



ON MAKING, SUSTAINABILITY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SMALL STEPS : A CONVERSATION

Corresponding Authors

David Gauntlett
Faculty of Media,
Arts and Design,
University of Westminster, UK
d.gauntlett@westminster.ac.uk

Amy Twigger Holroyd
School of Design,
University of Leeds, UK
a.t.holroyd@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

This article is a conversation between David Gauntlett and Amy Twigger Holroyd, who have shared interests in craft, making, sustainability and social change. Our discussion starts with the importance of small steps towards creativity: the personal satisfaction of making something yourself and of gaining recognition from others. These ‘micro’ steps, combined together at the macro level, become significant in contributing to social change. In particular, we explore the ways in which amateur making is important for sustainability – through offering an alternative to the mass consumption model and building a sense of engagement with the world. We then explore the idea of design as a process of action, change and creativity, which can be used to address social and environmental problems – whether by designing systems to support activity and reflection, or by creatively intervening in the complex systems within which we live.



Keywords

Creativity, craft, systems,
environment, design, social change

Biographical Statements

David Gauntlett is a professor in the Faculty of Media, Arts and Design, University of Westminster, UK. He is the author of several books, including *Creative Explorations* (2007) and *Making is Connecting* (2011). He has conducted collaborative research with a number of the world's leading creative organisations, including the BBC, the British Library, and Tate. For almost a decade he has worked with LEGO on innovation in creativity, play and learning.

Amy Twigger Holroyd is a designer, maker, writer and researcher, who founded the experimental knitwear label Keep & Share ten years ago. In 2013, she completed a PhD in amateur fashion making – ‘folk fashion’ – as a strategy for sustainability, and she is now a research fellow in the School of Design, University of Leeds. Her work has been featured in many magazines, books and journals, from *Vogue* to *Fashion Theory*.

Introduction

This article is a conversation between David Gauntlett and Amy Twigger Holroyd. We have shared interests in craft, making, sustainability and social change, and we decided to discuss some of these things and present this in a series of three conversations, which we posted in May 2014 on our respective blogs (davidgauntlett.com and keepandshare.co.uk). This article is a remixed version of those conversations and includes three infographics, which Amy subsequently created to summarise the key points we had raised.

Small steps

ATH: To kick off, I thought we could begin by talking about the importance of small steps towards creativity, which you identified as important in your two Maker Faire talks quite recently [at the World Maker Faire in New York, September 2013, and the first official European Maker Faire in Rome, October 2013]. I wondered if you could describe one situation, related to making, where you feel that small steps are important?

DG: Well my main ‘small steps’ point is that *any* small step can be a good and powerful step! I mean, where a person is taking a small step into the world of creating and making and sharing, rather than being just a consumer of stuff. So for each person it might be different, but it’s that moment of discovery where you get that feeling of surprise and power, that you actually made something, something that wasn’t there before, and now it is, because you made it. And that it’s kind of unique, and can’t be bought, and nobody else has one quite like it, and you did it yourself.

ATH: Oh yes, that’s nice. Do you have any examples of your own ‘small steps’?

DG: Oh, well memorable ones would be, say, when I got the first box of *Powercut* zines back from the printer in 1991, when I was 20 – ‘I made this!’ A zine that I had made myself (with contributions from others too – making and connecting). That was quite a big thing rather than a small thing. Similarly, the first time I put a webpage online, where you upload it on one computer and then find it very exciting to go to a different computer – maybe one in someone else’s house! – and find that you can see it on there too! Magic! Well, a 1996 sort of magic for me anyway. Of course that was quite a big deal too. And that was both ‘I made this’ and also ‘Here I am’ – because it was visible to the world. Whereas the *Powercut* zine was not really visible to the world at the point when it was just a cardboard box with 800 printed copies in it. So there, I had the ‘Here I am’ moments in little bits, later on, like when it was mentioned in a tiny bit on the *Guardian* women’s page or in a few feminist sort of magazines, or in other people’s zines, or when someone wrote me a letter about it.

So it would be different for different people, but it’s that moment when you can feel the pleasure of saying ‘Here I am’, and ‘I made this’, because you took some little step into the world of making things, making ideas, rather than the world of consuming other people’s things and ideas.

ATH: Ah yes, I see. So the ‘I made this’ thought is perhaps about a personal, and possibly private, satisfaction in seeing the thing that you have made – and ‘Here I am’ is about seeing that thing existing in the wider world, and being seen by others? I can certainly think of my own versions of that.

DG: Well to be precise (!) – since you’re asking! – these are the points, ‘Here I am’, and ‘I made this’, which I made in my talk at the Maker Faire in Rome, 2013 (Gauntlett, 2013). I meant ‘I made this’ to be a more emphatic, outward-facing statement, a message to others that, look, I made this thing. That’s the pride in the achievement – a pride which you want to be recognised by others. That ties in with a finding from my research for *Making is Connecting* (Gauntlett, 2011), where I looked at studies that had been done about why people liked to make and share things in the

offline world, and other studies about why people liked to make and share things in the online world, and a common finding was about the interest in being part of a community with shared interests, but this included a desire for *recognition* of the contribution that the person made to their community of interest.

