

Designing the Transition

SEVEN DESIGN PERSPECTIVES TO BUILD CAPACITIES
FOR PEOPLE, ORGANISATIONS AND ECOSYSTEMS

Paola Bertola, Carmen Bruno, Erminia D'Itria, Silvia Maria Gramegna,
Francesca Mattioli, Michele Melazzini, and Xue Pei

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7. Designing Organisational Culture for Sustainable Transition

Michele Melazzini

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7.1 Introduction

Sustainable transformation in organisations is not just about new technologies or operational efficiencies but about people. Culture shapes how organisations function, and design can be a powerful activator of change. We can empower individuals, influence behaviours, and seed a sustainable mindset by embedding design practices into corporate environments. This chapter explores how strategic design interventions can shift organisational culture, creating the conditions for sustainability to thrive not as a top-down mandate but as a people-centred evolution. Organisations can't change through rigid plans, analytics or hierarchical commands alone: transformation happens when people engage in genuine human-to-human dialogue (Verganti, 2024). How can strategic design foster these conversations in order to connect with the structural changes of the organisations?

Building on this foundation, we propose that activating a design intervention grounded in the nurturing of people is a powerful way to create the conditions for meaningful, long-term change toward

sustainability. This approach highlights one of the key contributions of design to complex processes of transformation: its capacity to operate not only through tangible outputs but through cultural and relational processes. In the context of sustainable transition, change must extend beyond strategy and structure; it must touch the *soft* and human side of organisations. Design has the potential to address this dimension by complementing traditional change management approaches, which often focus on formal structures, procedures, and performance metrics. Why design? Because design is more than a practice: it's also a cognitive model. It is a way of thinking and doing that invites curiosity, iteration, empathy, and systems awareness. When implemented within corporate environments, it can seed a design culture that becomes an internal force for behavioural and cultural change. Such culture is not enforced but grown, emerging through cross-level interactions, from individual mindsets and behaviours to collective narratives and organisational identity. Sustainable transition implies a cultural shift. This chapter reflects on how design can play a role in cultivating and accelerating this shift. How can design help organisations move from a logic of control and compliance to one of meaning and participation? By blending human-centred practices with systemic change perspectives, design has the unique potential to align structural transformation with the lived experience of people inside the organisation. The Ecodeck project, with its research through design initiative within the Italian furniture industry, explores these questions in a real-world context. This project also serves as a case study to examine how design can operate at the intersection of individual engagement, organisational change, and sectoral transformation, offering valuable insights into the practical and cultural dimensions of sustainability in action.

7.2 Organisational Cultures Transformation

To understand the role of design in sustainable transitions, we must look beyond structural interventions and into the deeper terrain of cultural change. Structural change refers to the reconfiguration of processes, hierarchies, and systems within an organisation, changes

that are often planned, measurable, and managed through traditional models of change management. Cultural change, by contrast, deals with the more elusive yet equally powerful layer of shared values, beliefs, assumptions, and behaviours that govern how people act and interact within the organisation. As Edgar Schein (Schein, 1985) famously argued, culture is not just an aspect of the organisation – it *is* the organisation. According to Schein's influential model, organisational culture exists across three interdependent levels: artefacts (the visible and tangible), espoused values (the strategic and declared), and basic underlying assumptions (the subconscious drivers of behaviour). It is in these layers that we can begin to explore how design, and more specifically design culture, can intervene. Organisational culture is not monolithic; as Sapelli (Sapelli, 1988) and Zurlo (Zurlo, 2019) emphasise, it is a constellation of co-existing cultures – economic, organisational, technological – that must coexist and negotiate meaning within the corporate environment. Design culture, in this sense, is not an external force but a catalytic subculture that serves the broader mission of corporate transformation.

Can we assume that it exists also a *sustainability culture* within the set of corporate cultures? If we look beneath the surface, into Schein's third level of underlying assumptions, we often find tacit beliefs about growth, resource use, and human relationships to the environment that are rarely challenged. Cultivating a sustainability culture, therefore, means reshaping these assumptions: shifting organisational mindsets from extraction to regeneration, from short-term efficiency to long-term impact.

