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Practicing the Worlds We Want: Prefigurative design for revolutionary transformation

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Practicing the worlds we want

Prefigurative design for radical transformation

Tara Campbell & Ariana Lutterman

[Superorganism](#)

Abstract

Prefigurative design involves manifesting qualities of a desired future in a design practice. For example, if one desires a future with non-hierarchical social relations (e.g., Bookchin, 1982), then a prefigurative design practice would be intentional about incorporating non-hierarchical principles of relating to and engaging with others. If “we view change as emergent from an accountable, accessible, and collaborative process, rather than as a point at the end of a process” (Design Justice Network, 2018), then we understand that the *way* we work toward change matters. Desired futures emerge in a prefigurative process of working toward them. We see prefigurative design as a crucial approach to include alongside traditional systemic design approaches of working toward radical societal transformation. We explored prefigurative design practices during an online workshop with attendees of the 9th Relating Systems Thinking and Design symposium. We guided our workshop attendees through activities corresponding to elementary phases of *principles-based design*, an intentionally prefigurative approach to design practices (Campbell & Lutterman, 2019). In this paper we provide an overview of prefigurative design, our workshop activities, and reflections and insights that emerged through discussions with our participants.

Introduction

The current converging global social, economic, and environmental crises motivate our desire for societal transitions to more sustainable, just, and convivial futures. As designers, we often find ourselves wrestling with difficult questions about how best to go about our work in service of these aims. How do we work for another world while living in the one we are trying to change? How do we push for revolutionary transformation with only a small influence? How do we take actions that create change in a complex world we cannot entirely understand?

We have not always found satisfactory answers in dominant design practices, but we have found inspiration elsewhere. We draw on Audre Lorde (1984): “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” In our understanding, transformed systems require transformed practices. In the words of adrienne maree brown (2017), “what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system.” From Donna Haraway (2016): “it matters what thoughts think thoughts.” The ways we create change in turn create (or preclude) the possibilities for how that change will emerge. It matters what designs design design. Understanding that the transformed state of a desired system should inherently look and function differently from its present state, we believe that practices intended to transform must similarly expand beyond the practices formed within the dominant system.

From our experience as systemic designers engaging with various practices, particularly with systems mapping (e.g., Jones & Bowes, 2017) and transition design (Irwin et al., 2015), we have found that these practices favour *intellectual*, *rational* and *analytical* approaches to working for systems change (Venkataramani & Menter, 2021). These approaches attempt to deeply understand a system through various kinds of analyses and then design strategies to shift it, placing change in the future as an outcome. Through collaborative reflection we have developed a desire to see these approaches complemented by *prefigurative* approaches where change is embodied in the design process (Campbell & Lutterman, 2019).

We explored these ideas at a workshop with participants from the RSD9 Symposium where we shared our understanding of prefigurative design, facilitated activities to briefly envision desired futures, and speculated as to how one could practice differently to enact a prefigurative politics. Our activities centred on *principles-based design*, a method we have developed specifically for prefigurative practice (Campbell & Lutterman, 2019). In this paper we provide an exposition of prefigurative design, an overview of our workshop activities, and review the collaborative reflections of prefigurative design we developed alongside our participants.

Prefigurative design

Prefigurative design is inspired by the notion of prefigurative politics which embody “within the ongoing political practice of a movement ... those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal” (Boggs, 1997). The Occupy movement from 2011 is one recent archetypical example. At Zucotti Park in New York City, the epicenter of the global movement, consensus-based decision making was used at inclusive general assemblies, there were libraries of free reading materials, a free kitchen, etc. As Deseriis & Dean (2012) describe “the practice of occupation and the very mode of existence of the movement are themselves prefigurative of a new, more democratic and more egalitarian world.” The movement was working toward a more collaborative, inclusive future and was organized and acted on in collaborative and inclusive ways.

To practice prefiguratively for systemic transformation is to form one's process as a reflection of a desired transformation. Like prefigurative politics from which these ideas are inspired, prefigurative design "is both an expressive and experimental endeavor. Through the processes of enactment, we not only indicate the social relations we desire; we also test what works, and does not work, in the construction and maintenance of those social relations" (Disalvo, 2016). Prefigurative practices allow for short-term "testing" of long-term goals, and simultaneously validate what is possible in the long-term by proving it is desirable in the short-term.

Mariam Asad (2019) notes that "prefigurative design is not meant to be an overarching framework or prescriptive model." Prefigurative design is instead an orientation through which researchers, designers, community members, and other systems actors can articulate and align their processes with a shared vision. It is but one strategy among many when working for revolutionary change, complementary and not opposed to the analytical systemic design practices mentioned earlier.

