Reframing and Strategic Transformation

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Abstract: As the problems and opportunities facing our organisations are becoming more open, complex, dynamic and networked, professionals are turning towards the designing disciplines to find inspiration for new ways of working. To really embed innovation, the impact of design should move beyond the project level and impact the strategy of the organisation, and possibly its processes and structures. In this paper we use a case study to investigate what design can do to help create such deep changes. The case study is an early social design project, which allows us to take a longitudinal perspective: ten years on, what has actually happened with the new frames and ideas of the initial project? What has followed? Has this project influenced strategic innovation? Or did it all come to naught? We discuss the lessons learned in this project to inform our understanding of the real impact of design, and its limitations. This leads us to posit a practice-based 'theory of change'.

Keywords: framing; social design; strategic transformation

1. Introduction

As the problems and opportunities facing our organisations are becoming more open, complex, dynamic and networked, professionals are turning towards the designing disciplines to find inspiration for new ways of working (Dorst, 2017). This is a sensible thing to do: after all, design situations do tend to be ill-structured and 'wicked', and as a result, designers have had to develop a set of practices, methods and tools to help them create novel solutions within such problem situations. But the need for new practices goes beyond the project level. To really embed innovation, the impact of design should move beyond the project level and impact the strategy of the organisation. To support such novel strategies, the organisations' processes and structures will have to be transformed in turn.

Thus, the challenge to design is to help create such deep changes, to create radical transformations on all levels. While the designing disciplines have a lot to offer that might be useful in such processes, there is a real danger of design over-extending, going beyond what it can do. Then promise and hope all too easily turn into pretence.

As a first investigation of what design CAN do, and what the limitations of designerly ways of thinking are, we will perform a critical post-mortem analysis on a well-known social design project, executed by the Designing Out Crime research centre in Sydney. The case study of this early social design project has become an often-retold story that captures the imagination of designers and innovators around the world. But ten years on, what has actually happened with the new frames and ideas of the initial project? What has followed? Has this project influenced strategic innovation, and led to structural transformation? Or did it all come to naught?

We will discuss the lessons learned in this project to inform our understanding of the real impact of design, and its limitations. This leads us to posit a practice-based 'theory of change' (a model of the dynamic interrelationship between reframing and strategic transformation), as well as an agenda for areas in which further research is needed to bolster the impact of design on strategic transformation.

2. Context: Designing Out Crime

In 2008, the New South Wales government's Department of Justice established a Designing Out Crime (DOC) research centre together with the University of Technology Sydney (Dorst et al., 2016).

The DOC centre's remit is to use design practices to revolutionise the way we achieve safety and security in society. Prevalent problem-solving strategies in the area of safety and security are focused on the creation of countermeasures, introducing preventive measures and using strong-arm tactics to force people's behaviour away from unwanted/illegal patterns (Boutellier, 2011). Central to the Designing Out Crime approach is the pledge to avoid the creation of countermeasures, as these create a climate of wariness and fear that destroys the social fabric of our public spaces and our society. In its projects, the Designing Out Crime centre sees crime as a symptom and takes aim at the 'upstream' causes. The initial briefs formulated by the DOC partner organisations are often a direct result of their earlier problem-solving attempts, and these questions are almost always aimed at symptoms, rather than core problems. Questioning and reframing these briefs is the key to achieving innovative solutions.

