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Design for a Time Between Worlds

A case study of an emerging Toronto well-being economies lab

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David Suzuki Foundation | Independent

Facing global crises that are interconnected and overlapping, it is clear that the world as we know it is in transition. Some call this the meta-crisis. Some situate us in a time between worlds, where we are “living off of expired stories” (Machado de Oliveira, 2021) and need to ready ourselves for different ones. In the tradition of systemic design, we seek to inquire into how design practices can be adapted for deeply complex contexts like transition. What does it mean to situate our design practice in the societal transitions we find ourselves in and with some directionality toward the transitions we desire? We are asking ourselves these questions in an ongoing project focused on transitions to well-being economies in Toronto, Canada.

Here, we outline four systemic design orthodoxies (i.e., norms that guide thinking and action) that we hypothesise can be limiting working within the context of transition: rushing, seriousness, needing requisite variety and creating anew. In our project, we experiment with flipping these orthodoxies and working from a foundation of slowing down, light-heartedness, following existing relations, and noticing existing wisdom and innovation. In our presentation, we share stories and learnings from the project thus far and reflect on what it means to design in this time between worlds.

KEYWORDS: transition design, systemic design, orthodoxies, wellbeing economies

RSD TOPIC(S): Cases & Practice, Methods & Methodology

Presentation: a call to design differently in this time between worlds

As humanity reckons with ways of living that are environmentally, socially, and economically unsustainable, we are drawn to the call to “hospice modernity” (Machado de Oliveira, 2021) and play a role as midwife to something new. In this “time between worlds” (Rowson & Pascal, 2021), we, as designers and as people, are interested in the competencies, practices, resources, relationships, infrastructure, and wisdom needed to gracefully navigate the deep societal transitions that we find ourselves within. As those in the systemic design community are aware, traditional design methods and mindsets need to be intentionally adapted and directed for use in complex design contexts (Jones, 2014; Van der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020). Likewise, we believe that our ways of designing need to look different to navigate deep transitions in this time between worlds.

Along with others (e.g. Irwin et al., 2015; Escobar, 2018), we have both been considering the theoretical implications for design practices situated in contexts of societal transition for some time (see Campbell & Lutterman, 2019; Lutterman & Campbell, 2020; Hsu, 2021). Looking to experiment with these considerations in practice, we took the opportunity to leverage our expertise in a new project taking place in Toronto, Canada. In this project, we are working on local transitions to well-being economies, economies purpose-built to generate well-being for people and the planet (Hough-Stewart et al., 2019). Over the past several months, we have gathered together a core team to imagine and enact what this work could look like. Soon, we will be initiating a broader community-grounded network that explores, imagines, creates, and advocates for well-being economies in the city in what we consider to be a large participatory transition design project.

Flipping systemic design orthodoxies

As Venkataramani and Menter (2020) outline, systemic design has biases towards intellectual, rational, expert-led, and analytical approaches to knowing and acting. These biases can manifest as norms and orthodoxies: implicitly held beliefs that guide a systemic designer's decisions. Orthodoxies can limit how we understand and engage with systems (Nagji & Walters, 2013) and, thus, possibilities for our work within the context of societal transitions. The orthodoxies we list here have all been noticed and critiqued before, both within and outside of design. We bring them here together as a proffered foundation for how we have been thinking about design in a time between worlds.

Orthodoxy flipping in theory¹

- **From rushing to slowing down** – Instead of despairing about the state of things in Toronto and beyond and urgently trying to change everything, we are resourcing ourselves and our collaborators with time. New ways of taking time to stumble into and rushing can lead to addressing symptoms instead of the syndrome. As Bayo Akomolafe and Marta Benavides (2020) remind us: “the time is very urgent – we must slow down”.
- **From seriousness to light-heartedness** – We heed adrienne maree brown's call for “pleasure activism” (2019) and “center[ing] pleasure as an organizing principle”. To “stay with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016) of the long and uncertain processes of transition, we need to bring fun and desire into our approaches to sustain and energise ourselves.
- **From needing requisite variety to following relations** – Instead of needing to “get the whole system in the room” (Shaw, 2003), we are starting with the relationships that we are already a part of and building from there. Trust is an

¹ While we have outlined these orthodoxies as dualities here, we try to think about them from a non-dual perspective; we don't intend to elevate one mode over another. We seek instead to highlight how systemic design is often practised following certain norms and that an overreliance on these norms may be limiting in contexts of deep transition.

important ingredient for collective experiments and doing things differently; we can start with the trust we have in existing relationships and grow from there.

- **From creating anew to noticing existing wisdom and innovation** – Instead of creating a new well-being economies network from a blank canvas, in the spirit of humility (Khan, 2020), we are building relationships and learning from existing micro-economies of well-being in Toronto. These micro-economies are already holders of practical wisdom around how we can mutually sustain well-being with each other during times of deep transition.

