The changing role of designers in transition processes

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Abstract

In the last twenty years, design research and design practice have mutually influenced each other in rethinking the role of design in an increasingly complex world. New areas, for example, service design, systemic design, and transition design have emerged out of this research-practice interaction. With the rise of these new fields, designers have developed new skills, new responsibilities, a different sense of agency, and, sometimes, a new mindset. This is especially the case for transition design, a field that deals with design processes over longer periods of time and that requires close collaboration with multiple other disciplines, exposing the need to reflect on the role and agency of the designer. In this research, ten design practitioners in the Flemish design agency landscape were interviewed to gain a deeper insight into the skills and mindset designers need today and in the future. During these interviews, the time was taken to thoroughly discuss agency in the design process, the changing relationship between client and service provider, and the concept and consequences of transdisciplinary. This resulted in an overview of the changing characteristics of design and designers regarding their soft and design skills, their role & ethics when dealing with complexity, the business model of design agencies and changes in the design process and team. With the insights from this research, we invite design education researchers to reflect on design education addressing our complex world. Besides training designers how to design, they could teach them about the world in which design exists and is implemented. Additionally, the results could motivate service providers to rethink the composition of their teams, their relationship with the clients, and their business strategy, so they will be fully prepared to navigate through the rapid transitions of our current and future world.

Author keywords

transition design; design skills; design for complexity; transdisciplinarity; design education

Introduction

The world we live in today, driven by technological changes and globalization, is changing rapidly, increasingly resulting in the emergence of **wicked or complex problems** (Weber, 2021). These problems are described as multiple, circular problems with no obvious relationship between causes and effects (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). A need for a transition to more regenerative and resilient systems with a focus on planetary health and life-conducive mindsets as an answer to these challenges, is expressed. Research on **socio-technical transitions** has known a quick rise since 1990 and finds its roots in innovation research and sustainability sciences (Loorbach et al., 2017). Gaziulusoy defines transitions and system innovations as "multi-phase, multi-level dynamic processes which take place over extended periods of time and result in mainstream practices becoming outdated and being replaced by a set of new practices. Transitions and system innovations cover not only product and process innovations but also changes in user practices, markets, policy, regulations, culture, infrastructure, lifestyle, and management of firms." (Gaziulusoy & Brezet, 2015).

In dealing with this complexity, combining the knowledge and skills of a multiplicity of people and perspectives is necessary. Since designers are predominantly trained and involved in problem-solving and innovation, it seems obvious that they too can have an interesting added value in these contexts. **Transition design** (together with service and social innovation design) emerged from this changing context and was originally introduced by Gideon Kossoff (Kossoff, 2011). It promotes social transitions towards a more sustainable future which is to be led by design as well in lifestyle, as existing systems and infrastructures. Typical characteristics of transition design are: working towards a long-term vision to tackle complex problems, integration of deep research, and working transdisciplinary on diverse levels of scale (Irwin, 2015)

The role of the designer has been through significant changes throughout the years. In the past, designers were primarily concerned with the aesthetics of products. However, as technology advanced and the scope of design expanded, the role of the designer evolved to include user experience, interaction design, business & strategy design as well as data visualization and information design. This shift led to the recognition of the significant role that designers play in shaping the functionality and usability of products, services, and systems. As a result, designers are now integral members of cross-functional teams, collaborating with professionals in fields such as engineering, marketing, and research to create innovative and effective solutions. The modern designer must have a broad skill set that includes both creative and analytical abilities as well as a series of soft skills (Yin, 2013). The skill set and role of the designer

can vary for these different fields and has been thoroughly researched for most of them (Fiore, 2020; Hansson et al., 2018; Tjahja & Yee, 2022; Yin, 2013). For transition design, this remains theoretical and speculative as it is not yet established as a widespread design practice.

