

PRACTISING ENGAGEMENT FOR TRANSITION DESIGN

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Abstract:

The present study focuses on stakeholder engagement within Transition Design, examining the consumer perspective on textile provenance, with particular attention to participants' knowledge and skills related to textiles. Building on the work of Stefano Boeri, the study investigates how participatory, embodied mapping can elicit distributed and individual perspectives on provenance, while also analysing how the act of map-making may serve as a phenomenological basis for experiencing emerging, incomplete, or absent knowledge and skills more deeply.

The paper draws on a series of pilot workshops entitled Co-creating an Eclectic Atlas of Cloth, conducted across different geographical and community contexts as part of a larger doctoral research project. In these workshops, participants contributed personal textile items and were invited to trace their provenance, prompting reflection on supply chains, cultural histories, and personal attachment. This process revealed how consumer behaviour, purchasing patterns, and cultural values shape sustainability narratives and supported the articulation of radical visions for future textile practices through facilitated discussion.

While the wider doctoral research explores Transition Design across multiple geographical focal points and textile-practising communities, the research presented here specifically investigates participatory engagement methods as tools for stakeholder involvement. Working with Transition Design approaches such as systems thinking and co-design, the study positions designers as facilitators of systemic change in response to complex, “wicked” problems. The outcomes contribute practical insights into how embodied, participatory methods can be designed and situated to support systems-level transformation within the textile industry.

Keywords: Transition Design, Ethnography, Sustainability, Textile Industry, Co-Design

1. INTRODUCTION

As the second biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, the Global Textile Manufacturing sector faces ongoing pressure to adopt more sustainable practices, and while there are different ways of defining and measuring textile industries, the total contribution of the textile and fashion sector is estimated to make up for 2% of the world's GDP [1]. In the UK, there are 88,000 people working towards a near \$80 billion (£62 billion) output per annum [2] whereas in Europe, where the economic contribution is almost 200 billion US dollars (€170 billion), more than 14 times the amount of people, 1.3 million people work in the industry [3]. These figures highlight that in The United Kingdom less people are employed but they tend to work in higher value parts of the sector than is average for their European neighbours. Consumption of new clothing is also estimated to be significantly higher in the UK than it is in many European countries, 26.7kg in the UK to 12.6kg per person in Sweden in 2018 (Used Textile Collection in European Cities, European Clothing Action Plan, March 2018, cited in [4]) and this paper thus focuses on the role community engagement may have within transition design in the nationally important UK textile sector.

9. TRANSITION DESIGN (TD)

Whilst the core principles of transition design were first published formally in 2015, they had been muted by Irwin and Tonkinwise since the beginning of the decade and in some sense present a

convergence of co-design, grassroots and community engagement methodologies that should be seen alongside other emerging design theories like speculative design and ontological design. All these theories are working towards trying to answer the question of what constitutes meaningful design [5], with transition design placing particular emphasis on the concept of cosmopolitan localism, or how we can give agency to distributed systems, grassroots organisations, and connectivity between system stakeholders. It advocates that real change can only start from the local level while being connected, informed or even scaled up globally.

“Design has changed from an activity often undertaken by an individual professional designer to a highly collaborative, co-design activity that involves a variety of actors, including professional designers, experts from other fields and disciplines and users/co-creators” [6, p. 57].

Terry Irwin posits that “Transition Design challenges existing paradigms, envisions new ones, and leads to radical, positive social and environmental change” [7, p. 8] which means TD works on fixing problems within existing system, trying to find a point for well-informed intervention. [8] wrote that if we fail to intervene, “we will continue to live from our culturally installed operating system and perpetuate our current reality” [8, p. 2], and the aim of involving stakeholders is not to simply replace a system but to find a point for intervention to lever a positive future that is geographically grounded, co-created and therefore able to change the postures of the communities touched by the change. A key point to TD is to do research within and with communities, to meaningfully contribute and co-create answers to current social and ecological crises. This emphasizes a significant change in the modern designer’s role as it considers designers as facilitators for systemic change [9]. The role designers take in the industry is an ongoing debate, and while some (e.g. [10] and [11]) advocate for a more expert approach, where designers are considered as the decision makers, there are many voices arguing for a more user-centred approach ([6], [12] and [13]), with TD falling squarely within this part of the debate.