ATH: Oh yes, I've definitely seen that in my research with knitters – a big part of the satisfaction is about being able to share the story of what you've made, and especially with other knitters.

DG: So 'I made this' reflects personal satisfaction, but it is also a statement to the world. And then 'Here I am' backs that up, saying not only that I made this but also that it contains something of myself within it. And that this deserves some recognition. So my points were slightly more outwardly demanding than in your version!

ATH: Another thing that I've realised about small steps is that one tends to lead to another – they take you on a journey. You do something and have that feeling of surprise and power – and want to do it again. But this time, you can be a little bolder, and go a little further, because you know a little more about the world you're stepping into. After a while, you look back and realise how far you've come: how much you've learned about crochet, or Arduino, or growing vegetables, or whatever. And with each step, you're likely to become more engaged with a community of fellow enthusiasts, and more knowledgeable about the activity you're doing – the subtleties of its particular challenges and opportunities for creativity.

DG: Oh that's nice, I like that – the steps are part of a *journey*. Of course they are.

The significance of small steps

ATH: Now, while it's reasonably straightforward to see that these steps and realisations are important and positive for the individuals involved, I think lots of people would see them as insignificant in the wider scheme of things. But I think we would both agree that these steps into creating, rather than consuming, are actually very significant indeed.

DG: Yes. Looking at each step and finding it unremarkable misses the point, because we are not saying that the small steps are actually, somehow, big steps. We are talking about *small steps*. But all of these small steps made by different people add up and pile higher and higher, until you've got a huge amount of meaningful activity in your culture which, once it's all piled up together, is bigger than many other big cultural things.

ATH: In my PhD thesis (Twigger Holroyd, 2013), I was looking at how homemade clothes could contribute to sustainability. I remember acknowledging that this approach could be seen as both over-ambitious and naïve: to think that you can change something as huge and complex as the fashion industry through such personal and individual acts as making and mending clothes. But I honestly feel like it's potentially more powerful, and certainly more subversive and exciting, to think about change in this way.

DG: Yes exactly – that's the only way real change works, I think. That's similar to my wee rant about the 'critical' media studies scholars – which appears in Gauntlett (2014) – who seem satisfied to have come up with a complex theoretical account of what's wrong with things, but are unable to tell you how this might actually be changed. I think change happens, step-by-step, little step by little step, as people do things differently. That's the only way it makes sense. People on the ground start to do things a bit differently, and start to expect things to happen a bit differently, and then this gets absorbed into the more macro-level context of how people in government, or visible in the media, do things, and what they expect things to be like, and then this

macro level sets the tone of what is then assumed and expected down at the micro level, which then means the envelope can be pushed a tiny bit more, and so on, and the whole thing goes on in a cycle. This is, in fact, Giddens' structuration theory in action, of course (Giddens, 1984, 1991). Giddens is a sort of middling-left figure politically, not a fully signed up Marxist, but he's the one who has the theory of how things can actually be changed in modern societies. And it shows the significance of the small steps. As long as there are quite a lot of them.

ATH: Yes, that's really useful and makes a lot of real-world sense. It's an important reminder to step back and see that macro view, that things really can change – that tides can turn. To share my own current rant, I've been frustrated recently by people who seem to think that behaviour only ever moves in one direction – more specifically, that because in recent years, clothes have become cheaper and cheaper, and (on average) people wear them for a much shorter time before disposing of them – that it's impossible to conceive of any future in which people are happy to keep their clothes for longer, and to pay more for them. Now, this is obviously a very crude view, as it lumps everyone together, as if we all think and behave in the same way – but it's also depressingly fatalistic. Whereas I think, well if things can change in one direction, surely they can change in another! So, structuration theory helps me to remember that.