Besides the role of the designer, **the environment** in which they work is also affected when dealing with complex problems. Subsequently, the current consultancy business model and design education system are questioned (Meyer & Norman, 2020; Rozentale & van Baalen, 2021): how will the design discipline deal with these changes and how will the new generation of designers be prepared for them? Gradual changes in the **education system of design** can be observed: research has been criticizing the current design education system and multiple universities offer courses in rising design disciplines such as service design, systemic design, and transition design (*Academic Programs*, 2023). Additionally, a shift in focus is found in students at Design Universities: they show an increased interest in tackling global and complex challenges such as climate change or inequality. This is visible in the program of design fairs like the Dutch Design Week, where a strong sense of urgency and a collective mission facing these challenges is a recurring theme in the submissions from students and young designers (*DDW22*, 2022). According to Mintzberg, an organization focused on innovation should not be led by (economical) efficiency and have an organic structure with project teams consisting of experts from different specialties (Hendrick, 2017; Notebaert & Delagrange, 2019). Since the essence of transition demands transdisciplinary work on a long-term scale with many different stakeholders, it is assumed that this **business model** should be reconsidered: how would a design agency that deals with transitions and complexity differ from regular design agencies?

This paper explores the changing characteristics of design and designers regarding their soft and design skills, their role & ethics when dealing with complexity, the business model of design agencies and changes in the design process.

Method

Given this is an emerging topic involving many perspectives, qualitative research methods were used. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten design practitioners in the Flemish design agency landscape were conducted. The interviews featured open-ended questions as well as exercises that were used to gather different sorts of data and spur conversation. They were structured as follows:

1 The interviewer asked which skills the interviewees (and their colleagues) use to deal with complexity, and which skills they lack at this moment.

2 The interviewee rates a chosen set of skills on importance (1 = not important, 10= very important), firstly for now and secondly for the future. The rated skills are a mix of design skills, soft skills, and skills needed for transition, based on literature (Jordan et al., 2021).

3 The interviewee is asked about their practices when dealing with complex topics: do they see a difference in project phases, how do they feel when handling these topics, what skills do they need.

4 The interviewee places cards with different actors involved in the design process on a chart according to

their involvement. The design process is the core of the chart, with concentric circles around it that indicate decreasing involvement further away from the core. Follow-up questions are asked about the difference in relationships between actors. The same exercise is done for transition design processes in the future.

5 Finishing questions on the role that respondents would assign to themselves as designers, how that could change in the future and what is needed for that change.

Interviewees

This study focused on designers working in design agencies. Interviewees who have extensive experience working on various kinds of complex issues were recruited, based on their previous projects: did they experience a certain degree of complexity in the issues they addressed as a designer? Designers from different agencies and with different grades of experience were interviewed, with interviews taking between ~1h and ~2h. Out of ten interviewees, nine have an education in product development and one is educated in philosophy.

Table 1. Overview of interviewees and context

Interviewee (Self-described role)	Years of experience	Sector focus
1. Systemic designer	35	Service- & systemic design for public sector
2. Participation designer	3	Participation design
3. Business designer	12	Regenerative design & consulting
4. Service designer	3	Commercial product & service design
5. Business&strategy designer	2	Business innovation
6. Business&strategy designer	11	Commercial design & innovation agency
7. Business&strategy designer	7	Service design for public sector
8. Design researcher	15	Commercial product & service design agency
9. Product designer	20	Social innovation
10. Process designer	20	Strategy design consulting

Data analysis and interpretation

To analyze and interpret the data in a meaningful and holistic way, steps were taken to go beyond the typical phases of thematic analysis. With a Describe – Compare – Relate approach (Bazeley, 2009), themes were linked and a clear coordinated picture was formed to draw conclusions from. To start, all interviews were transcribed and coded using the NVivo software. The context and background were specified for each interviewee (sector focus, self-described role, and years of experience). Then the authors discussed the clustering and naming of discovered themes in a collaborative workshop. To interpret the data, recurring themes were linked to the context of the interviewee, as to see under what conditions themes arise or what could cause them. The different themes were also viewed in relation to each other. The conclusions drawn from this data analysis are discussed in the next section.