Research into the way designers manage approach problem situations in new ways, has led to a frame creation methodology (Dorst, 2015). This starts with the acknowledgement that a problem has its roots in a specific context. To create a new frame that context needs to be critically looked at, its assumptions need to be challenged and it needs to be extended into a broader Field. The creation of new frames can be modelled as a process of nine steps (See figure 1).
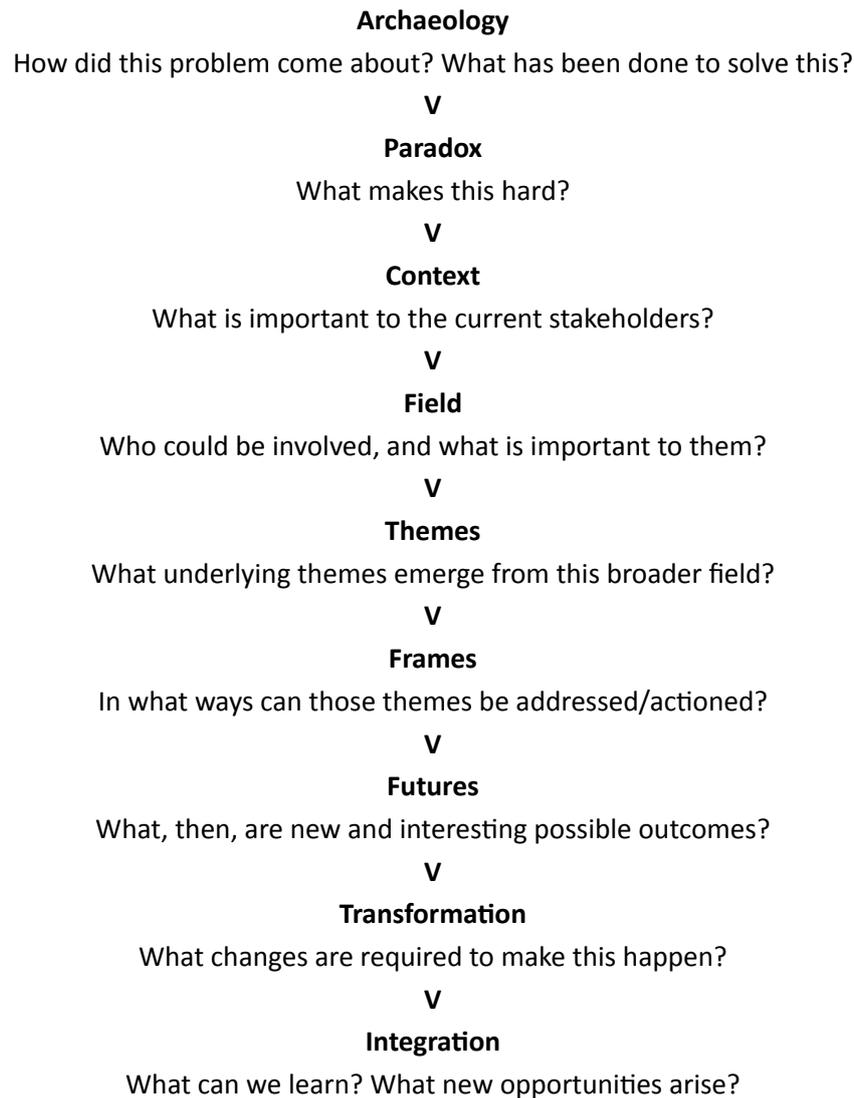
Archaeology

How did this problem come about? What has been done to solve this?

V

Paradox

What makes this hard?

V

Context

What is important to the current stakeholders?

V

Field

Who could be involved, and what is important to them?

V

Themes

What underlying themes emerge from this broader field?

V

Frames

In what ways can those themes be addressed/actioned?

V

Futures

What, then, are new and interesting possible outcomes?

V

Transformation

What changes are required to make this happen?

V

Integration

What can we learn? What new opportunities arise?

Figure 1   The nine steps of a Frame Creation process

Frame Creation is a process of thinking around the problem rather than confronting it head-on: it is the expansion of the problem space that allows new patterns to emerge. Central to the process is the fifth step, where an analysis of the values of the broader field of stakeholders leads to the Themes from which new approaches (the Frames) can be created. The first four steps lay the groundwork, the latter steps explore the implications of the potential frames and proposed solution directions. For a detailed step-by-step description of the reframing methodology see Dorst et al. (2016, pp 162-179). The core of the Frame Creation process can be compressed in a workshop that itself normally lasts two to four hours. But this is a bit misleading: in a complex problem situation such a reframing workshop takes months of preparation and after the in-principle adoption of a frame, the path to action is often hard and long. New frames invariably disturb organisational cultures, processes, and structures that have been set up to support the conventional problem-solving in an

organisation. Frames can also cut through organisational boundaries in unexpected ways – then there is a need to build a new network of organisations to support the creation and delivery of the chosen solution.

