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Commoning by Design: Staying relational in conflict

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In this presentation, we build on recent discussions of a paper presented at DRS2022¹ that explores the theories of the commons and their applicability to systemic design to transition existing systems from being dysfunctional to being regenerative (Schaeper, Kothari, Hamilton, 2022). As many of our social and environmental challenges have been described as a failure of design (Escobar, 2018), designers have been called to reconsider the way they work and to ultimately 'redesign design' (Akama et al., 2019; Irwin, 2015). We begin the presentation by sharing a case study of a marine protected area in South Africa's oceans and how a commoning practice could be applied more intentionally to increase cooperation amongst system actors and apply a multispecies – as opposed to human-centred – perspective to the management of natural, social, and immaterial resources. By drawing on our working hypothesis of how a commons approach could open up opportunities for creating the conditions of improved stakeholder cooperation, we will propose and invite further discussion around how 'Commoning by Design' could be positioned as an intentional and careful design act that aims at facilitating staying relational not only through alignment but by surfacing a plurality of voices and thereby holding space for conflicting planetary stakeholder needs, motivations and objectives.

¹ <https://www.drs2022.org/>

KEYWORDS: systemic design, commoning by design, commons, relational design, redesign design

RSD TOPIC(S): RSD: Economics & Organizations, Policy & Governance, Society & Culture, Sociotechnical Systems

Presentation: redesigning design based on the commons

To preserve a liveable planet for future generations, we need to successfully navigate the transformation to a sustainable world. This ambitious goal not only requires new approaches for transitioning existing systems from being dysfunctional to being regenerative (Raworth, 2017) but for organisations to change the products and services they create and how they create them (Irwin, 2015). Design is said to play an important role in this context, providing participatory processes to empower key stakeholders and giving them agency to effectuate change (Design Council, 2021). At the same time, many of the challenges we are facing have been described as a failure of design (Escobar, 2017), including a failure to design for regeneration (Acaroglu, 2017), a failure to design for multispecies (Metcalf, 2015) and a failure to design well for endings. There is an ongoing debate on how the focus of design practice on participation methods (i.e., through Service Design, Participatory Design or Human-Centred-Design) has failed to combine knowledge from evolutionary, social, and economic sciences (Akama, 2019; Atkins et al., 2019). Participatory Design, for example, has been found to hinder regenerative outcomes (Wamsler et al., 2020), as participation often refers to the context of the human voice revolving around human needs and decision-making structures (Akama, Light, Kamihira, 2020).

With the recognition of a more complex and multispecies interdependence in our surrounding systems (Escobar, 2017), interdisciplinary approaches are increasingly being applied to incorporate new systems-based practices in design, particularly in the areas of transition (Irwin, 2015) and systemic design (Design Council, 2021). As a result, designers are being called to 'redesign design' (Akama et al., 2019) and to reconsider the way they collaborate, design, and navigate towards creating sustainable change (Irwin, 2015). It is argued that this requires a much deeper understanding of relationality in

design practice to inform a more collective and regenerative future (Akama, Light, Kamihira, 2020; Escobar, 2017).

In response to these complex challenges, scholars have turned towards the social practice of the commons more recently (Akomolafe, 2016; Bollier, 2019; Botero et al., 2020). The commons can be understood as deeply collaborative arrangements for value production based on participatory principles (Bauwens et al., 2018) that resonate well with the idea of co-design aspirations. Contrary to popular belief, Elinor Ostrom was able to prove that the collaborative management of common resources is possible for economic and environmental sustainability (Ostrom, 1990) by involving relationships and community as a form of living organisation that emerges based on cooperative behaviours that can be enacted through a set of core design principles (CDPs).

In this presentation, we pick up on the idea of the commons as presented in the previous DRS paper (Schaeper, Kothari & Hamilton, 2022) to make an appealing case for the need to bring commoning to the fore as a form of designing for systems and holding the much-needed space for systemic relations to unfold.

Commoning as a way to stay relational by design

The commons cannot only be considered common-pool resources (such as parts of an ocean) but also a set of co-created social practices, behaviours, and norms. Commoners can be seen as social actors who observe norms, communicate, and constantly negotiate boundaries and behaviours and who, while pursuing individual interests, understand that it is in their best interest to build ways and incentives for all stakeholders to cooperate. As such, it could be argued that the commons are nothing but the outcome of an ongoing process of commoning (Bollier, 2019). As we view the commons as an enduring and living form of organisation, we share how they could inform a deeper understanding of how to design for increased relationality and participation, including how communities of users, human and non/human, can successfully organise in common, while employing efficient and sustainable ways of managing their resources. We also discuss the notion of “conflicts and commons,” as recently discussed at DRS2022.

Ever since Ostrom's publication of *Governing the Commons*, the commons have been associated with relying on harmonious cooperation between all stakeholders based on a strong sense of belonging and shared community (Ostrom, 1990). As conflicts could be seen as a threat to the sustainability of cooperation, Ostrom's sixth CDP focuses on quick and effective internal conflict resolution (Ostrom, 1990). While a lack of obvious conflict might have surfaced as a key tenet of the commons when based on Ostrom's writing, she, too, found empirical evidence of power imbalances and conflicts arising in many guises within commons management (Ostrom, 1990, pp. 146–9).

Case study: a marine protected area in South Africa's oceans

In the case study analysis of a marine protected area in South Africa's oceans, we emphasise a potentially decisive role of commoning activities that can bring to light internal stakeholder conflicts and, through careful facilitation of all views, help to maintain a vibrant pluralism. After all, there is value to be gained from conflict and understanding various views and perspectives. Just as democracy's task 'is to transform antagonism into agonism' (Mouffe, 2005, p. 20), one could make a case that commoning, too, channels—does not repress—conflicts to reach alignment and a peaceful co-existence and sharing of resources. As such, conflicts could no longer be seen as a negative trait to resolve but a force that, through carefully designed facilitation, could steer the course of the commons towards sustainable self-governance. By drawing on this working hypothesis of how a commons approach could open up novel opportunities for systemic design to create the conditions of increased stakeholder cooperation, we will invite further discussion around how "Commoning by Design" could be positioned as intentional design facilitation that focuses on being and staying relational by surfacing a plurality of voices while carefully stewarding towards more regeneratively designed futures.

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