

Drawing inspiration from the Bauhaus, a pioneering design school, to manage the green transition

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Titre original S'inspirer du Bauhaus, une école de design pionnière, pour gérer la transition verte.

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For several years now, research and training programs conducted in partnership with socio-economic players have been demonstrating their commitment to working towards the transitions called for today: first and foremost the green transition. For example, an aeronautics supplier is developing a new channel for recycling its components; a company is supporting collective action to reinvent ski resorts in the face of climate change; and co-design is enabling players to mobilize satellite data for new services that strongly support sustainable development. There are studies underway to radically lighten the weight of glass bottles to reduce their environmental impact, and others to redesign socio-agro-ecosystems with a better food-agriculture-environment articulation.

Yet many of these transitions, still in their infancy, seem already to be struggling. Management science tells us that one of the reasons for these difficulties is a lack of capacity to collectively manage the unknown. The required changes are not just a matter of following a predefined trajectory towards a well-known end state, as the origin of the notion of transition would suggest. Contemporary transitions are transitions into the unknown; they involve inventing a sustainable future in the face of crises and the limits of past modes of development. We can, however, retain the systemic nature of the concept: all dimensions of action need to be reinvented.

Contemporary transitions call for a renewal of, inter alia, sciences, uses and lifestyles, skills, collaboration and solidarity regimes, responsibilities, and ways of learning and teaching. Far from a naive techno-solutionism, the need for design is immense and underestimated, so much so that it concerns aspects transcending the usual categories of R&D and

technology. The management sciences are warning us: managing collective design efforts for transitions into the unknown implies a major paradigm shift for management.

From creative destruction to creative preservation?

For a long time, managers were equated with decision-makers – people who saw contemporary transitions as nothing more than sacrificial dilemmas in which each decision produced only losers. This would inexorably lead to a hardening of positions and discourse: employment versus biodiversity, social peace versus the environment, mobility for all versus low-carbon motorization, and so on. Manager-decision-makers would thus be tempted to make decisions that would ensure a minimum of social acceptability.

Yet, faced with the unknown, the need is for designing, not managing. The manager-design expert organizes collective exploration to imagine new, more sustainable, more resilient alternatives. This is done by mobilizing all the inventive resources of science-art-industry-society to design future prosperity and power.

Management of the unknown has developed significantly in the innovation departments that have appeared in companies and organizations in recent years. But managing the unknowns of transitions has two singular characteristics.

First, contemporary transitions raise the question of preserving not only resources, but also community life, values, and lifestyles. Here, the innovation regime cannot be one of Schumpeterian destructive creation; it must be one of preservation-oriented creation.

Secondly, transitions have an impact on many different players: citizens, associations, politicians, academics and, in the corporate world, a wide range of functions. The challenge today is to make all these players designers, well beyond the strict confines of "innovation experts". In short, managing the unknowns of transitions requires collective creation that preserves, and in which all players can be designers.

Drawing inspiration from the pioneering Bauhaus school of design

This type of management has yet to be invented. It has regularly been evoked in management science but has lacked the theoretical underpinnings to account for rationality in the unknown that is both generative and preservative. Progress in design theory and advances in corporate governance have contributed to the development of more solid foundations, and opened the way to exploring the forms, methods, and responsibilities of this management of the unknowns of transitions.

This work has shed light on the way in which collectives can be creative because they preserve and draw on their creative heritage. By this we mean a set of knowledge and rules of collective action characterizing that which is preserved, to reinforce the associated creative logics. The challenge now is to apply this work, to ensure its socio-economic impact and scientific development.

What if the inspiration for this came from the world of training in creation?

Faced with the socio-economic changes of the 20th century, the German Bauhaus school brought together theorists, masters of form, and design practitioners, masters of material, to develop creative forces by combining the logics of training, research, and impact. Before it was dissolved by the Nazis, who saw its achievements as "degenerate art", and its members went into exile, it made a decisive contribution to design, industry, and the arts.

Inspired by this Bauhaus, and with the support of like-minded partners, Mines Paris – PSL is inaugurating a new "Bauhaus of Transitions". Here, researchers, practitioners, and leaders of inventive collectives will be able to develop new languages ("forms") and new practices ("matter") to manage the unknowns of contemporary transitions in ecology, health, mobility, materials, energy, industrial sovereignty, and spheres of information.

This Bauhaus for 21st-century transitions aims to renew management culture by exploring models of preserving generativity and experimenting with impactful projects. It is intended as a space for research-utopias and new forms of collective action to manage the unknown, in conjunction with other scientific disciplines exploring generative logics (data science, biology, history, mathematics, engineering sciences, etc.). It is part of the French, European and global networks of universities, companies and public institutions dedicated to meeting the challenges posed by managing the unknowns of transitions.