3. Research Method

This paper presents a *case history* (Bordens & Abbott, 2002) of the Kings Cross project. It draws on policy documents, public submissions to a government enquiry, media and consultancy reports and academic publications to put forward our observations of the evolution of the problem over a ten-year period. In putting forward these observations we also propose a theory of change model. This theory of change model provides a framework by which to critique the original Kings Cross project, identifying where things went wrong, or could have been done differently. The authors of this paper were leading the research centre at the focus of this study for the first 10 years of its existence. The case history and theory of change model in this paper are put forward as a meta-analysis of a body of work spanning more than 10 years, and the changes in how crime in the night-time was approached by governments over this time.

4. The original Kings Cross project

In 2009, the Designing Out Crime research centre was approached by the City of Sydney (the local council at the core of this big international city) to look into the problem of 'alcohol related violence' in Kings Cross, an entertainment district. The original project was led by staff from the Designing Out Crime research centre and involved a student group from the University of Technology Sydney's Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building under the mentorship of Sarah Gibson (Dorst, 2011).

The project in a nutshell (for a much more detailed description of this project and its outcomes see Dorst et al. (2016, pp: 14-19, 48-51, 162-179).

> The problem situation centres around Kings Cross, an entertainment quarter in Sydney. This particular area with its bars and clubs attracts about 30,000 young people on a good night. The issues include drunkenness, fights, petty theft, drugs dealing and later in the night, there is also sporadic violence. Over the years, the government has been using 'strong arm tactics', increasing the police presence and the putting in CCTV cameras. Clubs have been required to hire security personnel. All this extra security has made for a grim public environment, yet the problems have persisted.
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> Designers from the Designing Out Crime centre quickly realised that the issues were presented to them by the local council as law-and-order problems, needing law-and-order solutions (this is the initial framing). The designers took a broader approach and studied the behaviour of the revellers in more detail. Key themes that emerged were that the people concerned are overwhelmingly young people (non-criminals) wanting to have a good time, and that they were becoming increasingly bored and frustrated as the night progressed. Paradoxically, they were not getting a good experience at all – a problem that was not helped by the security measures in place. The designers framed what were originally presented

as crime issues differently by studying the themes in the broader problem situation and proposing a simple analogy: that this problem could be seen AS IF they were dealing with organising a good-sized music festival. This analogy immediately allows further exploration: what would one organise if one were to organising a music festival? This exploration in turn leads to new scenarios for action. Just to name a few, out of about 20 design directions that were sparked by this frame:

- Transportation. When organizing a music festival, one would make sure that people would be able to get there, and also leave again when they wanted. In this entertainment quarter, the peak time of young people coming into the area is about 1AM, and the last train leaves at 1.20AM. Getting a taxi takes about 2 hours, later in the night. So, once you are in the entertainment quarter you are basically crammed into a single road until the trains start running again at 6 AM. That leads to boredom, frustration and aggression. Apart from running more trains, the designers proposed as a fall-back position a system of temporary signage on the pavement, helping the party-goers to get to Town Hall station that has buses running throughout the night.

- Crowd control. In organising a music festival, one would also create chill-out spaces and continuous attractions, to make sure that people's experience does not completely depend on what happens on a single big stage. As it happens, this entertainment quarter has a few big clubs that form the main attractions. Young people that have visited a club and spill out on the street might find that the queue for the next one is too long and wander along with nothing to do. The designers proposed that this can be minimized by providing an app that tells people how long the waiting time for the next club is before leaving one. Some of the laneways around the central street can be opened up as rest areas, with water fountains and a relaxed "lounge" atmosphere.

