

Eco-Social Innovation by Design — Exploring Potential Contributions to Sustainability Transitions in an International PhD and a Master's Degree Programme

Chris Doering, Karin Fink, Claudia Ramseier, Andreas Unteidig & Jan-Christoph Zoels

#doctoral studies #eco-social innovation
#sustainable development #design
christopher.doering@hslu.ch · jan-christoph.zoels@hslu.ch



Contributions from the design disciplines toward sustainable development (UN, 2005) often aim to use less harmful materials, adopt more efficient processes, improve construction principles, or align individual behavior. However, designers also contribute to sustainable development by shaping the framework conditions for social innovation practices (Manzini, 2005), navigating between academic disciplines, professional

methods, and cultural conventions in all four orders of design (Buchanan, 2001): From graphics and products to interactions and systems. These interventions might be co-created visions for desirable futures, policymaking and regulation, goods and services, community activism or grassroots innovations, to educational experiences.

The global goals for sustainable transitions require unique design strategies, new forms of cooperation and unexpected alliances—between human and non-human stakeholders. The Lucerne School of Art and Design (HSLU), Switzerland, and the National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad, India, are collaborating in an international doctoral studies programme to explore the diverse landscape of eco-social innovation by design. Simultaneously, HSLU is currently implementing the MA programme ‘Eco-Social Design’, thus enabling a sequential design education specialising in sustainability transitions. The MA Eco-Social Design uses collaborative and practice-oriented design approaches to address societal, ecological, economic and cultural issues at different scales: the self, the common and the planet. From prototyping regulations, to participatory mitigation processes, to municipal adaptation strategies or emerging behaviours. This transdisciplinary design approach does not only seek to expand on the roles, capacities and possible alliances in which designers collaborate, but also the scope of what is understood as designable.

The PhD programme is open to educators and professionals in design and allied fields who seek to reinvent the basis of their knowledge and practice while pushing the boundaries of the design disciplines by creating new grounded theories. It encourages research scholars to be ‘learning by doing’ and ‘learning from the field’, preparing them for strategic positions in education, private/public sector organisations, or eco-social entrepreneurship. Research scholars benefit from the diversity of perspectives, the inter-regional sharing of academic practice and problem-solving strategies, the plurality of innovation cultures and the opportunity to study and conduct use-inspired research within an intercultural environment in Switzerland and India.

NID is one of the leading educational and research institutions for industrial, communication, textile and integrated design. A

long-standing partnership and fruitful knowledge exchange in practice-oriented research and sustainable innovation connect NID and HSLU. Researchers benefit from a diverse range of transdisciplinary courses, academic collaboration, and knowledge-sharing opportunities.

Suggested research areas:

- Design for participation and co-creation, focusing on formats, processes and frameworks for discourse, the integration of stakeholders from civil society, the public sector and governmental institutions, businesses and academia.
- Investigation and design of social and artistic interventions, educational activities, organisational processes, transformative grassroots innovations.
- Design for science communication, focusing on information and education about the city and regional planning, municipal policymaking, and social organisations. Design of virtual realities, data art, information graphics, campaigns, exhibitions, and animations.
- Design of future scenarios: foresight, disruptive innovation research or scientific and technical trend analyses.
- Design of fictional scenarios by using digital modelling, games, illustrations, and prototyping.
- Design of services and interactions with a focus on democratisation, strategies for climate mitigation, adaptation and coping, crisis communication, urban and rural infrastructure and communities. Design of digital applications, platforms, and guiding principles for organisational transformations.
- Design of products, processes, and systems focusing on circular manufacturing and recovery processes, craft culture, material science and production techniques. Design of material cycles, construction principles, application scenarios for textile, natural fibres, furnishing or building technology.
- Accompanying studies on new narratives and current discourses focusing on concepts and theories about aesthetic education, the Anthropocene, post-humanism and cohabitation.

The submissions of the first round of applications offered a wide range of thematic fields and a variety of approaches to explore

them. The proposals show a broader understanding of eco-social innovation and the associated tasks and fields of activity for designers: From incremental improvements of production processes to new knowledge transfer strategies to systemic approaches and a comprehensive reorientation of the designing disciplines.

Several submissions propose using artistic and creative methods to draw attention to real-world problems and discuss them on a social level without directly proposing concrete solutions. In such cases, art and design are assigned the capacities of mediating and explaining. Other concepts address specific eco-social challenges and propose tangible technical and design-related solutions in products, services, or processes. Here, design is interpreted primarily as a problem-solving discipline providing tools to be adapted and applied by other disciplines rendering the boundaries permeable and fluid.

The selection of the most suitable submissions for the programme is still pending. It will be interesting to see which positions have the potential to set impulses for design practice but also research and teaching. We aim to establish a productive dialogue between the master's curriculum and the PhD programme at the universities in Switzerland and India to transfer knowledge and research results between students and faculty. This diversity of perspectives should contribute to understanding eco-social design and innovation not only as a sub-discipline but to break new ground and create new alliances and forms of cooperation.

Buchanan. (2001). Design Research and the New Learning. *Design Issues*, 17(4), 3–23.

<https://doi.org/10.1162/07479360152681056>

Ezio Manzini. (2015). Design, when everybody designs: An introduction to design for social innovation. MIT Press, Cop.

United Nations General Assembly (2015): Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A/RES/70/1