Orthodoxy flipping in practice

The two of us spent some time thinking through these orthodoxies in preparation for this project, and some additional ones emerged in collaboration with our initial participants. We invited a small group of people to join us for four gatherings where we deepened our relationships and had fun getting into questions of well-being economies transitions while also thinking through how we might grow into a broader network in Toronto. In this process, we moved through four stages: creating sanctuary, letting go, dreaming, and then forming – a cyclical loop not unlike the complex adaptive cycle (Holling, 1986). We saw this as a fractal; with the smaller group, we were prototyping methods and mindsets that we hope to continue to experiment with as we bring others into the project.

To paint a brief picture, through words and images (Figure 1) of what things have looked like thus far: for initial inspiration, we considered the metaphor of a dance club—a place without prescribed moves, where we could take joy in the process of being, thinking, feeling, and creating together. We felt called to take Donella Meadow's (2001) provocation to dance with systems seriously: “we can't control systems or figure them out. But we can dance with them!”

Moving beyond whiteboards and endless sticky notes (McKercher, 2020), beyond the urge to map and plan our way to the world we desire, we found ourselves instead dancing with Toronto: talking about home around campfires in city parks, telling tales of desire along the Toronto waterfront, sandwiched between a heavy metal concert and the gentle crashing of waves; and lots of time eating food with each other and just

hanging out. In our presentation, we will share these stories in more detail, as well as work that will be emerging from now until the symposium, reflecting on what it has been like to design with these flipped orthodoxies in mind.



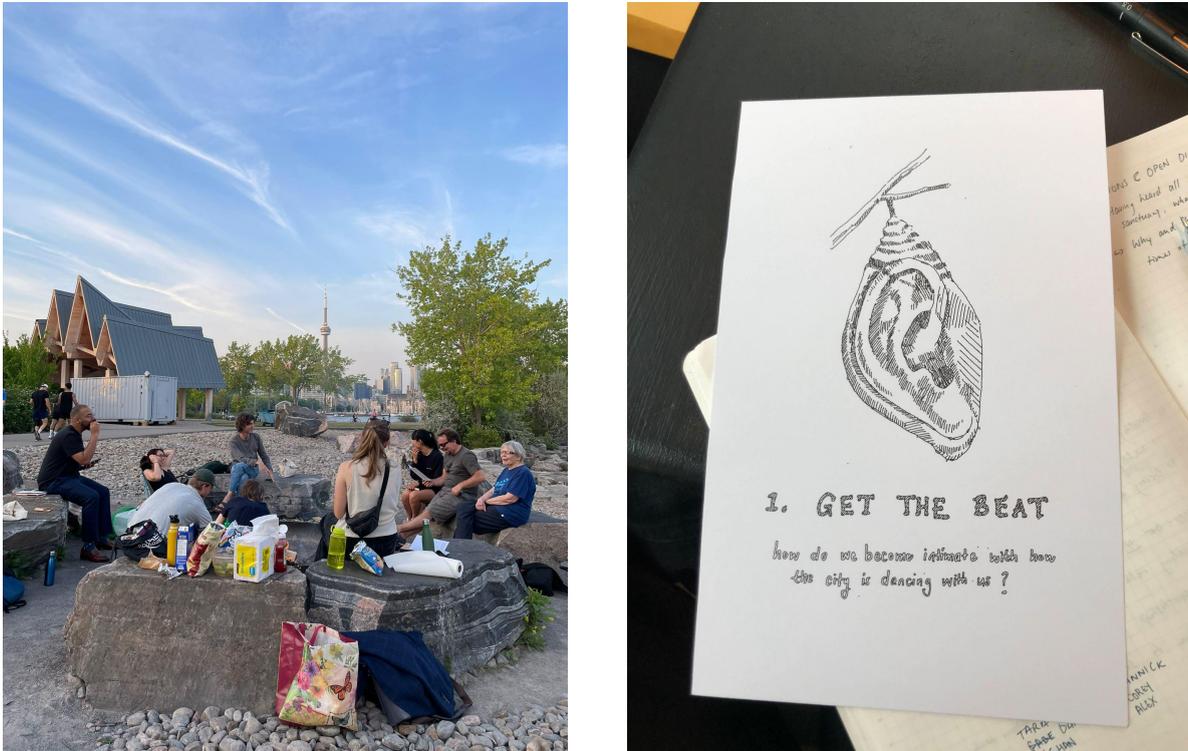


Figure 1. Snapshots from our well-being economies transition design work. Photos by Gabe Li, Tara Campbell, Cheryl Hsu.

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