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# The design culture and the challenges of the new normal

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**Abstract** | The challenge of the *new normal* would be nothing particularly new for those designers that for years have advocated radical challenges to address major socio-technical crises in our society. Yet the urgency of the new normal would need society to take action very quickly, and this in turn, imply a well-structured design approach. The challenge for designers is therefore to operationalise principles that have been in the air for quite a long time, transforming them into practices, accelerating the exploration of mechanisms of transition and finding conceptual terms and operative strategies for working at different scales. This paper is exploring the implications of the idea of a *new normal*, in the view of taking a further step for the definition of a working site for the *new normal*.

**KEYWORDS** | NEW NORMAL, MISSION ORIENTED INNOVATION, EVOLUTIONARY INNOVATION PROCESSES, TRANSITIONS

## 1. Introduction: the new normal and the dynamic of innovation

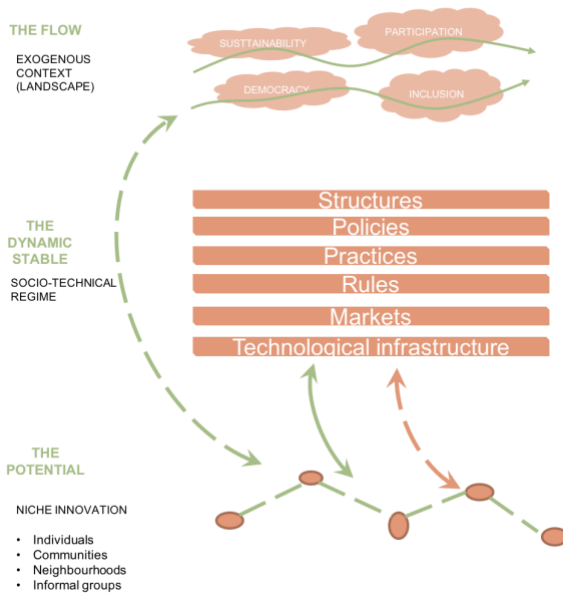
The pandemic crisis and what is coming soon after it is monopolizing the debate in all the disciplines working on innovation, from the most technical ones to social and humanistic disciplines. Since the beginning of this crisis it has been clear that the challenge it poses is not limited to the medical science, which are frantically working to find vaccines and treatments, but it is a systemic crises that involves the way capitalist societies are organized (Latour, 2020; Mazzucato, 2020) and it is therefore extended to all the aspects of society, and it does not exclude any geographical region in the globe. No technical device or knowledge will solve this problem if its use will not be complemented by a radically different way to organize our everyday social interaction. Moreover, the challenge is not limited in time, we will not come to the *normal*, as the socio-technical configuration of the post-pandemic will never be the same as the old one.

Talking about the *new normal* means imagining a way of living, interacting, working, learning, and taking care of people that is unfamiliar to the most, and the permanent condition of this change requires that such change be widely accepted, possibly co-designed by large part of society, and organized at multiple levels. The concept of normality refers to routinely way of doing things, it is about everyday doing and it is based on a multitude of practices, each related to specific niches, activity, social-cultural contexts and technical knowledge. Routines generate the structure of social practices and social order (Reckwitz, 2002). A transition in social order implies the crises of the routines and of the knowledge such routines are based on. The crisis of the normal and the shift to a new normal has to be explored as a change in different logical structures, at different levels. It is not just a new way of living the everyday life, but it has to be understood as a change in the context, in the structures, in the institutional forms and in the general socio-cultural landscape that frames our society.

Changing such practices and the infrastructure that support them is usually very hard, because of the inertia they oppose to every major transformation. History of society and technology do recognize a progress in such social structures, but the nature and speed of change process seems inexorable. *We use to think that the "train of progress" was unstoppable or could not even been stopped, and yet, in few weeks this train has been stopped. It could not be slowed down or redirected* (Latour, 2020).

A restart on a new track implies a process of innovation at both the micro scale and the large scale. It requires the acceleration of processes that are normally slow and evolutionary and, for a design perspective, it requires the extension of the design approach to a scale of change that designers have never faced.

