

# **Radical Civic Transitions: Networking and Building Civic Solutions**

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## Introducing Radical Civic Transitions

In this intervention, as with the Civics exhibition, we draw on a range of UK grassroots movements, broadly concerned with matters of pressing social and environmental concern, which are arguably shaping, and may shape future, civic geographies. We propose that these movements are laying the foundations for, and actively co-creating, what we call ‘radical civic transitions’. We detect much that is ‘civic’ – according to the sensibility of this *Interventions* theme section – at the heart of working participatively towards change, seeking to effect transitions in how local ecologies, life-worlds and communities *reconnect* to a wider world whose current socio-environmental trajectories are potentially so damaging. We propose that our contribution usefully inserts a more explicitly temporal dimension into civic geographies than is apparent from more ‘conservative’ versions of civics, wherein the temptation is to look back, to conserve what is, rather than to project forward in building something new. In what follows, we write with and for four different civic groups: the Network of Wellbeing, the Transition Research Network, the Ecological Land Cooperative and Transition Homes. Each group plays brokering roles, bringing alternative, radical movements and ideas into more mainstream contexts, thereby engaging with more established civic geographies, such as those enacted by local authorities and higher education institutions, in a range of complementary and contradictory ways. The tensions, insights and opportunities which arise may in turn extend to and be extended by other civic groups in other times and spaces.

The four case studies outlined here operate most clearly within what Philo et al. (this volume) describe as civic geographies’ ‘second cut’ of ‘gritty’ “geographical knowledges/practices mobilised in the fashioning of such *counter-civics*”. However, our work as acadavists (academics/activists) embedded within these case studies highlights the importance of avoiding ‘simple polarities’ (Philo et al., this volume) as the civics entrained here simultaneously exist within a wider set of civic geographies, including the ‘first cut’ of established, ‘establishment’ geographies rooted in place. Their inclusive, non-binary framework is central to our description of these case studies as ‘radical’ civic geographies, radical in the sense that they address root causes of the radical enviro-socio-economic challenges of severe climate change in ways which broker between the existing, ‘first-cut’ civic structures and institutions, on the one hand, and grassroots ‘second-cut’ responses, on the other, and in between. We hope that the brief narratives of each of the case studies demonstrate this sense of brokerage across and between different forms of civics, all orientated towards networking and building radical transitions.

Each of us is always already engaged, each moment, in co-creating the world. From this recognition we asked in the exhibition, and encourage you to ask now

when reading this intervention, what are our strengths, gifts and talents? How are we, individually and collectively, best able to support ourselves and others to create a world of human and non-human flourishing, creating what some now term the 'Era of Great Benefit' from within the current Anthropocene? (Balanced View Team 2013). How can we support what some other writers, emphasising changes at the landscape level, have relatedly referred to as 'The Great Turning' (Korten 2009) and others, focused on regime change, as 'The Great Transition' (Ryan-Collins et al. 2009)? Such notions must be critically considered, and some may question their eco-spirituality, and preference for a local (even 'village') scale of activity and hence other-worldliness in the face of global capital and geopolitics, there remain a persuasive set of visions in play here, that undoubtedly inspire diverse practical experiments prepared to nurture radical civic transitions.

As we attempted in the exhibition, and in all our work, we celebrate the diverse qualities and activities brought to these *civic transitions*, responding to the vast social, economic and environmental challenges of our times: runaway climate change, economic instability, social dis-ease, growing inequality and many more. We briefly outline the civic geographies conveyed in the exhibition, considering the roles each play within these transitional civic geographies, contributing to wider debates about the role of civic groupings within community wellbeing.

### **Networking Civic Transitions**

#### ***The Network of Wellbeing* ([www.networkofwellbeing.org](http://www.networkofwellbeing.org))**

The Network of Wellbeing (NOW) is a grassroots charitable organisation that seeks to distil wellbeing best practice from around the world and apply it within place-based communities. The exhibition highlighted the different levels and scales of civic geographies on which NOW operates, using its grounded, local work to build national and international networks and collaborations. Through its various strands of work, NOW bridges establishment civics, such as institutional service providers and academic researchers, with more marginal or counter-civics, ranging from charities and grassroots groups to individuals. In developing this brokering role, NOW draws on over 40 years' evidence into what supports and contradicts wellbeing and emerging national and international wellbeing policy (Diener et al. 1999; OECD 2012). This enables NOW to address the gaps between scientific and lay knowledges, international, national and local policies and actual practices within place-based communities. In this sense NOW simultaneously draws firmly on and extends the tradition of civic geographies being practical, place-based initiatives.

