

DESIGNING FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Transforming Public
Sector Innovation



André Schaminée

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There is a crack in everything,
that's how the light gets in.

Excerpt from 'Anthem' by Leonard Cohen

The big question today is not why transition is necessary, but how it can be realized. That is the question that remains largely unanswered. Many good intentions have not been fulfilled because too many people and organizations are stuck in outdated ideas about how scaled, irreversible, positive change happens.¹

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Christian Bason

In search of the miraculous

I was walking through the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven with my mother. We were looking at art by Bas-Jan Ader. Him cycling into a canal. Him falling off a roof. Him standing on a tree branch breaking off.

At the top of the museum, there is a little boat suspended from the ceiling. It is a replica of the boat that he wanted to cross the Atlantic Ocean in. My mother looked at it with a mixture of awe and incomprehension. “What do you think his work is about?” she asked me.

I told her that many people believe his oeuvre is about letting go – physically, mentally, existentially. Not just resigning oneself to what is inevitable, but also going in search of the intangible, the transcendental that follows. My mother nodded hesitantly. “If such a famous artist spends his entire life trying to understand what it means to let go,” she said, “how can ordinary people like us be expected to succeed at it?”

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INTRODUCTION

WORKING ON
SYSTEM CHANGE

System
change is,
at its core,
a social
challenge

As a society, we are facing major challenges in the pursuit of a more sustainable and equitable world. Every day, we see familiar systems breaking down around us. Biodiversity is under pressure, the climate is changing and the gap between rich and poor is growing. All of this affects many of the systems that give stability, content and colour to our daily lives, such as the food, mobility, care and energy systems, and also our economic system. These and many other systems need to be thoroughly overhauled, and time is of the essence.

All over the world, citizens, companies and public authorities are confronting this challenge. But although significant results are being achieved, changes in general are arduous and they are tearing society apart. Why is it that we, humanity, appear so stubbornly intent on acting against our own interests? Wasn't it always supposed to be the case that the generations following us would be better off than we were?

Why you should read this book

The need for system change is much discussed and written about. There are plenty of thinkers from the worlds of science and the arts that have inspired me in this regard. For instance, Kate Raworth and Mariana Mazzucato – system innovators from the realm of economics. Raworth has written an influential book in which she calls for the economy to be constrained by social and ecological limits. Mazzucato proposes restructuring the economy around public missions. The world of the arts also stirs a sense of urgency and appeals to the imagination, with exhibitions with resonant titles like *Changing the System*.

These thinkers and makers matter. They help us look at the world through different eyes and convince

us that things have to change. At the same time, for me the line between inspiration and frustration is often thin. After all, what am I going to do with all that inspiration? Can these abstract expressions really lead to change? Why is everything so incredibly slow-moving, with even little steps resulting in endless drama? In short: how do I translate my engagement into meaningful action?

That's what this book is about. How do we, change-makers take the step from long-term aspirations to daily practice? How do we operationalise this effectively and in a way that does not tear society apart? In answering these questions, I navigate between theory and practice, between society and the boardroom, and between the other and myself.

This is not a typical management manual. It is not filled with canvases and step-by-step plans. Such books are out there and can be very helpful in tackling matters in a structured way². But when it comes to complex challenges, much of the change has to take place deep within the bowels of organizations. This is often poorly understood and therefore overlooked – with all the attendant consequences.

In this book, I will show you, in an accessible way, the part of the change mission that generally remains hidden. As such, it fills the gap between abstract future scenarios and operational models. Using practical examples and usable models, I provide a guide to how good ideas can actually lead to transitions.

This is – and is not – a design book

In this book, you will find a selection of case studies that show that system change is possible. These case studies are drawn from design practice, by which I mean the creative and analytical methods, instruments and mentality that designers use to develop ideas and

design products, services and systems. I would point out that this goes beyond finding ‘solutions’. It is also about *research through design* – a research strategy involving the use of design activities such as making prototypes, scenarios or interventions to develop new insights, theories or questions concerning complex issues³.

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In the Netherlands, design practice has become inextricably bound up with societal issues. More and more, designers are working with and within government and, increasingly, designers are a factor in political decision-making.