Several recent studies are emphasizing how the structure of innovation can be described as an evolutionary process that amplifies some cases of innovation in niches, to create changes in the way institutional structures are organized (see figure below). Clusters of niche innovation can converge into changes that have an impact in regimes. Those regimes in turn impact on new niches, but in some cases the change at the regime level can impact on the system of values, culture, believe and organizational frames on which institutions are funded. This new level has been described as a landscape, which change slowly and according to evolutionary processes, while they set the frame for changes in niches and regimes. (Geels, 2005; Geels & Schot, 2007).



*The evolutionary innovation process, inspired to (Geels, 2005), elaborated by the author.*

## Design and transitions to the new normal

The dynamic of change described above and the relation between changes at different levels is also part of the discussion on the possibility and opportunity of those changes to be *designed* or in any way *directed* by designers, planners or policy makers. This discussion challenges the design community to a deeper understanding of the structure and the dynamic of change and an exploration of the strategies for this change to become real.

In fact this discussion is not new to the design community. The call for a radical view towards change has been advocated for many years, especially in respect to

crucial questions, such as the question of sustainability. Soon after the Club of Rome urgent call for action (Meadows & Club of, 1972) design research started to systematize the early experience of the pioneers of environmentally responsible design, such as Buckminster Fuller and Victor Papanek (Papanek, 1973), towards strategies to support radical changes in the way human beings organize their artificial environment (Manzini, 1997) and it was quite clear that such change would have started from the everyday life (Manzini & Jegou, 2005), but would have implied broad framework changes (Thackara, 2007). The question of sustainability was possibly the first working ground for designers to face challenges that overcome their traditional range of action, which until that point was focused on products (industrial design), interaction and participation (interaction design). Other challenges came, which implied a design-oriented vision towards broader changes, from the question of migration and integration to the call for social innovation and even to democracy (Margolin, 2012)

While this approach was maturing on a theoretical level, the explorative activity was very prolific, but limited to local experiments and it was hardly scaled up to broader changes, as it was facing the resistance of social, technical and economic systems to any large transition. Design conferences offer many examples of local projects focusing on social innovation, personalized healthcare, environmental initiatives, but few contributions - such as Manzini and Rizzo (2011) - and few projects – such as DoTT07 (Thackara, 2007) - are focusing on how those initiatives should be scaled up.

The pandemic has changed the context conditions, because it introduced an element of radical change that cannot be avoided any longer. Everybody understands that we cannot come back to the previous situation, everybody understands that the accumulation of points of crisis and the massive investment of funds to face the upcoming crisis will need to be addressed somehow, towards a *new normal*, i.e. new practices, new institutional frames, new cultures.

The problem can be seen from two perspectives: from one perspective the massive crisis is imposing large visions of change, which need to address major challenges highlighted by the present crisis. On the other hand it becomes very clear that the *new normal* society is looking for cannot be described through large visions, or through a panoramic view, but in the everyday observation and in the way the life of everybody is changing. The problem that the crisis is proposing is not only to figure out the missions for the upcoming future, but also to make sure that the change in everyday life, or, to come back to Geels' transition patterns, the innovation in niches, is going in the right direction, that clusters are created and amplified, that converge towards the desired missions, and that every single initiative and every minimal change can be used - if consistent with the broader missions - to reach the results that society is looking for, especially in this moment. Such results are addressing certain objectives, concerning healthcare,

environmental conditions, social equality, democracy or different configurations for capitalism, that are shared by large part of the public opinion.

Looking at those changes from a design perspective means focusing on how those mechanisms of change can be analysed and possibly supported.

We can look at change in two complementary perspectives: the landscape-to-niche perspective and the niche-to-landscape perspective. The first may start from the large challenges and try to address the niche changes, the second should start from specific projects and look at how the direction of change suggested by those projects can be selected, empowered, when they are heading to the desired direction, or avoided, when directed in undesired directions.

