



The Best We Can Do

An Introduction to Designing
Our Systems, Together

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Mary Parker Follett
Foundation

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Dedicated to Bela H. Banathy

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INTRODUCTION

What is a good society? What is the most important thing in life? What are your values and ideas about justice? What would be the ideal education system?

Your reaction to questions like this might be “I don’t know; I’ve never thought about it” or “The ideal doesn’t exist” or “These questions are a waste of time; we have practical things to deal with.”

Any of these reactions would be understandable. This booklet will explain why, if we ask and answer these kinds of questions together, and then *do something with them*, we could make substantial improvement to our opportunities and quality of life, and to those of our children and their children.

Who This Booklet is For

This booklet is meant for people who connect ideas with opportunities and action. That includes advocates and facilitators; visionary civic leaders; funders whose focus is authentic public engagement; and “pracademics.” Readers might be those in any organization, in areas as diverse as education and public administration, health care, religion, and infrastructure—any kind of system that needs to be re-connected to its broader societal purpose. Readers might be those who’ve taken note of where top-down improvement, restructuring, and reform have proven inadequate to foster needed change and which have left the stakeholders—all of those affected—out of the process. Readers might be people working with democracy movements and projects, or with design thinking, systems practices, or consensus methods, but who have not experienced or thought of those concepts and practices in the context of the design of social and societal systems.

The Mary Parker Follett Foundation

The Mary Parker Follett Foundation is dedicated to advancing the understanding and practice of democracy as a creative experience and to supporting the intellectual and literacy legacy of Mary Parker Follett

(1868-1933). Follett was a pioneer in modern thinking about human relations, social organization, participatory democracy, conflict, leadership, and management. The Foundation sees the participatory design of social systems as an important expression of democracy, yet one whose theory is not well recognized, and whose practice is far too rare. This booklet is intended to help increase familiarity with the theory and to help extend it into practice.

The Mary Parker Follett Foundation is interested in working with any organization who wants to further the theory and practice of the participatory design of social systems.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Matt Shapiro". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Matt" and last name "Shapiro" clearly distinguishable.

Matthew Shapiro
Director
The Mary Parker Follett Foundation

OUR SYSTEMS

What are our “systems”? They’re the institutions that exist to support our lives in various ways. Some big systems include education, health care, justice, government, transportation, and our economy. Some of them are government-run and publicly funded, while others have public and private aspects.

While the ones named above are what we usually think of as systems, any organization is a “system” in that it is something made up of relationships and has a purpose. Neighborhood associations, churches, and businesses are kinds of systems, too.

Whether they are big or small, government-run or community-based or privately owned, you interact with systems every day, and they affect your life in powerful ways. They help us function as a community and as a society. But they don’t always function well or serve us in the best ways.

Systems and Icebergs

Our systems are like icebergs in that they have a visible part above the surface and a part below the surface that we don’t easily see. Most people don’t even know that the sub-surface part there. It’s the values, beliefs, and assumptions that justify and guide the day-to-day.



Were our systems “designed”?

Who designed them? When?

Does it matter?

These are important questions that are seldom asked. And yes, it does matter. It matters because:

- The system may have been originally designed by people living a long time ago, when the world was very different.

This means that it may be long out of touch with the needs of today. For example, the public education systems of today were originally set up more than a century ago for industrial-style efficiency and the delivery of curriculum to students destined for very predictable career paths.

- The current system may not have ever been consciously designed but just sort of grew out of earlier systems and traditions. For example, our economic and justice systems have roots going back many centuries.
- The system may have been designed by people who had expertise or power but saw no need to check with the needs and desires of people who would serve, be served by, and be affected by the system. This is true of most large systems.

What kinds of things can make a system no longer a good fit with our needs and aspirations?

- The assumptions that the system was based on are no longer valid. Since most institutions and people don't examine assumptions, this lack of validity remains invisible.
- The system can't, or won't, adapt to changes in social conditions, norms, needs or expectations.
- The system can't, or won't, make use of the best available knowledge.
- The system lacks any way to foster reflection on its purpose and design, and it may not be set up to seek and include the views of its stakeholders (everyone who it affects).
- The system does "strategic planning," which is based on the question "where should we go, and how?" and thinks that this enough to keep serving its stakeholders in the best way; it never considers the question "what should we be?"—its very design.

More About Assumptions

Assumptions are ideas that underpin how we go about our lives, see the world, and interpret information. Assumptions generally

go unexamined because they're often reliable, like "the sun will rise tomorrow," and remain deeply buried. The problem is when they no longer fit with reality or with our needs and our goals but persist in their effect because we don't have a way to unearth them, talk about them, and consider replacing them. This is very common with systems.

Activity: Below are some examples of assumptions evident in current systems that some people might, at the very least, find debatable. What do you think?

System	Assumption	Evidence that the Assumption is Operating	Do You Agree with the Assumption?
Economic	There must always be poverty.	There are many people living in poverty, even in rich societies.	
Government	Political parties are necessary.	America's politics are dominated by two parties; there are almost no "independents" in office.	
Education	Teens feel awake earlier in the morning than kindergartners.	Junior high and high schools often start earlier in the day than elementaries.	
Health Care	Health care is not a right.	Health care is not guaranteed in US society, nor is it in the Constitution.	
Justice	Imprisonment rehabilitates criminals.	Prison time is the typical consequence for most serious crimes.	
Your Turn (fill in any system or aspect of society you choose)			

*It is design and
not intention that
creates the
future.*

Kenneth Boulding

Can we change the designs? And should we?

Maybe and maybe. We can change the design of our systems *if we learn how* to design our systems. Right now, we don't—as communities and as a society—know how to design entire systems. We sort of know how to make smaller changes to them. Words for that include “improvement,” “reform” and “restructuring.”

