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## Not the Venn

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# **Not the venn: an emergent notion of systemic design which transcends the intersection of design x systems thinking.**

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995 words

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As the scale, complexity and interdependence of societal challenges is more recognised, the need for systemic approaches to change has grown and design and systems thinking become ever more entwined. The RSD conference has led discussions about the integration of these practices, with papers putting forward frameworks (Ryan, 2014) and principles (Jones, 2014, Buchanan, 2019) that combine the two.

But what if it's not as simple as just putting the two together? Previous discussion has highlighted the shortcomings of systems thinking (e.g. preponderance of analysis over action) and design (e.g. limitations of rapid prototyping in complex systems where feedback is slow). But equally, that the role of design has not been used to its full potential (Jones & Sevaldson, 2019).

We are currently hosting a discussion series with leading designers in the UK on what a next generation of *creative* systemic design practice could look like that goes beyond combining current design approaches with systems thinking - and how design itself needs to evolve - to make a greater contribution to meeting these systemic societal challenges. This abstract contains emerging thoughts, with the final submission crystallising these.

The social innovation field has widely adopted design. However when it comes to systems the role of design is in practice largely limited to, firstly, mapping and understanding systems using visual tools, and secondly, designing incremental improvements within the terms of current systems. This reflects a bias towards the analytical and processual that we think has become endemic in parts of the design field itself and in social change more generally. Design has a greater role to play in strengthening the creative leadership required to reimagine and remake systems. We need more designers contributing their skills to big systemic challenges, and more non-designers valuing the act of creation - but design itself needs to be stretched to fulfil this potential. This paper contributes to conference themes around the

**methodology for systemic design**, and also - through its focus on design practitioners, on **systemic design (not just thinking) for creating systems for contentment and sustainability**.

Current limitations of design include:

The dominance of 'user-centred' design which centres the behaviours of individuals at the expense of relationships, the collective and the structural. It tends to view challenges as problems within the current system paradigm rather than as signals of what could be. Participatory design, whilst creating value through its *process*, often results in ideas that confirm generally-held consensus, and are rarely bold enough to address the scale of societal challenges we face.

The positioning of designer as neutral facilitator which works against more radical creation necessary for systemic breakthroughs. Reinforced by the participatory paradigm but with prevalence beyond that, is how reluctant designers are to take a position on things. Whether in terms of designing to make a political statement or just bringing intention to a design, taking a stand seems to be increasingly uncommon in the systemic design community - where people describe design as simply facilitative. At the same time design culture perpetuates the idea of a 'hero' designer that denies the multiple contributions that give something value.

Speculative design usefully creates provocations that jolt perception, however the majority of these works lack empathy with the frontlines of change, lessening their power to enable meaningful transitions on the ground.

Alongside the above observations, we agree with Jones & Sevaldson (2019) that there has developed too much of a focus on an 'essentialised methodology' over praxis. How many in the systemic design community are trained and practicing designers themselves, and is this the reason we've lost touch with the point of making, creating, generation and movement? What have we given up by co-opting design's creativity to serve the mechanistic lens of 'leverage points'?

We've been holding conversations with leading designers\* spanning architecture, product, service, policy, strategy, UX, data and AI, to understand what a creative systemic design practice is for them, and the barriers to more of it happening. Topics have included collective intelligence, regenerative design, invisible design (e.g. of power dynamics, norms), collective or ecosystem design, paradigm shifts.

Although still emerging from discussion, we think that the following are attributes of a stretched design practice that can more fully play a role in shifting systems. Happening in pockets, we need to bring more

awareness around these to influence system change practice and how we teach a new breed of designer.

- Start from a different understanding: to imagine new systems, we need to access different types of intelligence, including more diverse cultural, spiritual, emotional and ecological ways of knowing.
- The act of making (not just describing) is necessary to bring to life alternatives and surface resistance that can be worked with. We can start with the micro (material and making) and probing out, as much as the macro (systems analysis) and honing in.
- Designers must be allowed to deliberately *not* solve the problem, ‘failing’ not to spot errors and iteratively improve something, but to create bold propositions that open up with mind/ideas space and boundaries for others to contribute.
- System change comes through design action across multiple scales, from big instigative ‘designs’ to everyday acts of transgression. Design can illuminate and collect these together into a narrative that locates them into a bigger movement of change.

There are some barriers and tensions that need further exploration, which we invite RSD9 participants to do with us and a collective enquiry:

- What is an appropriate metaphor for design leadership in systems? How can we be provocative and provide direction, while inviting true participation?
- How can we step into other ways of knowing, but not colonise these?
- How can we surface and aggregate intelligence in an emergent but not centralised way?
- How can we value creating the ‘invisible’ relationships, mindsets and goodwill for a new system to emerge as much as the ‘visible’ embodiment of it?
- And how can we do this when the predominant economic model for design is priced according to individual projects focused on tangible outputs rather than the collective wisdom involved?

\* Designers include: Sarah Gold, Julia Shaeper, Indy Johar, Alistair Parvin, Josina Vinks, Seetal Solanki, Jo Morrison, Adam Groves, Laura Melissa Williams, Makalya Lewis, Sarah Drummon, Deborah Szebeko, Andrea Siodmok, Sarah Mann, Annabelle Campbell

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