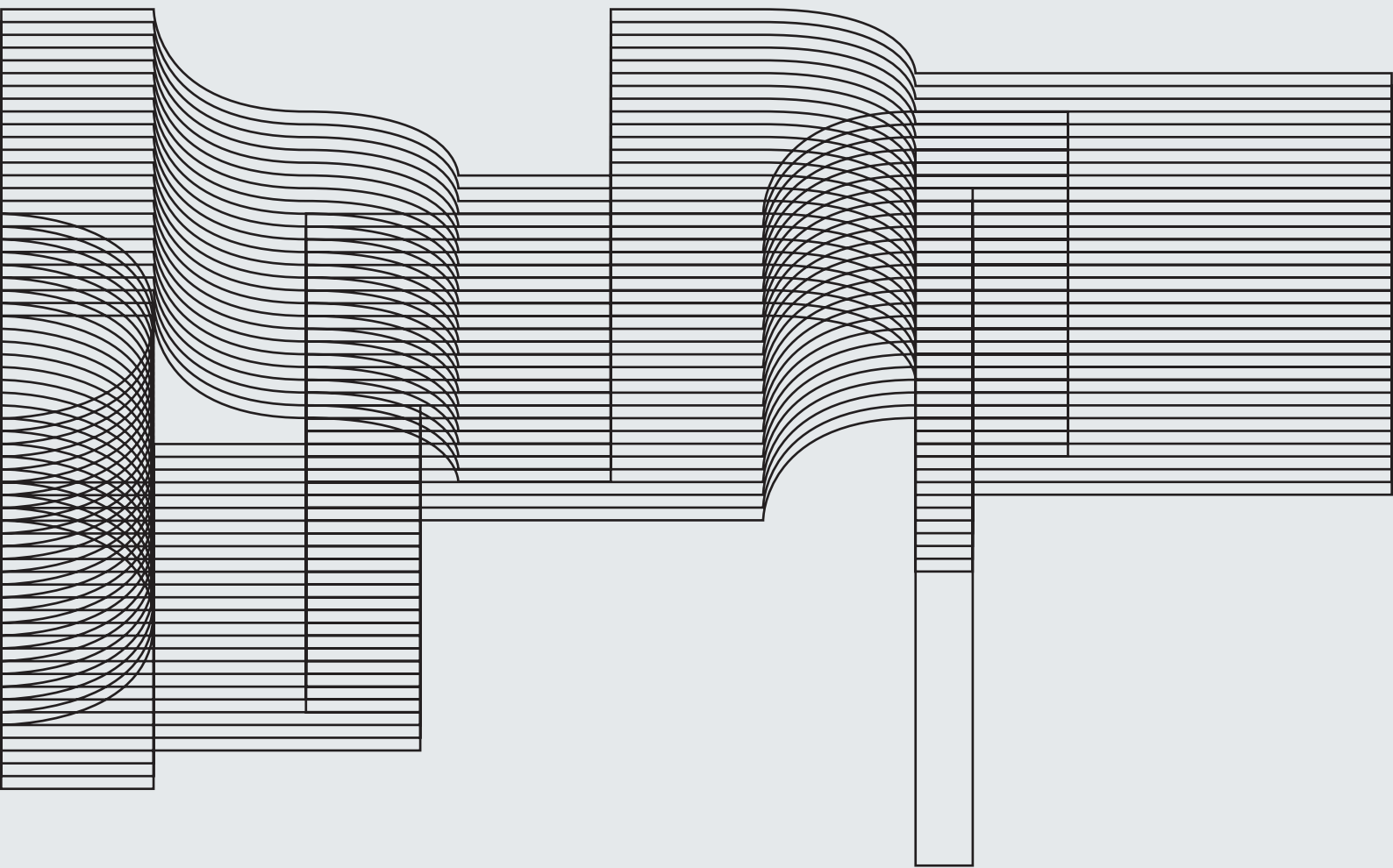


# KEYWORDS

Building a language of systems change

VOLUME 001



# **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

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INTRODUCTION

CONTRIBUTORS

SYNTHESIS

WORDS

QUESTIONS

PROCESS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

# INTRODUCTION

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Words matter. Words are intimately linked to the accumulation and exercise of power in complex fields of activity. For people who want to imagine and build alternatives to the large-scale systems in which we live, words play an especially critical role in making legible and transforming system dynamics.

System change as a practice is starting to coalesce, in the work and identities of ‘system entrepreneurs’, that is, organisations, groups and movements and/or individuals in collaboration who work to transform systems by recognising incumbent system architectures, then by incubating, building, and promoting alternatives. The keywords in this volume come from work completed at a November 2014 Workshop at the University of Oxford, with the theme ‘Keywords: Building the language of system entrepreneurship’.[1]

## WHY KEYWORDS?

This volume reports on first steps to bring together people from across the UK system change world to address the challenge of language in systems change. Our focus on ‘Keywords’ is in part a recognition of the wide range of scholarly and practical wisdom about how words and other symbol systems bring into common practice more abstract purposes. ‘Keywords’ today are most commonly associated with practices of search in digital data. Our usage harks back to the classic work by Raymond Williams (1976) on Keywords as signposts of deep cultural change.[2] One important speculation to come is the way these two usages of the word keyword may well be joining up in contemporary digital-social change practices.[3] Williams argued that certain words change meaning in fundamental ways in times of basic social and institutional change. He says ‘I called these words Keywords in two connected senses: They are significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretations; [and] they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought’ (1976: 15).

## WHAT IS SYSTEM CHANGE?

We moderns live in worlds complexly and consequentially organised by large-scale institutional systems.[4] These systems, on the one hand, provide for many of our everyday needs and wealth; yet, on the other hand, they restrict the well-being of others and create a host of unintended negative side effects. Our carbon-based energy system, for example, supports unprecedented mobility and heats our houses, yet it also contributes to climate instability and geopolitical risks. Our education systems realise a fundamental right to learning and knowledge,

facilitating the pursuit of human potential. However, they also reinforce many societal divides and they produce workers set for a 20th century industrial economy, who often encounter frustration or failure in a contemporary knowledge society. Our healthcare systems extend lives, but they are not financially sustainable, nor do they necessarily improve well-being and quality of lives.

These massive systems seem like monoliths—powerful, integral, and enduring structures that dominate the institutional landscape. Some system entrepreneurs provide a powerful imagery: ‘These massive systems seem like skyscrapers—powerful, enduring, and rigid structures that dominate the landscape. And yet these skyscrapers must somehow evolve and change to create space for the new and better system that wants to be born’ (Tiesinga, H. et al., 2014).[5] Shifting these institutions doesn’t just happen: Systemic change “needs to be planted in the right conditions and carefully cultivated to ensure it can take root and flourish” (Sherri Torjman, 2014).

There are a growing number of actors working inside and outside of incumbent systems to create this type of change. We call these people ‘system entrepreneurs’. They can be found in a wide range of industries, markets and sectors. They address some of the most complex challenges of our time – from climate change, to depleting fish-stocks, to the misalignment of our global financial system. They architect and build new form systems, based on alternative principles and desiderata. [6] They are building new markets that connect social entrepreneurs to capital, fixing inefficient markets in the developing world, and creating the infrastructure for inclusive markets in many sectors. They map the possible solutions in each sector and fund the most promising; they are helping to evolve the most entrenched and broken systems from healthcare to food, from finance to political participation.

Systems entrepreneurship is an emerging practice that lacks a shared vocabulary. Systems entrepreneurs work in ways that don’t fit into existing categories of social institutional change in their efforts to transform market systems. Even more importantly, the ‘market’ for systems entrepreneurship is itself nascent, neither well-structured, nor well understood. For the success of these endeavours, it is important to name this world of work activity, to build language around it and to develop an understanding of the emerging methods and practices related to it, so that it becomes credible and better funded.

‘System’ itself is a complex word with rich history and usages. In recent decades, one broad meaning with wide usage underscores the fact of interdependencies, with attention to features of the system. This has generated

[1] See later section ‘How we crafted the Keywords’ for a detailed review of the Workshop process, purposes, logistics, and learnings.

[2] Williams, R. (1976), *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Croon Helm. See also revisions and related updates, Oxford University Press 1983; and Bennett, T., L. Grossberg, and M. Morris, eds. (2005), *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Blackwell. For a rich, contemporary overview, see the Keywords Project, a joint project by University of Pittsburgh and Jesus College, Cambridge: [http://keywords.pitt.edu/williams\\_keywords.html](http://keywords.pitt.edu/williams_keywords.html)

[3] We thank Andrew Bredenkamp and colleagues at Dublin’s CNGL industry-university research consortium for this provocation.

