The Distributed City

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The Glasgow School of Art is leading an initiative called *Design Innovation Scotland*: a network of innovation experts and organisations across government, academia, and industry who create complex design challenges and assemble 'extreme collaborations' to generate solutions. Our approach is to apply design thinking and practices to structure creativity, to share ideas and to 'fold in' multiple areas of 'extreme expertise'. Design Innovation means both innovation *through* design and innovation *of* design, with the aim of generating sustainable social, cultural, and economic growth in Scotland. We believe that to innovate is not to 'make something new' such as a new product or service but to re-new our framework for thinking. An example of such a creative challenge is *Distributed City* – in the context of a global financial recession, it gives us the opportunity to reappraise what we value, and to direct those limited and valuable resources towards goals which create sustainable solutions.

21st Century Innovation
We have identified a number of ways of working that we think are important for 21st century radical, value-based, design-led, multi-purpose innovation:

Create motivational enterprises: create aspirational projects such as Distributed City to attract interest and participation.

Collaborate creatively: imagine and assemble dynamic experimental groups to address 'big ideas' and activate them in sessions in which outcomes can be radical and unexpected – we call this approach 'extreme expertise and extreme collaboration'.

Include everyone: use inclusive knowledge methods – that is, learn to recognise that everyone is an expert. Use community, public and private sector skills and expertise intelligently and appropriately to solve complex problems.

Think visibly: use visual languages to communicate complex ideas and to get feedback on possible directions – this allows for wide participation and open debate on outcomes.

Distributed City
Our first design challenge and innovation theme is Distributed City and it embodies our way of thinking and working. Distributed City is a way of linking small enterprises together, locally and internationally. Unlike other ideas of distribution or connectedness within actual cities as densely populated urban areas, our city is imagined city, a metaphor to help create new relationships in and beyond a region.

We know that the dominant discourse on distributed enterprises is typically technology-driven, while the determinants of success are social and cultural.

So instead of employing the dominant globalisation narrative which links the individual to the global and the virtual, we instead locate our practice and focus on the levels of collectivities which we believe are needed between the individual and the global, and we therefore include the local, the regional, the national, and the cultural in the mix – distributed local communities and enterprises exploiting their potential in collectives of scale. The idea here is to address a geographical area such as the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and to imagine it as being a distributed city. By doing this, we can look at the ways in which apparently disparate resources – intellectual, physical, social and material – can be usefully related to one another to create motivational, distributed enterprises within a regional ecology of cultural and economic activities.

Collaborative Creativity
In this, we are defining a new type of collaboration which we call 'extreme collaboration' – setting up the mechanisms by which we learn, understand, and use radical assemblies of thinkers and practitioners to address issues at several levels of socio-cultural 'granularity'. In investigating the social psychology of innovation we are exploring how people recognize the value of each other's skills and knowledge in such a way that they can collaborate creatively and productively. Most research on creativity is geared to understanding the individual and how they generate novel ideas. However, in this approach we are more focussed on the dynamics of collaborative creativity: how groups of people can create shared insights and then collectively resource their further development.

This approach recognises that 'everyone is an expert', and seeks to fold in community knowledge and culture alongside expertise from industry, academia, design practice and government to create resourceful communities working across distance. And by bringing together people with place-based, indigenous knowledge and skills together with multidisciplinary academic and industrial expertise in extreme collaborations we think we can generate creative solutions relevant to our context. By recognising and using existing knowledge and skills within new contextual frameworks we propose to make a visible difference to our current economic environment.

Motivational Enterprises
Our approach is to create challenges which as well as being aspirational, are also recognisable and beneficial to the participants, and feasible in terms of outcomes. Through our Distributed City approach, we recognize that all work includes intrinsic motivators beyond remuneration such as collective and social factors: being able to make things work, being proud of one's skills and expertise, being recognized for accomplishments, and being part of a group effort. We would like to harness these motivators to create future distributed enterprises in Scotland and beyond.

Towards A New Cartography
As part of this initiative, we are researching how to imagine and visualise new frameworks of relations which will expand across global cultures. For example, our first Distributed City in the Highlands and Islands will certainly grow to include our academic colleagues in MIT (in the U.S.) and in universities and industries in Europe. This city will include suburbs across the globe, decentering its 'old centre'.

We will research ways of defining and visualising new types of cities which include both geographic and virtual components and stretch across national boundaries. To study this, we are engaging with multinational corporations to explore how they operate across distance as a distributed enterprise with local variations, cultural dynamics and ways of working.

21st Century: Back To The Rough Ground!
Perhaps we can view the current economic context as a way of reframing values and recognising the urgent need to redirect our collective energies more effectively into projects that are genuinely beneficial to more people and for a longer period of time. However, this demands that 'innovation' is genuinely innovative, and not just 'the next' or 'the new'. It needs to be bold, radical and engaged. ∎