Transforming the Future: a design perspective

A reflection from the design side.

That was a lot to do in a week. It’s worth remembering that this was just a pilot project with the objective of learning better how to value design in respect of an emerging ecologically aware society. That we were a multidisciplinary group; art, craft, business and design was a challenging dynamic. That we were multi cultural; Swedish, French, Scottish, English and Cornish added further potential for exciting interaction. That we kept sane was a testament to a deep passion concerning our collective future and our responsibility in making that both sustainable and joyful.

It was a privilege to be able to spend this time in Totnes. We purposefully wanted to be there because to know a thing you have to become that thing, as Ghandi has said, “You have to become the change you wish to see”. We wanted to, primarily, do something not just think about doing something. We wanted to put ourselves on the line.

There is a sense, with these kinds of activities, of parachuting in and then running away. What we tried to do was to ensure that we left as much behind as we took away with us together with an open door for future collaboration beyond this pilot project. To see one of the Students, Ben, actively engaging with David Banks of Re-Furnish to ensure that he had the templates for the reworked leaflets and Graphic Identity and that he would be willing to develop them further was a joy.

That we have learnt a lot is without dispute, what that will turn into in time we have yet to see. How it differed from the normal design process is yet to be fully understood. It did differ, fundamentally. Some of this was predictable and some surprising. It would have been easy to bring the all knowing, all solving, designer knows best perspective to bear – but we were after something more meaningful. We tried not to come with assumptions, but of course we did. That Transition Town Totnes and the project champions came with assumptions is also true, so from both sides we had to work hard to find an open dialogue from which to collectively move forwards. I would say that we did and we did that well. This perhaps is the greatest achievement of the project.

This project has produced compassionate tools. Those which work across disciplines, cultures and that are sensitive to varying amounts of time input and personal needs both in giving to the project and also taking from it. These tools come from trust, openness and willingness to engage even when the outcome was not entirely clear. So in this it may be that the journey is more important than the destination. Certainly the journey was the thing and the destination although assumed to some extent at the outset was not the destination at the conclusion. I would maintain that this is what produced such a richness of material and potential. It resides in the qualitative experience not the quantitative analysis. Much of this still has to surface, be made manifest. It is much more here than two twenty minute presentations could give justice to.

Another thing is that this project is not reproducible. Nor should it be. In this it’s a bit like live music. In this arena there can be no clearly defined format. Each project will and should be a function of the participants’ commitment and the context in which it is enacted. This cannot start with assumption, only with trust and a willingness to find what is needed, what is already there waiting to be made clear. Perhaps this is where design can be of value.

All this is difficult to formulate but is, without doubt powerful in working towards how we may better understand new and useful roles for design. What really remains from this pilot project is what continues in the hearts and minds of those who participated and what that will cause to happen as we build upon it in new contacts, situations and contexts.
What I have learnt through this is a greater humility as a designer (if that’s what I believe I should call myself) to listen, engage with and reflect upon what unfolds as it unfolds and also a great deal of empathy with and for the people for which, hopefully, this kind of activity serves a multitude of meaningful purposes.

Many thanks are due; to all involved, to Pete Davis of Plymouth University for his support and especially to Janey Hunt of Transition Town Totnes not least because she kept the project from crashing more times than I would care to admit to. Finally to Richenda Macgregor who gave me the term empathic reflection which this small piece of writing tries to be my first attempt at. Ah yes, life is indeed for learning.

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