

Earlier this year Sarah Macbeth and I ran the 'Citizens Are Designers' project for the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill, Sussex as part of their 'Care and Citizenship' series. We were representing Transition Town Hastings (a collective move towards sustainable living). Concerned about our communities – soon to be hopefully emerging from the fog of the pandemic – but conscious of all communities in the same boat, we wanted to come up with a generic and easy to use design tool to help facilitate community activists become designers for local, place-based positive change.

Staying at home over the last year has at least made us get to know the few streets around our homes like never before. How many of us have ever stayed so deeply in the same place for so long, in any one year? It is when we walk through our local places that we truly have a chance to observe life on our doorsteps: the changing seasons, maybe local animal and bird-life, species of wildflowers coming up through the pavement and identifying local trees, ones that might be in blossom or provide fruit for foraging. It is by walking that we notice our neighbours too, common spaces that are unused and sometimes things that need addressing, like where a bench could be put or an extra street bin or a gap in the hedge that needs filling.

### Small but Beautiful Interventions

Our model (shown overleaf) is designed to operate on this level, in our own backyards, and is about a shift from being consumers to being citizens. It's important to have agency over our home environments, our neighbourhoods, over our collective destinies, actively designing and creating the future we would like to live in. It's really not hard to make small, but beautiful interventions in our everyday life that might be game-changers for some of our neighbours, bring joy to someone's day or practically help solve a problem – like sharing plants, providing a needed seat to gather and connect, or planting a fruit tree to create a community food legacy. It doesn't take much.

Our model has both discovery and designing phases – many of the 'stepping stones' will be recognisable to a permaculture designer. The model has been set out like a winding footpath that

# Citizens are

**Anna Locke** explores how we can move from being consumers to citizens, where we design and create the future we want to live in



Photos left and right: © Aranya – Learn Permaculture; centre: © Anna Locke

we walk along with others, and this first stage is about taking an actual, or metaphorical, walk to look for opportunity (there is a downloadable audio guide). The discovery phase starts with asking a motivational question (MQ): 'Is there a problem you wish to tackle? Are you aware of any needs or opportunities you wish to support through a small group effort?' It's very

much about forming a small group with similar aims and intentions, connecting with others around the question in order to vitalise everyday life in our community. We walk with this group on a journey and really observe, talk and knuckle down our vision for solving the problem or creating an opportunity in order to live more sustainably! We choose a site, map it, observe our conditions,

# e Designers



People learning how to use permaculture to design new spaces for their community at Ourganics and, centre, a guerrilla forager's garden, the community contributes plants and time

species, talk to passers by and make an inventory of the resources freely available to us and the ones we might need.

Then we move into the designing phase. It's worth a pause here to really think about what design means. With permaculture we are all about design, but why? When making this model I ended up going down a bit of a rabbit

hole and would like to share what I found down there! There are some awesome papers to read if you like the academic nitty gritty (see Further Information at the end of this article). The most exciting ones I found were from Terry Irwin, who heads up the School of Design at Carnegie Mellon University, USA.

## Transition Design

There is an emergent discipline called Transition Design, which really each and every permaculture design falls into, i.e. designs for more sustainable futures.

Transition designs are longer-term design solutions that always acknowledge the natural world and are seeking to make our lifestyles more integrated with where we live. This gives rise to sharing the concept of 'cosmopolitan localism – a place-based lifestyle in which solutions to global problems are designed to be appropriate for local social and environmental conditions'. Or put another way, where we, the citizens, are the designers and the visionaries of new sustainable lifestyles. A future where most of our needs are being met locally or regionally, where 'the economy is designed to meet those needs, rather than grow for its own sake'. In short it is about reimagining the future and making 'everyday life' be positive, enhancing and enriching (in the true sense of the word), but most importantly **REGENERATIVE**. We are the designers. We are the ones that conjure up compelling visions of sustainable futures and truly desire them. Conceptual design frameworks (like our model) can guide the tangible actions we need to take to realise our visions. We are more powerful than you can possibly imagine. We can affect our community in small, but beautiful, ways, we really can.

In fact we already do. I'm sure everyone here can think of numerous examples where our communities have invented simple systems of sharing – books, seeds, seedlings – community 'shelves' that are autonomous, self regulating and well, just nice! It shows we care and are thinking of others. Although seemingly small efforts, these simple interventions really can enable people to be more sustainable, (by recycling books or growing food for example). The sky is the limit – mobile community cafés, street fridges, urban forager's gardens, book clubs, eco-verges, community composting, clothes swaps – there is so much creativity already in action. It's much more fun being a citizen than a consumer!

In our Care and Citizenship project our motivational question was, 'How can we create more urban foraging in Bexhill?', calling this part of the project 'In Search of Common Food'. In the spirit of 'gather skills and resources' I led a short permaculture workshop

# DISCOVERY



# DESIGN

with De La Warr Pavilion on how to design an urban forager's garden. By the end of the morning, participants had some sketches for their sites and the beginning of a plan of what to do. Some participants met up (online) and some joined forces afterwards.

## Design is Alchemy

If you know and love permaculture, you will be familiar with the design half of the model. This step, that of skilling ourselves up (before going through the rest of a design process) is what we do best! We also love DESIGN: communicating our vision, making our intentions known to ourselves and the world, whilst setting out how we will implement our ideas in the real world. With design we turn imagination into practicality. It's an alchemy that is addictive, as we all want to feel our own efficacy and bring things to life! Developing simple systems (that can do the work or help us do the work) is addictive too and also, as you are aware, quintessentially permaculture.

Transition design proposes that we need compelling, future orientated visions to inform and inspire projects and that the process of design makes this happen. This is why permaculture, especially right now, is so important.

Visioning is crucial for its role in opening conversations, generating alternatives to the status quo, spending time dreaming about what a 'better' (more sustainable) future really looks like – it needs us 'to suspend disbelief and forget about how things are now and wonder about how things could be'. This last sentence to me seems really pertinent and pivotal to the moment we are in now. Let's not waste the 'suspended belief' that the pandemic experience has given us. What we had thought of as being fixed has actually turned out to be more fluid than we thought. The truth is we can always change the future, it has always been this fluid (quantum theory), it's just that we need to start creating our futures more locally and on a community level and stop relying on grandiose politics that simply hasn't been truly thinking sustainably – the bigger machine has had its chance and failed us, and now the smaller cogs, in smaller places, even in the smallest place, just need to get on with it. Climate change is not going away, the pandemic has taught us to value Nature and our immediate communities, so let's keep showing them some love and positivity so we can TLC the future into being. After all, when it comes to the future of our communities – who

is imagining it, who is deciding it and who is our future for? We think we are!

## Further Information

The Citizens are Designers project can be downloaded at

[www.transitiontownhastings.org.uk](http://www.transitiontownhastings.org.uk)  
[www.dlwp.com/care-and-citizenship/citizens-are-designers](http://www.dlwp.com/care-and-citizenship/citizens-are-designers)

Article ref: Terry Irwin (2015)

'Transition Design: A Proposal for a New Area of Design Practice, Study, and Research', *Design and Culture Journal*.

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Anna is author of *The Forager's Garden* available from PM's online shop, which is available with 10% off the RRP:

<https://shop.permaculture.co.uk/the-foragers-garden.html>