## **The landscape-to-niche perspective: translating missions to action**

In the last few years, the most frequently mentioned approach to large-scale change has been articulated around the definition of specific *missions* (Georghiou, Tataj et al., 2018; Mazzucato, 2017; Mazzucato, Kattel et al., 2020). This term is used for defining well-defined goals, that address major societal challenges and help policy-makers setting directions for growth and making strategic investments. It is important to mention that missions do not refer to top-down policy intervention, but rather into the operationalization of visions based on a large consensus around problems that are considered as crucial in every specific moment and social context. This concept has been integrated in the forthcoming programs of the EU (Mazzucato, 2019) and develops the implications of the definition of *grand challenges* in the previous strategic programs (Georghiou et al., 2018). Missions are therefore a way to define direction of changes, or preferred trajectories of evolution of the whole socio-technical landscape in a geo-political context, such as Europe in this historical moment. The challenge is obviously to translate such missions into actions and strategies that also concerns the minimal changes in everyday life, or in specific local contexts. This translation from broad societal goals to people's life is in fact bridging the question of innovation from the political and strategic level close to the area of interest for design, at far as we consider design as an attitude to translate values and social aspirations into concrete actions or infrastructures.

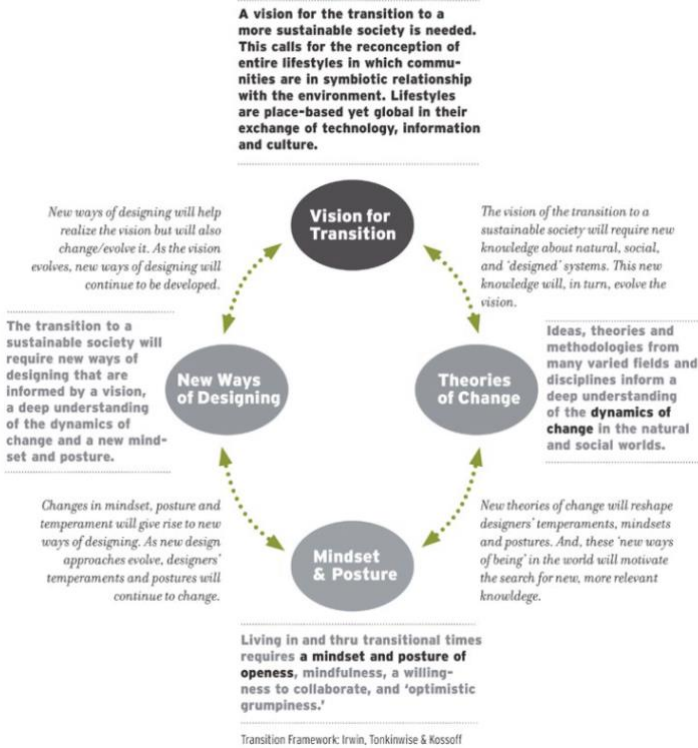
This strategic level however, has hardly been considered by the design discipline, which has more often worked at the level of interaction, participation, personal and social engagement in specific cases. Only in the last few years the interest in increased, for a design actions that could trigger a dialogue between different perspectives, from the perspective of policy makers to initiatives of co-design, that could operationalize the activity of policy making (Bason, 2014, 2017; Irwin, 2015;

Kimbell, 2015). In parallel, the awareness of a possible role for design in broader societal transformation has been considered in EU-funded projects, such as Design for Europe ([designforeurope.eu](http://designforeurope.eu)) or within broader innovation support projects, such as Designscapes ([designscapes.eu](http://designscapes.eu)) or Urbact ([urbact.eu](http://urbact.eu)).

From a design perspective the question is to understand the role of design, or a design approach, in processes of transition, but also the operational definition of a design approach and the impact that could result.