- Safety and wayfinding. In organizing a music festival, one would have staff around to help people and keep an eye on safety. Over the years, the clubs have hired more and more security personnel and bouncers. The designers proposed a system of very visible young 'Kings Cross guides' in bright T-shirts, that help people find their way through the area and that are also approachable when help is needed.'

5. Impact on strategy, and structure and the sector

By its very nature, such a radical reframing (from 'alcohol related violence' to 'a music festival') cannot be implemented without having deep repercussions for the organisations involved. Such a reframing implies a change agenda for the stakeholders that have earlier framed the issue, defined the problem and kept it in place. For lasting impact, the Themes and Frames that result from the frame creation process should lead to changes in the strategy of the organisations, and possibly their structures and processes. Radically new Frames can become harbingers of a new paradigm, they have the potential to transform the unwritten rules of the game in a whole sector (in this case: influencing the criminal justice system by presenting alternative crime prevention strategies).

A number of remarkable people within the City of Sydney local government quickly picked up on the possible role that they could play within the 'Music Festival' frame, and recast their organisation from being centred around the conventional local government roles, provision

of infrastructure and rule enforcement, to become a 'conductor' of night life in the Kings Cross area. From this much more active, creative role they recalibrated their relations with a wide group of stakeholders that could be involved in shaping the future of the Kings Cross experience.

And they even went much further: the Music Festival frame is a nice metaphor to think with, but it has obvious limitations: (1) many elements of the complex Kings Cross environment cannot be captured within this frame (e.g. the experience of local residents), (2) this frame only applies to Kings Cross (which is only a couple of streets), and merely to a couple of nights per week, mostly in the summer months. For the City of Sydney to become a true conductor of nightlife throughout its local government area, it would need frames or development agendas for all of its different neighbourhoods – some are local entertainment oriented, others more touristy, and yet others are residential. These would need to be based on evidence as to the current state of the night life there, and of course involve the participation of citizen, local businesses and other societal stakeholders. The City of Sydney commissioned research into the night life (City of Sydney, 2011) and consulted with residents and stakeholders about appropriate ambitions and frames for the various areas going forward. This resulted in a comprehensive Open Sydney strategy (City of Sydney, 2013) that captures the local ambitions and translates them in hundreds of action points for the short, medium and longer term. These action points in turn resulted in more projects being commissioned to explore possible futures in Kings Cross and other parts of the city.

Some of the new Kings Cross projects that the Designing Out Crime research centre was involved in built on the original reframe (the 'music festival'), others were much more detailed and specific. For instance, one project focused on the problem of violence: to a degree the groups of young men get into fights because they want to fight, as part of their specific group culture as they establish a hierarchy within and between groups. The reframing here was based on the realisation that the key Theme behind this behaviour is competition, not violence per se. Creating other arenas for competition, like urban sports, helps them achieve these goals by less violent means. And as it turns out, they are quite happy to compete in these less harmful ways.

The original 2009 Kings Cross project was done in collaboration with the Safer Sydney unit of the City of Sydney as the commissioning party. In the years after the project, this unit spun out the 'The Night-time Economy team'. This team takes a much broader and more comprehensive and inclusive view of the meaning, significance and the value of nightlife in a big international city like Sydney. The dollar value of the economic transactions of the city at night has also become part of the bottom line, in 2019 Sydney's night-time economy is $27.2 billion per annum (Deloitte, 2019). The Night-time Economy team set about implementing many of the recommendations of the Kings Cross project.

The Kings Cross case study story has travelled really well, in professional practice and in academia as an early example of social design, and a successful case of design contributing to public sector innovation (Bason, 2018). It has had a widespread international influence.

