



## Cumulus Mumbai 2015:

In a planet of our own - a vision of sustainability with focus on water

<http://www.cumulumumbai2015.org/>

## Beyond Consumption

How can design intervene at the level of paradigms to transform our relationships with things, resources and people?

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the rationale for and early insights from the research project *Beyond Consumption - practising abundance*. The project is informed by Donella Meadows' notion that the most effective way to affect change is to address it at the very "mindset or paradigm out of which the goals, rules, feedback structure arise". (Meadows 1997) This research therefore explores the possibility for and potential of design to intervene directly at the level of paradigms or mindsets. By reaching upstream into the personal and collective construction of our (Western, minority world, affluent) societies' obsession with material goods, it seeks to inspire individuals and communities to negotiate abundance in entirely new, or reappraised old ways. Here, the approaches are exemplified in the context of domestic water usage.

**Key words:** *Sustainability, Metadesign, Linguaging, Paradigm Change, Water, Consumption*

### 1. Introduction

Since at least the 1980s, the necessity of understanding sustainability (or unsustainability) systemically has been articulated, as regards the socio-cultural and economic interdependencies of the environmental predicament, and local, regional and global interconnections. (WCED, 1987) The transgression, or near transgression of critical thresholds of vital earth system functions is now formally and globally recognized, as well as the fact that in our current epoch, termed the anthropocene, human activities drive earth systems off balance. (Rockström, 2009; IPCC, 2013) Yet, the sum total of policy, fiscal measures, technological advancements, citizen education initiatives, and more, has not achieved a net improvement, but only that degradation continues to take place at a lower gear. Gains are easily swallowed by accelerating consumption; the UN's environmental organ predicting a tripling of annual resource use and consumption by 2050.

(UNEP, 2011) A growing body of research evidences that a correlation between economic growth and well-being has ceased to be true, moreover indicating a negative correlation. (See e.g. Offer, 2006) One reading of the inefficacy of measures to date (rehearsed in different terms in various texts, see e.g. Thackara, 2005; Walker and Salt, 2006; Klein, 2014) and evoking a famous quote by Einstein, as well as insights of Kuhn (1962), is that solutions stemming from the same current, dominant mindset (permeated by a growth logic), that caused the problems will but produce more of the same. In other words, paradigmatic change is required to meet the challenges of enviro-socio-financial tolls within the urgent time frame.

The rebound effect concept exemplifies the complexity, such as non-linear causality, of systems in the remit of consumption. It describes how “reducing cost of one utility may increase levels of consumption of that utility”. (Kane, 2003). Best known in financial terms, there is also evidence pointing to a ‘feel good’ rebound effect. In this instance, an individual’s experience of virtuous behaviour from, for example recycling, may result in a sense of entitlement to increased consumption of resources in another remit, thus removing the benefit or even achieving a net increase. (See Caitlin and Wangan 2013 as cited in Thorpe, 2014: 65.) Rebound effects are obviously difficult to study, as, arguably, they may play out over time, across consumption areas, and even across family members or communities.

The research project *Beyond consumption - practising abundance* starts from the stance that design can affect positive and fast change if it intervenes directly at the level of the paradigm, and only if it is sensitive to systems dynamics. The paper presents the core rationales of the research project and exemplifies its methodological approaches with a workshop aiming to challenge water consumption paradigmatically.

## **2. Project rationale**

### **2.1 Lucky People Forecast and Metadesign**

During the PhD project *Lucky People Forecast - a systemic futures perspective on fashion and sustainability* I developed pedagogical approaches to prompt systemic engagement with sustainability in the fashion industry’s mass-market segment. (Tham, 2008) Six key insights from this empirical work are pertinent for the purposes of this paper.

- A) Even a small increase in an individual’s experience of agency can promote a greater interest in sustainability and willingness to learn more, lead to an enhanced perception of the importance and urgency of sustainability, and support

an individual to situate herself both as problem causer and solution holder in the remit of sustainability, and support her ability to grasp the interdependence of social, environmental and financial factors.

