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Insights from the Design for Planet Fellowship

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Emerging Practices from the Design for Planet Fellowship

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In December 2021, the Design Council launched the Design for Planet Fellowship: a proto-type programme that convened eight designers working across disciplines to develop new practices around regenerative design. The programme began as an opportunity to explore the important role that designers can play as knowledge weavers within systemic change: identifying opportunities for cross-sector collaboration and knowledge transfer and facilitating those relationships to happen (Drew and Hunter, 2021). It also sought to investigate a series of key issues within regenerative design, from design's entanglement with language to mapping the power relations that shape practice. This presentation shares key insights from the fellowship and reflections on how to create spaces for collective enquiry into design systems.

KEYWORDS: systemic design, design for planet, collective intelligence, regenerative design

RSD TOPIC(S): Socioecological Design

Presentation summary

In December 2021, the Design Council launched the Design for Planet Fellowship: a proto-type programme that convened eight designers working across disciplines to develop new practice around systemic and regenerative design. Its aim was to undertake a collective enquiry into a set of key challenges within regenerative design, from the relationship between design and language to understanding power relations within systemic design projects.

Alongside this, it explored how designers can act as 'knowledge weavers': experts at spotting the connections between different kinds of knowledges, sectors and industries, and who are adept at building relationships and new opportunities across these existing spheres in order to enable systemic change.[1] Knowledge weavers are often incredibly important actors within social and ecological activism, but their work is often undervalued, and their distinctive contribution to design goes unrecognised. In this, the project builds on Design Council's recent reports on systemic design and system shifting.[2]

The eight fellows come from a multitude of disciplines: product, fashion, engineering, architecture, technology, community design, policy and regenerative architecture. What unites them is their investment in working in this way across sectors. Their work is also entangled with adjacent practices such as activism, tech investment, education, farming and ecology. In the fellowship, they have been supported by a broader network of people who are translating their findings through visualisation, podcasts and writing.

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[1] In this work we were influenced by Ursula Le Guin's carrier bag theory of fiction, and the work of initiatives such as the network weavers collective (networkweaver.com).

[2] See: Drew, C & Hunter, N. Beyond Net Zero: A Systemic Design Approach. 2021. Design Council: London. Available at: https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/fileadmin/uploads/dc/Documents/Beyond%2520Net%2520Zero%2520-%2520A%2520Systemic%2520Design%2520Approach.pdf and also Drew, C., Robinson, D., Winhall, J., System-shifting design: An emerging practice explored. 2021. Design Council: London. Available at: https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/fileadmin/uploads/dc/Documents/Systemic%2520Design%2520Report.pdf

Each month, two of the fellows led a collective intelligence workshop to map emerging practices, opportunities and design examples. Rather than seeking to produce a set of universal insights, these operated as spaces to surface the situated, material and often entangled knowledges that the fellows had from their work across sectors and disciplines.[3] Through this series of sessions, we developed a series of invitations for those who wish to begin to design more regeneratively and to themselves act as 'knowledge weavers' in helping to create systemic and planetary change. Rather than providing a set of rules, these invitations offer a set of long-term practices for systemic designers to try and adopt and develop through their work.

Invitations for designers

1) How might you shift from degenerative to regenerative design practices?

Much of today's design continues to adopt a linear, extractive approach to material use which actively harms our planetary systems. Whereas this 'degenerative' design reproduces unsustainable practices, regenerative practice aims to create conditions that restore and revitalise social and ecological systems.[4]

Invitation for designers: Rather than just using materials or resources in your design, how can your design actively regenerate them?

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[3] See Donna Harraway, *Staying with the Trouble,* 2016, Duke University Press: Durham, p.4,32.

[4] See: Daniel C Wahl, Designing Regenerative Cultures, 2016, Triarchy Press: Axminster.

2) Are you cultivating slowness and embracing different forms of temporality?

Just as building trust and relationships takes time, so too does effecting change at the level of ecological, technological or social systems. Building awareness and capacity to act in and for the long term is an important part of designing regeneratively, as is finding ways to orient your work beyond the constraints of individual project briefs.

Invitation for designers: How can you continue the impact of a project beyond the brief? What conditions are needed to steward your project over the long term for greater change?