As to whether we should redesign a system, design a whole new system, or just make adjustments to a system—that's for the stakeholders to decide together. A great way to answer that question is to design our ideal—based on what we really need and want—and then compare it with what we have. Then we have a basis for deciding what to do and where to go.

Design, as we're talking about it, is about people creating a compass for the systems that support their lives, with the desired direction of travel being their core values and ideas about *what should be*.

FROM THE BOTTOM UP, FROM THE IDEAL TO THE ACTUAL, AND FROM THE OUTSIDE IN

From the Bottom Up

This has to do with *who* should be doing the designing. The system should be designed by the people who serve, are served by, and who are affected by the system. This will help ensure that the system fits their needs and aspirations while also reflecting their experience, shared wisdom, and creativity. This doesn't mean that experts don't play a part, or that the people we usually choose to make decisions on our behalf (elected officials) don't have a role. But in participatory design, the roles change (see more on this below).

In addition to serving the aim of designing the best system, there is a moral and ethical basis for design from the bottom up: the idea that *no one has the right to design a social system for everyone else*. When someone designs a social system for someone else, it is like they are designing that person's life and future—or at least the conditions that influence them. How can anyone else be given this responsibility?

Even if a system is designed by someone with the best of intentions, the resulting system does not come from the life of the people who serve it, are served by it, and are affected by it. It will thus be of lower quality, probably inadequate, and very possibly harmful.

Even if a system is designed with a lot of public input, through surveys and opinion polls and hearings, so that it appears to have the “consent of the governed,” it can't be truly owned by the people who inhabit it unless they are the authors of at least its core foundation.

From the Ideal to the Actual

This has to do with where we should start in our thinking about a design for our system—the *state* we start with in our thinking.

The state we start with is either the current one (as we perceive it) or the image of a desired one, which might be a version of what we have or something radically different. If we start with the current one, we

*I must Create
a System, or
be enslav'd by
another
Man's.*

*I will not
Reason and
Compare; my
business is to
Create.*

William Blake,
Jerusalem

are typically asking, How can we increase x ? How can we decrease y ? How can we fix z ?

Starting with the current state usually means we are fine-tuning what already exists, or we are in problem-solving mode, or we are in crisis-management mode. These starting points can really limit us if the bigger (and often overlooked) issue is a fundamental mismatch between the system and the environment it lives within, or between the system's assumptions and what we actually believe in and aspire to. It also tends to lead to adaptations or adjustments here and there, in piecemeal fashion, rather than solutions that account for the interconnectedness of the whole system.

If we start with the current state, we can also fall into a tendency to think that by removing what we don't want, we are getting closer to what we do want. But as noted by Mary Parker Follett, "It may be necessary to prune the garden, but we do not make a pile of the dead branches and take our guests to see them as evidence of the flourishing state of the garden."

In participatory design as we're talking about it here, you start with imagining a *desired* state. Imagining and defining our ideal can shed a fresh light on the present situation. For a moment, instead of looking at it from within, struggling to work with it within the limitations we think we have (or aren't even aware that we've created for ourselves), we can look at our situation with fresh eyes. We can see fresh possibilities and have a new direction to go in. We've built our compass. Then it becomes a matter of designing the path to getting there.

From the Outside In

This has to do with the *scope* we start with. The scope is how much our view should take in as we design or redesign our system. Do we look at the system just by itself, in isolation? Or do we start with the wider community and society in which it functions? Starting with a wider scope fills in the *why* of our system. It answers the question, *why should it exist?*

Banathy called this “painting the largest possible picture on the largest possible canvas.” This is why in the design of social systems we should start by creating an idealized, desired image of our community or society. Our system can either help us move in that direction or it can hold us back. Why not design it to help us?

Activity: The “why” of a system: An exercise in painting the largest possible picture on the largest possible canvas

	Why should it exist? Who should it serve? What is <i>ideally</i> its purpose and contribution? How does it help us, ultimately?
An education system	
A health care system	
A justice system	
An economic system	
A private enterprise (pick any kind)	
Other:	

Hurdles to Idealizing, and Ways to Overcome Them

Some men see things as they are and ask why. Others dream things that never were and say, why not.

George
Bernard Shaw

It’s important to acknowledge some of the hurdles that can be encountered in imagining and expressing our ideals.

A common reason, or excuse, for not daring to imagine “the ideal” is that “it’s not practical” or “it’s not realistic.” This is understandable if there is no apparent path by which our ideals can take form. It is understandable if people have, in the past, reached for a lofty goal and fallen far short or have seen others experience the same. It is also explained by the misconception that an ideal is something that must be achieved or else we have failed. Remember that idealizing, in the

context of design as being discussed here, is really just the creation of our North Star, or our compass.

Also keep in mind that ignoring true needs and deepest aspirations is hardly practical, as it forces us to stay within limits that may well be unnecessary or even tragic.

Idealism and realism meet in the actual.

Mary Parker Follett

All of that said, realism itself is not an obstacle to participatory, ideals-based design. If we want to be successful in (re)designing social systems, we have to “be real” about the issues, the obstacles, the potential pitfalls along the way, and what would have to change *around* the system in order to allow it to exist and to thrive. As is suggested in Follett’s statement that “idealism and realism meet in the actual”—the two are not necessarily opposed. “The actual”—what *is*—is their union. And we, the people, can be the officiators of that union.

The following conditions and factors will help to overcome cultural and personal hurdles to idealizing:

- A *real reason* for doing it. There has to be a light at the end of the tunnel, or (if it’s a more helpful metaphor) a place for the plane to land. This is why there has to be buy-in by people leading, working for, and using the system that’s already in place (unless there is a good reason and opportunity to bypass that).
- Doing it *together*. People tend to be encouraged to overcome fears when they see other people doing it and combine their efforts.
- Activities that help to open up thinking. This includes multiple ways of expressing values, ideas and ideals, including verbal, written, artistic and symbolic forms.

The ideal will always be on the horizon and will guide our purposeful move toward it. The ideal might be truly revolutionary, but its realization can be evolutionary.