This research framework offers a powerful lens to examine how sustainability may not merely be implemented as a strategy but internalised as a belief system. The integration of a sustainability organisational culture depends precisely on this deep embedding of values and assumptions, not just procedural or symbolic changes. According to Assoratgoon and Kantabutra (Assoratgoon & Kantabutra, 2023), the field has long emphasised sustainability at the artefact level, such as green offices, eco-certifications, and CSR reports; while the level of basic assumptions has remained understudied and underutilised, despite being fundamental for driving long-term transformation. In Schein's terms, organisational culture operates as a social control

mechanism that channels behaviour through shared beliefs and invisible assumptions. These assumptions, which shape “how we do things around here,” are exactly where sustainability culture must take root. A sustainability organisational culture can be defined as a set of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs about sustainability that manifest in an organisation’s decision-making and practices (Ket-prapakorn & Kantabutra, 2022). This cultural embedding is essential, as merely aligning surface-level behaviours (like recycling policies or carbon tracking) without addressing the normative foundations (e.g., beliefs about growth, ethics, responsibility) often leads to performative sustainability. Design can act as a lever to access and reshape these deep cultural layers. The process of embedding design culture into organisations requires not just structured interventions but ongoing acts of creative disruption: a form of *creative distress* that destabilises the status quo and opens up spaces for alternative futures (Melazzini *et al.*, 2023; Zurlo, 2019). Through visible elements such as space, symbols, and service experiences, design can influence the artifact level. Through storytelling, vision design, and participatory engagement, it can affect espoused values. But its most transformative potential lies in the cultivation of new assumptions: in creating opportunities *for employees to experience, reflect upon, and internalize new ways of thinking about sustainability, value, and purpose. Thus, design does not merely serve the broader corporate culture; it actively co-constructs it.* In this light, the introduction of a design culture becomes a strategic act of *cultural prototyping*: testing, iterating, and seeding new cultural codes that align with sustainability principles. As shown in the sustainability cultural transformation frameworks discussed by Assoratgoon & Kantabutra (Assoratgoon & Kantabutra, 2023), the move toward a sustainability organisational culture involves more than technical solutions: it demands normative grounding, attention to identity formation, and a rethinking of what success means within the organisation. Design, with its capacity to operate across tangible and intangible dimensions, emerges as an ally in this transformation. In this way, design could support organisations not only in transforming what they do, but also who they are.

7.3 Design and Organisational Change

Cultural change in management theory has long been recognised as one of the most complex and deeply embedded challenges within organisations. Scholars such as Alvesson and Sveningsson (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015) describe cultural change as a *work in progress*, involving slow, nonlinear processes that depend heavily on contextual, political, and emotional dynamics within the organisation. Meyerson and Martin's (Meyerson & Martin, 1987) seminal work adds a useful framework by synthesising three dominant perspectives on cultural change: the integration view (culture as shared), the differentiation view (culture as contested), and the fragmentation view (culture as inherently ambiguous). These theories highlight the layered and sometimes contradictory nature of organisational culture, setting the stage for why traditional managerial approaches often struggle to engineer meaningful cultural transformations.

It is precisely in these kinds of conditions that design enters as a transformative force. The emerging relationship between design and management offers not just a toolkit for solving problems but a new paradigm for reforming organisational culture (Buchanan, 2015). Unlike traditional management approaches, which often focus on optimisation and control, design focuses on synthesis, systems thinking, and the quality of experience as a central metric of success. Buchanan positions design as a cultural act: a way of imagining and shaping the values, symbols, behaviours, and spaces that constitute the lived culture of an organisation. Importantly, this perspective sees decision makers not merely as administrators or strategists, but as designers of the environments that shape how individuals work, interact, and grow. As such, design is not a surface intervention but a driver of deep cultural reform. To understand how design catalyses cultural change, it is helpful to consider the organisational behaviour framework through its three levels: micro (individual), meso (group), and macro (organisational). In recent years, the field of organisational behaviour has increasingly emphasised the importance of the micro-level – individuals – as agents of transformation (Miner, 2006; Wagner & Hollenbeck, 2014). Micro-organisational behaviour research sheds light on how individual traits and practices, such as

