

Designerly dancing with the systems

What design can give to systems thinking and systems practice

By using Systems Oriented Design, designers can learn how to better deal with very complex issues. The approach offers a designerly way of dealing with systems towards social and environmental sustainability. It also addresses ethical concerns in practice by considering multiple perspectives in co-design processes.

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Sevaldson, B. 2022. *Designing complexity: The methodology and practice of systems oriented design*. Champaign, IL: Common Ground Research Network. 385 pp., \$ 65.—, ISBN 978-0949313614. <https://doi.org/10.18848/978-1-86335-262-8/CGP>

Birger Sevaldson, professor at the Institute of Design at Oslo School of Architecture and Design, introduces the methodology of Systems Oriented Design (SOD) as a designerly way of dealing with systems towards sustainability. SOD is uncovering the complexities behind global systems as well as behind the coffee cup. Anything can be approached as system through the SOD methodology.

SOD is positioned between design practice, systems practice, design thinking and systems thinking whilst being closer to practice than thinking. Sevaldson shows that other systems approaches are too inflexible for designers and discusses how to be creative about systems. This inflexibility, he says, is because other systems approaches come from science, not from design and undermine creativity. Sevaldson underlines the special role of design and places it in relation to science, criticizing the current tendency to adapt design to science. He highlights the knowledge forms of designers, such as intuition, empathy, tacit knowledge, and creativity, and

suggests that designers should be confident in these skills and in their approach to uncovering systems. This is what design can give to systems thinking and practice as opposed to science.

The book also argues, contrary to traditional scientific approaches, that it is necessary to start designing at an early stage when dealing with systems, using the designer's intuition. It's especially important to start designing when you are mapping, because you do not know what to map if you are not designing. At the same time, you do not know what to design if you do not map. Such processes are handled with intuition and tacit knowledge.

In addition, the book has an ethical concern for practice, discussing how we need to look at things through different lenses. This could be achieved through early-stage co-design to bring multiple perspectives to such processes, such as ecology or future generations representatives, different experts and stakeholders in relation to the project. The aim is social and environmental sustainability with ethical considerations. The different perspectives can relate to scale, discipline or personal agendas. This often leads to a redefinition of the boundaries in the system, hence the boundary critique, which involves multiple voices, including the representatives of those who cannot be heard, such as an ecologist speaking on behalf of the ecosystem. Such processes are easily managed with the empathy and intuition of the designer, which

is difficult in science, which tends to rely on exact data. SOD is in the realm of soft systems that relate to this empathy and intuition, not to exact data like science. Although SOD sometimes refers to hard data, it relates them to the soft data. This connection is particularly interesting because it allows science to be interpreted by design through intuition and tacit knowledge.

Sevaldson succeeds in showing designers how they can deal with complexity creatively and in a way that is unique to designers. He discusses complex issues in a way that is easy to understand, making the book accessible to a wide audience in design and beyond. Sevaldson highlights the skills of designers and how these can enrich the systems thinking and systems practice. This perspective is often lacking on the systems side, where such qualities are not sufficiently recognized. SOD also considers ethical concerns, which are sometimes not taken into account in design practice, for example for short-term economic or political reasons. That's why the book is aimed at the right audience! However, GAIA audiences can really benefit from the designerly approach to systems, therefore the audience for the book is much wider, as mentioned above.

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<https://doi.org/10.14512/gaia.32.4.20>
Received December 1, 2023; revised version accepted
December 11, 2023 (editorial board peer review).