

Design research proposal

Introduction

Departing from an understanding of the climate and ecological emergency (C.E.E) as a manifestation of and reproduced by (certain¹) human activities, we question the underlying logics of anthropocentrism and the modern relationship humans have with non-humans. At the core of the anthropocentric lies the logic of growth and human essentialism, the prevailing relationship (although not the only) is one of extraction and (according to us) of disconnection between humans and non-humans. We understand the relationship of humans and non-humans as not based on prepositions (such as living on Earth and off of the Earth) but as entanglements we may or may not be aware of. This is the outer scaffolding for our position as designers and researchers, or perhaps as respondents were we to consider the C.E.E as a prompt or call to action.

Our approach builds on an aspiration to transform this entanglement, or as we have put it; renegotiate the symbiosis (from ancient Greek, living together) between humans and nature. The ambition was to renegotiate the existing relationship beyond the human view of nature as a resource. This extractivist gaze over nature is, as we view it, both caused and accelerated through modern notions of technology established through industrialization in the 1850s. The relation between the Anthropocene and C.E.E is clear if we look at the most recent period of the era, dubbed the Great Acceleration. This period, beginning after the Second World War, is characterized by the rapid rate of increased socioeconomic growth, predominantly within the wealthy countries (global north). The emotional disconnect in humans mindsets that they are entangled with everything becomes more visible through C.E.E as humanity is reaching a point where the resulting extractivist behavior guided ourselves into the crisis, but also highlights and brings attention to our existing entanglement with the non-human world² (bodily, wealth, health) through for example catastrophes and direct effects on the body.

¹ [Enes]: We have touched on some social aspects of human essentialism in terms of global south/north throughout the project, never in depth though as our progression towards intervening in the urban led us to situate the project where we currently are, which is a city in northern Europe. Truthfully, we did this without deeper critical reflection and perhaps should have considered a more plural approach to this situating in terms of socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity and more. This would be interesting since we know that the effects of CEE disproportionately affect people that are marginalized or outside of a western hegemonic norm. An intersectional perspective on how to intervene as a designer responding to CEE is thought provoking.

² [Natalie]: In times of the CEE, the highlighting of this entanglement for us humans probably consists primarily of tendencies that are negative and destructive for us, such as crises and shortages. One reaction to this will be despair and anger - at other people, but also at the environment. But can we also find examples where positive tendencies can be experienced and emphasized through disruptions and an emotional connection can be supported? Opportunities?

Positioning and aligning

The scaffolding informing our approach consists of perspectives mainly situated in the posthuman and postmodern and perspectives. The need to break with human essentialism, in the sense that humans being superior to other species, is necessary to overcome the notion of dichotomies and hierarchies as drivers of disconnect and resulting exploitation³. Posthumanist thoughts do not just simply add nonhumans to the recipe, they address the notion of relationships, entanglements, and inextricable connections⁴. The project is approached as taking apart dualisms and embracing pluralisms through highlighting the entanglement of the human with the environment by renegotiating the symbiosis of humans and non-humans on different scales and on a rational and emotional level.

Moving away from human essentialism, the project calls for pluralism⁵ by lifting up and/or balancing more-than-human agencies within human dominated spaces like urban areas through the notion of technology. The term technology was opened up and therefore can be seen as human-made or nature-technology as we use Native American indigenous logic in this statement, as all things besides those which are man-made are considered animate⁶. While seeing posthumanism primarily as a response to humanism and power beyond pure human domination⁷, we embrace or make the entanglement more intimate, but we also approach the project by breaking with it through flipping the relationship upside down.