[4] This paragraph adapted from the original text in Tiesinga, H. et al, (2014).

[5] Tiesinga, H., et al. (2014) *Labcraft: How Social Labs Cultivate Change through Innovation & Collaboration*. Labcraft Publishing.

[6] The work by Social Innovation Generation in Toronto points to how such system builders display characteristics of keystone individuals – see Hwang, V. and Horowitz, G. (2012). *The Rainforest: The Secret to Building the Next Silicon Valley*. They are: They are: integrative -- “comfortable reaching across boundaries to bring people together”; influential -- “have the ability to convince people to do things that they otherwise would never do. But they never use force or coercion”; and impactful -- “have the ability to make things happen, not just create a lot of heat and noise.”

See also, M.J. Ventresca (2011) on ‘System builders’: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9T3diyqRPg>

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work on complexity and also on 'systems thinking', e.g., seeing the forest as well as the trees. For our purposes, system change involves four steps: Recognition of current institutional dynamics, including identification of institutional arrangements, rules of the game, and supporting practices; recognising critical elements in that system with tools for legibility; making available, promoting and incubating alternatives to the existing system (e.g., either a cascade of incremental innovations from the periphery or a transformative innovation in a system critical component); implementing on these alternatives, and re-stitching the 'system' elements into a new working arrangement, which often requires substantial collateral and complementary infrastructure.

The intent of this volume is to continue a conversation occurring informally across existing systems change 'worlds' and amongst practitioners, policymakers and researchers: What are the words these system builders use and what meanings do they carry? How best to recognise these words as a specialist vocabulary, to what purposes and to what impacts? Our ambition is to explore and share a set of Keywords, this to better articulate the purpose, process and impact of system entrepreneurship work and in doing so, take it to a wider audience.

## THE KEYWORDS WORKSHOP

We have identified language as a particular challenge to systems entrepreneurs and a key leverage point for change for a number of reasons;

### **Systems entrepreneurs have to find the words to express what they do in a world where there are few examples.**

The shared language to describe the intention, strategies and organisational models of systems entrepreneurs is incomplete, partial, and distributed among diverse communities.

It doesn't have to be this way. We can observe how effective language is at spreading change strategy if we look at other examples. We have come to a definition of social enterprise for instance, as a business with a social benefit at its heart. In CSR we understand that we're talking about how businesses take account of their positive and negative impact on people, planet and profit.

These movements have emerged themselves over the last ten years. They have spread most effectively once the practitioners, commentators and academics around them have been able to describe, in simple terms, why they believe in an alternative methodology, what it is,

and what the impact of their work might be. This allows a much wider audience to participate and enables the mainstream press to champion the practice, thus contributing to widespread awareness and practices.

Systems change strategies are emergent and often require iteration. Systems entrepreneurs are trying to catalyse emergent innovations in a particular domain, through diverse strategies and interventions.

They tend to act, reflect, adapt their strategy and act again. This makes it particularly difficult for systems entrepreneurs to articulate their strategy and the outcomes of their work. Their strategies are often multipronged in their nature and finding an elevator pitch that characterises their organisation and demystifies its work is a huge challenge.

As Eugenie Teasley of Spark and Mettle says: *"I needed to be able to articulate what I was trying to do, even though it wasn't clear and kept changing. I still haven't nailed down my pitchy one liner."* [7]

### **The prospect of systems change can make people very uncomfortable. A strong narrative can help put things in perspective. It can build our collective understanding 'where we have been' and 'where we are going'.**

We inherit systems that most people do not question. Systems like democracy and capitalism, health care, education, government services, and industries like food and finance, have pre-existed many of our individual lives and have been passed on through generations.

Julian Corner, of Lankelly Chase has his own strategy: *"(O)ne of the interesting things about systems change is history, and understanding the historical route of where our systems have come from. It can be quite revelatory in terms of freeing you up to think it doesn't have to be like this, that at some point along the route a decision was made that we have inherited, that have then ossified over time and just become the way we do things."* [8]

Systems change work calls these features of our landscape into question, reframing the way we think about them. This requires strong storytelling skills and an ability to break these 'comforting' systems down into parts that can be changed. As Lisa Harker of The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) notes, *"The way we communicate about social issues can open up or shut down people automatically."* [9] We know that many of the systems entrepreneurs in our network have already developed powerful strategies around such narratives and we would like to surface and share these.

For example social innovation specialist, Jennie Winhall says *"I think there's something in there about how you describe the*

[7] Teasley and others quoted here made remarks available by video on [systemschangers.com](https://www.systemschangers.com), a digital platform created by The Point People. This platform highlights the practice of a group of systems changers in the UK through a series of video interviews. The themes of narrative and language reoccurred in many of the interviews. This work helped inform the Keywords Workshop.

[8] Corner, on [systemschangers.com](https://www.systemschangers.com)

[9] Harker, on [systemschangers.com](https://www.systemschangers.com).

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*problem in the first place. If you simple describe the problem as it's seen through the eyes of the existing system constraints, it looks quite narrow and locked down, whereas if you find a way to turn it on its head or rethink what the ultimate goal is then new opportunities arise that weren't there before and that can have their own momentum."*[10]

Narrative helps us become aware that the systems we live in are socially constructed and can help people become aware of their relationships to the wider system, growing systems consciousness.

## HOW WE USE KEYWORDS

Williams provided brief etymologies of over 100 Keywords of post WW2 British culture and society, along with paragraphs for each to document its 'new' and shifting meaning. For Williams, Keywords 'is not a series of footnotes to dictionary histories or definitions. It is, rather, the record of an inquiry into a vocabulary: A shared body of words and meanings of the practices and institutions which we group as culture and society' (1976: 15). His argument underscored that such keywords carry the new meanings but also provide evidence of those shifts.

Williams provides diverse words that resonate today for the work of system builders, in vivid, if changing ways from his early analysis. These include 'community,' 'conventional,' 'institution,' 'pragmatic,' and 'technology' (all from Williams 1976). We emphasise this quality of Keywords: They are words that capture and effect worlds in transition. In the Keywords in this volume, we provide brief etymological discussion, followed by rich context and quotes from the Workshop participants. In many cases, these words are shifting in purpose and usage for system builders from their now conventional meanings.

With the Keywords in this volume, we build on this dual quality of words that imagine alternatives and also document them, to engage the project of building a vocabulary for systems entrepreneurs. Words organise available social reality, providing 'categories' of what exists, what is good, and what is possible (Therborn 1980/1999).[11] Words both reinforce current practices and arrangements, and also authorise innovative ones. Jargon carries specialty expertise, in succinct form, in ways that may be exclusive but are also efficient. Vernacular 'localises' meaning to particular communities. And, shared language is a key building block for communities of practice that launch effective interventions and that mobilise successfully towards change and innovation.

Words also describe and also conjure worlds (Nelson Goodman 1978[12]; Rich 2008[13]); words carry with them freighted meanings that mean other and more than intended. A wide range of voices that call for change and transformation have focused on the problems of legacy language: Orwell, in his well-known work on bureaucratic-political language, pointed to how words and their meanings come to be intertwined with purposeful distraction and how this exhausts the language. [14] Audre Lorde's trenchant observation that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' signals the ways that words as tools require renovation or re-invention to be fit for purpose. The import of words also suggests silences, whether intentional and motivated or inadvertent and serendipitous, where words are absent or do not suffice.

That said, initiatives to transform incumbent systems routinely spill across incumbent knowledge and existing words. These starting points for change may well source in silences, in the absence of available or recognised words. Practices may come first, with words to follow. This kind of transformative action may well need to invent, repurpose, capture and/or conventionalise available words. In Williams' original ideas on Keywords, he recognised that the words both focused action and also themselves carried and effected action. As the old feminist adage goes, 'who gets to name the world, controls it'. Slogans like Occupy Wall Street's 'the 99%' exemplify how powerful words can be at galvanising and mobilising a group of people who want the same thing.

Please enjoy the Keywords we have assembled here. We welcome your contributions, both by using them, adding to them, and rethinking them. Welcome to contact Marc Ventresca ([marc.ventresca@sbs.ox.ac.uk](mailto:marc.ventresca@sbs.ox.ac.uk)) or Rachel Sinha ([rachelmsinha@gmail.com](mailto:rachelmsinha@gmail.com))

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Marc Ventresca and Rachel Sinha  
November 2014

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[10] Winhall, on [systemchangers.com](http://systemchangers.com)

[11] Therborn, Goran (1980), *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (reprinted 1999 as Verso Classic).