The design approach has much to offer in terms of system change. Designers have an important role to play in bringing about a constructive dialogue within society. Using the power of their imaginations, they make different futures conceivable. They have a keen eye for uncertainties, and through testing, iteration and embedding they are able to take steps towards a new system. That the design approach has much to offer is apparent from the fact that no fewer than four of the cases presented in this book have been discussed in the Dutch House of Representatives.

Nevertheless, this book is not about designing per se. What fascinates me are the processes around it. The processes that determine whether a design leads to change – or not. That makes this story universal. Because those processes are not just relevant for designers, but also for all other change-makers grappling with complex issues.

For the interested reader, references have been included throughout the book to publications about designing that can be used for more in-depth enquiry but are not a prerequisite for reading this book.

A central role for government

It is essential to consider the question of how democracies can remain intact, or even be strengthened, while we are tackling complex challenges. Democracies are under pressure around the world. Even in countries where you would never have expected it, parties that are autocratic and anti-constitutional in nature are gaining a foothold. The troubling thing is that *precisely* the complex challenges I am talking about in this book provide a seedbed for the authoritarian movement. That scares me, because I cannot imagine a system other than the democratic system to assure the public values that will enable a transition to a more sustainable and fairer world.

In most countries and communities, there is a role for government in decisively tackling system changes. But governments are struggling. I see them trying to accelerate system change as well as hindering it. I will briefly cite the two most important reasons here, before returning to them at length later in this book.

The first is that there are significant electoral interests in not changing, or at least not changing too quickly. In the words of Jean-Claude Juncker, then chairman of the Eurogroup: “We all know what to do. We just don’t know how we’ll get re-elected if we do it.”

The second reason is that we expect governments to play different roles that in practice are very difficult to reconcile with one another. We want a just government that upholds rules and follows agreed procedures. And a government that delivers measurable results. But what if those rules and procedures have become part of the problem? And what if you don’t know beforehand exactly what is going to work and what isn’t?

Because that is precisely what happens in the process of system change. The complex issues are

fundamentally unbounded, have no clear owner and impact deeply on our thinking, acting and organising. A top-down approach doesn't work for these kinds of interwoven, dynamic challenges. You can't work out everything beforehand and then roll it out. You need to collaborate, experiment, learn and then embed what you have learned. For this reason, we also want a government that operates in networks with a wide range of partners, is responsive and builds on initiatives emerging from within society⁴.

In short, governments are facing a major change mission. In this book, I unravel how we can accelerate transitions by improving the position of governments.

Who is this book for?

This book is for people who want to change the system from within or in collaboration with the government. People who want to move more quickly. People who want to intervene more decisively in long-winded change processes. People who can see the world as it is and who dare to take responsibility for the things they are not satisfied with. People who want to develop alternatives and get them to work. In short, people who want to contribute to deep change.

Summary of contents

This book begins with a question that is as pressing as it is natural: why don't we just sort it out? We have never had so much knowledge and so many resources to tackle issues with, and yet we seem to be more powerless than ever. In order to better understand that, I explore the term complexity in Chapter 1. What do we mean by that? And how does the approach to a complex issue differ from the familiar approaches that have worked for so long?

In Chapter 2, I construct a composite conceptual

framework, drawing on design, public administration, organizational science and transition science. The framework is both descriptive and directive. It helps us to understand what is going on and provides tools for action.

In Chapter 3, I discuss society and its values at length. System change can easily become technical and technocratic, but at the deepest level it is a societal challenge. It is important to reflect on that. Not least because system changes are associated with significant economic and political interests, and virtually anything you come up with in order to move a step forwards will become part of a culture war.

Chapter 4 centres on experimentation, learning and embedding. One of the challenges of systemic change is permanent uncertainty, and the only way to cope with that is to learn together – each in their own role. But learning experiences only become meaningful if they lead to change. That doesn't happen by itself, though. Indeed, the pilot paradox shows us that successful experiments very often do not result in significant change. In order to overcome this paradox, I discuss the learning agenda, the learning structure and different forms of learning, and I introduce a governance model.