Results

Skills

When investigating the necessary skills for design teams in the future, the respondent's answers fell into two key areas: soft skills and design skills. Taking a closer look at the soft skills, multiple interviewees brought up **deep listening** and **creating networks**. "Critical listening is key, they might say A but that can have B, C and D hiding behind it" (4, personal communication, 23/11/2022) The transition designer needs to be **assertive** yet even more **empathic**, to see which societal needs there are. Their ability to listen and understand is key to working out a sound strategy. (6, personal communication, 25/11/2022) The ability to **communicate** allows professionals to effectively engage with stakeholders and build consensus around change initiatives. "There is a need for a certain diplomacy in your interactions with clients and stakeholders, there is no room for political baggage or general tension in the room. You want to keep people close since they remain involved" (6, personal communication, 25/11/2022). **Another important skill is adaptability, which allows profes-**sionals to respond to challenges and pivot as needed.

In addition to soft skills, design-specific skills are frequently mentioned, such as being **facilitators**. This brings diverse perspectives together and helps create a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities at hand (Lor, 2017). Facilitating collective learning processes, meetings and co-creating processes is an important strength in design as it is today. "You have to be fast at making links between things stakeholders bring to the table, ask the right questions in response, without pushing them in a certain direction." (1, personal communication, 11/11/2022). The interviewees mention that their less experienced fellow designers struggle with this: they tend to be more specialized in visualizing designs rather than facilitating workshops and discussions (6, 1, personal communication, 2022). Furthermore, **holistic synthesis** was mentioned, a way of synthesizing information without losing sight of the system as a whole. "It is important to synthesize all the information so you can communicate it in bite-size to the stakeholders to encourage them to take action" (7, personal communication, 30/11/2022) Lastly, we noticed **visualizing** played a significant role. "90 percent of my job is meetings and massaging people about ideas. You need to visualize your ideas to the stakeholders to get them on board" (3, personal communication, 22/11/2022). This skill is already an essential design skill but will be even more important when dealing with complex problems and abstract futures.

Role of the designer, the design team, ethical considerations

Nowadays, designers take on different roles during the design process. "When interviewing you are doing research, then you are a journalist. At a certain point you also really have to choose, you must decide. You are more of a judge. Sometimes you must be able to go completely wild and dream visionary." (9, personal communication, 19/12/2022). Designers guide and connect people, they make strategies, concepts, and visions tangible. Additionally, it was mentioned that "Designers talk to different stakeholders to synthesize all findings." (8, personal information, 2022). In the future, the role will become more strategic (1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, personal information, 2022). According to some interviewees, designers should even be involved on a policy level (4, 6, 9, personal information, 2022). They will become the link between different areas of expertise and ensure that the right knowledge will be deployed at the right times (4, 9, personal information, 2022). This shift also has an impact on the composition of **design teams**. A close collaboration with experts in other fields and a different role for stakeholders as part of the design team, together with a strong connection both with policy and the academic world will be necessary when tackling the complexity of transitions. One of the interviewees added to this with the value of experience: "(...) you will understand that you have your limits as a designer, which will entail a certain modesty, I guess. By becoming more mature as a professional, you grow towards what I call a systems being." (1, personal communication, 2022). With this changing role, the interviewed practitioners reported a shift in the importance of **ethical considerations and values**. Although these topics were not explicitly questioned, they came up in multiple interviews. Designers put a greater emphasis on inclusivity and empathy for stakeholders (2, 3, 6, 9, personal information, 2022). Having a strong moral compass can aid professionals in making ethical decisions and ensuring that their actions align with their principles and benefit the well-being of all stakeholders. Particularly regarding balancing short-term gain with long-term sustainability.