[12] Goodman, N. 1978. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Hackett Publishing Company. Indianapolis & Cambridge. 'Worlds are made out of symbols [including words] through these processes: Composition and decomposition; weighting; ordering; deletion and supplementation; and reformations'. Source: <http://www.cs.joensuu.fi/~whamalai/skc/goodman.html>

[13] Rich, A. 2008 'Cartographies of silence', <https://poetrying.wordpress.com/2008/12/15/cartographies-of-silence-adrienne-rich/>

[14] Orwell, G. 1946. 'Politics and the English language', in *Horizon*; see also the blog 'Politics and Language' for a useful reading of the original essay: <https://politicsandlanguage.wordpress.com/2012/06/23/main-points-revisited-of-orwells-famous-essay/>

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# A NOTE ON THE SYNTHESIS

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These Keywords were not selected by consensus, but rather by their relevance to the practice of particular individuals. We didn't want the selection of words to hide the messy complexity of systems change or to simplify the rich variety of approaches in the group. After a lot of conversation, debate and listening, each participant at the Keywords event, chose a word and then in small groups discussed the ways that word related to our work.

My role at the event was to listen deeply and to synthesise. In writing about the usage of each word, I have drawn on material generated throughout workshop. All of the non-attributed quotes are taken directly from the workshop itself, or from correspondence after the event.

To begin with, I have woven these words together into a description of the work of systems changers. Please take the below as an invitation rather than a definition; as part of a conversation, rather than an attempt to lock down a definitive account of the work. After all, there are many different ways to tell the story of systems change...

ELLA SALTMARSH  
NOVEMBER 2014

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# THE WORDS

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CHOREOGRAPH

DESTROY

EMERGENCE

EMPATHY

HOLD

INFRASTRUCTURE

ILLUMINATE

LONG NOW

MAGNET

PLURALITY

PROVISION

PURPOSE

SEISMIC SHIFT

SPACE

UNCERTAINTY

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# SYNTHESIS

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Leading systems change requires a strong sense of PURPOSE and EMPATHY, combined with the ability to HOLD PLURALITY, to navigate UNCERTAINTY and to take a LONG-NOW perspective, based on the understanding that the changes we seek may take years, decades or even centuries to achieve.

We identified three important elements to systemic work:

1. ILLUMINATION - making the current system visible, understanding intervention points, highlighting the SEISMIC SHIFTS, bringing existing solutions into focus and envisioning the future
2. Building - convening players to create the new, through experimentation, reflection and iteration; producing powerful MAGNETS (objects, projects, frames) that attract participation.
3. Unbuilding - DESTROYING negative elements of the old, whether through direct confrontation or through a gentle unthreading.

Systems changers won't necessarily work across all three of these areas, and these activities don't necessarily happen in a particular order. We often find ourselves oscillating between them, as we respond to change. This work is necessarily messy, based on principles of EMERGENCE and self-organisation.

There is both a structural and a dynamic aspect to systems change, with a focus both on INFRASTRUCTURE and SPACE, and the PROVISIONING and CHOREOGRAPHING of change.

The words we chose relate to four kinds of craft:

1. Inner craft- reflecting, connecting, holding
  2. Thinking craft - mapping, analysis, conceptualising, illuminating, sharing
  3. Organising craft- convening, choreographing, galvanising
  4. Building craft- creating, modelling, exemplifying, iterating, manifesting
-

# **WELCOME TO OUR WORDS**

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# CHOREOGRAPH



**Origin:** 1789, from French chorégraphie, coined from Latinized form of Greek khoreia “dance” (see chorus) + graphein “to write” (see -graphy).

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Just as the choreographer designs sequences of movement for others to participate in, so too does the systems changer. This is not the choreographer as conductor, or composer, but rather as the creator of a space for movement, expression and connection. The choreographer has influence without control.

Choreographers themselves are normally invisible, working behind the scenes, so too are systems-changers. Much of their work is hidden. Take the process for convening a diverse group of people to initiate change. Depending on the complexity of situation, designing for such a conversation can take weeks. Yet if done well, it will feel effortless to participants who will be unaware of the work involved.

Choreography also relates to the craft of creating the conditions for spaces and events that support change (see HOLD), paying careful attention to the details from the location, to the invitations, to food, to organising materials and interaction.

*“If you want people to have a difference conversation, rearrange the chairs!”*

Choreographing can also refer to the physical movement of the facilitator during a process.

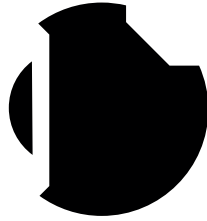
*“As hosts of a conversation, our body language, where we sit in the room, how tidy we keep the space we are working in, all has a significant impact on how the group responds. If we, the facilitators, all sit at one table at the back of the room, for example, it creates a feeling of them and us. When things get turbulent we literally encircle the group, one person stands at each corner of the room. This acts like a psychological blanket, which says ‘we’re committed to this and we’ll be standing with you until we work it out.’”*

We can stretch this metaphor to talk about ‘choreographies’. As systems changers we need to be aware that different people like to dance to different music. Take the example of one of the chefs who engaged with the Future of Fish project. The initial idea, or ‘choreography’ (in the sense of steps he might take) was to support him as a campaigner. That didn’t work for him though, he was uncomfortable -- it wasn’t his dance. So Future of Fish worked with him to create a different ‘choreography’ of steps, finding other ways to give him a platform (working with culinary schools, helping other chefs to cook sustainably and extolling the virtues of eating fish). Here to choreograph refers to the ability to support others in finding the dance that most suits their personality, skills and context.

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**Related words:** align/ design/ curate/ platform/ dance/ improvise

# DESTROY



**Origin:** early 13c., from Old French *destruire* (12c., Modern French *détruire*) “**destroy, ravage, lay waste,**” from Vulgar Latin *\*destrugere* (source of Italian *distruggere*), refashioned (influenced by *destructus*), from Latin *destruere* “**tear down, demolish,**” literally “**un-build,**” from *de-* “**un-, down**” (see *de-*) + *struere* “**to pile, build**”.

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Destroying or unbuilding is a crucial element of systems change.

We may actively dismantle parts of a system, or we may deconstruct a system through our work creating alternatives. Just as when a magnet attracts iron filings it is also pulling them away from something else, when systems changers attract people/ resources they simultaneously pull them away from the incumbent system.

Some systems changers will directly confront vested interests and the status quo, challenging dominant frames and shining a light (see ILLUMINATION) on their negative impact. Others will use more gentle tactics, quietly unpicking the existing system.

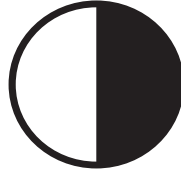
Destruction can feel dark, negative and difficult. Sometimes the people we work with will have to face the pain of this destruction first hand, like the community of senior executives in the finance sector who had devoted their lives to getting to the top of the ladder only to realise that the ladder was against the wrong wall, that the profession they were so proud of was doing more harm than good. In these cases, systems changers need the skills (see HOLD) to support individuals as they grieve and adjust to change.

Other times, the people we work with will fiercely resist destruction. Learning how to deal with resistance and rejection from the systems we are seeking to transform, is a key part of this work.

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**Related words:** deconstruct/ dismantle/ destabilise/ bend/ unsettle/ collapse/ transition/ decay/ discomfort/ disaggregate

# EMPATHY



**Origin:** The English word is derived from the Ancient Greek word ἐμπάθεια (empathēia), “**physical affection, passion, partiality**” which comes from ἐν (en), “**in, at**” and πάθος (pathos), “**passion**” or “**suffering**”. The term was adapted by Hermann Lotze and Robert Vischer to create the German word Einfühlung (“**feeling into**”), which was translated by Edward B. Titchener into the English term empathy.

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Empathy is the bedrock for systems-change. It’s vital to listen deeply, to suspend judgement and to be able to place yourselves in the shoes of people occupying very different positions in the system. Systems changers design mechanisms for deepening empathy.

While empathy is a vital entry point, different systems changers, have different opinions when it comes whether they are trying to change the people they work with.