Bela H.
Banathy

- As noted above, making it clear in the process that expressing core values and ideas, highest aspirations, and ideals for our lives and our futures does not conflict with practicality and realism; that what is real today is partly a result of someone's core values and ideas (or lack of expression thereof) from long ago; and that every system is built on ideas and values. In this approach discussed here, we're just making them explicit.

What if we don't agree on our ideals?

We've suggested that only the users of a system have the right to design that system. What happens if different users have different core values and ideas? Different ideals? What if they can't agree on a common set? This is why dialogue, and the mutual respect that goes with it, is a pre-requisite for participatory design. Through dialogue, there is shared learning—room for shifting and expanding perspectives. There is also room for coming up with solutions that meet a range of needs and values.

Working from the outside in, as described earlier, also helps to transcend differences that at first might seem to be irreconcilable or incompatible. The act of "painting the largest possible picture on the largest possible canvas" expands the context and puts what might be pre-assumed conflicts into a space big enough to accommodate a co-existence of divergent values or beliefs, or even the creation of new viewpoints that didn't exist prior to the process.

The section below titled *Working with Disagreement* explores this topic further.

The Role of Experts: No Longer the Source of All the Ideas, but Still a Source of Expertise

An expert can tell you about the latest research on how kids learn to read, but the expert can't tell you what the end-goal of education should be; that comes from you. An expert can tell us about the effects of regulation on a market, but they can't tell us if short-term or long-term thinking is more important; that's up to us, together. In short, in

participatory design, the expert doesn't do the designing. The expert should be there to help design the design process, then to offer information, knowledge, and experience to support the design that the "user-designers" have set the direction for.

The Role of Elected Officials and Government: From Policy-Makers and Deciders to Facilitators and Implementers

We're used to elected officials deciding things, making policies, and then directing bureaucracies to work on the details and implement things. In the design approach we're talking about, elected officials and government implement what the community designs. Ideally, elected officials—whichever ones are in positions related to what is being designed—champion the design process and help with implementation.

The Role of Us: Designers from Now On?

There are many reasons why we (all of us) should learn to be the user-designers of our systems. Here are some of them:

1. Our systems should reflect and support our needs and aspirations, individually and collectively, and those belong to us. No one knows them better than we do.
2. Design by the users, and a role for all who are affected by the system, brings to bear a vast range and depth of experience and creativity and, if brought out through good process, wisdom. These are unavailable to those who design *for* others or who merely consult with the stakeholders.
3. Design by the stakeholders, and the practice of "permanent designing" that should follow, will ensure the continued responsiveness of the system to changing needs, aspirations, knowledge, and conditions.
4. Design by the stakeholders will foster a sense of ownership in the system and responsibility for it.
5. The process of participatory design requires dialogue and democratic interaction in the sense of co-creation and

consensus-building. These skills are essential for a democratic way of life in general.

6. Designing together will strengthen community, building understanding, trust, and shared responsibility.

Is it practical to get *everyone* to participate in the design of their social systems? If not, how can we be true to the principles of participatory design?

In the spaces closest to our lives—the neighborhood block, the classroom, the small workplace, family, the faith community—it might be possible to get everyone who is a stakeholder to participate in the design of systems shared at that scale. (In fact, it's arguably most important that people learn to do it at that scale). But it's going to be more challenging to keep direct participation at larger scales. Democracy has the same challenge. That's why a republic elects representatives. But taken too far, that system disengages everyday citizens from playing an active role in defining issues and goals and in creating solutions and visions, particularly through interaction with others. Just as we need to find better ways to meet the challenge and promise of democracy (in this sense of co-creation) at scale, we need to do so with the design of social and societal systems.

One approach to scaling up and out is to convene a smaller body that reflects the diversity of the whole body of stakeholders. One proven approach to doing this is to randomly select from among distinct groups that cover the range of diversity. Another approach, sometimes called snowball sampling, is to ask people from across the spectrum of stakeholders to nominate those who they feel would represent well their background and perspectives. These individuals can, in turn, be asked to nominate people on the same basis, and so on. This can lead to a good pool of diverse and representative perspectives being at the table. There are other methods as well.

Whatever the method of identifying representatives that participate directly in design conversation on behalf of others, we should be clear that *not even the person closest to you, who has shared many life experiences with you, who seems to hold the same values and beliefs,*

can speak as you. A design without your ideas and your voice is automatically lower in quality, and a community that designs by proxy is inherently weaker in its design practice.

Regardless of what method is used to assemble a representative cross-section of stakeholders, it is essential to keep the process open and transparent. Through public documentation of the unfolding products of design, people should be able to *see* the core values and ideas laying the foundation; they should be able to *see* how they're connected to the specifications, and how those give rise to design ideas (aka design solutions), and on what basis some of those were selected for implementation. The entire community should also have continuous opportunity to weigh in through methods such as surveys that should be designed into the process. Consideration also needs to be given to those who may not be able to speak for themselves, including future generations.

Activity: Who Needs to Be Present, or at least Re-Presented?

We've said that only the users of a system have the right to design that system, but it's really more than just the users. The term *stakeholder** as used here is very inclusive, referring to everyone who serves, is served by, and is affected by the system. Think about who that might include in the following cases:

Your Local Police Department		
Who serves it?	Who is served <i>by</i> it?	Who does it affect?
Your Health Care System		
Who serves it?	Who is served <i>by</i> it?	Who does it affect?

Your Organization or Company		
Who serves it?	Who is served <i>by</i> it?	Who does it affect?

**Some people don't like this word due to historical connotations, but we're not aware of another word that fits the definition given above.*

Are we qualified to be the designers? If not, how do we “get” qualified?

At present, we are not collectively qualified to be designers of our social systems. This is not because we individually don't have anything to offer. You don't have to be an expert to know what you want. Our lack of qualification comes mainly from our collective lack of practice in designing together. Nevertheless, we can, and we should, get qualified. To do this, we need to develop design literacy, design readiness, and design competence.