Rationale for a prefigurative approach

There are fervent arguments about the merits (or lack thereof) of prefigurative approaches. These are nuanced debates which we will only briefly touch on to highlight a rationale for including prefigurative approaches in a design practice (see the Reflection section for additional thoughts on this matter). We have adapted Raekstad's (2017) argument and distilled the reasons down to three main concerns: *capabilities*, *possibilities*, and *desires*. The reason for prefigurative approaches that concerns *capabilities* is that 1) the future we want will require different societal skills, and these can be developed through prefigurative practices. The following two reasons are closely linked: one is about expanding the imagination for alternative societal *possibilities* and the other is about developing *desires* for those alternatives. These arguments are as follows: 2) prefigurative practices are important for generating revolutionary consciousness and understandings of what is possible; 3) prefigurative practices allow people to experience alternatives and discover needs they did not know existed. Prefigurative approaches allow you to try on alternative ways of being, knowing, and doing and in the process discover further how alternatives might be possible while building a stronger desire for them.

As designers, we recognized additional reasons for engaging in prefigurative practice. The constraint of aligning a design practice with desired futures provides scaffolding for ideation and creativity. Considering your design practice from a prefigurative lens also aligns with design philosopher Tony Fry's (2009) notion of futuring and defuturing: through our design practices and actions we shape possibilities for the future, making some futures more possible and, parallelly, closing possibilities to others.

Workshop process

While we had originally considered an in-person delivery, given the transition to a virtual symposium we adapted the workshop to an online format. We opted to run a shorter, 90-minute workshop with fewer activities over the videoconferencing platform Zoom on October 10th, 2020 (see Figure 1). Over 60 attendees joined us, with workshop participants largely self-facilitating by recording their activities and thoughts in a shared Google document (see Figure 2). Our workshop included a presentation on prefigurative design followed by several short interactive activities built around the structured prefigurative process we have developed, *principles-based design*.

Figure 1. Scenes from the workshop
The screenshot on the right was taken by Josina Vink.

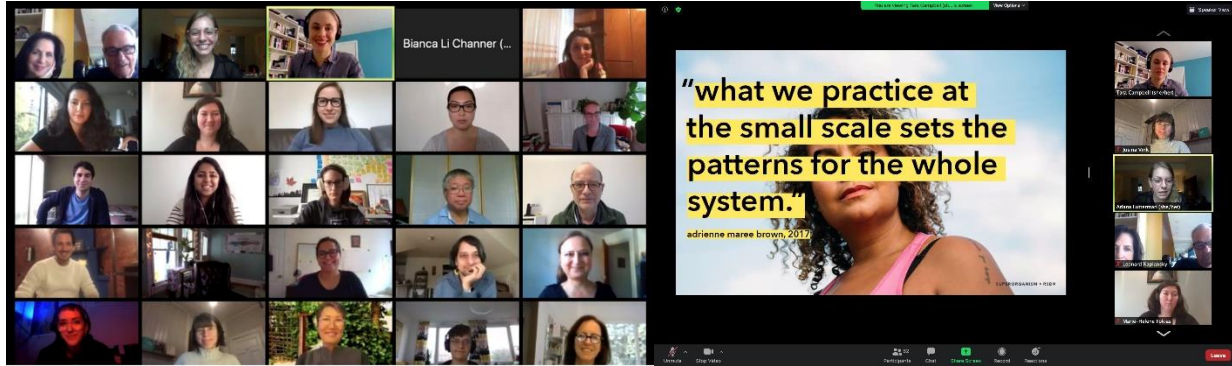


Figure 2. Real-time collaborative document
The first page of our real-time collaborative Google document where our workshop participants recorded their activity responses and reflections.