*“You need to cut with the grain of the wood.”*

*“I’m not trying to change anyone’s values. I’m not trying to force people to care. I’m trying to meet them where they are.”*

*“Our job is to move people’s thinking along. To build the appetite for change.”*

Having empathy does not equate to agreeing with all opinions. Sometimes systems entrepreneurs will need to listen to incumbents who vigorously disagree and will lose out as the system changes (see DESTRUCTION). It’s the responsibility of the systems leader to listen to these views and acknowledge they exist, even if they won’t change the direction of the work.

Empathy is linked to a beginner’s mind-set. Many systems changers are not sector specialists -- they are not experts in a particular field. As generalists they develop the flexibility to move into many different professional words. They become multi-lingual, able to speak many different languages. Not being an expert with a particular drum to bang, enables them to better empathise with different perspectives and to convene diversity (see PLURALITY).

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**Related words:** compassion/ to witness/ equanimity/ non-judgement/ to listen/ to appreciate

# EMERGENCE



**Origin:** late 14c., “**rising from what surrounds it, coming into view,**” from Latin emergentem (nominative emergens), present participle of emergere “**to rise out or up**” (emerge).

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Emergence refers to the process by which two or more things interact to create something new that is greater than the sum of its parts.

As systems changers we use the term in different ways. It is a helpful way of framing the unpredictability (see UNCERTAINTY) and unintended consequences of much of our work.

*“If I talk about something that’s emergent, it allows me to not know the outcome.”*

*“Change is scary. The language of emergence is a way to have a conversation that enables people to evolve and take risks.”*

Studies of complex adaptive systems, from the global economy, to biological ecosystems, to the Internet, have highlighted how new relationships, structures and properties emerge through processes of self-organisation. These emergent properties aren’t a feature of any one component but of the system as a whole. With the principle of emergence, causation is iterative; effects become causes.

Interconnectivity is key to emergence -- without connections, interaction is impossible. Systems changers cross-pollinate, connecting diverse ideas, people and organisations (PLURALITY). These new connections are essential to changing the emergent properties of a system.

When systems changers create exemplar projects (see MAGNET), the principles of emergence mean that even if these projects don’t gain traction, their very existence changes the market for change initiatives. They become transitional objects that allow others to learn and build new iterations.

Emergence is also relevant in the sense of ‘coming into view’ (see ILLUMINATE), Here it refers to showing how events, structures or concepts are part of a system rather than disparate bits and pieces.

On a micro-level, many systems changers use principles of emergence to design the processes they use with groups (see HOLD & CHOREOGRAPH), this involves providing the minimal viable structure (see INFRASTRUCTURE) to allow people to self organise.

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**Related words:** generative/ unpredictable/ evolution/ the adjacent possible



# HOLD



**Origin:** Old English *haldan* (Anglian), *healdan* (West Saxon), “**to contain, grasp; retain; foster, cherish,**” class VII strong verb (past tense *heold*, past participle *healden*), from Proto-Germanic *\*haldan* (cognates: Old Saxon *haldan*, Old Frisian *halda*, Old Norse *halda*, Dutch *houden*, German *halten* “**to hold,**” Gothic *haldan* “**to tend**”), originally “**to keep, tend, watch over**” (as cattle), later “**to have.**”

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Transforming systems requires leaders with the ability to hold the space for change; to foster, cherish, tend and nurture. These leaders focus on how they can become better instruments to hold the uncertainty, destruction and emergence that is part of changing systems. “Who I am being is more important than what I am doing.”

Often working behind the scenes, these leaders hold a space to bring together very different kinds of people who often hold very different perspectives (see PLURALITY). Convening such diverse groups is often fragile and emotionally charged. This can be enormously challenging work that requires commitment, responsibility, authenticity and vulnerability.

Systems entrepreneurs need to be able to hold a space for understanding to arise between people with opposing opinions.

*“Dune was one the last of an indigenous tribe in Alaska. A fisherman and environmental activist, Dune and his tribe had been reliant on salmon for generations. Gerry was a weather-beaten, fish processing executive from New Hampshire. The commercialization of the Alaskan fishery and particularly the commercial processors, were destroying the livelihoods of Dune and his tribe. On paper these two should have hated each other. At a Future of Fish workshop, we brought these two together and against all odds they became friends. Dune even came to refer to Jerry as a ‘brother.’”*

Finally, systems changers often need to coach, support and hold up, the people they work with.

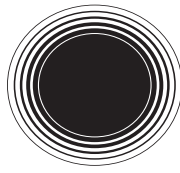
*“One entrepreneur supported by the Future of Fish, confided that he would have given up years ago if it hadn’t been for us. Over the years, we’ve provided strategic advice, helped him manage existing relationships and develop a new business model that supports his advocacy. But the part he remembers most vividly is that we believed in him. The bottle of bourbon sent on a bad day, the embroidered pillow with the reminder, ‘We are on this road TOGETHER’ ultimately made more of an impression than the tactical advice. Or, perhaps, the container in which that advice was delivered—a supportive relationship—played a more important role in supporting his tenacity.”*

Systems leaders both provide springboards to action, and cushions to soften the fall during difficult times.

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**Related words:** cultivate/ tend/ nurture/ cherish/ foster

# ILLUMINATE



**Origin:** late 14c., “**spiritual enlightenment**,” from Latin illuminationem (nominative illuminatio), from past participle stem of illuminare “**to throw into light, make bright, light up;**” figuratively “**to set off, illustrate,**” from assimilated form of in- “**in, into**” (see in- (2)) + lumen (genitive luminis) “**light,**” related to lucere “**to shine**” (see light (n.)). Meaning “**action of lighting**” is from 1560s.

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The act of illuminating is an important part of changing systems.

Shining a light on the current system makes it both visible and legible. The process of illumination highlights the fault-lines, the vulnerability, the resilience and the possibility in a system. It also shows the connections between things that seem disparate, making patterns visible (See EMERGENCE). Illumination helps systems-changers identify the pressure points and understand where to intervene (see INFRA-STRUCTURE). It can also reveal the system to itself.

Systems changers shine a light onto areas where change is already happening. They bring unevenly distributed innovation into focus, sharing and often giving legitimacy to the work.

*“As a foundation we illuminate both by providing the electricity (the resource) and we also shine a light on the exciting places where change is already happening.”*

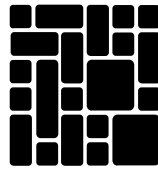
Take the example of fish; by shining a light on the current system, the Future of Fish team, quite literally made it legible. They sent a team of anthropologists into the supply chain, revealing the cultural and structural barriers to implementing up-to-date technology (see INFRA-STRUCTURE). They discovered that technology and regulation alone were not going to solve the mislabelling that is endemic in the US fish market. The ethnographic research also revealed the motivations of the players (see EMPATHY) in the middle of the supply chain, where many of the obstacles to change are situated. They realised a key intervention was to highlight the business benefits of traceability and showcase companies already benefiting from traceability technology.

Research, mapping, dissemination, storytelling, and championing are all processes of illumination.

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**Related words:** demonstrate/ show/ visible/ legible/ expose/ reveal/ brighten/ highlight

# INFRASTRUCTURE



**Origin:** 1887, from French infrastructure (1875); see infra- + structure (n.). The installations that form the basis for any operation or system. Originally in a military sense.

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Changing systems involves changing infrastructure.

Traditionally infrastructure referred to military/ industrial systems and was described using mechanistic language. Today we use the term to refer to softer, more embedded processes like rules, cognition, relationships and community in addition to physical structures. The word infrastructure, like so many of our keywords is a word in transition.

Infrastructure sets the terms of what's possible.

Systems builders use their understanding of infrastructure (see ILLUMINATION) to understand the pressure points where they can powerfully intervene. Given the powerful determining power of infrastructure, sometimes we need to accelerate the erosion of the incumbent system (see DESTRUCTION).

*"We're examining the infrastructure of laws and policies keeping the financial system in place. At the moment this very much favours incumbents and encourages monopolies. We're trying to dissolve this infrastructure so it is more accessible and malleable enabling the greater diversity and accelerating the access that the alternatives have."*

Creating the infrastructure for change is part of the work of the systems builder. The systems builder focuses on creating the minimal optimal structure to allow change to happen. This takes time (see the LONG-NOW) and can be difficult to resource.

*"Because most funders won't resource the infrastructure of change, we have to get funding for projects and then build infrastructure on the side, on the edge, almost like it's a naughty thing to be doing, when in fact it's often the most valuable part of the work."*

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**Related words:** framework/ base/ foundation

# THE LONG-NOW<sup>(13)</sup>



**Origin: LONG** (adj.) “that extends considerably from end to end,” Old English lang “**long**,” from Proto-Germanic \*langgaz (cognates: Old Frisian and Old Saxon lang, Old High German and German lang, Old Norse langr, Middle Dutch lanc, Dutch lang, Gothic laggs “**long**”).