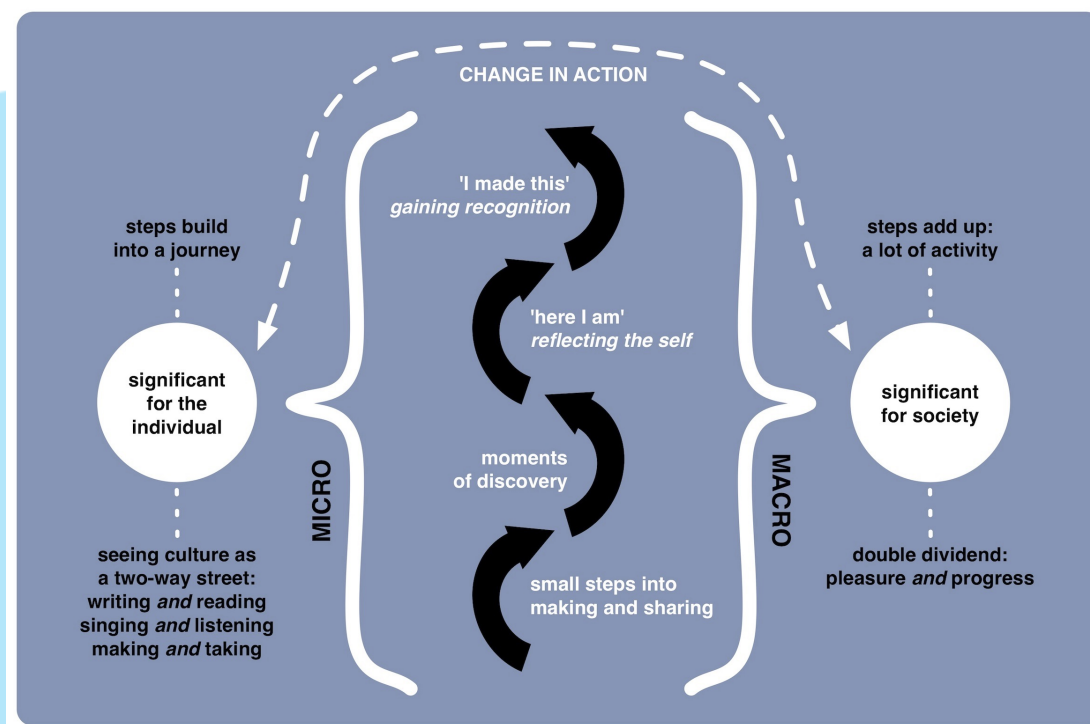


Figure 1: The significance of small steps into making

The personal is political

DG: These points about small steps, and structuration theory, connect with the feminist notion that ‘the personal is political’, I think. I take it to mean a number of things. One is the point that the small stuff of everyday life is important, and if you change that – and other people start to change it too – then you *really are* changing the world. You actually are. People think they can’t change things, but they can – by changing things, on an everyday level. It’s like the title of the new book by Rob Hopkins: ‘The Power of Just Doing Stuff’ (Hopkins, 2014). Talking about what’s wrong with the world can play some role – raising awareness, and so on, which is a necessary step – but *just doing stuff* is much more powerful in the obvious way – it’s tangible, it’s visible, people can experience it and hopefully like it and want to do more of it.

Now – ha – I say this as an exhausted father-of-two who doesn’t visibly do much big world-changing stuff. But thankfully we’re talking about small steps. Small steps

make a difference and they're not too hard. So, being a vegetarian counts – that's doing something I believe in, and it takes precisely no effort at all really. And being enthusiastic about a hands-on approach to creativity and play and learning just amongst the kids and the students that I am directly involved with – that's something too, because it's about fostering engagement with the world around us. And then, trying to spread a passion for certain ideas, and a commitment to them, through books and videos and even tweets, that all counts too, doesn't it. And it's all those choices you make in what you support and don't support.

A second meaning of 'the personal is political', for me, is I suppose the inverse version of the same thing – so it's saying that you can't do political pontification if you don't try to live up to those ideals in your personal life.

And a third one is that personal stories and experiences are meaningful political things. They're not trivia. There's not a hierarchy where people dealing with the things we call 'politics' are doing more important stuff than the people who are making their own efforts in different ways. Personal things are just as vital to social change as well.

That might just be three ways of saying the same thing, I don't know. But it shows that the feminist notion that 'the personal is political' was, and is, full of rich meanings, I think!

Making and sustainability

ATH: I agree with what you're saying about social change. However, if we think in terms of environmental stuff and sustainability – there are so many examples where people feel that any change they might make would be insignificant, compared to the bigger things going on in the world. It's that pessimistic view that there's no point in us making little changes to how we live, to reduce our energy usage or carbon

emissions or whatever, when however-many coal-fired power stations are being built every year in China. It's quite hard to challenge that mind-set, I think.

But there are a couple of things about small steps in making, in particular, that I find to be different and exciting. Often, the little lifestyle changes that might reduce energy use are worthwhile collectively, but don't bring any personal benefit (beyond the altruistic satisfaction of 'doing your bit', perhaps) – so it's easy to see why people sometimes feel they are pretty pointless. Making, creating and sharing, though, are personally satisfying – very much so – so there's the potential for a 'double dividend' scenario, where people feel happier, and collectively, their activities become more sustainable.

And the other thing is that these activities don't just contribute to environmental and social benefits in a purely technical and pragmatic way, but (surely more powerfully) they start to change how people relate and respond to other people and the world. So, as you say, these are small steps – but with a potentially big impact in terms of people's attitudes and perceptions, I think.

DG: Exactly.

ATH: I wanted to talk to you about sustainability, actually. I've been involved in design for sustainability for over ten years, and I really see that as the big underpinning motivation and context for all of my work in design, making and research.