The project itself has had direct influence on the thinking about nightlife in cities like Vancouver, New York, London, Cardiff, Manchester, Edinburgh, Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin. Direct follow-ups for the Designing Out Crime team include invitations to projects in Amsterdam, Eindhoven, Seoul, Hong Kong, among other places. The founding director of the Night-time Economy team at the City of Sydney won a Churchill fellowship to study best practices around the world (Matthews, 2009). In parallel, the Night Mayors movement emerged to help cities think about the importance and potential of the nightlife in a city. In 2019, this movement had spread to 40 cities across the world (Seijas & Gelders, 2020). This in turn has led to an international series of 'Global Cities after Dark' conferences, sharing practices and lessons on the creation of a thriving night-time economy from around the world (www.globalcitiesafterdark.com). Through the impact the movement is having and the discussions it is enabling, the movement is sharpening the emerging role of the Night Mayors. Part of this discussion is recognising the various roles that they play (regulatory, advocacy, etc.) in curating the night-time as a space for 'trust and identity building' (ibid).

6. Tragedy strikes

6.1 Incident and response

But then in 2012 and 2014, two young men were killed in separate unprovoked one-punch attacks in Kings Cross. These very tragic deaths were of course discussed in the media, which put pressure on politicians to create new countermeasures to clamp down on the 'alcohol related violence' in Kings Cross. In response, the state of New South Wales introduced so-called "Lockout Laws" (not changing the mandatory closing times, but basically preventing people from (re)entering a pub, café or restaurant after a certain time and limiting the service of alcohol) that covered a large part of the City of Sydney local government area including the city centre and Kings Cross. These laws served to make these areas very unattractive (no smoking outside, no pub crawls, not getting food), and effectively killed the nightlife. Restaurants, cafes, nightclubs, pubs and shops left the area or went bankrupt. In total, 176 establishments closed as a result of the lock-out laws (Taylor, 2018). The changes in Kings Cross meant that other, more suburban areas of the cities became busier, stretching the local infrastructure. Clearly a case of shifting the problems, rather than resolving them – although inadvertently, this shift might actually have brought down the overall violence in the Sydney metropolitan area, as youth from the different suburbs stopped using Kings Cross as a central arena to meet.

The sad irony behind this state of affairs is that the Lockout Laws would not have prevented the two one-punch attacks, as those were both earlier in the evening before the lockouts would have taken place. Yet in the political scheme of things, that did not seem to matter.

The introduction of the Lockout Laws led to ongoing protest from Sydneysiders, the community and business owners in the area. A political party was created to advocate for their repeal. This sparked an impassioned societal discussion on what being an 'international

city' actually means, what the role is of night entertainment in the life of a city, and how we as a society support young people going through the confusing years then they are coming of age, etc. The City of Sydney actively facilitated these discussions through platforms like *sydneyyoursay.com.au › openandcreative* while advocating for 'Sydney as a 24 hour city', commissioning research on the state of the 'night-time economy' to benchmark with other major cities around the world. The New South Wales Government also commissioned its own research into the matter. After a public inquiry that attracted more than 200 submissions, see for instance City of Sydney (2019), the Lockout Laws were largely repealed in 2019.

6.2 Reflection: what happened?

There are a number of lessons that can be learned from this unfortunate course of events.

In retrospect, there were three flaws in the original Kings Cross project... (1) The DOC centre designers had not realised that in commissioning this project, the City of Sydney was taking on a responsibility that was actually shared with several departments in the New South Wales government. Not involving those departments turned out to be a fatal omission. (2) Secondly, the DOC centre designers didn't involve the media in the project, and hence didn't influence the societal discussion on Kings Cross. When the tragic deaths happened, that discussion naturally started where it left off - from the old frame of 'alcohol related violence'. (3) The most influential voice in the whole societal discussion were the emergency room doctors at nearby St Vincent's hospital – they advocated for the Lockout Laws with all of the moral authority that comes with their profession. Again, the DOC centre designers had not involved them in the original Kings Cross project.

These hidden assumptions in the original project were called out. In the years since, the societal discussion has moved on, and the NSW Government has been reflecting on the appropriateness of the Lockout Laws as a response to the situation in Kings Cross. It is clear that there now is a much more resilient and robust societal discussion and a better context to really change the situation in Kings Cross for good.

