



Transition towns, or the desire for an urban alternative

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The entry of the term “transition” into the vocabulary of public action shows that questions regarding how to build more sustainable models for society are still relevant. The response offered by “transition towns” is a model for action involving a variety of local and citizen-led initiatives that are based on a method for sustainable environmental development called permaculture.

Faced with the threat of an environmental crisis, our Western societies created the notion of “sustainable development”. Defined and understood as a development model that seeks to strike a better balance between ecological, social and economic dimensions, as well as a means of managing natural resources that takes the needs of future generations into consideration, this term has today been integrated into public policies and planning and development practices.

The idea of “transition”, by contrast, is a concept that is currently emerging. It seems to pick up where “sustainable development” leaves off in terms of public policy, as this latter term – after more than 30 years of existence – no longer has sufficient clout in the context of the current ecological crisis. The notion of “transition”, which has made occasional appearances in specialist milieux since the early 1980s, is now at the heart of debates in various arenas: public institutions, academia, activist circles and among citizens. It takes several forms and can have a number of different meanings, depending on the contexts in which it is employed (“ecological transition”, “energy transition”, “post-carbon transition”, “sustainability transitions”, “citizen-led transition”, “transition towns”, etc.). Furthermore, it is gradually being incorporated into the linguistic register of public action in France and Europe.

Of these approaches, it is “transition towns” that are garnering growing interest through the spatialised dimension of the notion that they underpin. Since 2006, this “unidentified political object” (Cottin-Marx *et al.* 2013) is made up of local and citizen-led initiatives and experiments that seek to develop lifestyles that are less oil-dependent. The towns that have joined this movement have a practical guide on which to base their actions, the *Transition Handbook* drawn up by one of the movement’s initiators, Rob Hopkins, and are certified and structured by an NGO, the Transition Network. Transition towns can now be found in over 40 different countries, forming what observers call the “Transition Movement” (Semal 2013).

The combination of the words “transition” and “town” may raise a number of expectations among urban planners and other development professionals, in anticipation of alternative practices in their disciplines. The establishment of urban planning as a discipline was built on a desire for social reform and the constitution of models, the first of which took the form of utopias (Choay 1965). The word “transition” itself indicates a horizon of expectation that is reminiscent of this desire for reform. How does the “Transition Movement” address the question of space and the way space is used and developed? Does this outlook stem from a desire to return to a utopian situation or a model of some kind? And if so, to what extent?

Peak oil and local resilience

The “Transition Movement” emerged in England in 2006 at the initiative of Rob Hopkins, an environmental activist who teaches permaculture (a form of environmental design inspired by natural ecosystems, developed in the 1970s in Australia) at Kinsale College of Further Education in Kinsale, County Cork, Ireland. He is aware of the imminence of peak oil, announced by many experts as the moment when the global production of oil will reach its maximum output level before decreasing until all resources are exhausted. In our completely oil-dependent societies, the prospect of “peak oil” heralds disastrous consequences.

Hopkins works with his students on “energy descent action plans” (EDAPs) with the aim of offering solutions for transition towards a “post-oil” future. In 2006, in Totnes in Devon (south-west England), he organised the first experimental “transition town”. In 2008, he wrote the *Transition Handbook*, in which he explains the reasons for “making the transition” towards less oil-dependent lifestyles and proposes a 12-step method for launching a “transition initiative”, from the creation of a temporary “steering group” to the construction of an EDAP. This handbook and its various translations have led to a rapid increase in the number of local transition groups, as well as the internationalisation of the movement, which, as of September 2013, comprised almost 500 official initiatives in 43 countries.¹

Raising awareness of “peak oil” is at the very heart of the Transition Movement. As a result, a sense of urgency emerges, making – according to the Movement – the prospect of post-carbon transition inevitable. The issue at hand is therefore one of inventing and promoting “post-oil” lifestyles that can be built on the reinforcement of communities’ “resilience” – a concept taken from the environmental sciences that, in this context, designates the ability of a system (here, a community) to resist an external shock (the scarcity of oil). This capacity for “resilience” amounts to reducing communities’ dependency on oil by pursuing an “energy descent” objective, in other words a reduction in energy consumption, together with a relocation of production, in particular of food. The strengthening of inter-community ties and the “Great Reskilling”, which involves reviving vernacular skills (cultivating, repairing, making, etc.) that fell into decline with the advent of cheap energy, also forms part of this local “resilience”. The Transition Movement defines its approach as resolutely inclusive, positive and practical. It eschews conflict and criticism, preferring to foster commitment through the construction of real, tangible alternatives. This approach, which professes to be apolitical, is, however, also a source of criticism: objections focus on the absence of questions relating to social justice or equality, or underline the fact that it forms part of a movement that depoliticises environmental issues (Kenis and Mathijs 2014; Jonet and Servigne 2013; Chatterton and Cutler 2013).