Complexity and design process

Transition processes concern wicked problems. When asked to define a wicked problem all interviewees could give a clear definition. They were also aware of the difference between straightforward problems, and wicked problems. However, the respondents reported no structural changes in the design process when asked about the ways these complex problems were approached differently from other design challenges. The types of phases stay the same, remarkably close to the traditional double-diamond model (Kochanowska et al., 2022). Most interviewees mentioned that more work goes into the analysis phase, as it is of higher importance for complex problems, and deep insights into the system are required to define a solution space (2, 4, 6, 8, 9, personal communication, 2022). But the business model of design agencies working for clients calls for efficiency, which limits the possibilities in the analysis phase. Another difficulty in this first phase is that there is no clear cutoff point. Many interviewees mentioned it is difficult to conclude the analysis and start to design. This could be because they approach analysis in the same way as traditional problems. An alternative could be a system mapping approach (Jacoby & Van Ael, 2021), where three phases are defined: framing the system, listening to the system, and understanding the system. This is a better fit for complexity analysis, but clearly not an established model in the design agency world.

Some designers also discussed that they miss an implementation phase after they deliver a product or service or that they feel like they could also have been valuable in the phases before they are usually consulted by clients. Interviewees reported they sometimes feel frustrated with the current model and would like to approach things differently. Therefore, designers and/or design agencies might have to rebrand themselves and promote what they could offer beyond the design of a product or service. That also implies changing the design

process and methodology, since it is currently most fit for straightforward problems.

Business model

The business model of design agencies is mostly focused on consultancy, where a design team is hired by a company at an hourly rate, cooperates with the company for a short amount of time, and needs to work as efficiently as possible (1, 2, 7, 8, personal communication, 2022). This manifests itself in an internal-external paradox: the designer becomes a part of the client's company until the assignment is finished and splits off again: never being integrated completely, but having to cooperate intensely, often in change processes. The limitations of this work process result in limited room for long-term thinking or reevaluation with the client afterward (1, 2, 4, 8, personal communication, 2022). This in turn impacts the implementation phase of the solution, which is lacking in many projects (2, 4, 7, 8, personal communication, 2022). Both elements are of big importance to transition design in order to have impact and organize change. When asked about alternatives for the current business model that would suit design for complexity, some suggestions for essential elements are given. A shift from a short-term to long-term mindset is necessary. Only consulting external designers for a short amount of time to create something is not enough to foster transition. According to interviewees, a continuous collaboration between designers and the client is essential (2, 4, 8, personal communication, 2022). Some even question the agency model and advocate for a more design-led organization (2, 8, personal communication, 2022).

Discussion

To understand the changing role of the designer in complex design processes, ten interviews with a homogenous group of Belgian design practitioners were conducted. The study is constrained by a limited sample size and the fact that the concepts of transition design and systemic design are still relatively unfamiliar within the Belgian design sector. This homogeneity allows for the isolation of similarities in perspective but also means that a more diverse range of views on the importance of transition design and the designer's role may be missing.

It would be interesting to expand upon these findings by comparing them with the experiences of other countries and cultures. Ideally, we would opt to implement a more diverse group of designers (*Twomey & Gaziulusoy*, 2014). To implement significant changes across all aspects of society, we need to reinforce the co-evolving areas of knowledge, action, and self-reflection to develop new methodologies for design (*Irwin*, 2015). A transdisciplinary team is necessary to cross-contaminate each other's fields to shape desired societal development. To approach complex problems holistically, we should zoom in to relate to the context and the stakeholders, as well as zoom out to grasp the interconnectedness within the broader system(s).

Furthermore, the changing landscape challenges designers and design agencies. The findings from the interviews suggest that traditional problem-solving approaches are still being utilized for complex issues. An additional inquiry is needed to understand why design agencies continue to rely on the traditional methodology and agency model when addressing such problems, despite the availability of alternative techniques such as system mapping and the three horizons model. And finally, further research is required to alter the business model and the client-designer relationship, to engage designers during appropriate stages that align with their specialized and useful abilities, rather than simply being temporarily consulted for specific tasks.

Conclusion

A radically changing and increasingly complex environment has a substantial influence on all professions, one of them being the field of design. Socio-technical transitions have increased pressure on society, producing some new design disciplines such as service design, design for innovation and transition design. The paper focuses specifically on transition design and examines - through qualitative analysis of ten semi-structured interviews - the extent to which design practitioners are familiar with this field and the skills and mindsets required to work in this context. Should the design education system and the consultancy business model be reconsidered?

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