The most articulated theoretical frame to propose a design approach in the perspective of long term transition has been proposed by the studies on transition design (Irwin, 2015). Transition design analyses the role and contribution of design to large socio-technical changes, in the perspective of addressing major challenges, such as sustainable futures or social equality. This approach is based upon the understanding of the interconnectedness between social, economic, political and natural systems and explicitly refers to the connection between place-based solutions and lifestyle changes and broader social, economic and environmental changes. Transition design is the explicit attempt to challenge existing paradigms and envisioning new ones, using design as a methodological approach.

Rather than proposing a methodology, transition design proposes a process that starts from a vision, elaborates and proposes a dynamic of change, proposes a new mindset and posture of openness and proposes a new way of designing. The process is circular and assumes a progressive and co-evolving development of visions for transitions.



### *The transition design co-evolution process (Irwin 2015)*

The process suggests a design attitude, rather than a specific methodological toolkit, however one of the stages, the theory of change, is now a consolidated methodological tool for describing a dynamic of change and assessing its impact (Simeone, Drabble et al., 2019). The other stages of the process are instead looking at the design attitude towards change and are useful to frame individual design interventions, so that they are consistent with broader visions for transition. They are therefore useful to link landscape changes to individual instances of change, or to point out niche innovations that present promising opportunities to impact to larger scale. This highlights the interconnectedness of a landscape-to-niches and the niche-to-landscape perspectives.



## The niche-to-landscape perspective: the contribution of design for service and design for social innovation

Working for niche change means generating concrete transformations of everyday life by interacting with it, provoking, triggering new behaviors and proposing new solutions. Service designers do not need particular exemplifications to understand the nature of this work, because this is their bread and butter. It implies the interaction with people, their engagement, understanding their needs and possibly organizing solutions according to existing social, cultural or economic conditions and according to technological knowledge available at the local level. In the last decades, the contribution of design for social innovation has redirected design attitudes towards participatory approaches (Saad-Sulonen, de Götzen et al., 2020), thus changing what Irwin defined as the mindset and posture of design in respect to innovation.

Working at the niche level, that means working in specific contexts and on specific design solutions, with the aim of generating larger scale change implies an attempt to scale-up, or institutionalise change, thus generating mechanisms of codification and scalability that trigger regime changes, i.e. changes in public institutions and in the regulatory framework. Change at this level creates the institutional basis for changing what is perceived as *the normal* in a *new normal*.

Working for such change also implies that certain assumptions in the existing practice of professional design are changed, such as:

- *Assumption 1. Change needs a designer, that means only expert designers have the knowledge and the methodological tools to generate change and innovation.* Although this assumption is based on the fact that designers are officially trained to manage innovation and are educated to methods and tools to support such capabilities, in fact the change resulting from a design action is the result of the negotiation of several actors, including citizens, experts from other disciplines, service providers or public administrators (Manzini, 2015). A designer can only orchestrate or facilitate the action of such actors, the designer's action can trigger creative processes or support the development of new solutions by infrastructuring the creative process (Hillgren, Seravalli et al., 2011; Morelli, De Götzen et al., 2020), but the result is not in the brain of a single person, it is rather the result of a community.
- *Assumption 2. Supporting a group of people and lead them towards the definition of new solutions is enough to imagine large change.* In fact small participatory processes are very interesting and very encouraging, but in se they do not imply that those innovation process can be scaled up or replicated. Several cases can be found in literature, that are a very interesting and stimulating examples of co-design of new solutions, interaction among specific groups, brilliant cases that inspire the work of other designers. However the replication of such cases is not

always possible, because it depends on the context, on the availability of the same human and knowledge resources and on the quality of interaction among communities (Morelli, 2015). A different strategy to support large scale changes based on the replication of small niche interventions would be to set up framework programs, thus defining relevant thematic areas and ecosystems, on the basis of which the niche interventions should be organized (Manzini & Rizzo, 2011)