7. A theory of change

There are several sides to the Kings Cross project story: on the one hand, there is the emergence of a compelling frame that captures people's imagination and leads to success on project level – but on the other hand, we can see how difficult it can be to create real and lasting change.

Thoughtful design projects in which the frames we use to define the problem in the first place are called into question and alternative framings emerge can and should lead to changes in the practices of the organization, strategy of the organization, and inform changes in its structure and processes. Radically new frames have the potential to transform the unwritten rules of the game in a whole sector (see Figure 2).
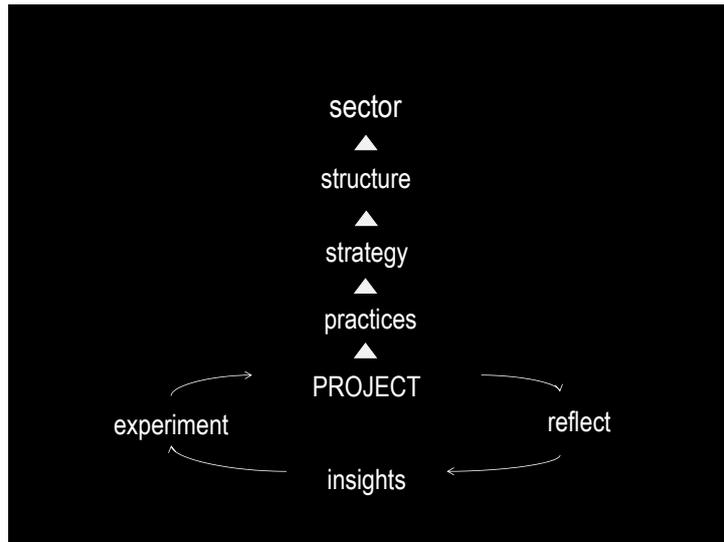
Figure 2   From reframing project to impact

But this hardly ever happens because these great insights come from bottom-up, while the strategic thinking is usually determined in a top-down process: the sector or organisation reacts to what is sees as its relevant context (the 'Field'), and adapts its structures and strategies accordingly (see Figure 3).
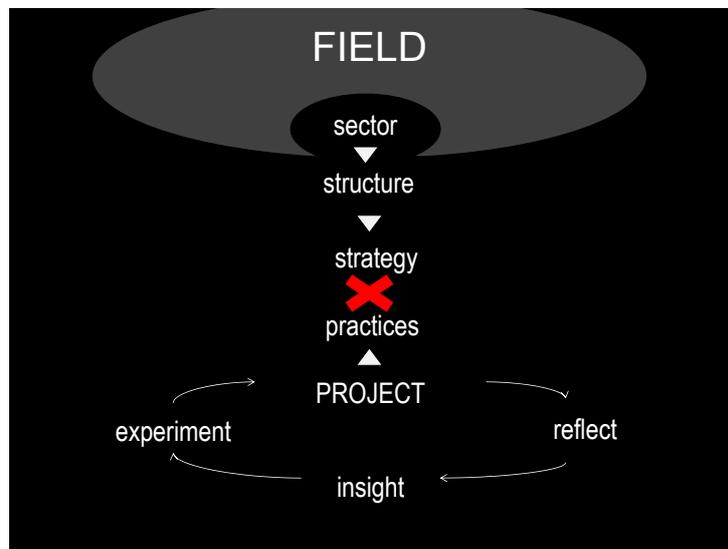

Figure 3   The blockage that comes from the top-down approach to strategy formulation

