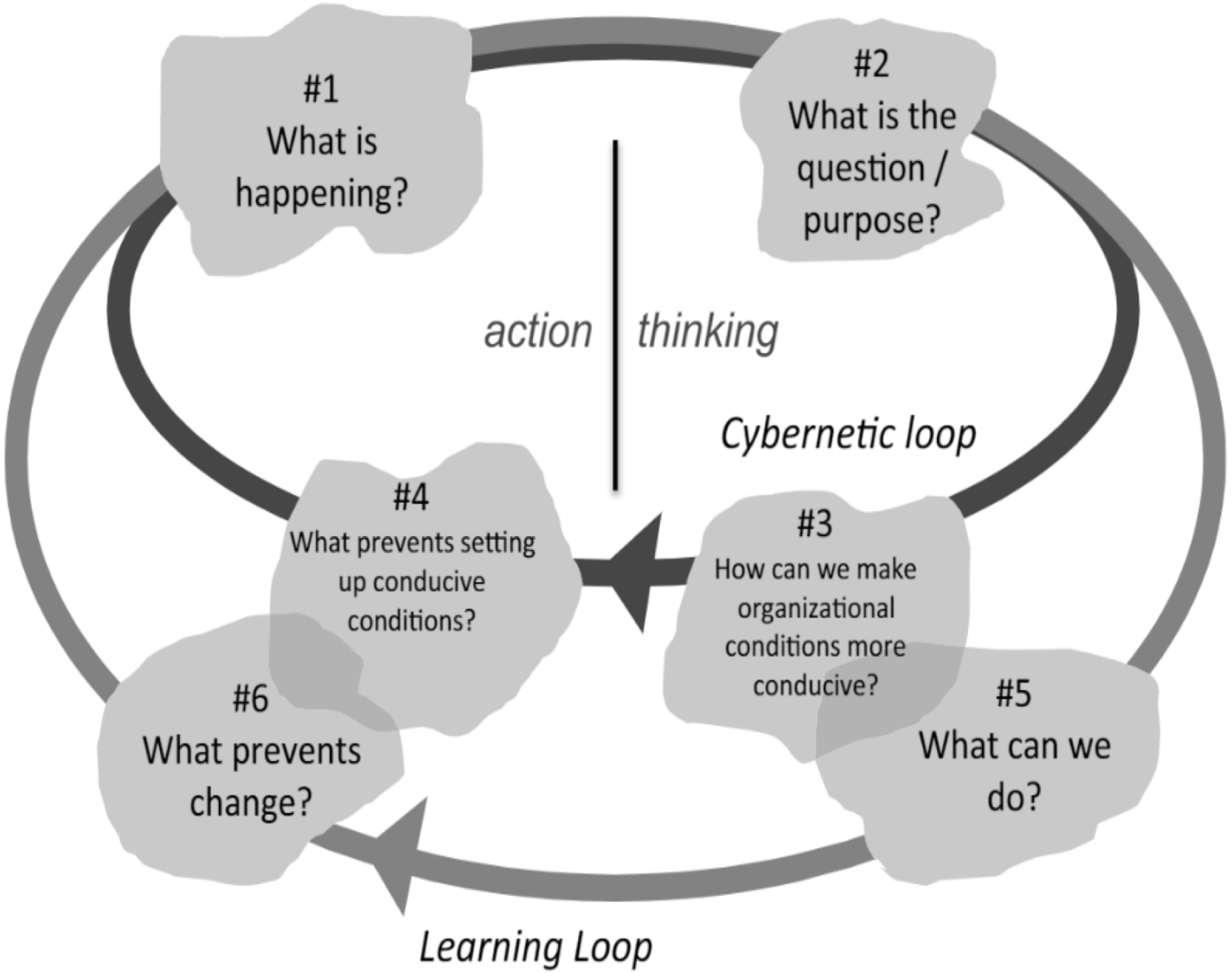
# In retrospect

**Practice implications**

- "Institutionalizing systemic processes of reflection and discourse on the boundary judgments that condition people's facts and values, [maps and design, helps us] … question the same facts … rather than being at cross-purposes" (Ulrich, 2021, p.7)
- The iterative process and the 4 dilemmas

**More contributions**

- Boundary specification problem in '*hard*' systems thinking (Laumann et al., 1983)
- '*Strategy-as-practice*' in strategic management (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020)




# My latest experiment

*What if* we could bring it all together?

Start with boundary critique, but keep it ongoing with real-time process data in situ - quantitative and qualitative (Wong & Tan, 2021).

I would love to hear from you!