TD emphasises the role of collaboration, specifically transdisciplinary collaboration. The need to bring in different disciplines (inter/trans disciplinary and technology transfer) is not a new idea, co-creation and co-design have been mentioned as early as the late 1960s. One of the most influential early examples of participatory design can be traced back to the 1970s in Scandinavia. [14] gives us a glimpse into important projects in Scandinavia, leveraging important pillars in participatory design, highlighting three key characteristics: “deep commitments to democracy and democratisation; discussions of values in design and imagined futures; and how conflict and contradictions are regarded as resources in design” [14, p. 62]. These points can be clearly seen in parallel with values of TD in which there is an important emphasis on the involvement of the end users and stakeholders and giving everyone a voice, in the belief that design must facilitate social innovation. Scandinavian Participatory design is built strongly on helping people realise attainable futures, and positions future users as co-designers in some cases. A well-known example is the “Swedish DEMOS Project” [14] from the late 1970s which emphasised workplace democracy and co-determination. Alongside Scandinavia, there have been other places that have benefitted from participatory and community-led design approaches during the same period. [15] gives us a brief introduction to the history behind the Coin Street redevelopment in London from the 1980s. The Coin Street Project is a social enterprise that is on-going to this date. By 1977 The “Coin Street Acton Group” [15] has formed and together with other organisations transformed its neighbourhood.

Transition Design was first formulated into an educational framework (figure 1) by Terry Irwin, Gideon Kossoff and Cameron Tonkinwise at California’s Carnegie Mellon University in 2015.

This framework is meant to help educators, designers, practitioners, to implement transition design methodologies in their own work. The four important pillars of the framework are “visions for transition, theories of change, posture, mindset and new ways of designing” [16].

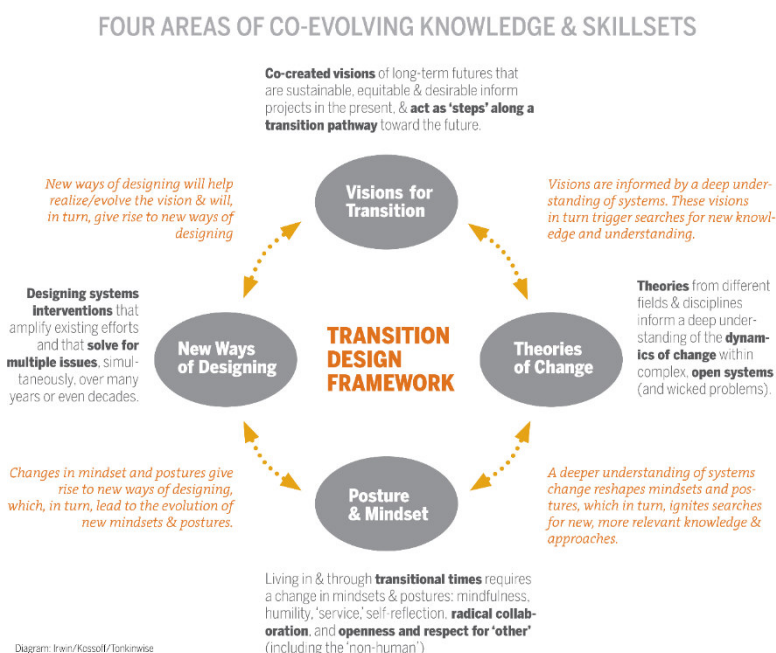


Figure 1: The Transition Design Framework (Transition Design Seminar CMU, 2019)

Workshop and community consultation

Workshops consistently come back as an important if rather informal aspect of the TD methodology, and we considered the systematic use of planned workshops as a point of departure to inform transition design goals in the textile industries. In other words, it is not just important to have a workshop but as a transition designer we need to think about the positioning of the workshop within the systems matrix, the potential stakeholders connected to the so-called wicked problems, based on the observations of the symptoms of the system's ills. As a transition designer, developing an effective workshop methodology needs to be a point of focus and we therefore, developed and undertook a series of pilot studies, entitled, *Co-creating an Eclectic Atlas of Cloth*, with three workshops so far following different intentions with a diverse range of participants.