NOW's first local initiative, NOW Totnes, offers information and practical support to individuals and community groups across the public and private sectors in Totnes, Devon, UK and its surrounding areas, using the framework of wellbeing to engage with the widest possible range of people. For example, NOW Totnes works closely with Totnes' Drop-in Centre which provides community, clothing,

food and access to services for all; to Totnes' Children's Centre and Transition Town Totnes, as well as to 'first cut' civics such as local schools, churches, health services and Councils. NOW Totnes has also developed a Wellbeing Fund, supporting local community groups and individuals who would otherwise struggle to access funding, alongside participatory, emergent wellbeing training, empowering individuals to develop their own programme of wellbeing learning and practice. NOW itself works in an emergent, participatory way responding to the needs and interests of the community to develop its activities, as illustrated by the Community Potluck which responded to requests for a free, family-friendly event which enables people to socialise in an evening without having to drink alcohol or spend money (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. NOW's first Community Potluck. This pilot event is now held monthly.

The growing interest in NOW's work locally, nationally and internationally suggests that wellbeing is a rich concept and set of practices around which radical civic transitions may mobilise, reflecting Walsh's (2013) findings that civic groupings and civic engagement supports community wellbeing, sustainability and quality of life. NOW's role as a network further demonstrates the value of brokering roles within civic transitions. Locally, this networking role helps to mobilise, connect and coordinate efforts which may otherwise be lost or diminished: Totnes has over 200 community groups with often overlapping, but hidden/undeveloped, areas of mutual interest and activity. Nationally and internationally, this includes working with a range of volunteers, supporters and partners to develop a network of wellbeing ambassadors who promote and support wellbeing within their various civic geographies of family, friends, neighbours and colleagues, as well as developing online resources and training. In such practical

ways, NOW contributes to the global movement towards wellbeing and away from GDP/growth as measures of progress. This implicit political agenda, combined with fine grained, bottom-up social change, illustrates the complex, overlapping ways in which such organisation contribute to radical civic transitions.

***Transition Research Network*** ([www.transitionresearchnetwork.org](http://www.transitionresearchnetwork.org))

The Transition Research Network's (TRN) exhibition introduced how a group of acadavists in the Transition movement came together with the express conviction that, despite the pressure on academics to live up to narrowly defined, metrics-driven criteria of success, collaboration with academics can be of value to both Transition groups and academics (Henfrey and Brangwyn 2013). Its work has sought to widen community-led and community-based research by identifying principles, approaches and methods that can promote effective and mutually beneficial collaboration (e.g. TRN 2012a), translating them into guidelines and tools that academics and community groups can use in designing and evaluating research collaborations (Henfrey and Brangwyn 2013; TRN 2012b).

The TRN may be regarded as a 'second cut' civic group in that it tends to operate at the margins of existing academic regimes, yet it has cultivated natural affinities with research groups and centres – as well as individual researchers – committed to collaborative research<sup>2</sup>, thus spanning 'first' and 'second cut' civics. The exhibition highlighted TRN's existing projects, which rely on collaboration between fringe academics embedded in Transition practice and established academics whose professional life limits their direct involvement in community action. It suggested that each of these groups can offer opportunities less accessible to the other, and their collaboration creates what permaculture, a key influence on Transition, refers to as an edge, or site, of mutually productive interchange between two systems (Henfrey 2010). Upon these sites are built broader edges: between Transition groups and universities, and between the Transition movement and academia as a whole. The exhibition invited all those attending to join this edge-building by asking everyone's views on the Transition Movement, and if and where they could see themselves getting involved. The richness of these edges was shown by the mix of academics and members of the public interested in the Transition movement (and the existing Transition practitioners) coming forward.

TRN, then, occupies, seeks to open and contributes to creating civic spaces arising from contradictions within current research regimes, and conflict between the actual practices of researchers and those favoured by university managers. The latter can be partly attributed to the international trend towards neoliberalisation which obliges universities to operate as businesses, compelled by an ethic of

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<sup>2</sup> Current collaborators include the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action at Durham University and the Environmental Change Institute at Oxford University, both UK.

continual growth to compete for scarce resources and perceived status (Maxey 2009). Such trends mean that TRN's work must in the long term seek to be transformative rather than reformist, and seek to contribute to fundamental changes in both academia and the broader landscapes within which academics operate, thus transitioning not only academia but the wider society within which academia sits and which it serves (Sterling et al. 2013).