Practicing the Worlds We Want: RSD9 2020

Practicing the Worlds We Want: Prefigurative design for revolutionary transformation

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Name	Values (3)	Principle (Groceries)	Principle (Work)	Reflection	Y/N
1 Marie Davidova	Ecosystem, equity, planetary health	Buy local sustainable products with no/recyclable/compostable packaging (vegan)	With both my teaching as well as NGO practice, we focus on real life interventions to generate systemic changes from the bottom up, <u>codesigning</u> with local communities and interact with the real life agents. This often leads to redesign. We work mainly with edible and habitable landscapes and their DIY. Generating a female support group for my students.	I will integrate prefigurative design in my work more explicitly as a strategy. This will take place in both my teaching as well as in my practice and research by design.	Y
2 Bhawna Tak	Equity, harmony, follow ecological order	Promote more seasonal veggies and fruits	Open to hear everyone's voice and there is no hierarchy	Understanding value of prefigurative	
3 Leanne Freeman	Non-hierarchical, earnest curiosity, care taking and receiving	Treat staff with respect Only going when it's necessary Impulse buy something confusing or novel Treats for friends	Empower my colleagues Risk my security when challenging Expose my own ignorance Checking in on others	A lot of where my values are put into <u>principles</u> and then practice are weighted, not toward which value I prioritize but, <u>toward</u> what I feel I have agency over.	Y
4 Rishi jangangi	Responsible, positive, fair	Gaining knowledge about your objectives and to have a better understanding about things, to have faith in yourself, observant and not jumping on conclusions	While designing something that's gonna be the part of a larger system and specially if the target audience is as vast as a nation we need to be responsible per se conscious enough to cater for all categories of people.	It's similar to have a self check and being prefigurative helps you to have the clarity, one could unleash a lot of its potential out of this...prefigurative or responsible sounds the same	y

superorganism

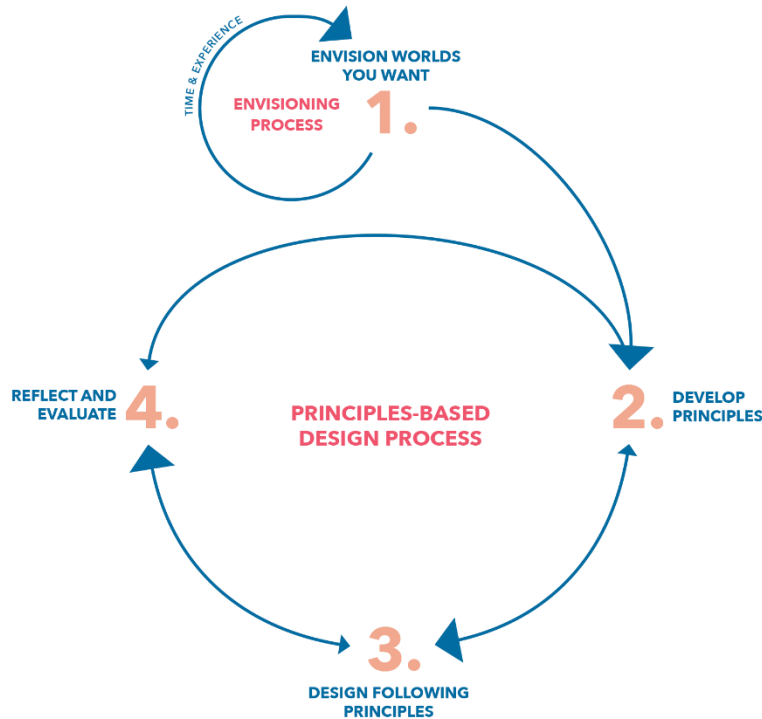
Principles-based design

Principles-based design is a method we have developed specifically for prefigurative practice. Principles-based design involves developing principles aligned with a vision or desired situation that can then be intentionally applied during a design process and against which the design process can be evaluated (Campbell & Lutterman, 2019). These principles are meant to guide and inform design decisions and actions. This process begins by distilling a desired future into core values which can be translated into

principles for design practice. To develop vision-oriented principles, we follow the GUIDE criteria for effective principles (Patton, 2017). According to GUIDE: a “high-quality principle (1) provides guidance, (2) is useful, (3) inspires, (4) supports ongoing development and adaptation, and (5) is evaluable” (p. 36). See Figure 3 and Lutterman & Campbell (2019) for more details.

Figure 3. Principles-based design

An outline of principles-based design, adapted from Lutterman & Campbell (2019).



For example, if we desire a future that values *care*, we might develop a principle for our design practice of prioritizing our wellbeing over our work. Similarly, if our desired future embraced pluriversality (Escobar, 2019) then we might have a principle of embracing difference and not try to arrive at single shared vision or solutions. In our workshop, we guided our participants through an activity to create principles aligned with their own desired futures, which they could then speculatively apply in various scenarios and imagine how their own prefigurative practice would play out.

Workshop activities

We began our workshop with a guided meditation on daily practices, prompting our participants to think about what they did regularly each day and how they acted in various situations. We then went through a presentation outlining prefigurative design and the rationale for its application. Afterwards, we entered into the 2-phase interactive portion of the workshop.