10. METHODOLOGY

The workshop format was inspired by the "eclectic atlas" that Stefano Boeri employed in urban planning in the early 21st century to incorporate multiple gazes about a place [17]. We re-imagined these co-created maps as tools to elicit and document knowledge on provenance of personal textiles, adding the physical stitching of buttons and threading of yarns to encourage an embodied experience of data and wicked problem discovery.

3.1 Workshop 1

The first workshop was planned as part the international doctoral program "Transformations in European Societies" with a group of ethnographic Doctoral students and their professors united in their commitment to understanding the world from a people's point of view. These participants not having a background in textiles was important, as they were sampled as European textile **consumers** from 7 countries, and as ethnographers, committed to the agency of participants in research. Ages ranged from mid twenty to around 50.

All participants were informed and agreed to data generated in the workshop being used in refining transition design co-creation methodologies with stakeholders.

The aim of this workshop was also to bring together people whose standard mode of engagement is not material led, and to see how it works, how it is received, and if it creates a rich space for engagement and to elicit radical ideas for future practice.

We took the eclectic atlas literally and printed an outline of the world map using sublimation printing onto deadstock fabric and using colour coded buttons and yarns sewn onto the fabric during as part of the workshop activities.

We began the workshop with a presentation on Transition Design, with particular emphasis on mindsets, seeking to fully inform participants on context and aims of the workshop, while a previously sent out email to all participants did not yet reveal transition design as a central concept, encouraging instead reflection on personal attachments to textiles:

1. Explore as much as you (easily) can of the provenance of one or two items of clothing that you were about to pop into the suitcase for your trip to Murcia. Provenance here describes the origins and history of the textile, from its materials to its culture to the people involved in its making, distribution and use.
2. Add an extra item of clothing or cloth to your suitcase that holds special importance for you, whether because of its provenance or due to a very personal relevance.
3. Bring to the table visions of cloth production and consumption that are (radically) different to our currently prevailing (fast) fashion system. Perhaps you are aware of an initiative in your neighbourhood, or have studied a long-forgotten heritage practice, or maybe you are already living or imagining a better future for our relationship with textiles [18].

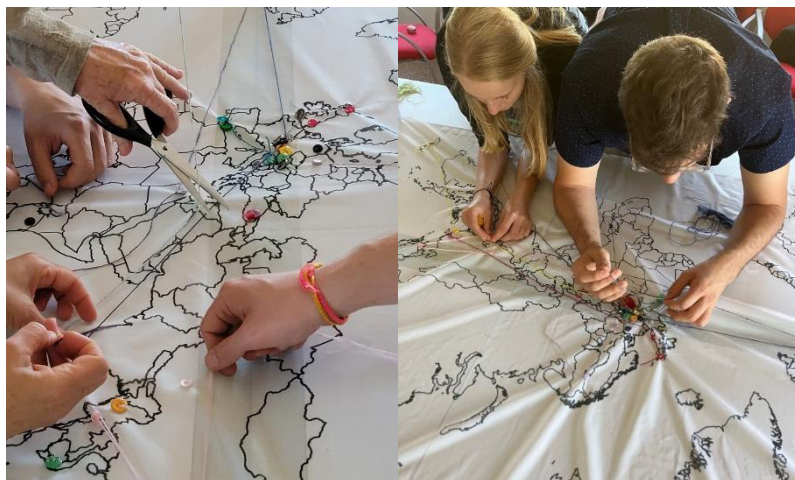


Figure 2: Workshop activities

The tasks followed these three prompts to map individual impacts of clothes with non-traditional, embodied modes of data collection. Signalling their own location in the world by one button participants sought and traced provenance of items by an additional button connected by physical supply chains, allowing the group to later collectively consider our “textile footprint” (figure 2 and 3).



Figure 3: Mapping our impact and relationship to our clothing in Murcia, Spain

We asked the participants to provide further reflections on the textile items they had chosen to bring, to add cultural provenance and personal relevance to our data (table 1). The task encouraged deep thinking about textile items of daily use.

