



Faculty of Design

2022

## Designing Infrastructures of Care: An exploration of listening and slowness for socio-ecological wellbeing

Wilson, Rachel

---

### Suggested citation:

Wilson, Rachel (2022) Designing Infrastructures of Care: An exploration of listening and slowness for socio-ecological wellbeing. In: Proceedings of Relating Systems Thinking and Design, RSD11, 3-16 Oct 2022, Brighton, United Kingdom. Available at <https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/4300/>

*Open Research is a publicly accessible, curated repository for the preservation and dissemination of scholarly and creative output of the OCAD University community. Material in Open Research is open access and made available via the consent of the author and/or rights holder on a non-exclusive basis.*

*The OCAD University Library is committed to accessibility as outlined in the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) and the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#) and is working to improve accessibility of the Open Research Repository collection. If you require an accessible version of a repository item contact us at [repository@ocadu.ca](mailto:repository@ocadu.ca).*



Relating Systems Thinking and Design  
2022 Symposium  
University of Brighton, Brighton, UK,  
October 13-16, 2022

## **Designing Infrastructures of Care**

### **An exploration into listening and slowness for socioecological well-being**

**Rachel J. Wilson**

University of Brighton

The pace of existing Western systems continues to contribute to underlying socio-ecological crises, the ramifications of which are felt globally. Whilst there is arguably a need to reduce this pace and consider multigenerational implications, there is tension in how the notion of slowness is balanced with the urgency of planetary crises. Therefore, this presentation asks: How might sustainable design practice a slow ontology that seeks to balance calls for both slowness and urgency within socio-ecological crises? What might this approach reveal about the in-betweens and the unheard? How might listening facilitate this? In this presentation, I reflect on the value of listening and slowness in designing infrastructures of care. Primarily drawing on Pauline Oliveros' practice of deep listening, Ranulph Glanville's cybernetic rumination on listening and Jasmine B. Ulmer's notion of slow ontology, I present a case for how these might be collectively integrated into methodological approaches when designing for socio-ecological care. I also present reflections on how this thinking has influenced an evolving methodology underpinning my own work. Considering listening and the notion of slowness, I argue, makes space for design beyond solutionism and for designers to remain open to more diverse modes of enquiry when dealing with wicked problems. Through listening, I pose an invitation for designers and researchers to question what lies between, to whom, and what

remains unheard, thus remaining open to the limitations of chosen methodologies. Through provocations offered in this presentation, I hope to contribute to a discussion on methods and the worlds they make by exploring the value of listening and slowness in the context of design for socio-ecological care. Exploring methodological engagement with listening and slowness in sustainable design, an invitation for more reflexive, transdisciplinary and radical methodologies is proposed.

KEYWORDS: listening, care, sustainable design, transdisciplinary, slowness

TOPIC(S): Methods & Methodology

---

## **Presentation description**

The pace of existing Western systems continues to contribute to underlying socio-ecological crises, the ramifications of which are felt globally. Whilst there is arguably a need to reduce this pace and consider multigenerational implications (Engle, 2022), calls for which are broadly exemplified in Indigenous ways of knowing (Dell, 2021) and post-growth movements (Soper, 2020), there is tension in how the notion of slowness is balanced with the urgency of planetary crises. Therefore, this presentation asks: How might sustainable design practice a slow ontology that seeks to balance calls for both slowness and urgency within socio-ecological crises? What might this approach reveal about the in-betweens and the unheard? How might listening facilitate this?

In this presentation, I provide insight into ongoing work and thinking for my final project on MA Sustainable Design, exploring listening and slowness in the context of designing infrastructures of care. Primarily drawing on Pauline Oliveros' practice of deep listening (Oliveros 2002, 2005; Gordon, 2021), Ranulph Glanville's cybernetic rumination on listening (Glanville 2001, 2007; Sweeting, 2015) and Jasmine B. Ulmer's notion of slow ontology (2017), I present a case for how these might be collectively integrated into methodological approaches when designing for socio-ecological care.

Listening, as an embodied practice that functions across the physical and the conceptual, can hold space for (inter)subjectivities and the relations between methodologies. Embracing listening in its many forms can also accommodate the interconnectedness of social and ecological systems without the dualistic separation so present in the West. Through Oliveros' and Glanville's takes on listening, I pose that we are invited to question what lies between, to whom, and what remains unheard. As designers and researchers, we can thus remain open to the limitations of our chosen methodologies. This is further reflected through exploring what slow ontology might offer design in the context of socio-ecological care.

It is from this place that I discuss how this has influenced the ongoing evolution of a transdisciplinary methodology underpinning my own work. This manifests itself here at the intersections of deep time, speculative listening, deep narratives and radical ecology. Further incorporating Dell's (2021) Rongomātau methodology (connecting in (self-inner world), connecting out (external physical world), connecting to the whole (higher/ spiritual consciousness) and Tham's (2022) meta-design approach (me, we, world and back again) to my own, these interrelation frameworks deepen the feedback loops – the listening between intersections.