An interesting reference project is “Urban Animals & Us” (UA & Us), by Lenskjold and Jönsson⁸. As we see it, both projects are interested in engaging with the nonhuman world and follow an explorative logic. UA & Us is interested in exploring the terrain vague between humans and animals with whom we share an urban space⁹ and proposes that an exploration of these relationships can help destabilize the anthropocentric dominance in design research. Not in comparison but perhaps more in alignment, both our project and “UA & Us” are concerned with de-centering the human and inviting a more entangled and plural worldview. How the two projects approach this endeavor is where they differ, UA & Us drifting more so into engaging with, as they put it, not-quite-companion-species (as a development or expansion of Haraway’s ‘companion species’) as co-designers whilst we chose to intervene in a human centered site and inviting to a participatory approach of re-making the site. Our logic was to intervene with a human-centered approach in mind, following a logic of intervening in the human in order to de-center the human.

³ Alaimo, Stacy, and Susan J. Hekman, eds. 2008. *Material Feminisms*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

⁴ Thomas Laurien et al., “An Emerging Posthumanist Design Landscape,” *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism*, October 15, 2022, 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-42681-1_42-2.

⁵ Alaimo, Stacy, and Susan J. Hekman, eds. 2008. *Material Feminisms*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

⁶ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

⁷ Laurien, Thomas, Li Jönsson, Petra Lilja, Kristina Lindström, Erik Sandelin, and Åsa Ståhl. 2022. “An Emerging Posthumanist Design Landscape.” *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism*, October, 5. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-42681-1_42-2.

⁸ Tau Lenskjold and Li Jönsson, “A Foray into Not-Quite Companion Species: Design Experiments with Urban-Animals as Signi!Cant Others,” *Nordes Conference Series*, June 9, 2013, <https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/nordes/nordes2013/researchpapers/33/>.

⁹ibid.

Another interesting aspect of UA & Us is the notion of *terrain vague*. This term, coined by architect and historian Ignasi de Solà-Morales designates the abandoned and empty spaces in urban spaces¹⁰. The foundation for this designation is rooted in how urban spaces are represented through photography, how this medium (inanimate technology, in our words) has come to define our understanding of our man-made surroundings and as de Solà-Morales puts it; “The development of this technology has made us effectively unable to separate our understanding of modern architecture from the mediating role that photographers have assumed”¹¹. We consider this to be parallel to our notion of technology as a reason for a disconnect between humans and nature, as technology and techno-solutionism has allowed humans to assume a dominant position on the planet and lead us to the belief that technology will save us from this man-made disaster. These abandoned spaces came into interest for de Solà-Morales as photographers in the 1970s turned their gaze towards empty spaces in their surroundings. Although Lenskjold and Jönsson only mention the term in the abstract of their paper, we understand it as meaning the relationship between people and animals in the urban space¹² and having both a relational and spatial dimension. The term *terrain vague* is an interesting wording process as well, having a triple signification based on four different languages and although most of these significations have negative prefixes, they imply a meaning of limitlessness and freedom (i.e., un-occupied or imprecise).

As our designerly efforts, in terms of intervening in the public, came fairly late in this project it is important to note that we consider our intervention to be a prototype to be iteratively developed in the future and that UA & Us could act as an useful orientation moving forward if we look in how the projects differed. Specifically in how UA & Us engaged with external collaborators, across disciplines and allowing the project to materialize in more complex ways (i.e., their engagement with the residents at an elderly home or how the project engaged multiple professions). Our project differs here in the sense that our public intervention was developed very much so in the echo chamber of our word group, which is problematic when considering that the aim was to intervene in a collective worldview.

Designerly practice in the state of CEE

Thus far, our work has been oriented towards collecting and creating the above mentioned scaffolding, attempting to synthesize our collection into a worldview that could inform our design work. Furthermore, our design work as embracing the existing more-than-human, highlighting the entanglement and/or flipping the relationship is necessary at a time in which ecosystems are almost irreversibly at a loss and the entanglements required for a planetary future are damaged¹³. Certainly we have operated in a designerly way, especially in the tail end of this process in our ideation and prototyping activities. However, the eleventh hour is nigh and we must engage with the entanglements outside of the echo chambers of our institution. This meaning, we must shift our

¹⁰ Ignasi de Solà-Morales, 1995

¹¹ Ignasi de Solà-Morales, 1995:18

¹² Tau Lenskjold and Li Jönsson, “A Foray into Not-Quite Companion Species: Design Experiments with Urban-Animals as Signi!Cant Others,” *Nordes Conference Series*, June 9, 1, 2013, <https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/nordes/nordes2013/researchpapers/33/>.