- *Assumption 3. Replication and scale up can be seen with the same lens as the analogous industrial processes.* In fact we cannot imagine to replicate a niche project, what we can replicate is the structure of change, but not the result of such change. The replication should be based on a process of codification of knowledge and skills and on an analysis of the process of value creation within the niche, in order to understand which of those processes can be replicated, which actors (and therefore which knowledge and skills) would be needed for the replication and what kind of scalability is possible to achieve. While industrial processes may generate wild fire scaling out mechanisms, small interventions of social innovation may replicate by clusters or by nodes (Morelli, 2015).
- *Assumption 4. The rules of replication are similar in all places.* In reality a change in UK has mechanisms of interaction that may not work in Greece, change is context dependent and so is replication, as well. It is not a case that certain design practices, such as participatory design, were very productive in Scandinavian countries, where the co-operative movement had shaped relevant social and productive infrastructures, including food production, housing and wind-energy production. The attempt to export successful models, such as the Scandinavian model or the industrial districts developed in the northern part of Italy in the 60s-70s have often failed because of the different landscape conditions, i.e. different institutional structure, different cultures and different way to live together or to share knowledge, experience, resources and risks.

## **The challenges of designing for the new normal?**

The challenge posed by this crisis calls for a change in practices and minimal details in everyday life, but this change is only possible if institutional structure can support the change and if the broad cultural, political and societal landscape is reconfigured. This paper outlined two approaches to those changes, which are not alternative, but rather complementary. The dynamic of socio-technical transition proposed by Geels and Schot (2007) highlights that this process is a continuous reshaping of niches, regimes and landscapes, with quick and small changes in niches shaping slower regime changes and evolutionary landscape changes. Understanding this dynamic and exploring the way it operationally works

in real contexts is the challenge for everybody, but this challenge becomes even bigger when considering two further instances:

- A design approach to those dynamics implies a research on how their operationalization can be in fact *designed*. While designers are comfortably managing or facilitating change at the niche level, and they are more and more often called to contribute to regime change, i.e. policy design, government intervention, public advocacy and consultancies, they are quite unfamiliar with changes at the level of landscape, and in fact the evolutionary nature of transitions at this level poses the question of the *designability* of such transitions.
- While the changes described by Geels and Schot (2007) are slow and evolutionary, the present condition, and the same idea of *the new normal* implies that the speed of the transition being much faster. In few periods in history such transitions have been so fast, more recently the post-war reconstruction in Europe, or, earlier in the last century the Chinese revolution or the Turkish cultural revolution promoted by Atatürk. Most of those transitions were simply acceleration of the evolutionary process, given a radical change in the status and the condition of a social context. In none of those cases the idea of *designing* the change was suggested, yet, in all of them we could find people that actually worked as *designers*. The question is whether this time we can propose a design approach – and of course if this approach can preserve fundamental values such as democracy, social equity and freedom, that were not always present in the previous cases.

The challenge of designing the new normal is therefore in the novelty of the situation and in the lack of a design culture embracing such broad changes. Designers, or a diffuse design approach, will need to redefine their way of working, tools and methods, mindset and posture. This is what makes the design of the new normal an opportunity the design community cannot afford to miss.

## Conclusions

The scale of the present challenge demands a design approach. National and international institutions seem to understand this, when they organize the economic support to the coming change not simply on the health crisis, but looking to broader and largely shared missions. However the involvement of professional designers in this process is not given for granted. Several contributions to the debate of the ethical values of design, from Papanek (Papanek, 1973) to Margolin (Margolin, 2002, 2012) suggest that design cannot just be seen as a technical technic discipline, because its implication are implicitly or explicitly political. This

paper suggest that the role of design in this epochal change could be to link broad visions for societal transformation and changes in specific contexts.

This paper however, is not proposing solutions or recipes to address the action of designers, but rather a ground for discussion, which implicitly suggest a number of questions: is the design community equipped to contribute to qualify missions in operative terms? What methodology do we need to operationalize missions into concrete and specific actions? On the other hand, do we have the conceptual tools to raise the impact of design action in specific initiatives to a level that contributes to larger transitions?

These are possibly questions to discuss in the design community, in education institutions and in common forums, even though the urgency of the search for a new normal will push the same community to participate to this transformation before the definite answers are mature.

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