# Food for thought

"To return to the things themselves is to return to this world prior to knowledge, … of which knowledge … speaks, and … with regard to which every scientific determination is abstract, signitive, and dependent, just like geography with regard to the landscape where we first learned what a forest, a meadow, or a river is. This movement is … distinct from the idealist return to consciousness, and the demand for a pure description excludes the process of reflective analysis just as much as it excludes the process of scientific explanation … The world is there prior to every analysis … it does not wait for our judgments … or deliberate taking of a stand … [Rather,] it is the natural milieu and the field of all my thoughts and … explicit perceptions."

- Merleau-Ponty, 2012 (pp.xxii-xxiv)

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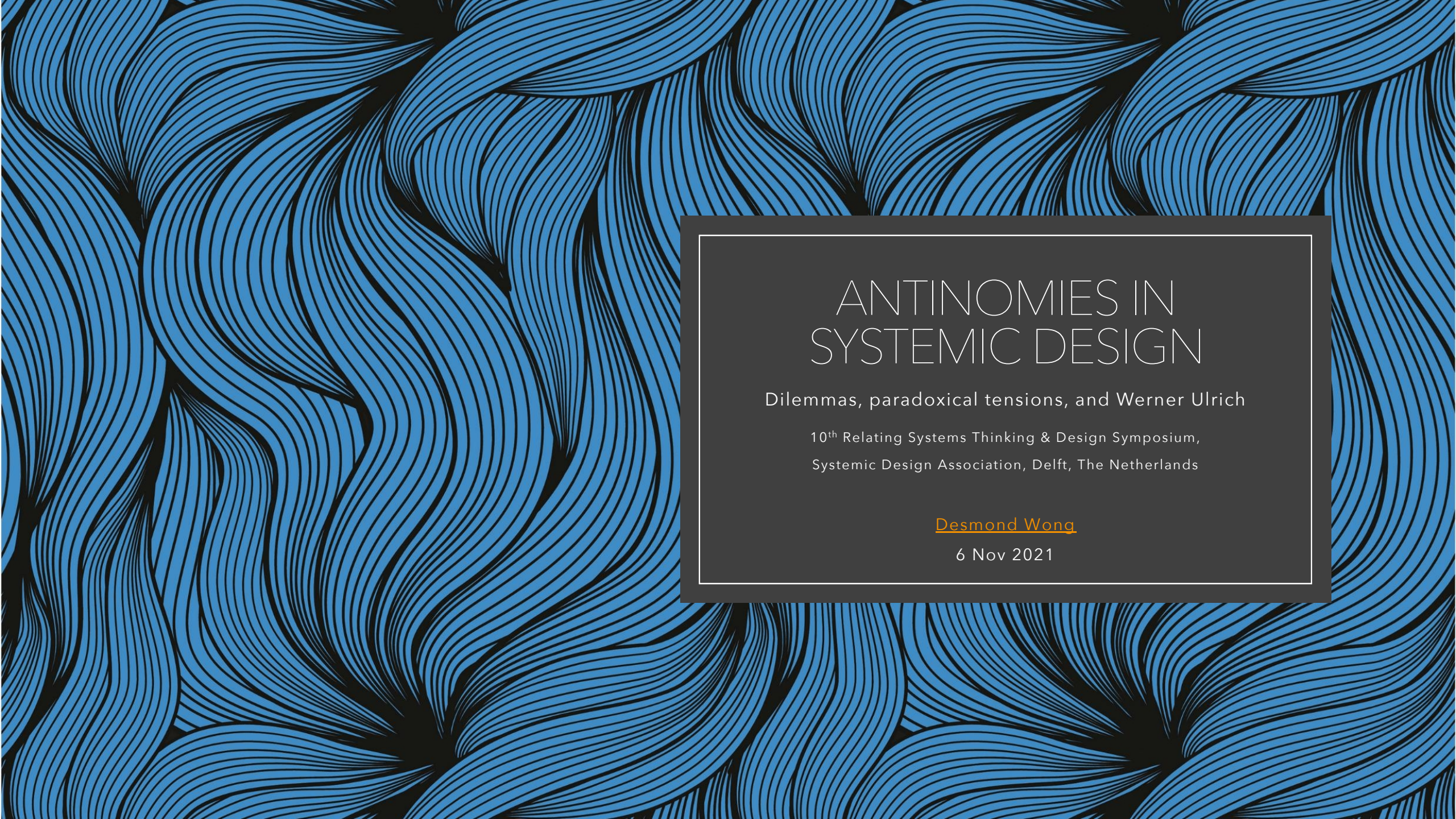
Thank
you!!!



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