DESIGN LITERACY, DESIGN READINESS, AND DESIGN COMPETENCE

Design literacy is our familiarity with the basic concepts and terms of design. This includes:

- What is design, in the context of what we're doing here? How is it different from planning, and different from engineering?
- Why is it important to know how to do, and why is it important to practice?
- What is the process? Who's involved? What do we need to be careful about?
- What is the difference between being merely *informed* versus being *consulted* versus being the designers?
- What do we need to know in order to do it?

Design readiness includes:

- Do we feel motivated to design or redesign, together?
- Are we ready to share responsibility for creating a new design for our system?
- Do we have the skills and attitudes needed for engaging in dialogue with others in our community? Do we have the skills and attitudes needed for reconciling and integrating different perspectives in order to create together?
- Are we prepared to let go of the current "reality" for the moment and allow ourselves to dream about what we really want? To envision an ideal?
- Will we have the patience to see a new design unfold and be implemented, and to support it (even while we may continue to see a need to keep working on it "as it flies"?)
- Are our leaders ready for the kind of leadership that participatory design takes?

*The future
cannot be
predicted, but
futures can be
invented.*

Dennis Gabor

The Ability and Willingness to Engage in Dialogue: A Key to Design Readiness

This is both an individual capacity and a collective (group) capacity, and each supports the other:

- The individuals who engage in “design conversation” have to be ready to listen, to learn, to see difference as a source of creativity and strength rather than division, and to have faith that people can together create something better than what they originally may have had in mind.
- The group in which design conversation takes place has to be organized and facilitated in such a way that participants feel respected, can contribute fully, build upon each other’s contributions, and integrate differences to build toward true consensus while respecting divergent viewpoints.

Design readiness will be enhanced if the community engaging in design has opportunity for dialogue that doesn’t involve choice-creating and decision-making but simply involves exploring assumptions, fostering understanding of different perspectives, and building trust, without any sense of pressure for agreement. Some have called this *generative* dialogue to distinguish it from the more decision-oriented *strategic* dialogue that we are used to jumping right into. Generative dialogue should at least be interwoven into the conversation.

Design competence is achieved through experience and reflection on experience. It includes:

- doing design with integrity to the principles of *design-by* and *design-with* (and not *design-for*);
- being able to idealize—going beyond *what is*—in order to ensure a design that fits with the needs and aspirations of stakeholders;
- being able to ensure inclusivity and representation in the design group or community;
- being able to practice an authentically democratic process;

- being aware of and avoiding design pitfalls (which are discussed below);
- reflecting on experience and learning from that experience; and
- keeping design permanently open and evolving.

THE PROCESS OF DESIGNING OUR SYSTEMS, TOGETHER

The Stages

When there is design literacy, design readiness, and commitment, the following would be the general stages of the design process being described here. Details, sequence, and stages may vary depending on the approach that is found to be best for the particular community, culture, system, etc.

1. Preparation
2. Creating an Idealized Image of the Desired Society, Community, Life Together, etc. (the broader context affected and effected by the system in focus)
3. Creating an Idealized Image of the Desired System in Focus
4. Defining the Specifications of the System
5. Creating Design Solutions
6. Evaluating and Selecting Design Solutions
7. Designing the Transition from Existing to New
8. Designing a Living Design Process
9. Implementation

While this list of stages might suggest a straight, or *linear* path, in practice it won't be so linear. It's more of a *spiral* through the design process, as the designing community will loop back through different aspects of the design to check, revise, and firm up details. Allowance needs to be made for learning, for invention and discovery, and for evolving the process.

Stage 1. Preparation

Defining and Coming to Agreement on the “**Why**”: There has to be a motive for the undertaking, probably rooted in recognition and agreement that a present problem or future problems in or around a system would be best addressed proactively, holistically, and democratically. And there has to be a shared intention to bring real benefit to people's lives.

Defining “**Who**”: Who are the stakeholders (everyone who serves, is served by, and who is affected by the system)? Who could represent them? Who is the “sponsor” of the design journey?

Designing the “**How**”: What will the process be? How will stakeholders be invited, and what would motivate them to participate? Will they all have direct participation, or will it be through semi-random selection, or through representatives? What are the trade-offs that would be made between direct versus indirect participation of the majority of stakeholders? What are the roles needed and who will play them (this relates to the “Who” above)? How will it be funded? Where will the design conversation take place? How will the design documentation be gathered and displayed? What means will be used to gather input from the broader community?

Another part of preparation will be creating or adapting a “knowledge base” that is applicable to the kind of system in focus. While your design will be based on your own core values and core ideas about *what is good* and *what should be*, as well as on the creativity of the user-designers, you may want or need to draw upon what is known, what’s been tried, etc. to advise and inform your design and present you with options as you get into the details.

Creating the knowledge base might begin with what the practitioners of a process called Structured Democratic Dialogue call a “Discovery Phase,” which encompasses both an identification of who the stakeholders are and a thorough review of the situation being faced that prompts the desire or need for design. It could include researching the history of the system in focus, demographic changes or social and societal dynamics, anticipated future conditions, etc.

Stage 2. Creating the Idealized Image of the Desired Big Picture Context (aka “Painting the Largest Possible Picture on the Largest Possible Canvas”)

The system being designed will have a reason for existing. What is that reason? Presume that it is to contribute to a greater good. If we don’t know what that greater good is, that greater purpose, then we have

no reference point for design. Thus we begin design with creating an *image* of the desired state. An image—more specifically, an *idealized image*—is a set of core values and core ideas that together represent the essence of what we truly want. Banathy used the term *markers* for these core values and core ideas.

How Large a Picture?