In the past few years I've become particularly interested in how craft and amateur making can contribute to sustainability, and of course, you're very interested in amateur making too. However, I don't think I've really heard you talk explicitly about sustainability. I wondered whether it's a motivation for you?

DG: Oh yes, it's a very strong motivation. *Making is Connecting* – which describes my main argument, the whole thing I'm most interested in – is about sustainability on multiple fronts, I think! I hope it's not too buried in the text. It's certainly the central thing in what I think of as the most important bits.

The first one is the vitally important thing, the thing I always say, that making and creating is not just 'a nice thing'. Obviously, it *is* a nice thing, when someone does some small creative act – they write a song or poem, or make a funny video, or knit a hat – but it's much more than that as well. All these acts of creativity, they are all cases of somebody doing something a bit different, expressing something of themselves and choosing not to just buy something made by someone else, but to make it themselves. It's about people changing their sense of being within our culture – recognising that culture is a two-way street, a place for writing as well as reading, singing as well as listening, making as well as taking.

They're making their mark – and saying, as we said before, 'Here I am'. It's the John Ruskin point about being able to see the spirit of the maker within the thing they have made. It doesn't have to be the most finely polished piece of art, it can be all rough and homemade, but you can see in it the passion of a person who wanted to make something. This applies just as well to a woodcarving or a YouTube video. All these little acts, if you look at them one by one, can seem small and sweet and insignificant, but if you take them all together, they add up to something big and something political.

These are people who want to sustain a creative, engaged world, not a world of mass consumption. In all the environmental and sustainability literature, the main enemy is mass, reckless consumption, isn't it?

ATH: Well yes, certainly in the so-called 'developed' world.

DG: Yes. And what *Making is Connecting* celebrates is the opposite of that mass consumption model, basically. So for that reason I think the connection with sustainability is obvious throughout, but maybe I could have spelt it out more.

Other things are also spelt out, though. One is just the whole point of *Making is Connecting*, that in making things you feel more engaged with the world and more connected to your environments. And therefore, you are more likely to care for that world, rather than being the sit-back, switched-off consumer.

Then there's the point, which links back to Ruskin again, that a society where people don't have regular opportunities to exercise their creativity is like a tree cut off from its roots, which will wither and fail.

There's also the point that I make, which is similar but slightly different, which is that I don't know what are the solutions to the various environmental challenges that we face, but what I do know is that we will need lots of creative people, and people engaged with their world, to be able to solve those problems, and I know that we can develop such people if we use different modes of learning, based around making and tinkering and experimenting, and with widespread everyday creativity based on a culture that embraces the homemade joy of creative practice more than it loves mass-manufactured entertainment (You can have a mix and a balance, of course – this is not about stamping out Hollywood movies or anything like that. But we need a mix of things and especially platforms for the sharing of diverse, personal stuff made by individuals).

ATH: Ah yes, so that's about the importance of creativity to how we might transition to sustainability.

DG: Would you say that all this is similar to, or different from, your own ideas about sustainability?

ATH: Oh, pretty similar, I think! I've always been of the view that sustainability really needs a massive diversity of approaches – there isn't one magical solution, but a galaxy of tiny, contextually relevant solutions. I think we're in the same bit of the galaxy.

DG: Oh yes I like that. A galaxy of diverse approaches. The reason I'd be nervous about talking to sustainability people is basically the fear that they would think that there was just one proper solution and were not tolerant of other solutions. But I have no particular reason to think that they'd be like that!

ATH: By the way I should say that I think it's important to remember that sustainability isn't just about 'the environment' – it's about social stuff, and some people, including me, would argue it's about culture, too. So lots of the points in *Making is Connecting* also relate to those other aspects of sustainability.

DG: Ah yes – good!

ATH: My personal approach as a designer has always been about tackling the issue of overconsumption and exploring the potential contribution of craft to that. So, I think a lot about the emotional connections and sense of satisfaction that can be engendered through making, and how they might make you feel more attached to your possessions and therefore consume less. And also about how the knowledge you gain through making can be applied to repairing, for example. If you scale up these ideas, I think they relate to your points about being engaged, connected and caring. And I certainly see people making things themselves as an important and political act – even if they don't see it as such themselves.

