ARCS OF IMPACT
RELATING SYSTEMS THINKING & DESIGN
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Where Do Systemic Designers Go To [BLANK]?

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Where is systemic design present in our lives?

The emergence of systemic design as an approach and practice has coevolved in the Toronto, Canadian and global landscape based as a course in the Strategic Foresight and Innovation (SFI) program at OCAD University. With decades now passed since the launch of the program in 2009, and various degrees of uptake around the design and innovation communities, systemic design can be understood both an elusive in where it exists locally and omnipresent in how it permeates throughout.

Digging into 'arcs of impact', we invite attendees into facilitated, small group conversations to unravel this paradox. We will reflect, explore, discover and share venues for where systemic design is most present in our lives. At RSD14, self-identifying community members can come together to share opportunities in which professional development can be extended beyond postgraduate studies.

This workshop welcomes current students, alumni with systemic design or "SD-adjacent" degrees, and "accidental" systemic designers who have found themselves drawn in. For example, in our socially constructed world today we grapple with many social, political, environmental, and economic challenges (and opportunities), from which we can create fundamental questions to explore. As such, we invite you to unconference into the conversation with your ideas, which may include, but not limited to, bringing a piece of artifact(s) to use

as a prop (or tool) to introduce and explore systemic design from your perspective.

This RSD14 workshop is led by four members of the OCAD University community, in a 2025 project to reinvigorate the sLab.

KEYWORDS: systemic design, professional development, convening

RSD TOPICS: Cases & Practice, Learning & Education

Background and Context

"Systemic design" has a long evolutionary history. Arguably, the formal term dates back to 2013, with the RSD2 meeting (Sevaldson & Jones, 2014). Many of the ideas were nurtured in the education program from 2009, in the launch of the M.Des. in Strategic Foresight and Innovation at the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD, 2009). The Systemic Design Network initiated circa 2012 became formally incorporated as the Systemic Design Association in 2018.

With continuing development in practice, "systemic designers" espouse "systemic design". At the international level, there may be commonalities in methods, models, and techniques. At regional levels, approaches and techniques may vary. Appreciations of the meanings of the intersection of "systemic" and "design" may be interpreted differently.

What about 'systemic design' is meaningful to us? What do we have in common? We want to hear, speak, and learn about our shared values, interests, aims, and hopes. Importantly, we're interested in *prospects* as well as *projects*. In the co-evolution of supply and demand, we want to better understand context — to sense, size up, and contemplate the dynamic greater environment.

As we witness or perchance promote the rethinking and reordering of institutions, are we finding a sense of professional and ethical belonging within this "interdiscipline"? How well are we processing misunderstanding, stress, and assorted other risks that accompany new practices? Are we managing by mitigating? Are new opportunities coming slowly, fast enough, or too fast to handle?

In Toronto, there have been other research units loosely associated with systemic design. Many of the faculty and students at OCAD University have been involved in related activities. The Beal Institute for Strategic Creativity was founded in 2005 to explore the intersection of technology and human behaviour. Many of those leaders were announced in 2008 as a "New Centre for Research and Innovation at the Ontario College of Art and Design" (OCAD, 2008) as the sLab (Strategic Innovation Lab). The mission was as "a centre for participatory foresight, systemic design research, and social innovation in Toronto, Ontario, Canada".

In 2025, four members of the OCAD U community have embarked on a reinvigoration project. The direction for sLab – possibly no longer emphasizing "Strategic Innovation" – is being revisited. With many cohorts having graduated from the SFI program, a more pluralistic, participatory way forward is anticipated.

For RSD14, we are taking advantage of colocating discussion groups interested in organizing regional community events. We welcome participants from more far-ranging locales to join in the conversation, and potentially take home some ideas to spark parallel regional circles.

Objectives

Workshop participants will provide (part 1) perspectives and (part 2) inputs on deepening systemic design locally. For part 1, participants will surface where systemic design is present in their lives. Where and when does their systemic designer come out? Where does it go to get nourished and/or inspired? And for part 2, facilitators will invite feedback and input on regional events that may resonate with an audience of systemic designers interested in further development of methods and skills. Facilitators will collate recordings and sketches that can be shared following the in-person event.