In some cases, the big picture context will be the entire society. This would be the appropriate larger context for an education system, for example, since implicit in the design of an education system is an influence on, or at least support for society and the role of learners who will live in that society. In other cases, a smaller scope—e.g., a local community—would be more appropriate. In other contexts, user-designers might even go wider in their image-making, to the entire world. This needs to be decided early on.

How to Start Creating an Image

Once the scope of the initial image is determined, a *triggering (or guiding) question* must be formulated and agreed to. The question is very important because it both invites and limits the answers. Thus, crafting the question should be done carefully and adopted in a consensual manner by the community engaging in design.

The start of a triggering question for image-creation might look like this: “*What should be the markers (core values and core ideas) of an image of our desired _____?*”

Each response to this question should be a distinct statement with a specific focus. For example, if the social system in focus was a park (see later for the concept of physical spaces being designed as social systems), a marker of the idealized image might be “Visitors to the park can enjoy both random socializing and solitude.” Articulating a core value or core idea well actually takes some practice, so coaching and guidance on this should be provided.

There are a variety of group interaction and idea-gathering methods that could be used; some would be more appropriate for in-person design dialogue and others more suited for remote, asynchronous,

Imagination is the beginning of creation. You imagine what you desire, you will what you imagine and at last, you create what you will.

George
Bernard Shaw

virtual interactions. In any case, the image-creation stages should always invite the broadest, freest expression of core values, core ideas, and ideals. While there should be provision for people to clarify their meaning, no judgment of the virtue or value of markers should be made during the generation phase.

“Image” vs. “Vision”

As the term is used here and in Banathy’s design model, an image is a system of core values and core ideas. Seen as a whole, the interwoven image can resemble a vision—a very rich vision that has been created in a collaborative fashion. The word “vision” evokes a picture, or a story, and indeed a designing community could translate the image that it’s created into an evocative vision. Conversely, they could even begin with a vision and work backwards into image. The important thing is that the image be fully conceptualized, include all needed dimensions (see below), and that it be created in a way that everyone understands the meaning and intention of those who contributed to it.

Dimensions of the Image

In order to be understandable as a coherent whole, an image should be more than a list of core values and core ideas. It should have a “shape,” which can be provided by *dimensions*. Dimensions are like categories. These can either emerge from the body of markers, based on what the user-designers see as logical groupings, or the designers can begin with a set of dimensions and then fill them in with markers. Through that process, dimensions could shift or be re-named; it should be an organic process.

Examples of some of the dimensions that might be useful or needed for the image for an entire society might be “Relationship with the Natural World,” “Making Decisions,” “Justice,” “Conflict,” and “Spirituality.” A few of the dimensions that might be expected to emerge with, or be used for, creating the image of a system of education are “Learning,” “Age Grouping,” “Assessment,” “Funding,” and “The Role of Parents & Guardians.”

The designing community shouldn't be afraid of starting with too many dimensions (i.e., making more distinctions between categories than are later determined to be helpful or needed). It is important to avoid *under-conceptualizing* the image—leaving out things that might be needed or relevant to the system in question. Dimensions can always be consolidated later. Under-conceptualization is mentioned again later in the section on pitfalls.

Multiple Ways of Expressing Ideals

While the image ultimately needs a set of statements organized into dimensions, it can start with or be supported by forms of expression that are not text-based. Visual and symbolic representations and dramatic approaches may help to inspire idealization and evoke core values and core ideas in ways that strictly verbal or text-based forms don't. This may be particularly helpful in cases where, as described above, the designing community is translating vision into image or image into vision.



Marshalltown, Iowa Mural

Stage 3. Creating the Idealized Image of the Desired System (the System, Organization or Institution of Focus)

Using the broader idealized image created in Stage 2 as a context, the user-designers will now reflect on and express core values and core ideas (“markers”) that should be included in the image of the desired system of focus. The same principles and considerations described in Stage 2 apply here.

Stage 4. Specifications

Once the community of user-designers have created the image that will underlie their system, they are ready to define the overall characteristics and features that the system would need to have in order to reflect and fulfill that image. These can be described as the *specifications* of the system. Specifications are a helpful bridge between the image and the design solutions (see the next stage) because they relieve the user-designers from the needless task of having to try to match every core value and core idea with a specific concrete action or design feature.

A specification might begin with the words “The system will...” and take a form like “will be financially self-sustaining” or “will be based on net-zero principles of environmental emissions. One specification that all systems should have, if meeting with the spirit of participatory design as described here, would be “...will be transparent in its assumptions, core values, core ideas and how these manifest in the life of the system” (or something to that effect).

Stage 5. Design Solutions

Design solutions are specific ideas that can fulfill the specifications and fit with the image. They are things that the system would have and do. Creating design solutions is where a combination of experience and imagination comes into play. Having access to a knowledge base will be useful here, as the community will want to draw upon the best available knowledge and consider whether there may be existing practices that fit well with their emerging design.

Stage 6. Evaluating and Selecting Solutions

As design solutions are created, they need to be evaluated based on how well they fit the specifications; on their ease or difficulty of implementation; on cost and political acceptability; etc. The user-designers will create the set of criteria that they will use. Applying them to the choice of solutions may involve trade-offs between desirability and ability to implement.

Evaluating ability to implement design solutions should not be considered as “final” prematurely, since the total combination of design solutions will affect that evaluation. This relates to the need to view design solutions as part of a dynamic, interconnected whole—i.e., as a system. Banathy suggested a framework to help with this, and it is briefly described below.

The “Three Lens” Model

Banathy advocated viewing a system through three complementary models (which are described here as “lenses”) in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of that system. As the user-designers design their idealized/idealizing system, the “Three Lens” Model can provide a framework in which to view their work.

a. The Structure-Function Lens

The Structure-Function Lens offers a “snapshot” of the system at a moment in time. Things you would see through this lens would include descriptions of the internal structure and functions of the system, and descriptions of roles and responsibilities.

b. The Process Lens

The Process Lens offers a “motion picture” view—a view of what is happening over time as a given activity or function is performed. Things you would see through this lens include patterns, behaviors, progress, successes and failures, learning, and *stories* related to these. You would also see descriptions of process and procedure—the “how.”

c. The System-Environment Lens

The System-Environment Lens shows the relationships between the system in focus and other systems in the community and larger society that are necessary to carry out its function and activities. Things you would see through this lens include the flow of human resources, the flow of financial and other material resources, the flow of communication in and out of the system, and legal and political aspects of the system in its wider context.