decision-making, creativity, stress management, and job performance, can ripple outward to shape broader organisational outcomes (Cummings, 1978). These dimensions are also key concerns in design management, where the goal is often to empower individuals as active participants in change processes rather than passive recipients of policy. Recognising employees as the starting point for cultural change allows design to serve not only as a cognitive model but as a participatory process rooted in everyday work life. Design-led interventions such as prototyping, co-creation, and scenario building can trigger micro-level transformations that, when supported structurally, scale to affect the meso and macro dimensions of culture. In this way, design doesn't impose cultural change: it enables it by fostering the trust, creativity, and shared purpose that can reconfigure an organisation's internal logics from the bottom up.

7.4 Design *Sustainable-Based* Interventions

Having explored the conceptual foundations linking design, organisational behaviour, and culture, this chapter now turns to practice. How can design concretely initiate cultural change in organisations committed to sustainable transitions? A possible answer lies in what we term design interventions: intentional, structured engagements through which design operates not only at the level of individual behaviours (micro), but also across group dynamics (meso) and institutional systems (macro). These interventions span both intangible elements (values, mindsets, competencies) and tangible aspects (spaces, routines, communication touchpoints) of corporate culture, offering a holistic framework to initiate and support cultural transformation. We distinguish two core typologies of design interventions: the first relates to nurturing design culture through capability building, the other instead addresses designing conditions for experiential engagement. Each type corresponds to distinct yet complementary dimensions of cultural change and leverages the power of design to reframe how individuals and organisations evolve.

7.4.1 Practising Design Culture: nurturing creative competencies

From a design perspective, the most fertile entry point for transformation lies at the micro-level: the individual employee. Employees are not passive recipients of organisational norms but active agents capable of reshaping them, provided they are equipped with the right tools and mindset. One key enabler in this context is *creative confidence* (Kelley *et al.*, 2013), which refers to the belief that everyone is capable of creative contribution. But this is not merely a matter of confidence it involves the development of specific design-based competencies: empathy, abductive reasoning, systems thinking, iteration, and co-creation. Design interventions of this type often take the form of capacity-building activities, such as workshops, labs, and immersive learning experiences, that foster both individual empowerment and cultural alignment. Such interventions aim to seed new ways of thinking about challenges such as sustainability, resilience, and innovation. Adopting creative confidence can be a transformative experience: it enables individuals to approach problems with fresh eyes, take meaningful risks, and propose unconventional yet effective solutions. In turn, these individual shifts in perspective influence collective behaviours, reinforcing a broader evolution of culture. The challenge, however, lies in designing intangible pathways that go beyond skills training to cultivate a sustained cultural disposition. This requires thoughtful scaffolding of experiences that instil not just tools, but a new lens through which employees understand their work, their role, and their contribution to a sustainable future. As employees grow in creative autonomy, their influence on team dynamics and organisational strategies grows as well, scaling cultural change from the micro to the meso and macro levels.

7.4.2 Designing the Conditions: Activating Culture Through Experience

Complementing this internal shift in mindset is the need to design the conditions that allow new behaviors to emerge and flourish. This second typology of intervention addresses the tangible aspects of culture: how employees physically and socially engage with their work environment, and how these engagements are structured and reinforced. Here, the focus shifts from internal capabilities to ex-

ternal experience design, a domain increasingly recognized at the intersection of Design and Human Resource transformation (Rossi, 2021; Batat, 2022). Drawing from insights in employee experience design (Maylett & Wride, 2017; Morgan, 2017), this intervention type involves rethinking the everyday realities of work: spaces, tools, rituals, interactions, and symbols that encode corporate culture. Design can shape physical environments that signal openness and sustainability, craft service journeys that reflect values, and prototype new routines that model the behaviors a company wants to cultivate. As Lesser (2016) outlines, employee experience spans three spheres: the physical environment, social connections, and task engagement, all of which can be intentionally redesigned to reflect and support a cultural shift. Designers in this space act not only as facilitators but as organizational scenographers, staging experiences that align the employee's journey with the company's transformation agenda. Whether reimagining onboarding processes, reframing work rituals, or reconfiguring collaborative spaces, the goal is to activate culture through experience – not through mandates or memos, but through meaningful, embodied engagement.