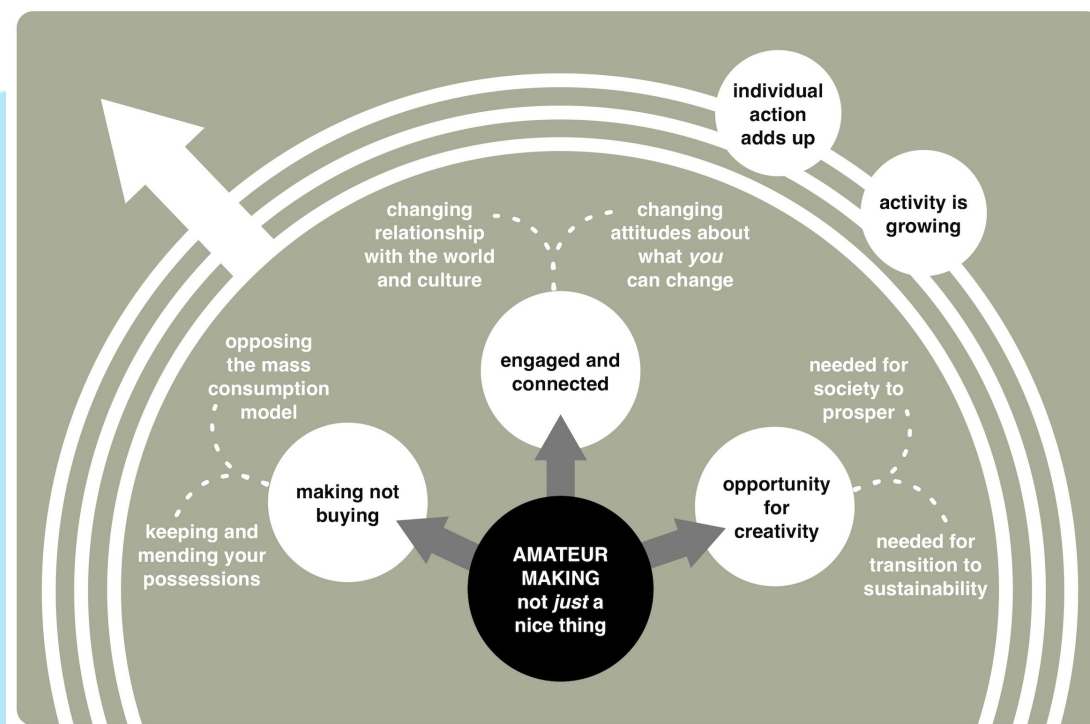


Figure 2: *The relationship between amateur making and sustainability*

Appreciating the homemade

ATH: But while I totally agree with all of that, I'm quite wary of romanticising making. From working with amateur knitters for years – and from making things for myself – I know that people aren't always emotionally connected to things they've made. Sometimes they are really disappointed with them! Knitters are often critical of a rough, 'homemade' finish. I think that's partly because of the dominance of shiny, mass-produced things – there's a temptation to compare homemade things to stuff brought from the shops, particularly in terms of clothing. So, while I passionately believe in the value of people making things themselves, and think there are many benefits from that in terms of sustainability, I think some people need support to do so.

DG: I agree about supporting people, of course. But this whole thing is quite curious. Your dissatisfied knitters do have the option of buying inexpensive, well-finished garments from the shops, don't they? But they choose to be knitters. I expect you've

explored this apparent contradiction. Why do they dislike the look of the things they've made themselves, or rather, why do they carry on doing it?

ATH: It's a conundrum! It's hard to speak on behalf of all knitters, as we're such a diverse bunch – and, of course, lots of people are happy with the things they've made, and enjoy wearing them, which is great. But, from my research, I think those that are sometimes disappointed carry on because they love the process of making, and find it really rewarding. And also, of course, there's the hope that you'll do better next time! That's part of why making things is so satisfying, I think – because it's a challenge.

While this might all sound a bit negative – I don't mean to be, honest! – I really think change is afoot. The stronger that 'maker' culture becomes, the more confident people will become in their own skills and in using the things that they've made.

DG: Yes, I agree. Just to have rough-and-ready maker culture offering a kind of role model for other makers – I mean, in the sense that you can be inspired by how imperfect something looks – is really valuable. Like, 'if they can do that, I can do that!' As rather a perfectionist myself, I tend to be more inspired by less polished things, not the highly polished things. That might seem counter-intuitive. But if people make highly polished stuff, it's kind of intimidating, whereas if they seem happy with effective, interesting, not-too-polished things, then you think, 'Oh yes, I can do that!' And you're released from the self-imposed obligation to spend hours and hours making the thing look perfect.

The meaning of 'sustainability'

ATH: I've just done a quick search of *Making is Connecting* and only found 'sustainability' to appear a few times. I wonder if it was a conscious decision not to use that word? Do you feel it's over-used, or perhaps might make people switch off?

DG: Well, I suppose I always try to use clear, everyday language, and although ‘sustainability’ isn’t exactly high-end jargon, it’s not that accessible, I think. I don’t really use it myself except when talking to someone like you and joining in with your terms. I suppose to be honest, I associate it a bit with holier-than-thou green sort of discourse – as I sort of alluded to before – and which is unfair, probably, and of course they’re lovely people, and it’s a bit inverse-snobbish of me to not use the term for that reason. But there you go. I think the typical reader (for example, me) doesn’t necessarily know quite what ‘sustainability’ is meant to mean, but we translate it into meaning ‘environmental issues’, and we find it slightly intimidating even though we know it’s all about some good values that we actually agree with. I wonder if you think this is all a very silly explanation!