Considering the system's environment is crucial because through that lens, you may find obstacles that are either insurmountable or will take more time to change than other factors, and these must be factored into your design process. On the other hand, you may also find flexibility and opportunities that you didn't know existed because you never thought "outside the box."

Use of the Three-Lens Model will foster more thorough development of design solutions. It will also contribute to a more "systemic" description of the designed system – a description that recognizes the essential interconnections among all aspects of the system.

Considering what has to change in the environment around the system in order for the new design to be implemented successfully

As the System-Environment lens suggests, systems don't exist in a vacuum. They live within larger systems—natural, political, economic, etc.—that affect the flow of energy and information in and out of the system. Therefore, designing or redesigning a system needs to take that wider context and the constraints (and opportunities) that it may present. The stakeholders may design a system that intentionally pushes against the broader system or pulls from it. But there are practical considerations that relate to constraints.

For example, if a community designs an education system that will require twice the funding of current levels, failure to include additional funding sources as part of its design will result in a failure of implementation. Or if the design involves new curriculum standards that conflict with existing state standards, the designing community

must have a strategy to get those state standards changed to accommodate it.

Activity: Aspects of the Environment of the System to Consider in Designing Toward Your Ideal

If you were (re)designing _____ , what aspects or factors around the system might need be changed in order to allow the new design to come into being? What aspects or factors in that environment might help fulfill your desired design?	
<i>System</i>	<i>Factors Around the System</i>
<i>Example: Your city government</i>	<i>State laws about city governance; existing agreements with other agencies; allowed finance mechanisms; neighborhood organizations</i>
Your turn...	

Stage 7. Designing the Transition: Getting from Here to There

The plane needs a place to land. A well-developed implementation plan developed with the same level of engagement as the design process itself will be critical to success. Just like the system itself, the transition should be modeled systemically, from multiple angles, including but not limited to the Structure-Function lens, the Process lens, and the System-Environment lens.

Transition should allow for enough time for learning and reflecting, and for new patterns and relationships to take root. There will have to be tolerance for fuzziness in metrics of success during the transition (which will be more challenging for some systems than others).

Transition time should also take into account political cycles and direct impacts on all stakeholders.

Stage 8. Designing A Living Design

Designing our social systems isn't something we can just do and then be finished with. We experience and learn, and through experiencing and learning our needs and aspirations might change. Design competence will grow. New ideas might (or rather, should) come along. New people may join the community and others may leave. Therefore, our design should be ready to evolve with integrity. In other words, this kind of design is meant to result in a *living design*. Maintaining a living design means using that compass we created, and the design culture and competence we've built will become a normal part of how we live within and around that system.

Stage 9. Implementation

This is where the rubber meets the road. Successful implementation can be expected for a design that has:

- been created in a truly participatory manner;
- swept in all the knowledge and wisdom available for its focus;
- taken into account the environment in which it is unfolding;
- included a well-developed transition plan; and
- permanently embodied a capacity for reflecting, learning, and self-evolution.

Specific Group Methods & Tools

There are a variety of group decision-making methods and tools that may be incorporated in this process. Since this document is only an introduction, we won't go into them here. What matters most is that they are chosen for best fit with the cultural context, the number of participants, and the logistical situation of the designing community; that they are processes and tools that honor the authenticity of participants and their viewpoints and contributions; that they allow for evolving viewpoints; and that they be implemented with integrity.

Those considering the participatory design journey should consult with expert facilitators and build a knowledge base of options.

Working with Disagreement

As noted earlier, it is important that an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust and civility exists among the community of people designing together. The protocol of group process should support and reinforce this and maintain a feeling of safety among the participants. Safety notwithstanding, it might be expected that some core values, ideas, and ideals expressed by some user-designers in a diverse group will conflict with, or appear to conflict with, some of those contributed by others. And there is no guarantee against one's ideas being subject to challenge, if only indirectly or implicitly. There is also no guarantee that a participant will not feel offended by something said during the design process.

The facilitators of design should help foster the understanding that difference is the key to creativity, and that conflict should not be confused with violence but is, in a context like this, simply the surfacing of different perspectives, and should be put to work.

Features of participatory design that should support the emergence of a working consensus (without compromise or horse-trading) include the following:

- Providing opportunity for “generative” dialogue before the “strategic” dialogue. This was discussed earlier under Design Readiness. Generative dialogue is for exploring and mutual understanding, not agreement or decisions or debate. Existing common ground can be discovered there as well, helping set the stage for creating new “ground in common” through the process.
- Using group processes that help the participants converge toward consensus without forcing them to do so.
- Using group processes that provide opportunity for clarification of meaning and intent, since misinterpretation can lead to unnecessary conflict.

- Using group processes that provide invitation and opportunity to suggest ideas that “rise above” earlier proposed ones that seem to conflict, allowing them to be fulfilled without compromise.
- Starting by “painting the largest possible picture on the largest possible canvas” (idealized image of community or society) provides space for a variety of viewpoints and ideas to find their place and find paths to reconciliation if there is conflict. Related to this, setting aside existing constraints through idealization liberates thinking to allow for a “bigger tent” and less of a conflict of values driven by perceived scarcity.
- Conflicting markers can be allowed to co-exist in the image while their reconciliation is manifested in specifications and design solutions that are taken into practice. An analogy is elements in a Constitution that at an abstract level have the potential to conflict, whereas in actual practice they are reconciled or at least don’t manifest as conflicting.
- In most cases, the groups of user-designers will be large enough to bypass inter-personal dynamics that can be negative.