- B) When an individual is able to integrate personal and professional value systems, and so not experience cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), this is auspicious for an increased experience of agency.
- C) An increased experience of agency in the personal, or civic remit, can lead to increased experience of agency in the professional remit.
- D) The creation of new legends is a powerful way to mobilise tacit and formal knowledge, values and interests, and the legends can become portable vessels that can translate information and agency between contexts and individuals.
- E) Positioning or constructing people as powerful solutions holders can create virtuous cycles of empowerment and ingenuity.
- F) Drawing on how in action research, research is regarded as both informative and transformative (e.g. Heron and Reason, 2001), research can be used as activism.

The *Lucky People Forecast* approaches have since been further developed, used and evaluated in a range of industry and academic contexts internationally. They have infused and been infused by approaches that were developed during the AHRC and EPSRC funded project *Benchmarking Synergy Levels with Metadesign* (Goldsmiths, University of London 2006-2009). This project resulted in upward 100 tools that can be used to prompt synergy in collaborative interdisciplinary practice. The auspicious trajectory from personal to professional context that was identified in the *Lucky People Forecast* research project, was complemented by insights into how pivotal the grounding of change in the personal experience, sphere of interests, knowledge and skillsets<sup>1</sup> can be for the agency to engage in change endeavours at the level of the community or organization. This was formalised in the framework 'from me to we' which we now employ in all our workshops and teaching, and have developed a series of tools and approaches to support. (See e.g. Tham and Jones, 2008)

That change needs to start in the individual is not a new idea and also obvious. Yet oftentimes, perhaps due to time constraints, such insights do not appear to be honoured

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<sup>1</sup> A further adaptation of this to 'from me to we to the world, forms the basis for the progression framework of two new degree programmes Design + Change and Visual Communication + Change, at the Department of Design, Linnaeus University, Sweden. (See Tham, 2014)

when processes of change are planned. However, considering the urgent need for profound change, skipping such pivotal groundwork appears negligent or dangerous. In the sustainability discourse that behavioural change is near impossible is often expressed. It is my view that if interventions are not addressed at the core, wherefrom purpose, meaning spring, but ‘merely’ at the level of behaviour this is probably true. The behaviour change asked for will then jar with a system logic, the mindset or paradigm, which remains unchanged and unexplored.

## **2.2 Linguaging**

The biologists Maturana and Varela coined the term *linguaging* to describe the circular interconnectedness between words, thoughts and actions. (Maturana and Varela, 1987) (The relationship between cognitive and language development is also well known in developmental psychology, see e.g. Gopnik, 2009). That language has power needs not to be elaborated on in this context. A famous historical example of how a specific term has been purposefully used to affect significant change is how the Polish Jewish lawyer Lemkin in 1944 coined the word *genocide* (*Genos* Greek for family, tribe or race, *cide* Latin for killing), making it possible to prosecute murder of entire populations. (Cooper, 2008) In 1999 the Swedish national organisation for sexual education (RFSU) launched the word *snippa* for a girl’s vagina. (Previously there was no communal colloquial term). Today the word is used by virtually all nurseries, schools, families, media, as well as society at large, and features in the official Swedish dictionary (Svenska akademins ordlista). (RFSU, 2015) A feminist initiative, the purpose of its invention and implementation was to give girls a word to use (like boys already had), to break down taboos, shame, invisibility of female sexuality. The two examples illustrate that language can intervene at the level of paradigms, opening up new conceptual spaces, enabling new actions. In the metadesign research, selective wording and neologisms have been appreciated as one powerful way for design to affect change, formalised in one of our ten metadesign principles: “metadesign can intervene creatively at the level of linguaging”. (Wood, 2007; Tham, 2010)