Phase 1: Values

We began our activities by asking everyone to think about three values they wanted to see the world. We asked: “what is good, beautiful, or constructive? A value denotes what is important. What do you want to be most prioritized in the world?” We gave everyone a few minutes to reflect on this prompt

participants stay long after the allotted time to discuss their perspectives with us, some of which are included in the following section.

Reflection

We have been thinking about prefigurative practices for several years now, and our reflections were enriched through the workshop discussion and comments we received. Some of the major themes that have emerged for us alongside our participants are that prefigurative practices: 1) provide hope and meaning, 2) recognize that change occurs in the process of working toward it, and 3) can be used as a form of assessment of or reflection on current practices.

Prefigurative practices provide hope and meaning

In the words of one of our participants, prefigurative practices "can so easily be adapted in our present lives with such simple changes and alterations in our preferences. This also gives hope and a sense of satisfaction in doing our tiny bit." As we have noted before, prefigurative principles can help one "feel more comfortable in complexity" (Campbell & Lutterman, 2019, p. 89). Prefigurative practices provide guidance and relief when faced with an enormous project of societal transition.

Of course, the challenge here is to distinguish prefigurative practices from a shallow form of lifestyle politics. Portwood-Stacer (2013) describes that "when individuals who desire social or political change are compelled to shape their own personal behaviors and choices toward the ideals they envision, this is known as *lifestyle politics*" (p. 2). This could easily be a definition for prefigurative practices, although practices can be engaged in collectively whereas lifestyle does have an individual connotation. There are shared critiques of both lifestyle and prefigurative politics, which can both be engaged with for appearance's sake without an understanding of historical political struggles, or that do not transcend the individual with "a carefully considered mechanism for disrupting hegemonic ideologies" (p. 148). These are nuanced discussions beyond the scope of this paper, but are treated with care by Laura Portwood-Stacer in her 2013 book *Lifestyle Politics and Radical Activism*.

The process is the product

We appreciated the framing of another participant who said prefigurative practices are things we may already do but perhaps we "haven't thought of them explicitly as reality-creating practices." The notion that we create realities through our practices is a philosophy at the heart of our own design practices. As we have said elsewhere "the process of how we move toward a future matters as much as the futures we desire" (Campbell & Lutterman, 2019, p. 96). Prefigurative design explicitly embodies this philosophy and agenda.

Prefigurative assessment as reflective practice

In our original agenda for a longer, in-person workshop, we had planned an initial activity, a *Prefigurative Assessment*, to explore the kinds of futures one is already prefiguring in one's practices. We left this activity out for the sake of shortening the workshop, but the value of activities as kinds of assessment tools came up in several of our participant reflections and in the discussion at the end of the workshop.

One participant noted how reflecting on current practices from a prefigurative lens can identify which practices should be removed: “thinking about the world I want to create will help me move through my work and life with more intention and allow me to let go of busy work that is not contributing to this change.” Another participant echoed these sentiments, seeing our activities as tools for self-assessment, “as an inquiry to find where our values aren't aligned with our actions.”

A few of our participants noted how we could adapt the exercises as well. Someone noted that “starting with values is tougher than starting from current practices,” suggesting that we create an activity to support the distillation of values and principles from what one is doing already. We strongly agree with this as an important starting exercise. In a similar vein, another participant asked us if we had tried identifying a desired future practice and then identifying what values would need to be held to align with it. We had chosen to start with values as we personally find those easier to identify than a more concrete vision of how they might manifest in practice. We were intrigued by this final suggestion, however, and will consider that adaptation, especially with audiences who may have detailed visions of desirable futures already in place.

Conclusion

To practice design prefiguratively is “to both imagine alternative futures and to structure design processes to manifest them in the present” (Asad, 2018). How do we work for another world while living in the one we are trying to change? How do we push for revolutionary transformation with only a small influence? How do we take actions that create change in a complex world we can't entirely understand? As systemic designers facing these kinds of questions, we find that a prefigurative perspective offers an initial foothold. Prefigurative practices allow you to create pockets of a desired future in your present practices and provide scaffolding for decisions within complexity.

As Sevaldson & Jones (2019) state: “the field of systemic design should evolve as an open system in its own right—an ecology of conversations, learnings, and methods that together form a dynamic, dialogic system supporting a new evolution in design.” We see prefigurative approaches as crucial expansions to systemic design practices when working toward radical societal transformation. They belong amongst the plural systemic design methods and mindsets and offer another perspective for richer systemic design conversations.

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