**NOW** (adv.) Old English nu “**now, at present, immediately; now that**,” also used as an interjection and as an introductory word; common Germanic (Old Norse nu, Dutch nu, Old Frisian nu, German nun, Gothic nu “**now**”), from PIE \*nu “**now**” (cognates: Sanskrit and Avestan nu, Old Persian nuram, Hittite nuwa, Greek nu, nun, Latin nunc, Old Church Slavonic nyne, Lithuanian nu, Old Irish nu-)

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Systems change does not happen overnight. Systems changers need to develop a long-now perspective, understanding that change may take years, decades, perhaps even centuries to achieve. They may not see the fruits of their labours in their lifetime.

*“Saving the ocean is like building a cathedral, in that it won’t be completed in our lifetime. You have to address that.”*

Working to such a long time scale requires immense personal resilience. It also requires the ability to differentiate between the patience to persevere with seemingly intractable problems, and the discernment to know when change isn’t happening because the tactics aren’t working. All too often, funders hold innovations to account in a time frame that’s far too short. This makes the innovation seem implausible, when what’s implausible is the time frame itself. Take the example of the donor that after 18 years supporting organisations pushing for freedom of information, started to question whether this avenue of funding was a total failure. They persevered and in the 21st year of funding these groups, the game-changing Freedom of Information Act was passed.

A long-now perspective helps us cultivate the patience to understand that sometimes the alternatives we create don’t thrive because the opportunity for them simply doesn’t exist yet. The context isn’t able to support them yet.

*“Through studying the market, we predicted the emergence of certain technological trends. We started to build out that way to meet them and then we just waited and waited for the inflection point, when a critical mass of vendors started offering the technology”*

Although there will be important moments of impact, as with the Freedom of Information example above, the work of systems changers is ongoing. It is not about ‘fixing’, or ‘solving’, or ‘winning’.

*“I’m not out to win. I will not see a win”*

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**Related terms:** long term thinking/ long attention span/ perspective/ patience/

[13] This phrase is borrowed from the Long Now Foundation, which fosters long-term thinking and responsibility.

# MAGNET



**Origin** mid-15c. (earlier *magnes*, late 14c.), from Old French *magnete* “**magnetite, magnet, lodestone,**” and directly from Latin *magnetum* (nominative *magnes*) “**lodestone,**” from Greek *ho Magnes lithos* “**the Magnesian stone,**” from Magnesia, region in Thessaly where magnetized ore was obtained. Figurative use from 1650s.

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Creating magnets is an important tactic in systems change. These magnets can be physical objects, exemplar projects, or positive frames. They attract players to form new alliances and to get very practically involved in transforming systems.

Magnet objects are physical things that systems changers use to build coalitions. Take the example of B9 Shipping’s 100% renewably powered commercial hybrid cargo ship. Through developing this groundbreaking physical object, B9 is also building alliances on sustainable shipping in the industry. Another example is Project Wild Thing, where a documentary has been used to create a large alliance of organisations focusing on helping children spend more time in nature. These physical objects can crystallise networks around systemic issues.

Magnet projects are the exemplars that show what is possible. They create new alternatives. They enable people to experience the future. They shift people’s thinking about what is possible. Magnet projects can also break the mould for others, creating a new market for solutions and providing valuable learning for others to build on and create the next generation of change (see EMERGENCE).

Magnet frames are compelling and beautiful. We all have different definitions of beauty, so systems changers need to be agile, creating different frames for different audiences. These frames will entice rather than bully. Creating these frames requires systems changers to be able to move between different worlds and to be multi-lingual (see EMPATHY), “*I need to talk like a biologist and talk like an impact investor.*”

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**Related terms:** positive attractor/ exemplar/ targeted bait/ demonstrator

# PLURALITY



**Origin:** late 14c., “state of being plural,” from Old French pluralite (14c.), from Late Latin pluralitatem (nominative pluralitas), from Latin pluralis “of or belonging to more than one,” from plus (genitive pluris) “more”. Meaning “fact of there being many, multitude” is from mid-15c.

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Fostering plurality is a principle deeply rooted in ecology, where biologists have demonstrated the importance of heterogeneity. Systems achieve resilience through diversity, not uniformity.

Plurality refers to both the composition of the groups that systems changers convene and to the diverse tactics they use, often working on many different levels simultaneously. One participant coined the term ‘radial change’ to describe the multiple non-linear interventions points in her work.

Expertise can hamper systems change. Experts by themselves will take the discussion where it always goes. Systems entrepreneurs seek to disrupt the normal conversation. They design for difference.

Some systems changers are very intentional in ensuring their processes are open and plural, bringing in creative agitators from different disciplines and consciously curating the group to ensure generative conversations.

*“I was recently at an event to design a leadership course in an area that I’ve done a lot of work in. It brought together a diverse group from hedge funds to theatre directors to indigenous leaders. At first I thought, what’s the point? What are these people with no sector expertise going to bring? It turned out to be one of the most productive conversations I’ve had in a long time. It worked because the group were passionately committed to the outcome.”*

However, plurality isn’t always appropriate. Part of the art of systems change, is knowing when to narrow the focus.

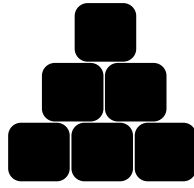
*“We’ve found that at some stages when we need to align and accelerate action, less plurality is helpful. We need both diversity and focus at different phases.”*

*“We decided we only wanted to focus on people committed to building the future, rather than also engaging with incumbents who are resisting change. This meant less diversity in the group, but made it easier to align for action. We still work to ensure difference in this narrower group.”*

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**Related words:** diversity/ heterogeneous/ multiplicity/ variety/ disparate

# PROVISION



**Origin:** late 14c., “a providing beforehand, action of arranging in advance” (originally in reference to ecclesiastical appointments made before the position was vacant), from Old French provision “**precaution, care**” (early 14c.), from Latin provisionem (nominative provisio) “a foreseeing, foresight, preparation, prevention,” noun of action from past participle stem of providere “look ahead” (see provide). Meaning “**something provided**” is attested from late 15c.; specific sense of “**supply of food**” is from c.1600.

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Provisioning has many meanings in the context of systems change.

Systems entrepreneurs often provision the safe places (see SPACE) where disparate actors can come together to connect their ideas and where uncomfortable alliances can be formed (see CHOREOGRAPH and HOLD).

Provisioning also refers to the act of sustaining change-makers who are creating models that demonstrate an alternative is possible (see MAGNET). Systems changers do this in a variety of ways, from championing individual entrepreneurs to building accelerator programmes (like the Civic Systems Lab), to providing leadership skills that help bolster these change-makers’ chances of success (like the Campaign Lab which supports economic justice campaigners).

For those who fund systems change, provisioning is about providing the financial resources to get systemic work off the ground and to sustain it through its many twists and turns.

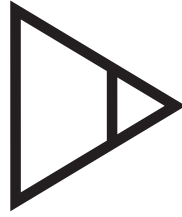
*“Trusts and foundations are beginning to talk more about the importance of funding system change, tackling the root causes of entrenched problems, not just the symptoms, and, with the benefit of independent resources and a strong belief in ‘risk-taking’, many are well placed to do so. At the same time, there is a responsibility to allocate precious resources wisely, making the allure of short-term, easy to attribute impact often irresistible. Thinking more about how we evidence long-term change in practical and meaningful ways over the short term may be key to unlocking a larder of trust and foundation provisions for this work.”*

In feminist economics, provisioning refers to the notion that economies should focus on providing for people rather than more abstract ideas of value of creation. The end goal becomes the provisioning of life in all its forms. This strand of study, brings to light the kinds of activity we don’t put monetary value on.

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**Related words:** incubate/ nurture/ cultivate/ nourish/ affordance

# PURPOSE



**Origin:** c.1300, “**intention, aim, goal,**” from Anglo-French *purpos*, Old French *porpos* “**aim, intention**” (12c.), from *porposer* “**to put forth,**” from *por-* “**forth**” (from Latin *pro-* “**forth;**” see *pur-*) + Old French *poser* “**to put, place**” (see *pose* (v.1)). On purpose “**by design**” is attested from 1580s; earlier of purpose (early 15c.).