## **3. Beyond consumption - practicing abundance**

### **3.1 Project in brief**

The insights presented above informed a research project aimed at exploring societal transformation in the context of overconsumption, and its methodology. My idea is to

stimulate paradigmatic change by challenging the terms consumer and consumption.<sup>2</sup>

These are deemed problematic because<sup>3</sup>:

- They literally mean devour and destroy, therefore setting up a destructive relationship with the objects and the resources (as well as people making them).
- They are used as opposites to producer and production, resulting in polarisation, homogenisation and depersonification of the actual humans. In reality, all humans are in some capacity of our lives both users, producers, and much more.
- The word consumer gives the act of purchase a skewed dignity in how it sounds like a 'job'. It is an unnuanced term for participation in highly complex events and relationships.
- As an opposite to producer and production, consumption comes across as passive reception, and consumers as passive receivers. This does not promote the taking of an active stance and responsibility.
- **More importantly**, the terms consumer and consumption do not harbour the awareness, wisdom, ingenuity and creativity that already characterise many individuals' relations with the things and the resources.
- **Most importantly**, the terms consumer and consumption are not futures oriented. They do not stimulate new ways of thinking, relating, communicating and acting in relationship with the objects, the resources and the people.

The project therefore explores the use of metadesign to intervene creatively at the level of relanguaging our current relationships with things, resources, fellow humans and other species, dominantly termed 'consumption'. The project operates with the understanding of a vicious circle where the terms consumer and consumption have spread from literal consumables to realms of healthcare, education and culture. The terms, it is argued, therefore risk colonising and homogenising future relationships with things, resources, humans, other species, infusing them with a market economic mono-logic and passivity. In contrast, and for example, the metaphors of a 'gardener' or 'adoptive parent' (as suggested by participants of exploratory workshops informing the study) open up entirely different conceptual and practical possibilities, with regards to our relationships with objects and resources.

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<sup>2</sup> I first articulated this idea at the Stockholm +40 event in 2012, when I was one of five panelists given the opportunity to pitch an idea to the environmental minister Lena Ek. At this point I proposed a nation wide competition for a new word to replace the term consumer.

<sup>3</sup> Terms such as responsible consumer, conscious consumer or green consumer exemplify attempts to address aspects of this problem. However these terms do not resolve the fundamental paradigmatic conflict.

The project invites a diverse range of stakeholders, including commercial organisations, cultural and academic institutions in the UK, Sweden, and beyond, to engage in naming and forecasting metadesign activities. These are aimed at generating new ways of articulating and visualising socio-material relationships towards ultimately transforming these relationships for sustainable futures. It will result in an online resource of refined, inspiring and creative approaches, tools and materials that can be used to facilitate paradigmatic discussions in a range of different contexts (nursery to boardroom).

My hypothesis is that addressing sustainability at the level of the individual mindset, or collective paradigm, will prevent the negative leakage known as the rebound effects. Further, it is my hope that such an approach may even result in positive leakage, from conventional sites of consumption firmly entangled in a market economy, coupled with high resource through put, to civic sites of engagement of lesser associated environmental impact, such as a public library. The research project *Beyond consumption - practicing abundance* therefore takes a holistic and systemic approach to the study of individuals' engagement with resources, tracing them primarily across five such remits: food, fashion, transport, energy and water, but will also collect data across added areas, such a social media, sports and recreation. Currently, I am establishing partnerships with suitable researchers, academic institutions, as well as other organisations across Europe, and beyond, with the view to establish an interdisciplinary consortium and apply for EU funding. I am also conducting workshops to explore and evaluate methodological approaches.

### **3.2 Water workshop**

During July 2015, an exploratory workshop with focus on domestic water consumption took place in London. The purpose of the workshop was to yield insights into the approaches' viability in the particular context of domestic water consumption. The five participants were acquaintants of mine, working in the creative sector. They were chosen for convenience and because at this stage I wanted feedback on methodological approaches from individuals with expertise in the creative use of language through various media.