¹³Laurien, Thomas, Li Jönsson, Petra Lilja, Kristina Lindström, Erik Sandelin, and Åsa Ståhl. 2022. “An Emerging Posthumanist Design Landscape.” *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism*, October, 10. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-42681-1_42-2.

mode from research into design to research through design¹⁴. We understand research through design as a transdisciplinary¹⁵ effort, using design methodology for creating new knowledge/insights that has the potential to change both the field of design and the public or phenomena being explored. The approach is no longer think in order to design, it is think through designing. We proceed as designers, developing a public intervention that we use as a research method, inspired by design things¹⁶ and design events¹⁷ which are design approaches that are congruent with our scaffolding. Currently, these approaches are understood as collective prototyping activities with the public as a vehicle for inquiry¹⁸.

Guiding principles for the design work are colored by the logic of action over perfection, as the C.E.E is understood as not only an emergency but also an urgency, and the notion of staying with the trouble¹⁹, as we are attempting to unlearn our disciplines as industrial and product designers. Also as design researchers with a focus on change, we can speculate about new/different ways of being and embracing the complexity of design work, action and being response-able, we have the power to say “yes” to certain futures²⁰. We are empowered to renegotiate and redesign relationships, entanglements and think the unthinkable. While dealing with the complexity of the C.E.E., the notion of time in different scales has to be taken into account. The possibly overarching idea of manifesting a paradigm shift has to be thought through in terms of possible changes in the present. Breaking with the anthropocentric paradigm in the long run can mean intervening within the anthropocentric frame in the present.

Public intervention as one participatory manifestation in response to CEE

¹⁴Christopher Frayling, *Research in Art and Design* (London: Royal College of Art, 1993).

¹⁵[Enes]: Perhaps instead of debating whether one acts as a trans-, inter- or intra-disciplinary designer, and all that these entail, it is more relevant to redefine what these words mean and how we relate to them. It could be argued that the *designerly* is inherently transdisciplinary. Designers are afforded a certain irreverence to how we approach different domains of knowledge, how we piecemeal together frameworks that inform our processes, how we synthesize data into findings into briefs and outcomes. In an age where we are aware of the consequences of our designerly actions, to align oneself with practices that are attempting to curb this disaster or to at least adapt to these new man-made conditions, means to veer away from what we have been taught throughout life. How to do this is unknown, although I am convinced there are a multitude of ways. I would argue that for designers, this means to unlearn our practice, or at least adopt other models and worldviews as the departure points for our processes. Intuitively, is this a transdisciplinary act? To go beyond the training and established methodologies and logics of design (for these reflections, as it is taught in a Scandinavian context), to see through the both written and unwritten rules of design industry and academy. Some consequences are clear, unemployment – undesirability – ethics hearings – critique – conflicts – threats – prosecution – and so on. How does one prepare for these consequences, and yet unknown externalities? Is it done on an individual scale or is it an organized collective effort?

¹⁶Pelle Ehn, “Participation in Design Things,” *Proceedings of the Tenth Anniversary Conference On ...*, January 1, 2008, https://www.academia.edu/17086207/Participation_in_design_things.

¹⁷Li Jönsson, “Design Events: On Explorations of a Non-Anthropocentric Framework in Design,” *Www.academia.edu*, 2014, https://www.academia.edu/11481605/Design_events_on_explorations_of_a_non_anthropocentric_framework_in_design.

¹⁸S. Wensveen and Ben Matthews, “Prototypes and Prototyping in Design Research,” www.semanticscholar.org, 2015, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Prototypes-and-prototyping-in-design-research-Wensveen-Matthews/e15af89d310ffb5e666f006c834b2e8ee87e2047>.

