



**Relating Systems Thinking and Design
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Root Metaphors of Systemic Design, Problems and Possibilities: An invitation to dialogue

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As systemic design develops and expands, its guiding epistemologies re-enter the modes of thinking and acting through which it is developed. This recursive structure forms root metaphors, where notions such as the system, the whole, and representing complexity become taken for granted within systemic designers' everyday practices. While this process may be helpful in expanding ways of working and maintaining the identity of the field, the uncritical replication of these and other concepts may lead to discussions becoming bounded within preconfigured pathways that can lead to problematic consequences. In this dialogue session, we invite you to identify and explore root metaphors in your own practices and to contribute to the interrogation of systemic design's underlying assumptions.

KEYWORDS: systemic design, sustainability transition, root metaphors, Gregory Bateson, second-order systems, cybernetics

RSD TOPICS: Architecture & Planning, Culture & Society, Methods & Methodology, Socioecological Design, Sociotechnical Systems

Introduction

As systemic design gains mainstream acceptance, it is important to interrogate its underlying assumptions. As the field expands, its guiding epistemologies re-enter the modes of thinking and acting through which it is developed. This recursive structure forms root metaphors that are taken for granted as part of the intuitive habitus of systemic designers' everyday practices. Root metaphors such as the system, the whole, representing complexity, or the use of co- as a prefix may be helpful in expanding tools and methods and maintaining the identity of the field. But the uncritical replication of these and other concepts may lead to discussions becoming bounded within preconfigured pathways or to faulty logics being more difficult to interrogate.

The term root metaphors was introduced by Chet Bowers, building on the work of Gregory Bateson, to acknowledge how problematic conceptual maps (metaphorical interpretative frameworks constituted in the past) enter recursively into the construction of today's cultural and ecological realities. When in place, they have an auto-instituting character and operate mostly unconsciously and in stories and narratives—in this case, in the stories that systemic designers tell about themselves and their work. Root metaphors are not scientifically or empirically addressable but rather emerge more implicitly within practice sites.

In this dialogue session, we invite participants to collectively identify and explore root metaphors in systemic design. All present join in relay form, picking up from each other's replies. Responses may be verbal, gestural, through drawing, through a poem, or by any other means. The conversation is recorded, and a script is shared amongst participants. In a second round of editing, we turn the script into a longer co-authored text by the participants, accompanied by illustrations, and published in the proceedings.

Agenda

90 minutes total

30 minutes – Introductions and setting the framework

20 minutes – Explore root metaphors in individual practices

30 minutes – Group summaries leading to a relay dialogue

10 minutes – Closing the session

Related reading

1. Bateson, G. (2000). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. University of Chicago Press. (Originally published 1972)
2. Bateson, M. C. (2005). *Our own metaphor: A personal account of a conference on the effects of conscious purpose on human adaptation*. Hampton Press.
3. Bowers, C. A., & Wickersham, E. (2002). An ecological understanding—Problematic: Metaphor matters. *Counterpoints*, 151, 2002, 73–88.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42976848>
4. Bowers, C. A. (2015, September 14). *Chet Bowers: Part 1: Linguistic roots of the ecological crisis* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0YSPtPnNio>
5. Krippendorff, K. (2021, July 7-13). A critical cybernetics [Paper presentation]. *The Art and Science of the Impossible: The 65th Annual Meeting of the International Society for the Systems Sciences*, online. <https://vimeo.com/585868761/ee13ba771f>
6. Lockton, D. (2022). Exploring Bateson's syllogism in grass in systemic design. *Proceedings of Relating Systems Thinking and Design, RSD11*.
<https://rdsymposium.org/exploring-batesons-syllogism-in-grass-in-systemic-design/>
7. Perera, D. (2023). Design fictioning of a second-order kind: Runaway cybernetics, futures of work, possibilities of engagement. *Enacting Cybernetics*, 1(1), Article 1.
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8. Sevaldson, B., & Jones, P. (2019). An interdiscipline emerges: Pathways to systemic design. *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation*, 5(2), 75-84.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2019.05.002>
9. Sweeting, B. & Sutherland, S. (2022). Possibilities and practices of systemic design: Questions for the next decade of Relating Systems Thinking and Design. *Proceedings of Relating Systems Thinking and Design, RSD11*.
<https://rsdsymposium.org/questions-for-systemic-design/>

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