With regard to this approach, measures that seek to “relocate” exchanges, such as locally sourced veg-box schemes, local and complementary currencies, LETS (local exchange trading systems) and time banks or waste recovery centres (places where discarded objects can be reused or recycled) clearly have their place within the Transition Movement. But it is through efforts to reintegrate agriculture into the city that the work of “transitioners” is most visible. This takes the form of actions and projects (community gardens, composters, crop plantation in public spaces, city roofs used for agriculture) that reflect the fact that the movement’s foundations lie in permaculture, which forms “the design ‘glue’ and the ethical foundations [used] to underpin Transition work” (Hopkins 2010, p. 135).

Permaculture: a social project for sustainable prosperity

Permaculture (a contraction of “permanent agriculture”) is an alternative approach to agriculture developed in Australia in the 1970s by biologist Bill Mollison and environmental designer David

¹ More detailed data can be found here: www.transitionnetwork.org/initiatives.

Holmgren, both environmental activists. Alongside the rise of a “third-world” environmentalism, permaculture developed in response to observations of the damage produced by industrial agriculture on cultivable land, and the high levels of energy consumed, as well as the asymmetries in development it generates (Holmgren and Mollison 1978).

As an alternative, Holmgren and Mollison proposed the creation of “adaptive, integrated systems for the self-perpetuation of plant and animal species useful to humankind” (Holmgren and Mollison 1978, p. 15). By imitating the relationships and structures observed in nature, they suggested a series of operating principles (including observation, adaptiveness, energy conservation, diversity and the use of simple, small-scale solutions) that could be used to obtain efficient, sustainable production systems.

Permaculture is more than just a set of organic farming techniques: its originators present it as a contribution towards the construction of a “truly environmental science in education and life” and a model that incorporates “ecology, energy conservation, landscape design, urban renewal, architecture, agriculture (...)” (Holmgren and Mollison 1978, p. 16). Their approach takes as its starting point the observation that “societies need shared ideals and long-term goals” and that permaculture “may be one of the contributions towards such ends”. Holmgren and Mollison assert that they have taken into account “problems of unemployment (...), of urban neurosis, and of the feeling of powerlessness and lack of direction common to many of us in today’s world.” In this sense, permaculture claims to be a solution capable of bringing sustainable prosperity to society, based on a truly global vision (Pezrès 2010).

Over the last 25 years, the definition of permaculture has evolved to incorporate inhabitants, their constructions and the ways in which they organise themselves, shifting from a vision of permaculture as “permanent or sustainable agriculture” to one of a “permanent or sustainable culture” (Holmgren 2011). Moreover, Hopkins declares that he sees the Transition model as an attempt to create permaculture on the scale of the city.² For him, it is a question of rethinking human establishments in the light of a renewed relationship with nature as the key to humanity’s long-term existence. From a development standpoint, this means creating a symbiotic relationship between the town and the country, with “the production of food within the city and the production of fibres, fuel (...) and proteins in nearby rural areas, and an exchange of services, assistance and skills” (Holmgren and Mollison 1978, p. 111). In town, this means converting potentially productive spaces (“All cities have unused vacant land; roadside verges (...), conservatories, concrete roofs, balconies, glass walls and south-facing windows” (Holmgren and Mollison 1978, p. 114)). These spaces are used to recover energy and produce food, leading to architectural adaptations relating to the position of windows, the layout of balconies and roofs, and the installation of trellis systems, for example.