PITFALLS IN THE DESIGN OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS: THINGS TO WATCH OUT FOR

There isn't a long track record of experience in participatory design from which to draw a definitive list of what what made for success vs. failure. However, we can draw from lessons learned historically, from political systems to public institutions to private enterprises, over many decades and across the world, to identify key pitfalls—areas of risk or mistakes that decrease chance of success—to watch out for.

The list of potential pitfalls is long. Some of these are drawn from Banathy's work, and some are supplementary to it.

Lack of Commitment to the Undertaking and to the Spirit of Participatory Design

- Absence of real commitment from leadership to transformation, in spite of words and gestures of support.
- Failure to commit to the spirit of participatory design and to allowing the stakeholders, rather than experts, do the designing.
- Not allowing sufficient time or resources for the design process

Compromised Integrity of Process

- Weak commitment to process or compromising on process. It is tempting to compromise in process, e.g., in representation and inclusiveness, in maintaining equality at the table, or in supporting a truly idealizing process. Any of these could be fatal to success.
- Limiting design freedom out of conformity to the status quo, or out of an unwillingness to push against or through the systemic environment to champion the design that the stakeholders have developed.

Insufficient Representation of Perspectives

- Not being sufficiently and consistently inclusive in representing the diversity of stakeholders at every stage of

the design journey, from planning the process through implementation.

Poor Process / Poorly Conducted Process

- Insufficient allowance for generative dialogue (versus the more decision-oriented strategic dialogue)
- Poorly selected and/or poorly conducted process of idea generation and group interaction. It may be inequitable and undemocratic; it may be lacking in transparency; it may provide insufficient opportunity for clarification, for changing one's mind, for adding ideas, etc.
- Group process that allow for or supports "groupthink" (a tendency toward conformity in thinking) or, conversely, causes "spreadthink" (moving away from consensus rather than toward it).
- Premature emphasis on agreement (related to groupthink).
- Avoidance of conflict rather than expecting differences of viewpoint and potential friction between those and putting them to use for exploration and creativity as much as possible.
- Triggering/guiding questions that are either too narrowly focused or too broadly expansive.
- Bias in triggering/guiding questions, in the facilitation, or elsewhere in the process.
- Unsystemic/unholistic combination of design solutions and modeling of the emerging system design.
- Underconceptualization of the images created through the process, leaving out whole dimensions to consider and critical details.
- Failure to take into account and compensate for weaknesses in asynchronous and virtual group activity.
- Failure to compensate for limitations in virtual interaction (versus in-person meetings), with virtual meetings' reduced non-verbal communication and greater opportunity for distraction.

- An insufficient knowledge base to draw upon when it's needed.

Failure to Idealize / Transcend Current Thinking

- Idealization constrained by fear or bias toward perceived realism.

Systemic Environment Ignored

- Insufficient consideration given to the systemic environment during the design process, i.e., designing as if in a vacuum.

Transition & Implementation Failures

- A transition plan for moving from existing design to new design that is insufficiently detailed, too rigid, too fast, or designed without sufficient stakeholder involvement.
- Insufficient time allowed for transition between existing design and new design.
- Implementing only some aspects of the desired design, in piecemeal fashion. If there is some unforeseen failure to implement the new design, implementing at least some of it could be beneficial. However, doing so incurs the risk of destroying the integrity of a design that was created holistically and weaken the benefits. This can even give critics an opportunity to dismiss the implemented aspects of the design as failures or bad ideas, when in fact if they had been implemented with integrity to the full design, they probably would have succeeded.

Approaching Systems Design as a One-Time Intervention

- Stage 8 described above involved “designing a living design.” Conditions change; aspirations change; stakeholders change; and we learn. To think that design is something we do once and then are done is to plant the seed for the system to fall out of synch again with the needs and aspirations of the stakeholders, with the needs of the

environment in which it lives, and best available knowledge. Instead, we should build upon our newfound design competence and foster a permanent *design culture* to keep our design a living one. Design culture is discussed further below.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR DESIGNING OUR SYSTEMS TOGETHER

The opportunities and the need for designing our systems together are literally everywhere. Some kinds of systems are, however, more immediately amenable to participatory (re)design than others.

The Character of Existing Systems More Amenable vs. Less Amenable to (Re)Design

Banathy, as influenced by Ackoff, noted that existing systems will differ in their openness to design or redesign. His spectrum ranged from the rigidly controlled and deterministic at one end of the spectrum to the *purpose-seeking* at the other end of the spectrum.

The closer the system is to the rigidly controlled/deterministic end of the spectrum, the less amenable it will be to participatory design; the closer to purpose-seeking, the more amenable. Of course, if there is a groundswell of support for change, even a deterministic system could be opened up to participatory design, or even—in an almost “revolutionary” fashion—be replaced by a parallel system designed from scratch.

The “chicken-or-egg” issue is not unique to participatory design, and the answer is not simple. It probably requires a “chicken-and-egg” approach, i.e., working from top and bottom, outside-in and inside-out at the same time. Some points of intervention, and opportunities, would include:

- Pilots and demonstrations that allow communities and systems to experience design without committing to depart from the status quo.
- Educating new generations of leaders, in all fields, about participatory design.
- Working with systems that are failing so badly that total redesign is attractive to a critical mass of people and to those in positions of authority.
- Gaining experience in participatory design at local levels and sharing broadly both the successes and the lessons learned so that others can be informed and inspired.

Below are just a few examples of systems that could be near-term and accessible opportunities for participatory design:

A neighborhood association: In medium-sized and larger cities, neighborhood associations (not to be confused with homeowner associations) are among the most grassroots, ultra-local social systems. They commonly form in response to threats like development, traffic issues, increases in crime, etc. However, as they are the organizations closest to home, and ostensibly open to broad participation, they have great potential to be vehicles for enhancing people's lives in direct ways and upwards into local government—if designed, sustained, and operated for those purposes.