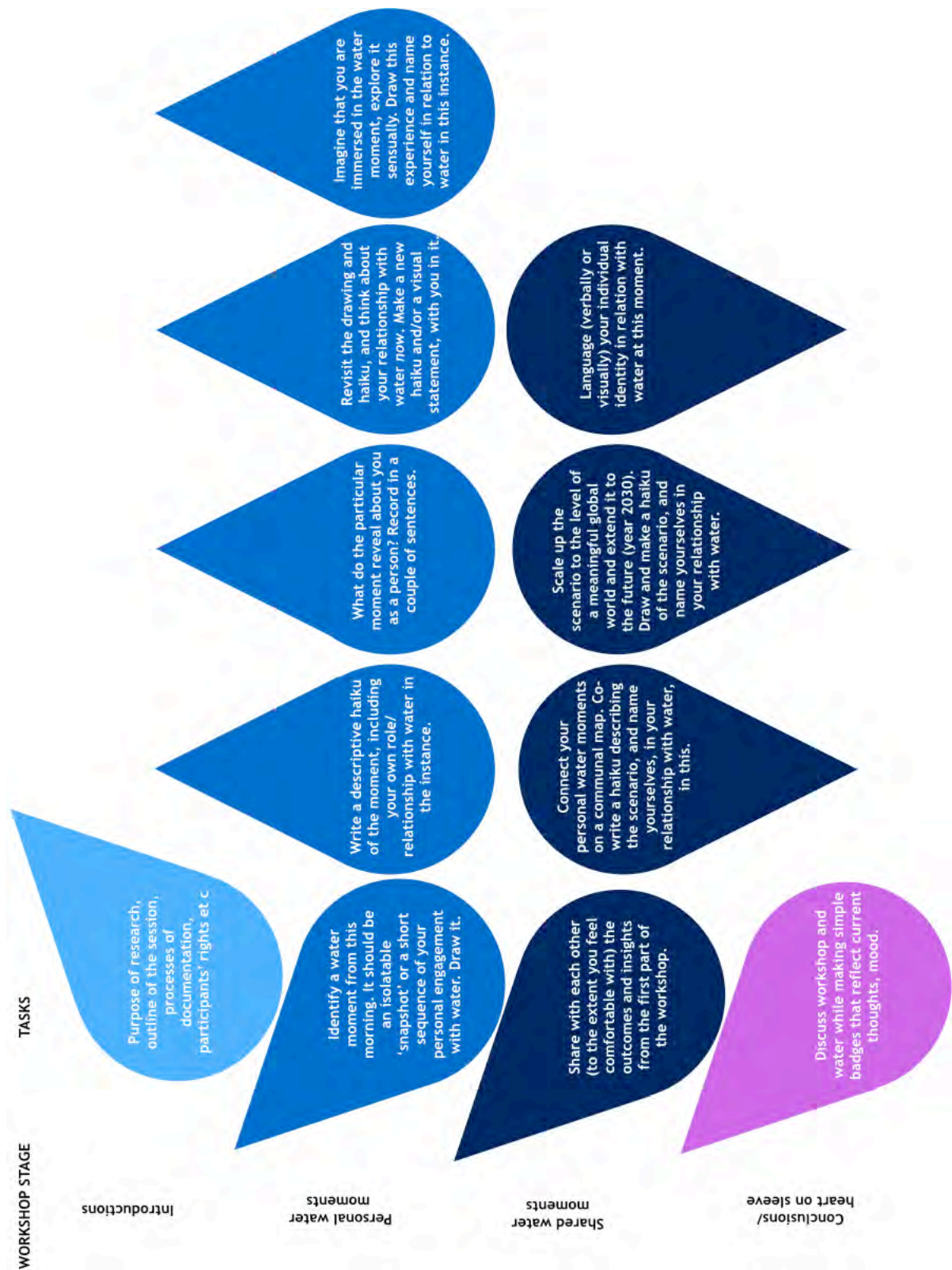


Figure.1 Overview of workshop design

After a brief introduction, the three-hour long workshop unfolded in a reiterative trajectory from the personal and local to the collective and global, and working individually and as a group. At each stage, participants were asked to identify and 'name'

themselves in their relationship to water. The participants languaged their experience of and relationship with water in drawings, short texts (haikus<sup>4</sup>), and simple making (embroidery on felt). I was taking the role as facilitator and participant in the workshops. Figure 1 shows an overview of the workshop design.