Design interventions, both intangible and tangible, represent more than tactical solutions. They are *strategic vehicles for cultural evolution*. When deployed thoughtfully, they create enabling environments that nudge people toward new ways of thinking, working, and relating. The power of design lies not in prescribing change but in inviting exploration, enabling participation, and provoking reflection. By offering experiences instead of edicts, options instead of orders, design makes room for *interpretation and ownership*, two essential conditions for any authentic cultural shift. Furthermore, the gradual, participatory nature of design interventions helps overcome resistance, fostering trust and openness even in organisations historically sceptical of change. Ultimately, these interventions aim to embed new assumptions into the fabric of organisational life, assumptions that support not only business goals but societal ones. Through design interventions, a process of transition can be activated.

7.5 Ecodeck: a Design Intervention to Cultivate Sustainable Culture

Design has the unique capacity to align systemic organisational transformation with the lived, human experiences of the people who inhabit institutions. As we have explored in this chapter, the power of design lies not merely in optimising operations or innovating products, but in shaping and nurturing culture, constructing new assumptions, behaviours, and meanings that reflect a more sustainable way of organising. By operating across micro, meso, and macro levels of organisational life, design interventions can seed and scale shifts in mindset, action, and strategic orientation. Design's transformative potential resides in its ability to work both within and beyond formal structures. Design interventions engage individuals in experiences that invite reflection, experimentation, and ownership of new practices and values. They activate what Edgar Schein would describe as a reconfiguration of *underlying assumptions*, subtly reshaping what is considered meaningful, desirable, and possible within the organisation. In this light, design culture becomes a strategic tool, a *cultural prototyping device*, through which the DNA of the organisation evolves in support of sustainability.

The ECODeCK project serves as a compelling case study to ground these concepts in practice. Developed within the Italian manufacturing sector, particularly the fashion and furniture industries, ECODeCK explores how design-led training can catalyse sustainable transition through human-centred, culturally sensitive methods. The project's core contribution lies in a design-based educational model, grounded in *Transformative Learning Theory* (Mezirow, 2003; Taylor, 2000), that equips employees at all levels with the capacity to think critically, engage ethically, and act creatively within their roles. Through a dedicated capacity-building model, ECODeCK offers an actionable pathway to cultural renewal. The project's competence framework provides a structured foundation for employees to integrate sustainable values into daily practices, transforming abstract ethical principles into concrete, innovative behaviours. This human-centred process becomes a lever for broader organisational

and sectoral evolution. At the same time, ECODeCK operates within a context of real challenges, particularly within the Italian furniture industry. As noted by Musso *et al.* (2024), many companies in this sector face cultural resistance, characterised by legacy mindsets, inertia, and fragmentation between product innovation and systemic sustainability. Despite the strong role of design in product development, circular economy practices remain marginal, with reuse and regeneration often secondary to recycling or disposal (Ghisellini & Ulgiati, 2020). Moreover, firms show a significant gap in organisational readiness, with limited integration of sustainability principles into their business models or employee training (Tessitore *et al.*, 2025). ECODeCK navigates this tension by working from the inside out, not imposing solutions but instead co-constructing meaning and practice through participatory training, co-design, and experiential learning. It recognises that changing corporate culture is not about replacing one system with another, but about inviting new conversations, new interpretations, and ultimately, new ways of being within organisations. In doing so, it validates the premise that design is not merely a support function: it is a strategic actor in cultural and sustainable transformation.

This chapter has argued that nudging sustainable transformation in organizations must start from the human side. It must begin with individuals, with the relationships they form, the values they share, and the environments they help co-create. Design interventions are powerful precisely because they do not demand immediate compliance: they create space for emergence, for slow shifts in perspective, practice, and identity. Rather than enforcing change, design invites it. It enables individuals to see themselves not just as employees or managers, but as co-authors of a shared future.

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