Activities are presumed to be volunteer-led, and self-funded. Four areas for convening are proposed:

Convening 1: Colocated workshops: Meeting in person for a few hours with a professional development agenda. Sample questions include:

- What are mutual areas of interest for professional development?
- How long should a workshop be? 2 hours? 4 hours?

- Where would a workshop meet? What resources are required?
- What roles would support organizing this event?

Convening 2: Outbound experiences: Convening outside of office hours for non-linear learning. Sample questions include:

- What venues encourage discussions on systemic design?
- When (weekdays? evenings?) and which frequencies would participants join?
- Which problems or situations might attract systemic designers?
- How might mutual learning be curated?

Convening 3: Online publishing and discussion: Blogging and/or short articles on practices and experiences by systemic designers. Sample questions include:

- Which distinctions qualify an author as credible?
- Who reviews the article(s)? What editorial responsibilities are to be assumed?
- What workflow would ease submission and release?
- Where would we find skills for this informal publication stream?

Convening 4: Research retreats: Multi-day intensive conversations involving leading researchers and practitioners in systemic design. Sample questions include:

- What topics would attract a research focus by a group (say 6 to 8 participants)?
- How would candidate applicants be selected and/or matched to groups?
- What is the balance of local participants, and international luminaries?
- Who is likely to organize and participate in such multi-day events?

Participants will engage in critical perception, expressing ideas, generative divergence, drawing connections, pluriversal thinking, appreciative convergence, sketching, and visual communication. Consensus is not a requirement! Alternative views and criticisms are welcomed.

In the last stage of the workshop, a delegate from each group will report findings and share co-created artifacts. Output and insights from the workshop will be shared amongst participants for their own use.

The sLab proponents already have begun planning some pilot events, but details are not yet baked!

Agenda

Attendees can self-select into groups for discussion. Permission to take photographs of the workshop in progress is requested (or individuals may choose to leave).

Table 1. Workshop activities

Time	Activity	Output
00:00 - 00:15	Introduction. Form Teams	Four teams, with four facilitators
00:15 - 00:45	Discussion Round 1 on one of four convenings	Named reporter for team. Sketches on flip charts. (Optional: record conversations on smartphones for AI summarizing) Collective learning.
00:45 - 00:50	Break for turnover	Participants can stay with same group, or jump to a new group
00:50 - 01:20	Discussion Round 2 on second of four convenings	Named reporter for team. Sketches on flip charts. (Optional: record conversations on smartphones for AI summarizing) Collective learning.
01:20 - 01:50	Readouts summarizing discussions	Commentary and criticisms across themes
01:50 - 02:00	Closing of session	Collection of flip charts. Sharing of recorded conversations, if

available.

Workshop leaders will invite participants to share an email address if they wish to receive a summary report of collective learnings.

References

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Facilitator/organiser profiles

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Greg Van Alstyne is a designer, futurist, university professor, and research director, with over twenty-five years of practice in foresight, systemic design, and strategic communication for international clients and sponsored research programs.

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David Ing is a reflective practitioner and researcher on systems thinking and systems changes. He is a past president (2011-2012) of the International Society for the Systems Sciences. In prior experience, he graduated from IBM after 28 years of service, with assignments in management consulting, market development and headquarters planning.

Peter Scott, Lecturer, OCAD University, https://www.ocadu.ca/academics/explore-faculty/pscott , pscott@ocadu.ca

Peter Scott bridges the gap between creative arts, business innovation, and social impact. He integrates disciplines such as dance, music and design in programs in executive education, small business, and the social economy.

Zaid Khan, Strategy Consultant, Creative Systemic Research Platform Institute, https://www.linkedin.com/in/zaid---khan/, zaid@zaidkhan.ca

Zaid Khan is distinguished by a blend of creative strategy, systems thinking, and a deep commitment to addressing complex human-centered challenges. As a Master of Design graduate of the Strategic Foresight and Innovation program, his professional focus has centered on systemic design.