Not intended to be proscriptive, this methodology serves as a lens through which to view my work in a way that might illuminate novel questions and insights through their connections. Workshopping these ideas with my peers, they were invited to consider their work through each section of the framework, incorporating Dell and Tham's scales of knowing. I reflect on this opportunity to observe how this lens might be applicable to the work of others, whereby as Sweeting (2015) notes, "we learn what is implied by our own ideas by seeing how they are interpreted and understood by others" (p. 101). This workshop ultimately asked: does slowing down to consider work deeply through these four intersections and the three scales inspire reflection and insights for moving forward? Assessing projects in this way, might opportunities arise to collectively articulate values and considerations reflective of complex entanglements when designing for inclusive planetary care? This listening-with and between is argued as key for "design action across multiple scales" (Drew, Winhall et al., 2020).

Where methodological frameworks can remain static and at risk of becoming essentialised (Drew, Winhall et al., 2020), the (re)generative act of listening provokes synergetic responsiveness to evolving interactions and interrelations. Considering listening and the notion of slowness, I argue, also makes space for design beyond solutionism (Ainsworth & Sutherland, 2021) and for designers to remain open to more diverse modes of enquiry (Drew, Winhall, et al., 2020) when dealing with wicked problems (Rittel, 1972) and systemic crises. Listening can demonstrate the agency of the spaces in-between, and slow ontology can encourage that depth of listening when designing. I suggest that to design deeply (Drew, 2019) requires an element of slowness. This is to say that it requires a staying-with (Harraway, 2016) and listening-with in deep contemplation against the impatience of modernity. Further still, broadening the scope of the disciplinary connections included within research and practice can provide rich insights and possibilities, where designing infrastructures of care might further integrate a transdisciplinary approach to planetary crises.

This transdisciplinarity encourages a listening-with and plurality. However, that which is unheard or not yet listened to is still obscured through the privilege of academic discourse. Cultural questions also arise in the form of what is slowness and to whom? Despite often being associated with an idyllic aesthetic, here slowness is understood as existing with tension and uncertainty where it is not devoid of friction.

## **Conclusion**

While this work is rooted primarily in the theoretical exploration of deep listening, second-order cybernetics and slow ontology, advocacy is made for praxis where the act of listening is capable of producing (re)generative insights through increased utilisation in designing infrastructures of care. Through the provocations offered in this presentation, I hope to contribute to the discussion on methods and the worlds they make by exploring the value of listening and slowness in the context of design for socio-ecological care. I conclude by communicating these as possibilities for alternative ways of being that ultimately lead to alternative ways of doing beyond dominant temporalities of Western design contexts (Pschetz, Bastian, et al., 2016). Through this methodological engagement with listening and slowness in sustainable design, an invitation for more reflexive, transdisciplinary and radical methodologies is proposed.

## References

1. Ainsworth, T., & Sutherland, S. (2021, June). Culture and Relationality. Moving towards 'post-rational' modes of design. [Paper presentation]. Design Culture(s), Cumulus Rome, Online.
2. Dell, K. (2021). Rongomātau – 'sensing the knowing': An Indigenous Methodology Utilising Sensed Knowledge From the Researcher. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211062411>.
3. Drew, C. (2019, December 24). Systemic design: examples of evolving and current practice. Medium.  
<https://medium.com/thepointpeople/systemic-design-examples-of-evolving-and-current-practice-e86eb9ef9d4b>.
4. Drew, C., Winhall, J., Robinson, C. (2020). Not the Venn: An emergent notion of systemic design which transcends the intersection of design x systems thinking. *Proceeding of Relating Systems Thinking and Design (RSD9) 2020 Symposium*.  
<https://rsdsymposium.org/not-the-venn-an-emergent-notion-of-systemic-design-which-transcends-the-intersection-of-design-x-systems-thinking/>.
5. Engle, J., Agyeman, J., & Chung-Tiam-Fook, T. (2022). *Sacred Civics: Building Seven Generation Cities*. Routledge.
6. Glanville, R. (2001). Listen. *Problems of participation and connection*, 425-432.
7. Glanville, R. (2007). Try again. Fail again. Fail better: The cybernetics in design and the design in cybernetics. *Kybernetes*.
8. Gordon, T. (2021). 'Androgynous Music': Pauline Oliveros's Early Cybernetic Improvisation. *Contemporary Music Review*, 40(4), 386-408.
9. Harraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
10. Oliveros, P. (2002). Quantum listening: From practice to theory (to practice practice). *Culture and Humanity in the New Millennium: The Future of Human Values*, 27-41.
11. Oliveros, P. (2005). *Deep listening: A composer's sound practice*. IUniverse.
12. Pschetz, L., Bastian, M., & Speed, C. (2016). Temporal design: looking at time as social coordination. *Proceedings of DRS*, 27-30.

13. Rittel, H. (1972). On the planning crisis: Systems analysis of the "first and second generations". *Bedriftskonomen*, 8, 390-396.
14. Soper, K. (2020). *Post-growth living: For an alternative hedonism*. Verso Books.
15. Sweeting, B. (2015). Conversation, design and ethics: The cybernetics of Ranulph Glanville. *Cybernetics & Human Knowing*, 22(2-3), 99-105.
16. Tham, M. (2022). Up Close and Personal: Metadesign Meditation to Find Agency for Careful Earth Work from Within a Ball of Yarn In John Wood (ed.), *Metadesigning Designing in the Anthropocene* (pp. 19-32). Routledge.
17. Ulmer, J. B. (2017). Writing slow ontology. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(3), 201-211.