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Purpose is core to the work of systems changers. In recent years the way we use the word has shifted back towards the original definition, which was about intention (the why), as opposed to function (the what).

*“Purpose is about the beliefs and values that underpin extraordinary action”*

One community member coined the term “hearts-eye view”, to express the purpose, passion and perspective that systems changers bring to their work. A connection to purpose provides a strong root in an uncertain world.

*“We are very intentional both about our own purposes and that of the Lab. The clearer we are on our purpose, the more attractive we are to others. It makes it easier for them to connect.”*

A clear and strong purpose, can enable diverse groups (see PLURALITY) who have coalesced around a project to overcome their differences (see UNCOMFORTABLE ALLIANCE).

The practice of clarifying purpose, of understanding the “why” is an introspective process whether on an individual, organisational or systemic level. The process often creates a vital opportunity for reflection (see SPACE). The answer is valuable, but so too is the journey we take to get there.

When systems dysfunction, sometimes this is because they have lost sight of their original purpose, other times it is because they need a new purpose.

*“We need to change the purpose of the health system from managing illness, to managing wellness. We need to change the purpose of the employment system from helping the unemployed find jobs in the short term to building employability over a lifetime.”*

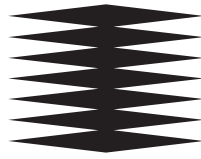
The systems entrepreneur can help systems develop a positive purpose that enables human life.

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**Related words:** Intention/ values/ telos/ motive/ intention/ reason



# SEISMIC SHIFTS



**Origin:** seismo- word-forming element meaning “earthquake,” from comb. form of Greek seismos “a shaking, shock; an earthquake,” from seiein “to shake,” from PIE root \*twei- “to agitate, shake, toss.”

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We are living through many seismic shifts, from global recession, to climate change, to the digital revolution. The underlying context is rapidly changing in all systems. Long-held myths are being displaced. The locus of power is shifting. The resulting cracks provide entry points for systems changers to transform entrenched systems. After all, it is much harder to have an impact in a closed system that is functioning well. These times of crisis (see UNCERTAINTY) are also times of opportunity. The craft of systems change is to recognise and seize that opportunity.

The work of the systems changer isn't just to note the seismic shifts, but to see the aftershocks, the resulting ripples, cascades, floods, erosion and spillovers.

*“We’re looking at seismic shifts within finance itself, mapping where those shifts are occurring in the monetary system -- in areas like long term investment, impact bonds and innovation. We’re mapping the movement of the undercurrents to help better connect, navigate and intervene.”*

*“In the Comms Lab, we’re working to identify shifting patterns in the advertising industry. We’re mapping the shifting economic, political, conceptual and organisational trends. We’re using this work to help the sector better understand the way the changing landscape is affecting their industry. Shining a light on the big shifts is really helpful in engaging them. It can act both as a carrot and a stick.”*

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**Related words:** crack/ fissure/ crisis/ tectonic shift/ chink/ fracture/ split

# SPACE



**Origin:** (n) c.1300, “**extent or area; room**” (to do something), a shortening of Old French espace “**period of time, distance, interval**” (12c.), from Latin spatium “**room, area, distance, stretch of time,**” **of unknown origin** (also source of Spanish espacio, Italian spazio). From early 14c. as “**a place,**” also “**amount or extent of time.**” From mid-14c. as “**distance, interval of space;**” from late 14c. as “**ground, land, territory; extension in three dimensions; distance between two or more points.**” From early 15c. as “**size, bulk,**” also “**an assigned position.**” (v) 1540s, “**to make of a certain extent;**” 1680s in typography; 1703 as “**to arrange at set intervals.**”

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The word ‘space’ has many uses in the context of systems change, from silence and the limits to language, to time to reflect, to the liminal places we create outside of systems.

It is important that we acknowledge the silences in our work. These silences may be because the things we want to express are unsayable. There are some concepts that cannot be defined. Systems change is about fundamentally transforming the structures that shape our lives. In breaking new ground we sometimes come across uncharted areas that we don’t yet have the language to describe.

The silences in our work may also have other origins such as domination, resistance, inequality, convention, and secrecy. It can be helpful for us to become more aware of the unsaid.

Without the spaces between words, language would be incomprehensible; without the silence between the notes, music would be a cacophony. It is the gaps that make sense of the words, the notes and our work. As systems changers, it is vital that we create space to reflect; breathing space; empty time to allow us to understand our work. This space is essential if we are to continuously learn and iterate.

Creating a space outside of the system to build exemplars (see MAGNET) is an important tactic in systems change. These liminal spaces operate as a bridge between the present and the future. They provide a safe space to experiment outside of the status quo (see HOLD). One of the key challenges for systems entrepreneurs is how to link this space back into to the existing system.

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**Related words:** gap/ silence/ reflection/ liminal

# UNCERTAINTY



**Origin.** c.1300, “of indeterminate time or occurrence,” from un- (1) “not” + certain (adj.). Meaning “not fully confident” is recorded from late 14c. (implied in uncertainty).

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A large part of systems change involves defending a space for uncertainty (see HOLD) and helping others get used to feeling uncertain.

*“I feel good about being uncertain. My job as a systems entrepreneur is to hold the uncertainty and to enable the process”*

As a society, most of the time we try to avoid being uncertain. The word has negative connotations. Look it up in a thesaurus and you will find lists of synonyms like anxiety, confusion, distrust, suspicion, weakness and insecurity. Many people and organisations find uncertainty extremely uncomfortable. As a result we come to conclusions too early, we try and make meaning too quickly and we give up too easily.

As systems changers much of our work is uncertain. This doesn't mean we lack rigor -- we can act strategically, analysing the system (see ILLUMINATE) targeting different pressure points (see INFRA-STRUCTURE) and delivering crafted processes (see HOLD), but we cannot predict the outcome.

Changing systems is full of curveball moments. We have to learn to expect the unexpected. We have to get rigorous about uncertainty, both developing the personal skills to enable us to handle it, and the process skills that enable us to work with it.

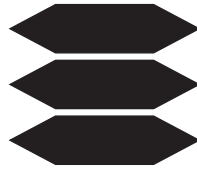
*“I think there's a kind of predictability to unpredictable events. I want to map these out. To produce a topology of unexpected events- noting categories and where they will repeat.”*

*“I've banned the word failure from my vocabulary because it implies that you know what success is. And in this work we don't always know success is. Instead we are constantly experimenting.”*

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**Related Words:** undetermined/ unpredictable/ unsettled/ chaotic/ messy/ fuzzy/ stochastic

# UNCOMFORTABLE ALLIANCE



**Origin: Uncomfortable** (adj.) early 15c. “causing bodily or mental discomfort, affording no comfort,” from un- (1) “not” + comfortable (adj.). Intransitive meaning “feeling discomfort, ill-at-ease” is attested from 1796.

**Alliance** (n.) c.1300, “bond of marriage” (between ruling houses or noble families), from Old French *aliance* (12c., Modern French *alliance*) “alliance, bond; marriage, union,” from *alialier* (Modern French *allier*) “combine, unite” (see *ally* (v.)). As a bond or treaty between rulers, late 14c.

Systems changers often find themselves forming uncomfortable alliances. A key job of the systems entrepreneur is to help players with very different perspectives, culture, values and ways of working (see PLURALITY) find enough common ground to be able to work together. Extraordinary achievements are often based on difficult partnerships.

*“When The Finance Innovation Lab launched, the World Wildlife Fund and the Institute of Chartered Accountants for England & Wales were very unlikely bedfellows. At first these very different organisations had major differences of opinion, yet it was from these very disagreements that some of the most interesting ideas emerged. Although these rocky discussions are some of the hardest parts of systems entrepreneurship, they can yield some of the most valuable work.”*

Although diversity breeds innovative thinking, ultimately, a systems entrepreneur aims to help people connect across their differences, so they can work together constructively and create a path that didn't exist before. One way of doing this is by reminding parties of what both what they share (see PURPOSE) and of the wider context.

Take, B9 Shipping, an organization working to build a 100% renewably powered commercial hybrid cargo ship (see MAGNET). This involves bringing together naval architects like Rolls Royce, who have large research budgets and long time frames, with offshore yacht manufacturers, who are more maverick with tighter timeframes and budgets. Both have firm (and different) beliefs about how to innovate. B9 is trying to create a middle way that is lower risk than the offshore yacht manufacturers are used to, and faster than the naval architects are comfortable with. B9 steers the partners through the inevitable clashes by reminding them of the higher context, offering them a vision of a ‘ship for all of you’.