ATH: No, not at all – it’s another conundrum, and one that’s very familiar to me. For the first few years of running my knitwear label Keep & Share, I didn’t use the word ‘sustainability’ in my communications to customers, because I didn’t want to put them off. I talked about slowness and emotions and relationships instead. As the sustainable fashion movement has grown, I’ve started to use it a bit more on my website, but I still try to explain my philosophy in a way that people can relate to.

It’s no wonder that people aren’t sure what ‘sustainability’ is meant to mean – there are so many different interpretations, even (and especially) amongst those most involved with it! That’s both in terms of defining sustainability itself, and how it relates to things like consumption and fashion. In the fashion sphere, many people still think it’s ‘just’ about organic cotton, or recycling, when it needs to encompass so much more than that.

So, I agree – when talking about ‘sustainability’ there’s always a danger of intimidating people and them either misunderstanding or switching off. But on the other hand, if we don’t explicitly say ‘this relates to sustainability’, then there’s the

danger that interesting ideas and creative efforts that are highly relevant to sustainability really are somewhat disconnected from those debates.

DG: Yes. Though you might hope that good ideas within the same sphere, whether labelled with a particular word or not, will probably be connected up by the people in that field.

ATH: Oh yes, that's true.

DG: This also relates to communication and what academics now have been told to call 'impact' – whether people make an effort to get their ideas out into the world and to connect up with others. Of course I think they *should* do that, but I also recognise that it's hard work, and there are often multiple communities that you *should* be talking to, but it's hard to link up with all of them. In my own case, and as you've sort of indicated, I've not really managed to connect up with the 'sustainability' people as much as I should.

But I think we both believe that amateur making, and craft, and the maker movement, and homemade media, all these things are valuable for sustainability, because they change people's relationship with the material world, and with culture, and your attitude about what things in the world you can change for yourself. And we think this is growing, yes?

ATH: Yes, I think so!

Design, change and frames for understanding

ATH: So if we agree about the power of making, let's also talk about design. What's your interest in design?

DG: I'm interested in design, basically, because it seems to be about doing things, or doing things *better*. Whereas the discipline or disciplines that I come from, they seem to be about commenting on things, or describing them, or providing frames for understanding them, but not really about doing things or making things. The 'describing' role is the most tedious, whilst the 'frames for understanding' role can be rather good, but in either case, it's not at all 'hands on'.

Now, I'm not a big fan of 'disciplines', and the idea of boundaries between disciplines. I genuinely have no idea why anybody would really think that 'disciplines' serve any purpose really. But nevertheless, in terms of my own 'discipline' background, I started off by doing a degree in Sociology, and then an MA in Sociology and Gender Studies, and then a PhD in an 'Institute of Communications Studies'. But nowadays I'm happier just saying I work in a Faculty of Media, Art and Design, because then it sounds like I might actually do something! And there is some 'practice' to integrate with the 'theory'.

Design, in particular, seems to be about using creative activity to address problems, or questions, and so... Well, I like that.

What does design mean to you?

ATH: I think that to me, design means action, change, and creativity – so, pretty close to your thoughts about 'doing things' and 'using creative activity'. The thing that has always excited me about design is the opportunity to do something new, to bring about a change in the world.

I trained as a fashion designer, so for some years my design practice was mainly about making new stuff – garments, in my case. Recently, I've become interested in broadening my design activity to include designing systems and services and structures within which other people can be creative.

Even more broadly, I think that a design attitude does encourage you to try to bring about change, rather than accepting things as they are. Like you, I've been frustrated by academic research that describes some sort of negative situation, but doesn't make any suggestions about how it could be improved. On the other hand, it might be dangerous to swan about trying to bring about change without really understanding a situation – so I think that designers, and 'design activists', could benefit from some of the 'frames for understanding' you described.

DG: Oh well that's nice – that makes sense.

ATH: So, whereas you're looking for some practice to integrate with the theory, I've been hunting out the relevant theory to enlighten my practice!

DG: This may be pointlessly pedantic about my own biography, but I do, incidentally, think I've always had some kind of practice, whether that has been making websites, or – later – online videos, or drawings, or even writing itself, or whatever. It's not unfair to the idea of 'practice' to understand it quite broadly, is it?

ATH: Oh no, that makes sense. I think of writing as part of my practice too, actually – it shares many characteristics with designing a collection of knitwear! Gathering inspiration, generating some rough ideas, refining and combining them to produce the finished article... So I guess we're saying that theory and practice are always entwined, but perhaps there's a happy balance that can be achieved between the two?

DG: Yes. And going back to what design means, I think it's useful and important to 'reclaim' the term design to be about something very useful and important, rather than the popular association between design and something flashy-looking. Design museums tend not to help on that front – they still tend to show some cool record sleeves and a classic telephone and an impractical chair. I can admire those things too

– well, nice record sleeves and pleasing technology designs, anyway, but not the chairs, I'm sick of seeing chairs in design museums – but where they are about making things look a bit nicer, then yes that's part of design but I think it's about 5 per cent of what design does. You saying 'design means action, change, and creativity' is much better – and the 'design attitude' where you're inclined to change things and make them better – that's what it's all about.