I end the book with Chapter 5, in which I introduce two concepts that will be quite decisive for the effectiveness of the approach. Firstly, I reflect on chaos. This concept is central to transition science and an inevitability in the shift from one system to the other. At the same time, it is also the main fuel for parties whose aim is to keep everything as unsustainable and inequitable as it was before, or even have anti-democratic agendas. This paradox may lead to the pursuit of a more sustainable society actually setting us back.

The key is to make chaos productive. To that end, I discuss a second concept, the window of opportunity. In moments of chaos, opportunities arise for taking a step towards a sustainable and just society. You must be able to recognize or facilitate such moments and then seize them. To do so, besides empathy and imagination, timing and intuition are essential. I conclude the book with two best practices in which change-makers demonstrate how to create and utilize those windows and in doing so avoid the chaos paradox.

About the case studies

I have approached this book according to the principle enunciated by James Joyce: *In the particular is contained the universal*. By zooming in closely on examples from daily practice, we start to recognize principles and mechanisms of action that prove relevant at a much larger scale.

In this book you will find many case studies. I am candid about occasions when everything did not work out as had been hoped or expected. But I also demonstrate that systemic change is possible. Step by step, we are working towards a more sustainable and more equitable future. Alongside case studies from my own practice, I am also keen to talk about the work of people who inspire me. Many of the case studies relate to challenges facing rural areas. Occasionally, I will illustrate a point with a case from a different domain. In earlier versions of this book, I tried to explore various subject areas, but in the process of writing I discovered that going into a single subject in great depth works better than briefly touching on multiple subjects. For example, change-makers in healthcare have no trouble understanding case studies from agriculture. Many of the principles and mechanisms are familiar to them and many of the

lessons in this book are also usable by them.

Most of the cases in this book are drawn from the Netherlands. The Netherlands is a small, densely populated country. It ranks among the world's top 20 economies in terms of GDP. Since space in the Netherlands is scarce, some challenges, as well as the inability to resolve them within the existing systems, are more obvious here than elsewhere. Spatial development is one such complex challenge. There is hardly any opportunity for building houses or expanding businesses. That is because environmental permits cannot be issued due to the fact that nature has been severely compromised, drinking water supplies are under pressure, it is impossible to create new connections to the energy network because the energy transition is stagnating, and so on. Economic activities that treat nature as an endless consumption good and fossil-driven economic activities have far exceeded the limits of the natural system; the inability of the political system to make timely adjustments has led to unprecedented legal gridlock, which is further accompanied by serious societal tensions. This isn't something to be proud of, but there is plenty there that can inform our insights.

There is also hope. Slowly but surely, we appear to be working our way forward. And that is something to be proud of, and also something which offers us valuable lessons. In recent years, research has been conducted in transition science, the design world and public administration into societal transitions based on extensive practical experience. Many recent insights have been incorporated into this book.

When I wrote my previous book⁵, I was very doubtful whether the Dutch case studies would be relatable enough to readers from other cultures, for example those characterized by different relationships between

government and citizens than exists in the Netherlands. But Joyce's rule proved to be applicable once again. I was pleasantly surprised by the reception of that book. Not only was a Japanese translation published, I also received positive reviews and correspondence from readers from every corner of the globe. Not just from Europe, but also from Japan, the Middle East, Australia, the United States, South America and Russia. For this reason, I am confident that Dutch case studies will once again help to draw lessons that are broadly applicable.



“Designing for systemic change is a groundbreaking new contribution to public sector innovation.” – Christian Bason, Ph.D.,
Co-founder, Transition Collective

“This book reveals how the power of imagination can be transformed into real, practical action.” – Willem van Zeeland, director
Dutch Design Week

Transitions are urgently needed to create a sustainable and just society. But anyone working on system change knows how difficult this can be. Progress is slow, resistance is strong, and systems often fall back into old patterns.

The good news: meaningful change is possible. This book shows how designers and public sector innovators achieve results that truly matter. Drawing on extensive experience, André Schaminée demonstrates how a design led approach can help navigate complexity, embrace the human factor, and enable organizations to build the capacity needed to realize deep change.

It is widely acknowledged that organizations must change as well. In this book, Schaminée shows how to tackle that challenge.

Written in an accessible style, the book weaves together personal stories with case studies and insights from transition studies, public administration, and design. It offers both inspiration and practical tools for everyone working towards a more sustainable and just future.

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