This blockage in the innovation system can be bypassed by using the insights that come from the projects to directly influence the Field. This creates a new dynamic, combining the two movements: as the insights that come from the projects are used to create a new Field, the sector adapts to this new Field by using its normal top-down adaptive processes, and meets the bottom-up movement halfway (see Figure 4).
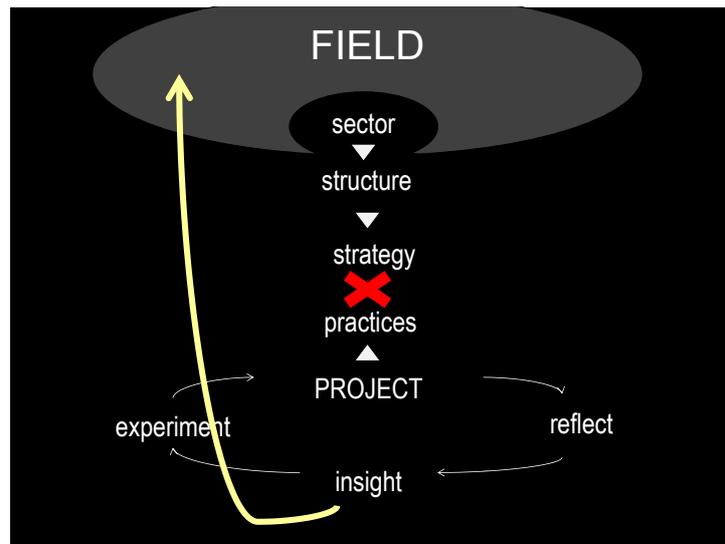
Figure 4   The Dynamics of Reframing and Strategic Transformation

We have encountered the different levels of this model at play in the aftermath of the Kings Cross project.

8. Conclusion: reframing and strategic transformation

What are the lessons we can draw from this extended case study-cum-aftermath to help us understand what design can bring to such open, complex, dynamic and networked problem situations, what are the pitfalls, and where do we need practices from other fields to augment what design can bring?

In retrospect, we can now see clearly that in the initial project, as designers we made the familiar mistake of being too focused on the project level. And as we have said earlier, the project team completely missed some of the major stakeholders – never a good idea (see section 5). And the vulnerability of the solution was exacerbated by the fact that they weren't very inclusive of the stakeholders they did work with, not really pulling them into a co-creation process. This was not by accident – they were making the classic design call in trying to get away with it, by staying under the radar, and assuming that the elegance of the reframe and the resulting ideas would be so compelling that this in itself would create the space for change needed for implementation. In a way they were lucky that the City of Sydney had a much more inclusive approach. But even so, despite with the positive developments in the aftermath of the project, including the advent of the Open Sydney strategy and the organisational shift to the Night-time Economy (incredibly rare), the solutions proved to critically vulnerable because the societal discussion had not moved on. For real change to occur, all levels in the model of Figure 4 need to shift into a new alignment. This means that if design is to have lasting impact, it will need to learn how to strategically work across these levels.

For design to reach its full potential to reframe issues and create real change it needs to

rethink some of its own assumptions, that come from its long history as a professional field (this is only natural: after all, dealing with such complex social issues we are using design practices for something they weren't conceived for). We have already outlined some of these above, in describing the shortcomings of the original Kings Cross project – but the list of assumptions is much longer. They include, an underestimation of the importance of the client role (Dorst, 2019), difficulty in allowing expertise from other professional fields to influence the course of the project, a potential problem in dealing with high levels of complexity, the fact that design tends to ignore the existence of power. Design tends to create a bubble in which a creative process can flourish, but in doing so it also creates a difficult interface with the broader organisation.

What is clear from this case study is that in order to achieve strategic transformation, design needs a theory of change beyond the project level and beyond the bottom-up approach that it traditionally applies. The fledgling model presented in Figure 4 can be a basis – at least it maps some of the layers to be traversed, and in this case study it has helped us build a close understanding of what could possibly go wrong. Other models from innovation management (Liedtka, 2017), change management (Schaminee, 2018), and public sector innovation (Bason, 2018) can all shed light on the position that design find itself in as it is moving into this important but incredibly complex problem domain. This is the moment to very closely collaborate with these fields.

To deliver on the promise of social design, (Tromp & Hekkert, 2019) design will need to change to meet these challenges, move beyond project-level solutions to change the practices, strategy, structure, and change the thinking in the sector.

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