ATH: Yes! And of course, that 'design attitude' can pop up anywhere. It means that design shouldn't stay in its own disciplinary silo (which of course you're not a fan of anyway), but really is an approach that can, and should, be applied very broadly.

Designing systems for creativity

ATH: Earlier, I mentioned the idea that we can design *systems*, which support people in being creative. I think you're interested in this too?

DG: Yes – the idea that you can set up a kind of process, or environment, and then let it take on a life of its own, so you've basically designed a system, which you hope will be fruitful or interesting, but you have no idea at the start what the outcomes are going to be. An example of that would be the version of LEGO Serious Play, developed by Anna Sophie Trolle Terkelsen, which I call the 'self extracting' version, where you can basically hand over a box of stuff, which comes with some simple instructions, to a group of people, and they can do what the instructions say, and a whole kind of experience unfolds, where they can learn about themselves, and each other, through building and talking.

ATH: Can I ask what you mean by 'self extracting'?

DG: Well, that's just the phrase I use, based on a sort of half-remembered thing, from the early days of Windows, when it had a thing called the 'self extracting file'. I don't

really have much of an idea of what ‘self extracting file’ really meant in Windows terms, but it had a nice icon with a sort of box with things springing out of it, and I always liked this idea of a kind of box of delights, which would open itself up and do something magical without you really having to do anything! If you know what I mean? You’d just click on it and then the delightful thing would happen. So, that’s like the idea of a system in a box, and you can hand it over, and people respond to it, and between them it does something unexpected and wonderful.

ATH: I like the self-extracting file idea! I’ve got an on-going project that relates to this – my Knitting Circle. It pops up at various events, and it’s basically a long knitted rope with loads of in-progress knitting growing off it at various points. People come along and join in, if they want to – they can stay for as long as they like, and experiment by changing the stitch or the colour or whatever of the bit they’re knitting. When they’ve finished, they leave their knitting for the next person to carry on with. As the whole thing grows, it visually reflects all the people who have taken part and their creative experiments – and because lots of people are sitting together, it encourages reflective conversation about making, which I really like. I provide little tags, so people can record a fragment of the conversations they’ve had – and these, in turn, inspire new conversations. I’ve refined the design of the project over the years, so now it’s pretty ‘self-extracting’ – once it’s set up, people can see what the ‘game’ is and join in without the need for much instruction.

DG: Oh that’s very good – especially that it gets to a point where you don’t even need instructions, it’s just implicit and ‘obvious’ what people are meant to do with it next. That’s great. And so that’s an example of you designing a system.

Intervening in systems

ATH: I think we both have another interest in systems – not just this version, where you’re setting up situations that support people in being creative – but looking at

systems in a much broader way, taking a holistic approach and understanding how things relate to each other.

DG: I absolutely agree, a systems view is the recognition that everything is just part of a whole – or, to put it another way, everything is just one element amongst other elements, and they are all interrelated in some way. Even if connections are not obvious, there are often knock-on effects. So, to make this more concrete, for example it means that I think it's silly to think about a communications medium or set of media, such as 'television' or 'the internet', in isolation, because each of those things – as well as being very complex and not-at-all-singular in themselves – each of those things is just part of an ecosystem of other media, and society, and culture, and economics, and all the complex relationships between all those complex things. So that's basically the holistic view and the 'ecosystem' model, which a focus on systems draws you towards.

ATH: Yes! That's exactly what I mean.

DG: This also reminds me of my recent trip to Italy, talking about the Italian translation of *Making is Connecting*, where I found I kept stressing that things were 'all part of the same thing'. There seemed to be a big separation between Italy's great craft traditions, which are all about carefully crafted things made by hand, and which are now associated with an old generation, and digital media, which is seen as being separate – almost the opposite – and done by young people. And there seems to be a sort of crisis of confidence in their craft traditions, and a fear about this modern internet destroying that kind of thing. And so for that reason, I kept finding myself saying that, for example, creativity, whether offline or online, old or new, is all part of the same thing, all part of the human drive to make and share things. It doesn't matter if you're making a physical thing by hand, or a digital thing by some more technological process – probably still led by the hands, in fact – it's all part of the same thing. And if you're a man trying to carve a small owl out of wood to give to

your child in 1714, or a woman making a short video for YouTube where she presents a poem about owls in 2014, it's all part of the same thing.

The thing it's all part of, the system here, is the system by which humans keep themselves alive in the world and engaged with each other and their environments, by making and sharing simple things which communicate some feelings, basically.