¹⁹Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

²⁰ Laurien, Thomas, Li Jönsson, Petra Lilja, Kristina Lindström, Erik Sandelin, and Åsa Ståhl. 2022. “An Emerging Posthumanist Design Landscape.” *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism*, October, 11. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-42681-1_42-2.

A public (inter)action is one possible approach in response to DR in times of C.E.E now. While engaging with the public an experimental, transdisciplinary and participatory space can be created to rethink, reflect and re-picture the status quo. Prompts and prototypes at a specific site can provoke bodily and sensorial engagement and thinking also through asking questions and making statements. They can give insights into anthropocentric viewpoints, but also plant seeds of thoughts through bringing attention to the unknown - through thinking what was, what is and what if²¹. Interacting with the public also means intervening within the anthropocentric in order to make a change within. Acting in the participatory frame also means staying within it, but possibly breaking with anthropocentric paradigms in the future.

The design experiment is an attempt to intervene at a site that is ubiquitous and ambiguous, a site that is a socio-material assembly that embodies or frames a worldview. A worldview which we wish to intervene in, to rattle. Too soon to tell whether efficient or not, but our logic follows Meadow's notion of points of intervention. The paradigm or, as we interpret it, the worldview level. The climate and ecological emergency is a (hu)man-made disaster, an anthropogenic phenomenon that is manifested through a myriad of events and structures. This project had the goal of intervening at the causal site and not the symptomatic one, meaning our goal was to affect the logics that have, and still are reproducing this emergency rather than intervening in the consequences of these logics.

Where

The group selected bus stops in urban areas as the intervention sites. This choice was made for two different reasons.

- In the urban (both a mentality and a site):

In urban areas, the concentration of people and diverse cultural perspectives is quite high, they are a meeting point for different forms of power (economic, political, social, cultural) in the human world^{22,23}. As such, it is also a representative location of dualism and extractivism and therefore a preferred option for implementing interventions in response to climate emergencies in order to intervene in human beings.

- At the bus stop:²⁴

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Bašová, Silvia. 2016. 'CULTURAL AND URBAN IMPORTANCE OF MEETING POINTS'. In . <https://doi.org/10.1000/9788024839400>.

²³ Goldenberg, Romain. 2021. 'Nature in Urban Regions : Understanding Linkages and Benefits to Human Populations' 29: 3607–16.

²⁴ Xinchí: Looking back at the planning of the interaction, I think we chose too narrow a sample for the specific bus stops. The group defined the general public as the target participants, but the three bus stops chosen for the actual activity were all located in the campus area. Therefore the actual participants were not fully representative of the general public. I now feel that if more bus stops were chosen to set the question (the same questions group being set at different stops groups), not only would more responses be gained, but also references and controls could be established, resulting in multi-study findings.

In urban areas, bus stops have a high daily flow of people and most of the people who come here have to wait for some time. This makes bus stops an ideal “spacetime” for interventions and reflection²⁵.

Who

The general public passing by, using the public transportation system or stopping briefly at a bus stop was targeted.

When

The action took place on the 15th of December and lasted for a couple of days.

How is your design research made public?

The group set up questions and statements projecting their worldview at selected bus stops to provoke a reaction and invite people waiting at the bus stop to discover, freely answer and interact²⁶. The depth of the different questions and statements is enhanced by prompting participants to think deeply about the group's research themes. The statements and questions are divided into three layers.

-What exists here at the bus stop if no human is around?

This question aims to encourage participants to take the initiative in discovering non-humans around the bus stop and to reflect on the relationship between non-humans and humans.

-Spiders live here. How do you feel about staying under the same roof as spiders?

The statement and question use spiders, one of the most common non-humans found at bus stops or in public spaces, as an example to guide people to think and feel about the entanglement between humans and non-humans.

²⁵ Natalie: This also applies to metro stations and railway stations, yet bus stations are usually more represented depending on the size of the urban area. Metros and trains require a completely different and more elaborate infrastructure, which of course also involves higher expenses. Depending on how a city has developed or is geographically located, there are different opportunities for providing a public transport network there. I assume that buses can be added more easily to an evolving city and therefore, for me, the decision to work with bus stops in the first place supports the decision even more.