Table 1: Example of feedback entry

White Tunic	Embroidered Pillow Cover
BLUE	-
Notes on supply chain provenance	Notes on supply chain provenance
Probably made in India, not sure where! but it resembles Indian products; travelled to the States, and brought back to Croatia	Came from Konavle Region in Croatia; present sent to a woman who used to live in Sisak (Croatian town); gifted second time to me by descendant of a first owner. Now kept in Zagreb as a souvenir. Base cloth is what we call PANAMA textile; thread is/was produced in Croatia (can't read this); but the cotton is Egyptian. Time of production around 60s.
Notes on cultural provenance	Notes on cultural provenance
Indian women's tunic, white cotton long shirt with blue flower imprints 'coloured blue'. Bought in ethnic shop 'HINDI' in San Francisco.	Croatian national embroidered pillow cover: so, called 'Levantin stitch' or locally known as 'Konavoski vez' (the stitch from Konavle region).
Notes on personal connections	Notes on personal connections
Bought in 2006, with Hindi speaking friend, kept as a reminder of a stay in America; nice to wear, cool feel; especially in summer.	A family piece given to me by father-in-law; belonged to his mother who was given the cloth by her relative from the Konavle region.

The third part of the workshop centred around the sharing of radical ideas about future textile consumption practices to mitigate provenance and footprints issues uncovered in the mapping exercise. Conducted in two smaller groups led by one of the researchers each, they interestingly elicited a wealth

of personal encounters with existing “green shoot” practices from across the European origins of this group.

We observed how the embodied nature of data collection in the physical mapping served as a base for futuring that was committed to extracting good information from lived and observed experience. That solid data base manifested in questions such as: Who made my clothes? What are the oldest items in my wardrobe? As not everyone wanted to answer these questions, our research observed potential generational and certainly personal differences in emotional connections to our clothes. An older member of the group described her own wardrobe as consisting of a few key items, we noted cyclical developments as what she described was essentially a *capsule wardrobe*, which is currently a rising trend among Gen Z ([19] and [20]).

Observation of behaviours and skills during the completion of the button sewing task offered a second valuable source of data for researchers and participants in transition design. A frequent lack of basic skills related to textiles, from threading a needle to sewing a button, gendered and generational to some extent, had not been anticipated and therefore not been mitigated by the researchers, but in the event created a useful distance and appreciation for the very objects that were being mapped.

The workshop was received by participants with great enthusiasm, indicating the value of non-traditional ways of eliciting data and affording time and place for lively and deep discussions before, during and after the hour-long physical mapping exercise. A fair amount of sharing basic skills and co-speculating or investigating provenance created a sense of belonging amongst the group of stakeholders.

3.2 Workshop 2

The Murcia trial was followed up by another workshop in Orkney, Scotland a few weeks later, when transition engineers, software engineers, circular economists and designers came together to explore different modes of engagements around Transitions. The very international composition of the group resulted in a map that offers a more global picture of textiles provenance and consumption. From a TD methodology point of view, this underlined strongly how important the consideration of different geographies is in making transition design engagements relevant to the communities it seeks to serve (figure 4).



Figure 4: Mapping our impact and relationship to our clothing in Orkney, Scotland

Workshop 2 was distinct in that its participants, as members of a transition engineering and design network at Heriot-Watt University, all have experience in collecting data for transition scenarios, with case studies ranging from transportation to energy and housing. One of these methodologies is the InTIME cycle employed by Prof Susan Krumdieck’s team in Orkney that also seeks stakeholder

engagement to inform radical visions for future practice [21]. Running and discussing the eclectic map workshop with this transition-experienced group of participants foregrounded an opportunity to develop a complete design futuring programme initiated by the embodied exercise of eclectic mapping, and including provisions for directed futuring, testing and scenario building.

A third workshop was run with Scottish and English schoolchildren aged 15, as a follow-on exercise to a short presentation of sustainability in fashion and textiles as part of their sustainability project week. The discussions and activities were received with enthusiasm and engaged attention. The third workshop is the only one of the three delivered within a specific community or region, whereas the previous workshops had a wide range of international attendees.

The workshops function as situated experiments within a broader transition design process rather than as endpoints in themselves. Their value lies in the insights they generate when read in combination with other tools and processes, and in how their outcomes can be critically reflected upon, compared, and iteratively developed over time. The following section discusses key findings relevant to stakeholder engagement and transition-oriented practice.

11. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of co-creating eclectic atlases of textiles provenance in our workshops was to trial embodied or phenomenological ways in which stakeholders can be engaged in the data collection and visioning phases of transition design. The ultimate aim was to test if personal engagement of this kind might be helpful in achieving design-led or enabled social change.

We learned that it is useful to work with groups of participants that are part of a shared community, be that in outlook, in demographic or geographical.

We found that geographically truthful maps can be physically tricky to work with as provenance and location of community of stakeholders leads to bunching in certain areas, but that this could also be considered an asset as it illustrates the uneven distribution of consumption and production very well.

A further workshop is currently being prepared for a community of textile makers in Oradea, Romania, to test how the methodology works within communities that are both highly skilled in the area of investigation and geographically distinct.

“Globalization is at the root of many wicked problems to which localism has been a common response. However, such problems are usually too complex and interconnected to be resolved at the local level. (...) Cosmopolitan Localism is the theory and practice of inter-regional and planetwide networking between place-based communities who share knowledge, technology, and resources” [22, pp. 51-52].

Following up from the textile mapping workshops, we are planning to lean into different design challenges and stakeholder groups, looking at the younger generations as possible, future shapers. Connecting with the school run project in Orkney [23] we are exploring how a hands-on mapping workshop can help the very youngest stakeholders to visualize their own ways of getting to school, seeking ways to engage children and the younger generations as ambassadors of change, to become net zero heroes.

To sum up, we realised that these workshops must be used intentionally and as part of a bigger effort to inform and effect transitions, not independently but strategically positioned within a specific context. We recognised also that these workshops can have different levels of output quality based on their regional context and the skills and knowledge levels of the participants. We posit that observing these differences can yield valuable data on who might be the hardest stakeholder groups to engage in transitions to preferred design futures. For long term change the workshop must be built around a fuller framework that integrates multiple dimensions of data collection and forms part of a connecting thread between stakeholders and systems within a wicked problem.

12. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have assessed that the method used in the workshop has been an interesting tool for the researcher and interesting, unconventional type of engagement for the stakeholders, where thoughts and ideas were generated in an unexpected way that delivered a sense of *safe environment* for self-expression as well. The hope is that for future applications the workshop can be adapted to work within more complex systems with a diverse stakeholder base, and to work in different regional contexts.

There are various emerging paths in the industry within the research context. An important part of the research is to now look at stakeholders within the industry, and to test different engagement methods for diverse environments and lifestyles and knowledge levels. It is important that we establish a network of varied contributors and shape with them a methodology of embodiment, physical engagement suitable for them.

We believe the eclectic atlas has broadly been a success in bringing non experts to the table, to hear everyone's ideas and voices and empower consumers to really become part of a community of change for better textiles futures. It is important to note that in our preliminary workshops, we are engaging with imperfect data in the sense that the sampling of participants was largely opportunistic, making it important to widen the workshop trials intentionally to further stakeholders' groups in order to establish best practice for different communities.

Transition design values local knowledge as much as it seeks visions for globally connected design futures, and a backdrop to our work has been the significant built environment presence of an industry that has since declined, and with people living in these environments no longer showing widespread knowledge or skills connected to goods formerly manufactured locally. The former mills and factories point sharply to the fact that these communities once but no longer operate effectively as local systems and have lost their importance and connection to global scenarios.

We consider them as interesting sites to turn the tide towards better design futures where cosmopolitan localism might find traction on account of their histories, residual knowledge and memories of a working system of production. An oral history project of Mill Memories is underway, and there is advanced planning to deliver a two-and-a-half-day workshop in Oradea, Romania, involving local stakeholders, featuring international collaborators from Hungary and Scotland. The aim is that this workshop will deliver the necessary adaptation requirements to determine the success of a progressed version of the workshop, involving local crafters (within the textile context), non-profit organisations with close links to the city council as well as internationally recognised individuals in their field of expertise to help deliver an experience that'll hopefully provide a vision for the future of stakeholders in the city.

This project will run under the name *Wandering Threads*, piloting in April 2026 (figure 5).



Figure 5: Call for Artifacts for upcoming Wandering Threads Project

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