## **Building Civic Transitions**

### ***The Ecological Land Co-operative* ([www.ecologicaland.coop](http://www.ecologicaland.coop))**

The Ecological Land Co-operative's (ELC) exhibition described its emergence in 2005 as a response to a disjunction between sustainability policies and the lack of provision in UK planning laws for settlements that can support sustainable lifestyles and livelihoods. Low Impact Developments (LIDs) generally find themselves in conflict with established civic geographies, including planning laws biased towards profit-led developments (Fairlie 2009) and the kind of small 'c' conservative 'first cut' civics outlined in the Introduction. This often restricts LID to niche civic geographies, accessible only to those prepared to defy or to ignore planning regulations. ELC broadens this niche as part of a longer-term transitioning of the planning system by making the case for LID, on environmental, social and economic grounds, consistent with existing local, national and international aspirations for sustainable development, and by directly facilitating the establishment of new developments.

The exhibition featured ELC's *Small is Successful* report (Maxey et al. 2011) on smallholdings with sustainable land-based businesses on ten acres or less, emphasising the impact that such work can have in the creation of new civic geographies. As the exhibition noted, the report was presented to the UK All Party Parliamentary Group for Agroecology, showcased by Research Councils UK as one of a hundred pieces of UK research "that will have a profound effect on our future," and it has been drawn on as evidence in a number of successful planning appeals and development plan submissions. The ELC mobilises new civic possibilities by using community shares/loan stock to buy land that has been, or is at risk of being, intensively managed, then securing planning permission for Low Impact, residential smallholdings. Land is thus made available at an affordable price to people who have the skills to manage it ecologically, but who could not otherwise afford to do so. The money received when new residents buy their long-term leases is then used to purchase a further site(s), where the process can begin again. In this way the ELC is based on a business model that is deliberately more replicable and scale-able than previous pioneering LIDs, such as Lammas ([www.lammas.org.uk](http://www.lammas.org.uk)) which have been largely driven by those wishing to live within the projects that they create. In common with Transition Homes (below), this represents a radical contribution to the development of Low/Zero Carbon Building business models (Pan and Maxey 2013).

At the exhibition, participants were invited to write letters of support for the ELC's planning appeal on its first 22-acres site, Greenham Reach, on the UK's Devon/Somerset border, as well as becoming steward, investor or workers members of the co-op. The support thus generated contributed to the approval of this application, with Planning Inspector Graham's report highlighting the ELC's co-operative model and assured research and monitoring of changes in biodiversity,



Figure 2. ELC Directors and volunteers raising the communal barn on its first site Greenham Reach, Mid Devon, UK

soil carbon and productivity which will be delivered alongside the three smallholdings. Crucially, Inspector Graham rejected the Council's fear of proliferation as grounds for refusal: thus, brokering between different actors and its own resourcefulness (Wangler et al. 2013) enables the ELC to set a precedent which opens up new opportunities for radical civic geographies.

***Transition Homes*** ([www.transitionhomes.org.uk](http://www.transitionhomes.org.uk))

Transition Homes Community Land Trust (TH)'s exhibition placed it within the Transition Towns Movement of 1008 Transition Initiatives (TIs) worldwide ([www.transitionnetwork.org/initiatives](http://www.transitionnetwork.org/initiatives)). TIs involve a community-led process of civic engagement and renewal. Transition Town Totnes, the first TI formed in 2006, now has over 40 groups and projects covering food, transport, energy, homes, education and arts as local civic responses to the global challenges of climate change, economic hardship and shrinking supplies of cheap energy. One of these groups, TH, has been working since 2008 to develop affordable LID homes for local people in housing need, as reflected in the group's strap-line 'Built by the community for the community' (Transition Homes 2013). After five years'

intensive work, TH's first site Clay Park, in Dartington Parish, near Totnes, will feature 25 homes, a community hub building and allotments on 6.83 acres. The tree planting carried out to celebrate the site purchase, was led by the Chair of the Parish Council and watched by members of neighbouring Town and District Councils, highlighting again a brokering between 'first' and 'second cut' civics.