²⁶ Natalie: I am still wondering what our *inter*action was. To me, it feels like a hybrid of thoughts. We for sure wanted to project our worldview through questions and statements in the “spacetime” of reflection, but we also invited people to write things down. Talking about “interaction” I have the feeling that it was not reciprocal. But we projected the worldview there and tried to kick-start something. They were free to answer or respond or keep a thread of conversation alive, but to me, the written “answers” were not for us as a team, but for the next participant. If we were to collect data, we could have not given the people waiting the chance to add things to the questions and statements. But we wanted to create some kind of a drop-in platform where the written thoughts could activate a “click in the mind”(Meadow) of the next person. The experience of a person being part of our intervention for sure differed a lot comparing the first rounds and later in the afternoon.

- *Our bodies are buses for microorganisms, they travel on/with us.*²⁷

The statement presents participants with a hypothesis that flips the entanglement between humans and non-humans, speculating about a scenario in which humans are used by non-humans.

What does it involve and why?

The interaction is part of the group's design research and contains a range of elements that are virtual, concrete, newly created, and already present. Specifically it includes the group's research theme and worldview, projecting questions and statements, a poster to introduce the research and a QR code for online responses, selected intervention sites and infrastructure, human and non-humans, and participants.

How does making your design research public relate to agency, mobilization, climate emergency and planetary boundaries?

Based on the group's research arriving at the approaches of *highlighting the existing entanglement, making the (existing but yet unnoticed) relationship more intimate and flipping the entanglement*, they are questioning the anthropocentric and dualistic mindset of separating humans and non-humans which led to exploiting human behavior. This has also led directly to an imbalance in the relationship between humans and non-humans, and has further contributed to the current climate emergency. We believe that multiple actions should be done to renegotiate the symbioses between humans and non-humans. This action projected the worldview of humans existing in entanglement with non-humans on an equal footing with plants, animals and any living creature etc. In urban areas and bus stations, the daily commuters do not tend to pay special attention to the non-human agencies being present²⁸. Therefore, actions that induce people to take the initiative to discover and think, help to achieve our goal of renegotiation.

²⁷ Xinch: As the team did not find strong references and suggestions on whether to choose the statement or the question set at bus stops, we chose to use both formats at different stops. However, the end result was that the fewest valid responses were received at the stations where the statement was used fully. However, there is still uncertainty about such a result. I think it is possible that the statement format did not attract enough engagement, or that potential participants did not know how to respond to it, and that passers-by would have been more inclined to see it as an exhibition rather than an interaction. However, there is also the possibility that the thematic content of the station is so complex that participants may not know how to respond.

²⁸Harata, Noboru. 2000. 'Passengers' Waiting Behavior at Bus Stops', January.
https://www.academia.edu/12477055/Passengers_Waiting_Behavior_at_Bus_Stops

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Appendix 1.

Photos of public intervention (taken by the authors)



Appendix 2.

Hua's reflection

The relationship between human beings and non-human is our research topic. We hope that by making people rethink the existing relationship between human beings and non-human beings, we can inspire people to seek a new relationship of harmonious symbiosis with nature. I hope it can arouse people's thinking about this issue. I think it is the key first step to deal with the CEE issue. Unfortunately, there is only this first step at the end of the project. The behavioral impact after inspiration, including the study of human desires and needs, cannot continue. Moreover, the re-establishment of the relationship between human beings and nature (non-human) is entirely based on human individual needs, because CEE has seriously affected human life. However, whether it is the use and destruction of nature based on development reasons in the past, or the desire to seek a way to protect nature (non-human) after CEE, these are all wishful thinking of human beings. Human beings have never really considered the views of nature (non-human). I think it is important to take into account the views of both sides on the issue of CEE and the search for a new relationship between the two sides. However, we need to find a way to understand the opinions of nature (non-human), so that we can really put human beings back into nature. We should avoid falling into the extremes of anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism and strive to find a balance between humanity and naturalness.