Many systems changers are not experts in a particular field of the system they are transforming (see EMPATHY). This lack of sector expertise can be a key element in building uncomfortable alliances, when it translates into the ability to remain neutral, not to take sides. If you come with a strong agenda, then you will have little success in building uncomfortable alliances, as your bias will attract people who agree and repel people who disagree.

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**Related words:** unlikely allies/ constructive disagreement/ plurality

# QUESTIONS

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The Keywords event was an attempt to begin a conversation, rather than to lock down a vocabulary. We want to ignite a noisy discussion about the words we use to describe our work changing systems. We want you, the reader to suggest alternatives, to disagree, to edit. We want you to take these words and make them your own, to find vivid replacements, to translate them for different communities.

We all see the world differently. We have different entry points into different systems. We use different words to describe the work we do. Yet during the course of the Keywords event, we found common themes. We found words that rang true for practitioners working across diverse communities. We tentatively began to develop a shared language. But, as with any event worth its while, we were left with at least as many questions as answers. We would like to end with these questions...

**Keywords for whom?** There were big questions about the kinds of words we were identifying. Were we looking to select and compare the 'words in motion' in our respective fields, as Raymond Williams did with the original Keywords book? Or were we looking for the words that would help us communicate our work to external audiences, like community members, donors and influencers? Or were we looking for the internal common language that unites our systems changer community & distinguishes it from other approaches to change?

During the event, it felt like there was most energy and passion behind the latter with participants unearthing words through deep, meandering conversations about what they did on a day-to-day basis. But that's not to say there wasn't some confusion...

**Do we need to define the practice before we define the language?** Words seemed to be most meaningful for participants when they emerged from stories they told one another about what they actually do. Participants first needed to make sense of all the activities involved in their work (systems change work is by its very nature often very broad in scope) and only then were they able to generate words that held meaning for them. Talking about words without talking about their context wasn't helpful.

**Are we systems 'entrepreneurs'?** Some participants objected to this term as much of their work is at odds with the practice and discourse of entrepreneurship. Rather than seeking to build and develop one organisation as an entrepreneur does, systems changers are frequently concerned with weaving together networks, with bridging organisations and sectors, with enriching an ecosystem of organisations. Others felt that this debate was part of the challenge that brought us together at the event. That we need some kind of language in order to be seen as an emerging movement for change and that the term 'entrepreneur' captures the risk, the commitment (it's not just a 'project') and the dynamic experimental nature of the activity.

**Should we even be reducing our concepts, strategies and experiences to single words?** Many participants felt that phrases, or even paragraphs might be a better way to capture the spirit of their work.

**Are words themselves inadequate?** As a group we kept butting up against the limits of language. As one participant put it, "words are flat and we are talking about dynamic processes". Another stated, "we all deal in areas of immense uncertainty, how do you talk about something when you don't know what it is yet?" In this context, metaphor became very useful. Words like infrastructure and choreography were 'borrowed' from other disciplines and seemed to bring to life some of the concepts participants struggled with the most.

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**Do we borrow words from particular areas?** We seemed to appropriate words from a handful of disciplines; engineering ('demonstrator'- the version before the prototype and 'trimtab'- the leverage point in the rudder that moves the whole ship), biology ('ecosystem', 'osmosis'), geology ('bedrock', 'erosion', 'seismic shifts', "fissure") and textiles ('weave' and 'thread') were the most common source of metaphor for the group.

**What about Keywords from other cultures?** System changers operate in different communities, cultures and contexts around the world. These words may be a starting point in helping to learn from one another and connect across distances. Other cultures might provide valuable language, concepts and metaphors that could provide new perspectives on our work.

**Do we have to agree on the meanings of words?** Words can have many meanings. Certain words can become contested spaces rather than usable vocabulary. We found that the inquiry into the different meanings of words was often more valuable than agreeing a common meaning.

**What about silence?** Sometimes what is not said is just as important as what is said. Although participants brought up its importance, we didn't have space to explore the location and origins of the silences in our work.

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# PROCESS

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Rachel Sinha and Marc Ventresca devised the Keywords workshop over a series of months, with the support of colleagues. We came together to design a process that might capture the meaningful Keywords from this community. In this section, we offer a process narrative of the Workshop to help others build on our design. We conclude by looking at lessons learned.

## OUR OBJECTIVES

The workshop was designed so that:

// The disparate groups of people convened could start to find common ground, explore shared identities and start to feel like a community

// We were able to identify a set of keywords for systems entrepreneurs, with explanations and etymology that could be turned into a publishable output; the first of which would be a concise lexicon of keywords for systems entrepreneurs

// We could learn from the experience of hosting this initial workshop and feed this into designing future events on language and systems change

To help build a sense of shared purpose the workshop was designed to be exploratory, reflective and intimate. We used participatory processes to maximise the opportunity for participants to meet one another, have good conversations and become friends.

## PARTICIPANTS

The community that gathered were a remarkable and distinctive group, some are systems entrepreneurs; others do the infrastructure work that allows systems change to be possible; others are the observers and intermediaries who support systems entrepreneurs (a full list of attendees can be found in the appendix). We invited along several recent MBA alumni and current research students, many of whom had substantial experience of social innovation.

## WORKSHOP STRUCTURE AND ACTIVITY

### Pre-Workshop and the welcome dinner

In the weeks prior to the Workshop, we circulated a reading list to participants. We also pointed participants in the direction of the work of Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society* (1976). The Workshop convened late on Sunday afternoon, 2 November and continued all day 3 & 4 November. We kicked off with a welcome at Oxford University's Saïd Business School, followed by an intimate dinner, where we shared stories of trying to communicate our work – and laughed together rather a lot. The dinner activity was designed as a deep listening exercise where one person asked questions, another answered and a further one or two listened

for themes and interesting twists and turns. The listeners reflected back after each person had spoken to build connection and deepen understanding and then the next member of the community picked up the role of storyteller.

### Day 1

Day one was designed to generate a breadth of keywords. We asked the participants to work in groups of three or four to keep conversations manageable and to generate as many keywords from as many perspectives as possible, noting them individually on post-it notes. In some cases participants generated so many words they resorted to sticking post-it notes onto table legs.

We used a subsequent game of bingo designed to cluster these words on the wall and to see the overlap between tables. This exercise, despite being lively, did not help us move to a more concise lexicon of words. Rather, the breadth of words was substantial; the whiteboards were covered with clusters of brightly clustered post-it notes. But no analytically or substantively robust categories emerged as the participants attempted to build meaning into the broad range of words.

Participants tried grouping them into 'why', 'how', 'what' categories, which provided order, but not satisfaction. This exercise did generate additional board clusters of 'toxic words' and 'words to avoid'. In the debrief after and in many small conversations in the breaks, we reflected on the range and found broad agreement that we had generated words that described the full spectrum of social change from movement building, to social entrepreneurship, to CSR. These were not keywords for system change. They did not mark out the role of systems entrepreneurs well enough. We were confronted with the challenge- how to get closer to words in use and to keywords that engage and express the work of system entrepreneurs?

We adapted the Workshop design to reflect this realisation. We had planned a model building exercise where each participant would take a word category and generate further keywords that would fit within it, but it was clear what we needed was more depth rather than breadth.

After an introduction on the meaning and use of metaphor by Ella Saltmarshe, participants set about using art materials to build a model of a metaphor that described their work. Each member of the community then shared their model and the meaning behind it. This was a positive exercise as it unearthed some of the deeper, harder to articulate experience, of participants, rather than a top-of-mind description of what they do. Participants also argued for paying more attention to phrases and

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compound words. There was active, critical engagement and a series of small group debates and conversations about the point of 'keywords' for system change and whether and how other word forms were relevant.

At this point, we asked the participants to pull out a maximum of five keywords each from the model-building exercise. They stuck these up on a separate wall and we allocated three small stickers, to each participant. Their task was to choose just three keywords from the hundreds of words now on both walls.

This exercise greatly reduced the number of words overall and also started to identify words with more complex meanings. This smaller set could be categorised according to 1) phrases that described the nature of a systems approach, e.g. 'change the frame' 2) words that described the nature of systems themselves, e.g. 'complex' 3) words that described what systems entrepreneurs actually did, e.g. 'build' and 4) words that pointed to words in transition in the usage of systems entrepreneurs, e.g. 'infrastructure'. The group had conversations also about verbs and nouns, and again why word phrases were important.