In his *Transition Handbook*, Hopkins proposes a “vision” for England in 2030. He imagines urban agriculture as a priority for urban planners and for communities (“we have redesigned cities in order to make them productive places” (Hopkins 2010, p. 110)). He sees the return of market gardens on the fringes of cities and in large urban parks. In terms of architecture, he foresees an increase in the energy efficiency of dwellings, the development of group housing, the use of local and natural materials such as rammed earth, straw, hemp and wood, or recycled materials, as well as a nationwide training programme in building techniques. These spatial measures go hand in hand with a slower pace of life and changes in residents’ habits, leading to a greater rootedness in their

² Interview with Rob Hopkins by Sami Grover, 27 March 2007, available online at the following address: www.treehugger.com/culture/rob-hopkins-of-transition-town-totnes-and-transition-culture.html.

cities and their “bioregions”,³ as well as increased participation in what is consequently a more “vibrant” local life.

Urban planning based on a hybrid of the natural and social sciences

Through its reformatory scope and its description of measures for a more desirable use of space, the Transition Movement could be considered to have characteristics in common with certain urbanistic or pre-urbanistic models described by Françoise Choay (Choay 1965; Carriou and Ratouis 2014). For example, in the *Transition Handbook* and *Permaculture One*, references are made to William Morris and Ebenezer Howard, as well as to Kropotkin and Lewis Mumford. The origins of the Transition Movement appear to lie with the “culturalist urbanists” – through the importance accorded to the community, through its criticisms of industry and technological progress, through a certain nostalgia for a pre-industrial past considered more “resilient”, and so forth. In this way, it places itself within a utopian lineage, while also introducing new elements that enable it to move beyond this ancestry.

For example, the definition of a desirable future society no longer takes place “nowhere” but instead in the multiple possibilities offered by a model for action. In this respect, the Transition is rooted in reality. Unlike “utopias of spatial form”, and their tendency for closure (Harvey 2000), it proposes a practice for transforming the real where the vision acts as a catalyst or compass rather than a plan. Furthermore, the Transition does not base its alternative paradigm on “culture” or exclusively in social relations but on a new link with nature considered as the prelude to a “permanent culture”, yet without adopting an anti-urban stance.

Accordingly, the Transition Movement would seem to stem from an “environmentalisation” of culturalism. This enables it to firmly tie development practices to a more in-depth knowledge of ecological systems. In doing so, it re-examines urban planning from a different angle: while it is typically considered a rational science or interpreted from the standpoint of the social sciences, here it appears as a hybrid branch of knowledge that combines aspects from both the natural and social sciences. The Transition Movement raises the question of a design and development rationality that seeks to move beyond “sustainable development” approaches by focusing on the local and the specificities thereof, while also establishing the essential conditions for the self-replication of ecosystems.

Principles rather than a model

The idea of transition calls for us to abandon one situation and achieve another, more desirable one. In this sense, it seems to mobilise both utopia, as “a situationally transcendent idea” (Mannheim 1956), and a project-based approach, as it strives to build a trajectory, however uncertain, towards this desired situation. There is no question of an overarching rational planning approach, or of seeking “one best way”, but rather of opening the field of possibilities and of recognising the various means of reaching this goal. In this way, the Transition Movement is guided by principles, values, and one or more visions that act as compasses that orient its development. It makes use of experimentation, training and individuals’ capacity for reflection.

³ The notion of “bioregions” was influenced by the work of Patrick Geddes and, later, Lewis Mumford on regionalism. It was conceptualised in order to define a scale of development capable of taking environmental problems into consideration (see Sale, K. 1985. *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision*, San Francisco: Sierra Club; Thayer, R. L., Jr. 2003. *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice*, Oakland: University of California Press; Berg, P. and Dasmann, R. 1977. “Reinhabiting California”, *The Ecologist*, vol. 7, no. 10, pp. 399–401). Currently, the concept of the “urban bioregion” lies at the heart of the work of the Italian territorialist school, led by Alberto Magnaghi (see Magnaghi, A. 2014. *La Biorégion urbaine. Petit traité sur le territoire bien commun*, Paris: Eterotopia).

Although it maintains links with texts considered utopian, the Transition Movement does not propose any kind of urban model. It calls into question our ability to construct our future in a collective, considered manner, by proposing alternatives that aim to be both radical and realistic.

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To quote this article:

Adrien Krauz, translated by Oliver Waine, “Transition towns, or the desire for an urban alternative”, *Metropolitics*, 15 May 2015. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Transition-towns-or-the-desire-for.html>.