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Dan Lockton  
*Norwich University of the Arts, UK, d.lockton@norwichuni.ac.uk*

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# Design Research for Sustainable Worlds

Dan Lockton, IAC Member

Norwich University of the Arts, UK

d.lockton@norwichuni.ac.uk

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*New Waterscapes: Tales from Imagined Coastal Futures, an Institute for Sustainable Worlds workshop as part of the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts and Norwich University of the Arts' symposium 'Shared Seas: Coastal Encounters'— June 2025.*



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Earlier this year I was fortunate to start a new job: developing and directing the Institute for Sustainable Worlds at Norwich University of the Arts. This is a brand-new initiative, a research institute at a specialist creative arts university in a mediaeval city in the east of England—a small university with growing research activity and ambitions, to build on its excellent teaching. It is a university which has previously only had a relatively small engagement with the design research field, but I am hoping we will have much more.

In some ways it does not necessarily feel like the most auspicious time to be starting something new in a university: as I write this, the Trump regime is destroying American academia (and the careers and dreams of thousands of students and researchers, not to mention countless advances in medicine, climate research, and other fields), while many British universities are making staff redundant and closing programmes even as apparently serious politicians joke about being “not that disappointed” if universities close<sup>1</sup>.



*Participants imagined and built speculative future North Sea land/waterscapes, and explored what moments of everyday life might be like through telling stories about these new worlds.*

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<sup>1</sup> Parr, C. (2025). Labour MP ‘not disappointed’ if universities go bust. Research Professional News, 30 April 2025 <https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-news-uk-politics-2025-4-labour-mp-not-disappointed-if-universities-go-bust/> . It’s worth noting here that the closest university to the MP’s constituency contributes £200 million per year to the economy of the region: <https://www.lancashire.ac.uk/news/higher-education-sector-changes-means-university-has-to-cut-costs>

In the Netherlands a series of national strikes have followed the chaotic right-wing government's attempted de-internationalisation of higher education. And yet perhaps it is exactly this wanton wrecking of the sector—by people who have themselves benefitted from it—that shows the need for new types of initiatives that enable different kinds of models for what role universities can have in fragmented and failing societies.

We do need something different: we are trapped in multiple accelerating crises and design is not, magically, going to save us (indeed unfortunately it is implicated in many of the problems we are facing: how much did, for example, the design pattern of the endless scroll, or the right-hand side of YouTube, or how follower counts are displayed on social media, contribute to the echo-chambers of stupidity that are ruining us? Designers designed those). But I believe design research methods, applied to the challenges we face, can offer us some new ways to reimagine our collective futures on this planet, together.

We are trapped partly because we can't imagine alternatives to our current trajectory. The "crisis of imagination" that Amitav Ghosh (2018), Geoff Mulgan (2020), Ruha Benjamin (2024) and others have identified is something that critically-informed design research and creative methods are well-placed to address. At DRS 2024, our theme track and workshop around designing for transitions and transformations (co-organised with Femke Coops, İdil Gaziulusoy, Joanna Boehnert, Marysol Ortega Pallanez, Anja Overdiek, Ida Nilstad Pettersen, Alma Leora Culén, Silvana Juri, and Cameron Tonkinwise; Coops et al, 2024a) revealed what a strong interest and experience base there is among the DRS community in using design research methods to address this kind of opening up collective imagination for more sustainable worlds—building capacity and confidence to imagine, visualise, and experiment with different futures and more just societies, beyond dominant imaginaries, and with new interactions between humans, nature, and technologies. Design research methods can both surface cultural assumptions about futures and what worlds people assume to be desirable or possible, and materialise aspects of diverse (and divergent) possible futures in engaging and experiential ways—enabling provocation, confrontation, emotion, and reflection, including on (contested) pasts and presents (Chambers, 2024) and people's lived experiences and emotions (Coops et al, 2024b). We can use speculative design to bring imagined futures to life experientially (Candy & Kornet, 2019), even prefiguring new ways to live—but we can also work on developing methods and tools and techniques and opportunities for others to do so: futures literacy (Miller, 2010), in the confidently reading/writing/critiquing sense, and imagination literacy more widely.