Although everyone had chosen three favourite words, there was a palpable feeling of disappointment in the room. When we looked at these resulting 'Keywords' as a group, some were contested ('values' for example suggests there is a good set of values and a bad and that a system entrepreneur is making judgments based on those). They were words that were already in common use ('systems thinking' -- wasn't that just describing the whole field? How did it help us?). The most interesting words seemed to be around what systems entrepreneurs did and yet the list lacked coherence or depth. Several delegates pointed out that while these words might have had described our diverse work, these were not the words they actually used in practice.

We left the room with mixed feelings, and a general sense of frustration. Focusing on breadth rather than depth highlighted the challenge that system entrepreneurs had been convened to overcome. There is a general language that can be used to describe their work, but it lacks powerful words, which really helped them make sense of their own experience or articulate it to the outside world in a compelling way.

We had planned to come back together after dinner for some provocations about language. As the dinner conversations become more lively and diverse, we agreed that a night off would be make more sense. We closed with the request to participants to think carefully about a word they liked and a word they didn't like and adjourned to allow conversations to wander and participants to reflect in their own time.

## Day 2

Day 2 was designed to generate meaning for our words. There was some discussion about how to best go about this given the results and experiences of the words generated on the previous day. We had planned personal reflection time, with a stream of consciousness exercise; instead we invited participants to pair up and go for a walk outside for 40 minutes, to share and reflect on a word that had stayed with them overnight. This gave participants space to digest and share ideas that had emerged overnight, to process what had happened so far in the workshop, and to explore in depth the meaning of a word that meant something to them.

What seemed to best engage participants was focused group discussion around the actual work of a systems entrepreneur. Two broad word themes that had emerged the previous day were 'build' and 'un-build'. We decided to let the participants self-organise into groups depending on which of these themes they felt most called to discuss. One group chose to talk about un-build or the role of destruction in the work of a systems entrepreneur. The majority of people (three groups) focused on different aspects of 'build' -- leadership, process and strategy.

The four groups moved in different rooms. We asked them to come up with a set of meaningful keywords and to populate each keyword sheet with stories, examples, or connected keywords that would add richness to the description. After the first session each group reported back to the wider community, to help bring some coherence and chance for reflection from others. They then returned to discussions to build on what they had already done, in the light of that feedback.

These work sessions generated a wide range of outputs, keywords assembled various ways with supporting meanings and other words. One group produced three keywords, each with a dozen further keywords clustered around the three. Another group cultivated an intricate diagram of inter-locking keywords, with additional dozen of words that they believed required discussion and definition. The two other groups provided a dozen words each, with descriptors, stories, and context.

Finally in the mid-afternoon, the groups reconvened to share what they'd produced. Each of the presentations generated comments and reactions, and often more examples and words. There was a palpable sense that we were beginning to find the kind of shared language that felt meaningful for this community. The groups had generated different levels of context setting information around their keywords, so the original groups convened in different sets to help those who had written little down, to generate more content.



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We closed the two days by joining in a circle and reflecting one by one on the word we were taking with us, where we planned to use it and what we'd learnt from the experience.

Subsequent meanings were generated post-workshop by emailing participants for additional stories and by listening to recordings of discussions created by some of the groups. Several people responded, some with blog posts and personal reflection essays that they had produced to reflect on what they had learnt. These words make up the Keywords reported in this publication.

## **KEY INSIGHTS ON METHODOLOGY**

### **What worked?**

// The residential nature of the event allowed participants to disconnect from work, reflect and build community  
// The format overall and mix of activities kept people engaged and present through the full 2+ days  
// A flexible approach to workshop design. When it wasn't working we were open to adapting it to what the participants responded to best  
// Discovering keywords based on experience. Sharing stories and pulling from those experiences, rather than selecting words that happened to be 'top of mind'  
// Working with metaphors to express what was difficult to articulate.

### **What didn't?**

// A lack of clarity around what we meant by keywords. Did we mean words that could be used on a website, or shared language that articulated the work of systems entrepreneurs? How closely did we want to stay with Williams' original sense?  
// A focus on breadth of words. This was a group who wanted to unearth the words that had most meaning for them. They already had the general language.

### **What would we do differently?**

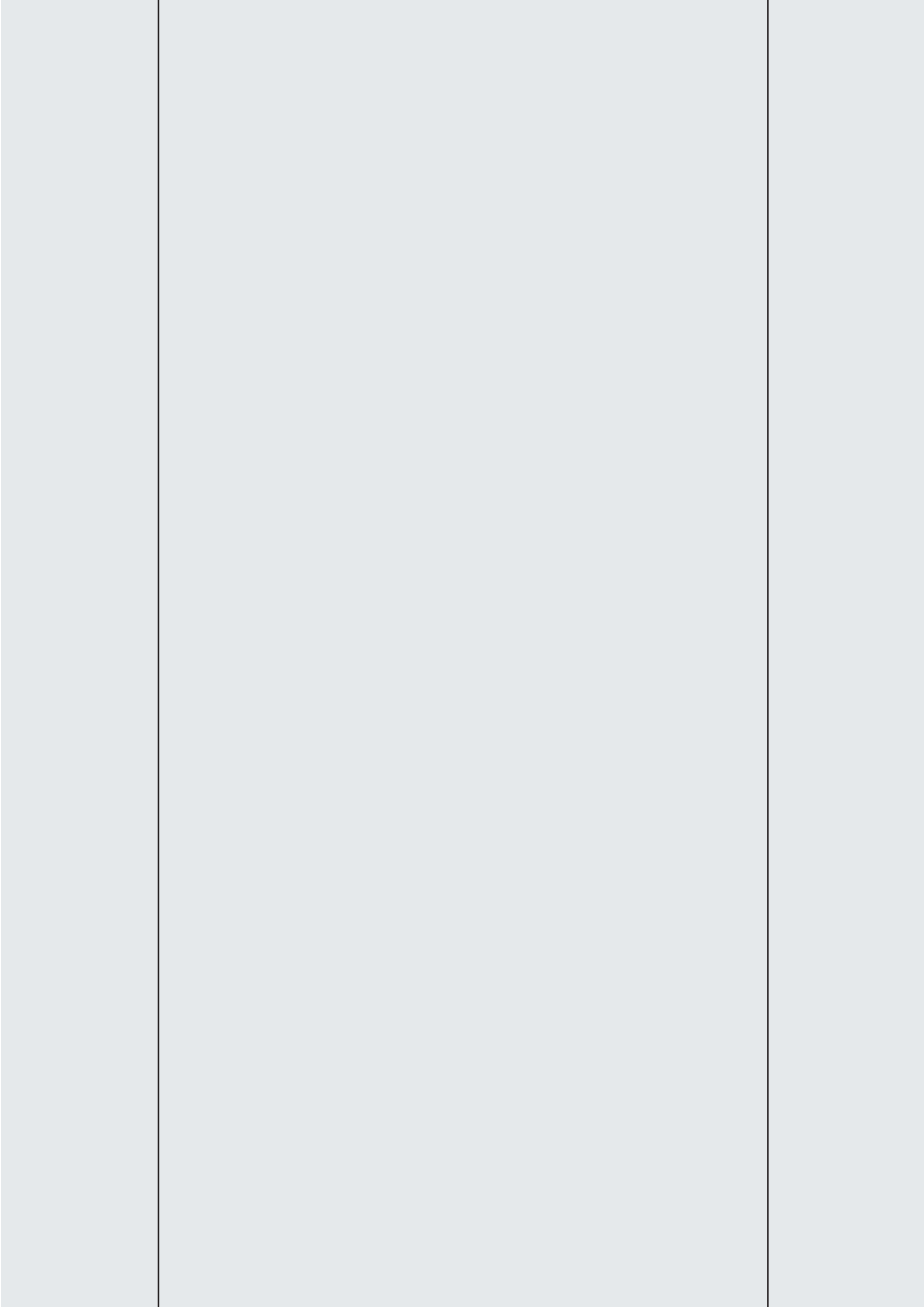
// A clearer focus on 'keywords' and more framing around the purpose of the workshop  
// More storytelling  
// A focus on articulating what we did as systems entrepreneurs and then building language from that  
// Involving additional rapporteurs and scribes

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“My publishers have been good enough to include some blank pages, not only for the convenience of making notes, but as a sign that the inquiry remains open, and that the author will welcome all amendments, corrections and additions. In the use of our common language, in so important an area, this is only spirit in which this work can be properly done.”

**RAYMOND WILLIAMS, KEYWORDS, 1975**

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IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE POINT PEOPLE



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