3) Have you spent time upfront designing the language you want to use together and actively brought in diverse perspectives?

Language shapes how we think and act in the world, and so language is one of the most important design tools that we have. Language embodies our values and forms of knowledge and helps make visible the perspectives of others. Regenerative design means different things to different people, requiring designers to be intentional about the language they use.

Invitation for designers: How can you give space to intentionally learn from the language of others and ensure that everyone involved in a project has a shared understanding?

4) **Are you tuned in to your embodied knowledge and encouraging others to do so?**

Our experience of nature is important to building a sense of its value. Western forms of knowledge have downplayed the importance of the senses and embodied experience.[5] However, utilising these can help attune us to greater systemic changes and shifts, not only in empathising with non-human life forms but also in giving insight into wider ecosystems, possible futures and environments.

Invitation for designers: What sources of knowledge or insight are you neglecting on a project? How can you treat embodied knowledge as an equally valid source of insight?

5) **Have you honoured and respected those who hold indigenous and cultural knowledges?**

Regenerative design is itself a contested term and territory: many cultures and communities have been undertaking work that restores, revitalises and cares for planetary systems for millennia, particularly indigenous communities across the planet.[6] Designing well requires us to not appropriate or extract the knowledges and practices of others, but to honour what is already happening, learn from others and act in solidarity with those already working in this way.

Invitation for designers: Have you considered the histories and relations that have shaped your work? Whose knowledge, labour and expertise are you relying on? How can you honour and respect the knowledge that is already there and the communities that steward it?

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[5] See: Walter Mignolo, The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options, 2011, Duke University Press: Durham.

[6] See: Arturo Escobar, Designs for the Pluriverse, 2017, Duke University Press: Durham.

6) What strategies have you adopted to cultivate empathy with non-human life forms and systems?

Our capacities for imagination, empathy and observation provide us with rich insight into the lives of non-human animals and plants. How can we draw on empathy tools and activities, passionate immersion and embodied observation[7] to help centre non-human animals and living systems in the design process?

Invitation for designers: What non-human lifeforms might be affected by your project? Have you considered how this will affect them and how it can actively support non-human species and life forms?

7) Are you keeping sight of the complexity of the situation you want to change?

Regenerative design starts by recognising that our planetary, social, and technological systems are entangled and interdependent with each other. Changing one part of a system might not have the transformative potential you imagined, which requires knowledge weavers to be able to horizon-scan and understand the context of their work at the macro and micro levels.[8]

Invitation for designers: Are you considering your work across multiple scales (its impact on the planet to a specific community)?

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[7] For a discussion on the importance of passionate immersion to multi-species studies, see: Van Dooren, T. et al. "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness'. In 'Environmental Humanities (2016) 8 (1), pp. 1-23. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3527695

[8] Drew, C & Hunter, N. Beyond Net Zero: A Systemic Design Approach. 2021. Design Council: London. Available at: https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/fileadmin/uploads/dc/Documents/Beyond%2520Net%2520Zero%2520-%2520A%2520Systemic%2520Design%2520Approach.pdf

8) How are you sharing power collectively, and do you understand your own?

Cultural change can happen in many different ways and at a range of scales, from the introduction of new legislation to a shift in the values and shared beliefs of a specific community. New developments, such as the rise of decentralised autonomous organisations and Web-3, are providing ways in which power can be shared and distributed.

Invitation for designers: Have you mapped the relationships you have around a project and your ability to effect change through them?

9) Make time for reconnecting with nature.

Whilst we are a part of nature, we can easily forget why it matters to us and the reasons we have to care for it. Tuning into our embodied relation to the natural world can help to re-evoke and inspire our sense of wonder and why regenerative design work matters.

Invitation for designers: Have you taken time to re-connect with the natural world, for example, through walking, being in nature or reflective journaling?

Next Steps

This fellowship was funded by The National Lottery Community Fund to help shift design to a form that supports regenerative communities, understanding the strength that exists within community, the critical role they play in stewarding our land, the need for deep social and human-non-human connections, and designing from that space.

The role of the designer as knowledge weaver is a distinctive form of practice that brings that wider web of knowledge and relationships both within and to a community to support in this way.

Alongside these invitations to practice will be a series of practical insights for designers and tools.