Two weeks after the workshop, I conducted follow up interviews with the participants individually. This concerned the experience of the workshop as a whole, particular thoughts on methodological approaches, thoughts on water, and personal water usage, and ideas for improvements of the workshop. In total the pilot study yielded a series of insights, to incorporate into further developments of the methodological approaches. Here some of these are summarized.

### *Mobilizing expertise in laypersons*

Neither any of the participants, nor I, was an expert on water or water consumption. Yet, it was clear that collectively we knew ‘enough’ to make the workshop useful, stepping out of it with an enhanced understanding of both our respective motivations behind water usage and how these connect at the level of a community, the ability to formulate key questions as regards water usage (such as how the water in our respective neighbourhoods actually reaches our taps), as well as an enhanced curiosity.

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<sup>4</sup> The haiku is a three-part traditional form of Japanese poetry, the first and last line consisting of five syllables, and the middle of seven.







Figure.3 “I am a water diviner.” Badge describing the desire to continue appreciating, and sensing the omnipresence and power of, water in the everyday.

### *Touching mindsets or paradigms*

The verbal and visual rearticulations of the personal water moments helped participants to also start exploring personal value positions and interests - a mindset. For one individual this concerned a new understanding of the role of vanity in the consumption of resources. “I wash my hair - but actually it’s never just for me but for others.” For another it concerned the experience of, because of stress from work, not feeling present in the everyday tasks - and a sorrow at this. These exercises in combination with the communal mapping, drawing and wording also started laying bare paradigmatic dilemmas - such as that of capitalising on a vital human resource. This study did not test in a robust way for attitudinal or behavioural change. Still, workshop participants described that it had provoked a new awareness of water for them, a new sense of presence in their engagement with water on a daily basis.

## Experiential methodology

“What if it had been a rainy day?” and “We could have used water as a material!” were two comments by participant after the workshop. Future iterations should certainly increase the experiential dimension, and include more languaging medias. Evaluating the experience of the approaches for individuals outside the ‘creative sector’ is taking place. As in the *Lucky People Forecast* study, this pilot indicated that legends become comparable to such of the dominant paradigm, as they are drawn or succinctly articulated. Visualising - individually and as a group - appears a powerful to link the personal tangible experience to the abstract level of a system.