My aim is that the Institute for Sustainable Worlds will focus on collaborative re-imagining: helping people, together, create and explore possible futures, imagine and experience new ways to live, and understand ourselves and the worlds around us better, in an age of crises and transitions in climate, health, and social inequalities. Design research, particularly an infrastructuring approach (Le Dantec & DiSalvo, 2013), is a major part of this: developing, testing, using, and refining creative, critically-informed, interdisciplinary research methods, with groups in both community and organisational contexts. The 'worlds' part of 'Sustainable Worlds' could be very powerful—there is an inherent valuing of plurality (or even pluriversality (Noel, 2020)) and what multiple futures can co-exist, utopian (Chambers, 2025) or otherwise, but also a recognition that applying creative methods to understanding people's own worlds, their lived experiences, their imaginaries, hopes, fears, nostalgia even (Arnold-Forster, 2025), is just as important as visions of entire societies. In my work at Brunel, the Royal College of Art, Carnegie Mellon, and TU Eindhoven over the past 15+ years, and via the Imaginaries Lab, I have

explored imaginaries (in one form or another) through design methods, and while much of that has been aligned more with imaginaries and mental models of technologies—e.g. spookiness (Byrne et al, 2022), or qualities (Lockton et al. 2022), or alternative ways of thinking about AI (Murray-Rust et al, 2022) or robots (Alves-Oliveira et al, 2021)—much of it has really been around ways for people to share and materialise aspects of their own worlds, from students’ mental health (Luria et al, 2021) to how we imagine energy (Bowden et al, 2015) to the visioning aspects of transition design (Lockton & Candy, 2018). I see this as part of a continuum with imagining and enacting different futures in design, since those futures are never created in isolation. Developing creative methods to help people share their worlds is a form of imagination infrastructuring (Oldham, 2021; Robinson, 2022; Vervoort, 2023; Bendor, 2023; Potts & Facer, 2024) that works in people’s current worlds as much as futures. The example illustrated here, a recent workshop organised as part of a joint Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts (University of East Anglia) and Norwich University of the Arts symposium about seas and coastal futures, used a development of the metaphorical landscape modelling techniques that originally started as a student project (Ricketts & Lockton, 2019; Lockton et al, 2020).



*We had Wetropolis with buildings on stilts, new seashore hermits’ cabins, giant saline frogs, and a salt-based community travelling using Zorb balls, among other things. What matters to those who live in these futures, human or otherwise? What can we learn from how we imagine futures, that gives us insights into our current crises?*

How does this fit with design research's role within universities? Back when 'design thinking' was all the rage—that era seems like another world, looking from our current hellscape—design seemed to be finding a somewhat more strategic place within academia. Of course this had its downsides: instrumentalising and trivialising much of the craft of what design researchers do, and enabling (some) university management to hollow out the expensive parts of design programmes, such as technical staff, studios, and space allocation per student. But over the past few years there has been some maturing of this approach, as initiatives aiming to support interdisciplinary collaborations in research have come to recognise the value of bringing design researchers in beyond merely superficial or instrumental engagement. For example, from experience working with the pioneering Centre for Unusual Collaborations in the Netherlands (see Lamain et al, 2024 for a background to the Centre), I have seen how designerly approaches, often creative or playful methods, from 'outside' any particular academic discipline (other than design itself), can enable groups of researchers to understand each other better, from understanding different worldviews to developing collaborative future projects together, to supporting more critical forms of co-investigation (Lockton, 2023) in education.

Tao-Leigh Goffe (2025) argues for “the necessity of interdisciplinary methods for our collective global survival beyond the climate crisis”. Collaborations between design, arts, sciences, social sciences, humanities, and technologies—beyond design and the arts only being used only instrumentally—could have a powerful role in how our societies can imagine and dream what 'sustainable' and just futures might entail in everyday life. How design research intersects with the major challenges facing our societies and planet is a direction inherent in many of the specialisms and focuses that we have seen in the DRS in the past decade, as special interest groups in topics such as Pluriversal Design, Policy & Governance, Design Ethics, Designing Change, Global Health, and others have grown and emerged and pursued new forms of knowledge and collaboration between design researchers and other fields. From my perspective, this is something the DRS can do well—enable, support, and be a voice for design's role in these kinds of disciplinary intersections. Is there a role for the DRS as an active advocate for this kind of work—a body which promotes design research to other disciplines, other contexts?

Practically: I am hoping that the Institute for Sustainable Worlds, as our team grows, can contribute usefully to design research's progression in this direction. We aim to concentrate, initially, on three main research directions, which overlap in methodologies but which are distinct enough as lenses to allow focused international collaborations at the intersections of the directions: societal (futures, imagination, and transitions), environmental (relationships with climate, nature, and landscapes), and personal (lived experience, creative health, and communities). I hope to be able to report on some of our activities in future papers at DRS, through our reconfigured Sustainability SIG, and in the new DRS journal. But also, please do get in touch if you might be interested in collaborating.

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