A police department: Public safety services in the form of police departments are generally valued by community members but also can be sources of tension in communities. Recent calls for reexamining the best role for police relative to other agencies, best practices for preventing violence, issues of fairness, etc. might make a police department, and the approach to policing and public safety in general, a good subject of participatory design.

A school district: Schools, particularly public schools, are ubiquitous institutions that live at the intersection of neighborhood life, impersonal bureaucracy, and the broader society. Due to the multiple purposes (some explicit and some implicit) that they are expected to fulfill, to the complex nature of what they work with (human beings), and to the evolving environment in which they are set (socially, politically, and in terms of theory and knowledge about learning and teaching), schools have been subject to decades of tensions pulling in many directions. The result has, overall, been incremental change (via improvement and reform efforts) but a constant gap between their design and the needs of community & society and the aspirations of stakeholders, manifesting as chronic “crisis” that is mistaken as a performance issue.

In spite of their constant interaction with children, families, and neighborhoods, most school systems have built tall cultural and institutional barriers to the examination of their core assumptions and

design. At the same time, the need for redesign has been growing for a long time. If the critical mass for supporting a design journey can be built between parents, elected school board members, and teachers, there is great opportunity for participatory design.

A Faith Community: Churches, mosques, synagogues—any community of faith and worship—have the head start of a well-defined body of members and some shared sense of purpose. Many would seem to be open to the question of how they can better fulfill their mission, or even to changing their mission. Depending on the leadership and culture of the particular community, this kind of system could be open to participatory design. Certain sects/denominations would be more open to it than others.

A private company: A private enterprise offers both opportunity and challenge for participatory design. The opportunity lies the lack of any formal restrictions to doing so, the relatively concentrated authority within the organization, an ostensible openness to considering fresh approaches to both its purpose and to fulfilling its purpose, and a clear definition of who its stakeholders are: the owners/investors; the management; the employees; and the customers. Larger companies, of course, affect more people in more ways, so their stakeholders for purposes of design might include government agencies, unions, and beyond.

Participatory design is arguably critically overdue for many kinds of social systems today. At the very least, it would add value to any kind of human social organization, from family all the way up to an international organization like the United Nations, or one that doesn't yet exist. How we could "scale up" the kind of direct stakeholder involvement in design that is needed—that solution remains to be invented.

Designing Public Spaces as Social Systems

Designing public physical spaces like streets, parks, and public buildings is often seen as just a matter of engineering aesthetics, and economics. However, their design reflects values and assumptions, and they influence how people interact. In that sense, they could be

seen as social systems also. For example, the design of streets, parks, and buildings affects whether they will encourage or inhibit human interaction, and how; it affects people's interaction with nature; it affects accessibility by diverse segments of the community.

How might treating physical spaces as social systems change the design process, if participatory design as described here was used? The same principles about stakeholder-led design would seem to apply. So would the concept of using core values and ideas to create idealized images of a desired situation, "painting the largest possible picture on the largest possible canvas," and other aspects of participatory design. It could be a good entry point for building design literacy, design readiness, and design competence in a community, with lower initial barriers than proposing to (re)design local governments or education systems.

Designing Systems That Don't Exist Yet

The process of design described here always includes the possibility of designing systems that don't exist yet because the designing community is "leaping out" of what exists now in order to envision an ideal, then working backwards to the present. However, there may also be *kinds* of systems that don't exist yet, at least not for that community, for which a function/need emerges. In some ways, designing those may be an easier task, in two ways: (1) There's no existing image or system to hold people back in their idealizing, and (2) There would be less complication in transitioning from an existing system to a new (or newly redesigned) one.

We won't speculate here about what such new kinds of systems might be, but we encourage you to imagine what they might be.

Design at a Larger Scale

Since the participatory design approach here begins with the community of user-designers defining their ideals for life and society in general, the design of a specific system is in some sense also an act of *societal* design. But what if there was readiness to actually design

across a wider scale, e.g., across states, regions, nations and continents?

The challenges and complexities of coordinating participatory design on a wider scale would be significant, including and probably exceeding some of the same challenges faced in practicing participatory democracy at large scales. In spite of the challenges, however, the need appears to be here, so we should endeavor to find—and to design—solutions.

A Design Culture and Communities that Design

The emergence of a *design culture*, where participatory design is the norm and continuous rather than a rare or one-off process, would be a major step forward for any community or society. It would represent a direct and important manifestation of democracy in its fullest sense—as a capacity for creating together, for integrating our different viewpoints, needs, and ideas in framing issues, creating solutions, and reaching toward shared visions.

The Conference of the Birds
as summarized by Bela H. Banathy

In *The Conference of the Birds* the Persian poet Fariduddin Attar tells the story of the assembly of the birds. The assembly was called together by the wise Hoopoe bird, who convinced the assembly that they have to find the King of the Birds and ask his advice if they wish to live their lives to the fullest.

But the wise Hoopoe warned them of the many dangers of the journey that leads to the castle of the King. Still, a large delegation of birds embarked on the search. During the journey many fell victim to deathly perils. At the end, only a few reached the castle.

At the gate, the Chamberlain first refused to hear their plea, but they persisted and finally they were allowed into the throne room. To their amazement, no one was sitting on the throne.

After great hesitation the birds approached the throne one by one and sat on it. First, they became confused. But after a while they were astonished as they looked into each other's eyes and realized that they themselves were, as a collective, the King. The throne was theirs and they together shared the responsibility for the kingdom.

Further Reading

Bela H. Banathy's *Designing Social Systems in a Changing World* (Plenum, 1996) is probably the richest exploration of the theory behind the participatory design of social systems. Banathy draws from a vast array of other thinkers and practitioners in building the case for, and potential approaches to, participatory design.