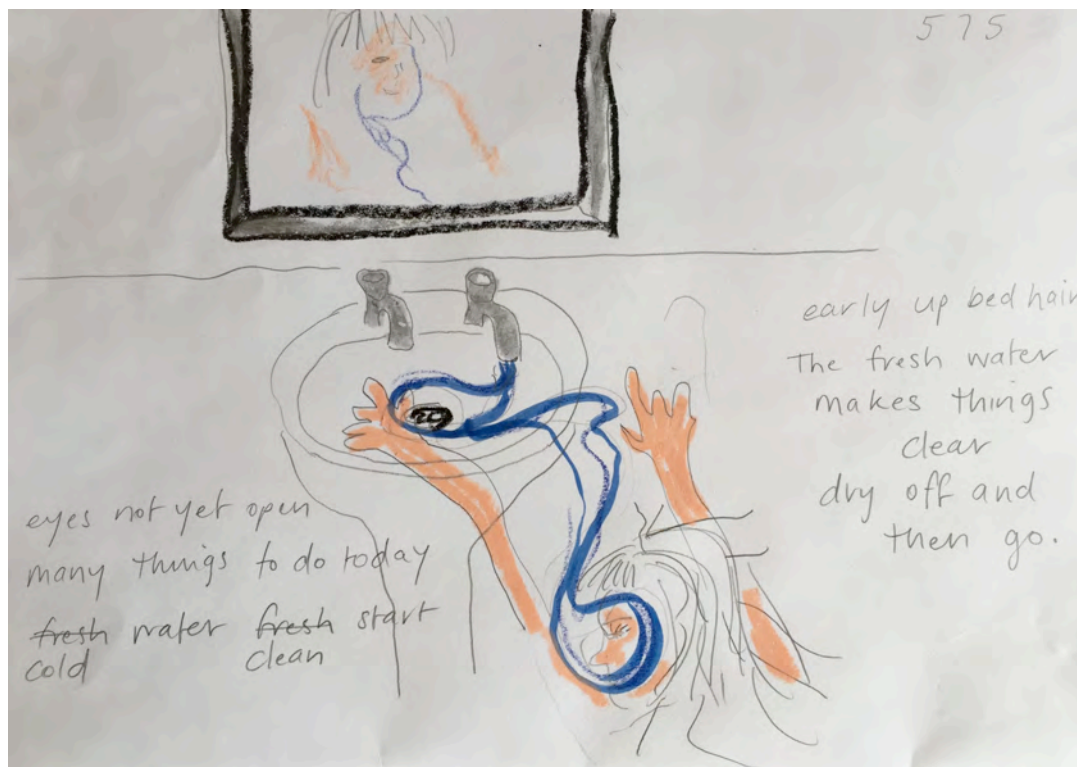


Figure.4 “Drawing to think through an experience and how things connect really helped. As soon as you visualise it takes on a different reality.” Personal water moment.

## 4. Conclusions

This paper describes the beginning of an ambitious research project *Beyond consumption - practising abundance*. Ultimately it is hoped that this research will contribute pathways to significant reductions in resource use, by generating methodological approaches that challenge consumption paradigmatically. The contribution so far is a conceptual framework, methodological and pedagogical approaches, and a tentative proof of concept: that metadesign can intervene through languaging at the level of mindsets or paradigms.

A conundrum I faced before the water workshop concerned whether it would be necessary to engage each individual participating in the study in exercises across (at least) the five specified consumer remits in order to avoid rebound effects. (E.g. would a more aware relationship to water otherwise propel more consumption of, for example, fashion?) However, despite its unfinished quality, this workshop did provoke reflections at what can be termed the level of the mindset or paradigm; so profound that they certainly are translatable to other consumption remits. Therefore, it is possible that changes prompted through engagement in one area infuse behavioural change in another. This of course remains to be further and more robustly explored and evaluated.

I believe the mobilization of laypersons' knowledge that occurred during the workshop (and which also happened in the *Lucky People Forecast* research) to be of great value. It is of course vital that advanced knowledge is drawn upon to meet the challenges of the sustainability imperative. Yet, it is, I argue, as important that sustainability belongs to everyone, and that knowing in the remit of sustainability is democratized. As the reader will have recognized, several of the realisations the workshop provoked are 'obvious'. However, the value lies in the individual having such insights springing from her personal life, values and interests. This is what can spur the experience of agency.

Key priorities onwards:

- To keep identifying suitable collaborators from other relevant disciplines, as well as stakeholders outside academia.
- To develop ways to triangulate qualitative data on behavioural change (e.g. from interviews) with measurements of, for example, water consumption in the home.
- To develop ways to robustly trace rebound effects across consumption areas, as well as potential positive spillage into civic functions, such as use of public libraries and parks.

I hope at the Cumulus conference in Mumbai to get valuable feedback for further developments on this research and also to establish new collaborations with researchers

internationally. I welcome notes from researchers and educators who wish to use the approaches to date in their practice.

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