Figure 3. Image developed for Transition Homes' first site

Indeed, TH is a radical, grassroots civic group working closely with more established civic agencies such as the local planning authority, while also engaging with a wide range of groups and individuals. Indeed, TH listed forty categories of those with whom it interacts, from residents and volunteers to suppliers and near-

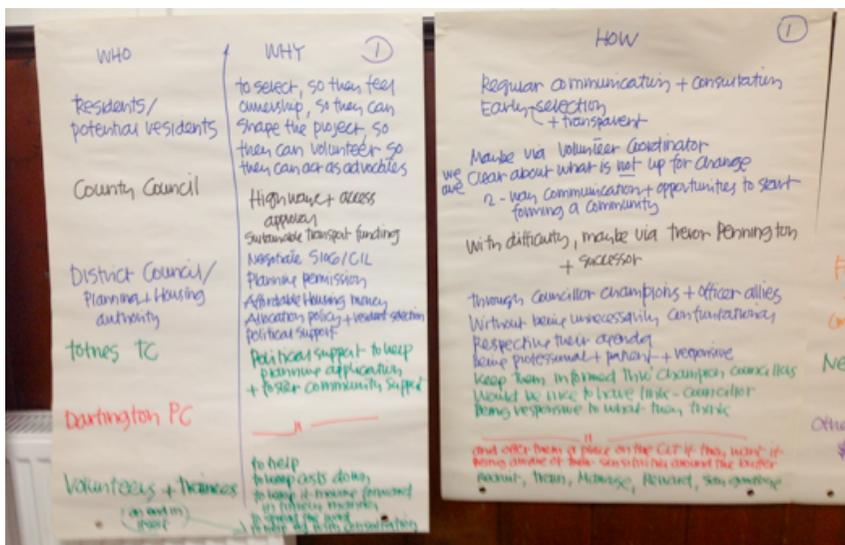


Figure 4. Who? Why? How? Communication List - image shows 1 of 4 sets of columns

neighbours (see Figure 4), to deliver an innovative and nationally important project which address overlapping challenges relevant to civic geographies globally: housing crisis, climate change, food security, loss of community, 'lifestyle diseases', peak oil vulnerability, pollution and traffic congestion. As with the ELC, TH explicitly aims to be replicable and to support others seeking to create sustainable affordable housing solutions and this is reflected in its daily practices as well as strategic planning and decision-making. As one member commented:

I hope we're going to make lots of mistakes! That's part of the aim, so people can learn from us and so we can learn from that! (Maxey Participant Observation journal, 5<sup>th</sup> March 2013).

### **Transitioning Radical Civic Geographies**

All four groups build bridges between radical and more established civic geographies. In doing so they help to implement local, national and international policy while widening the benefits offered by their varied civic engagements and exploring the potential of such radical civic geographies to contribute to sustainability transitions. All groups act as open, participatory brokers between different regimes: planning, building regulations, academia, media, local cultures, and others. For example, securing prospective rather than retrospective planning permission entails lengthy and challenging engagement with the gatekeepers of established civic geographies such as local authority planning departments. In the case of the ELC, this engagement has involved substantial time, money and people resources to pursue a planning appeal.

As the exhibition and our embedded participatory work within these case studies illustrates, high levels of resilience and resourcefulness are common to all four groups. ELC draws extensively on national networks which include *pro bono* professional support (Wangler et al. 2013), for example, whilst the Transition movement provides a supportive network which kept TH going through adversity for five years. In comparable successful civic groups such as Lammas (Pickerill and Maxey 2009; [www.lammas.org.uk](http://www.lammas.org.uk)) and to some extent Occupy (Hudson and Cook this volume), this resilience and determination is provided by the motivation that comes when people are developing homes for themselves, which is not the case for either ELC or TH. However, within the LID movement such resident-led groups are approximately nine times more likely to form and fold than actually make it to purchasing and developing a site (Maxey, forthcoming). This highlights the value of these alternative, innovative approaches illustrated by ELC and TH which help to broker between 'first' and 'second cut' civics.

All four groups are developing new, replicable models of and for radical civic transitions: hybrid, innovative, flexible, responsive and emergent. The TRN clearly merges academic and activist regimes, as do NOW, ELC and TH, albeit to lesser degrees. Each group engages with and brokers between a considerable range

of civic geographies, bringing often complex and radical approaches to everyday contexts. Each group operates simultaneously at a range of scales, co-creating their local and interest-based communities in tandem with national and international communities and the wider societal changes needed for sustainability transitions as they – and indeed we, the authors included – strive to build the ‘Era of Great Benefit’. The exhibition itself was civic geography in action and this intervention is too: you are invited to get involved with these groups directly, or take these ideas and apply them in your own local civic geographies.

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