ATH: Ah yes, interesting! I like to try to take a systems view of fashion – which requires a pretty epic perspective – and aim to alter flows and relationships within that system through design interventions. I recognise that that's pretty ambitious! I think the whole idea of designing interventions within a systems view links to the 'design attitude' we were discussing earlier. If you have this design attitude, you can look at something – recognising its complexity and links to other elements – and start to think about how the system might be redesigned, or tinkered with. You might try to create new paths and connections, or support existing ones – and include individual people's experiences and attitudes and emotional responses, as part of the system.

For example, I'm interested in people making their own clothes, because I think that could bring lots of benefits for both sustainability and personal well-being. However, I know that – as we've discussed – many people are dissatisfied with things they've made, largely because they're comparing them to 'perfect' items bought from the shops. If you take a narrow view of homemade clothes, they seem straightforward – but when you recognise the wider context, things are way more complicated. So, I've been looking at designing ways to support people in their making, to help them to be happier with that they've made. In my PhD research, this was about running a project that created a space where amateurs had 'permission' to design for themselves and supported each other to develop and execute their creative ideas. That might seem a really tiny and insignificant change, but it could potentially have quite a significant impact on the way that fashion works, both sociologically and economically.

I think that to take a systems view, you really need to take advantage of ‘frames for understanding’, as you called them – otherwise the complexity is just too overwhelming, and you can’t see the wood for the trees. So we’re back once again to the need for theory and practice to be entwined, I think – so you can try to change things, but really understand the context you’re trying to work within.

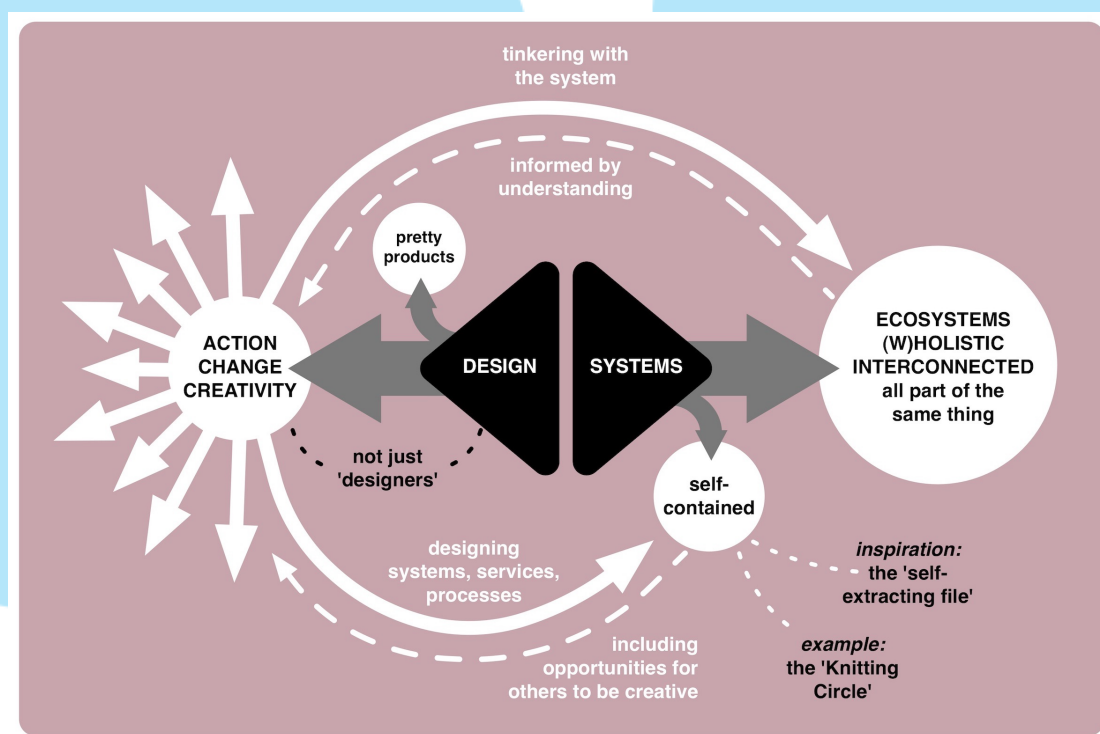


Figure 3: Designing systems for social change

Conclusion

DG: So if I can try to tie things up here, we’ve talked about a range of things but they are strikingly interconnected. We’ve covered personal, micro level themes concerning individual identity and sense of self – the feelings of pride, recognition, achievement and engagement, which can be associated with making and with being involved with communities of makers – and much grander, macro level ideas about social change, ecosystems and sustainability.

ATH: But you can't have one level without the other.

DG: Exactly, that's what I mean, I think it's good that we're not even trying to talk about one without the other. Perhaps that's the overriding theme of this conversation, that engagement with everyday creativity is vital to social change, and that you can't even think about improving things across the whole ecosystem if you don't engage with people's own creativity and ways to support them. And so this means we need to *design* effective ways to support people to do the stuff they want to do. We don't need to specify what that is. But we agree that engagement with making things, even in a small way, is the best path we know of to lead to that recognition that the world is what you make it.

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