Wicked Series: *The Collection*

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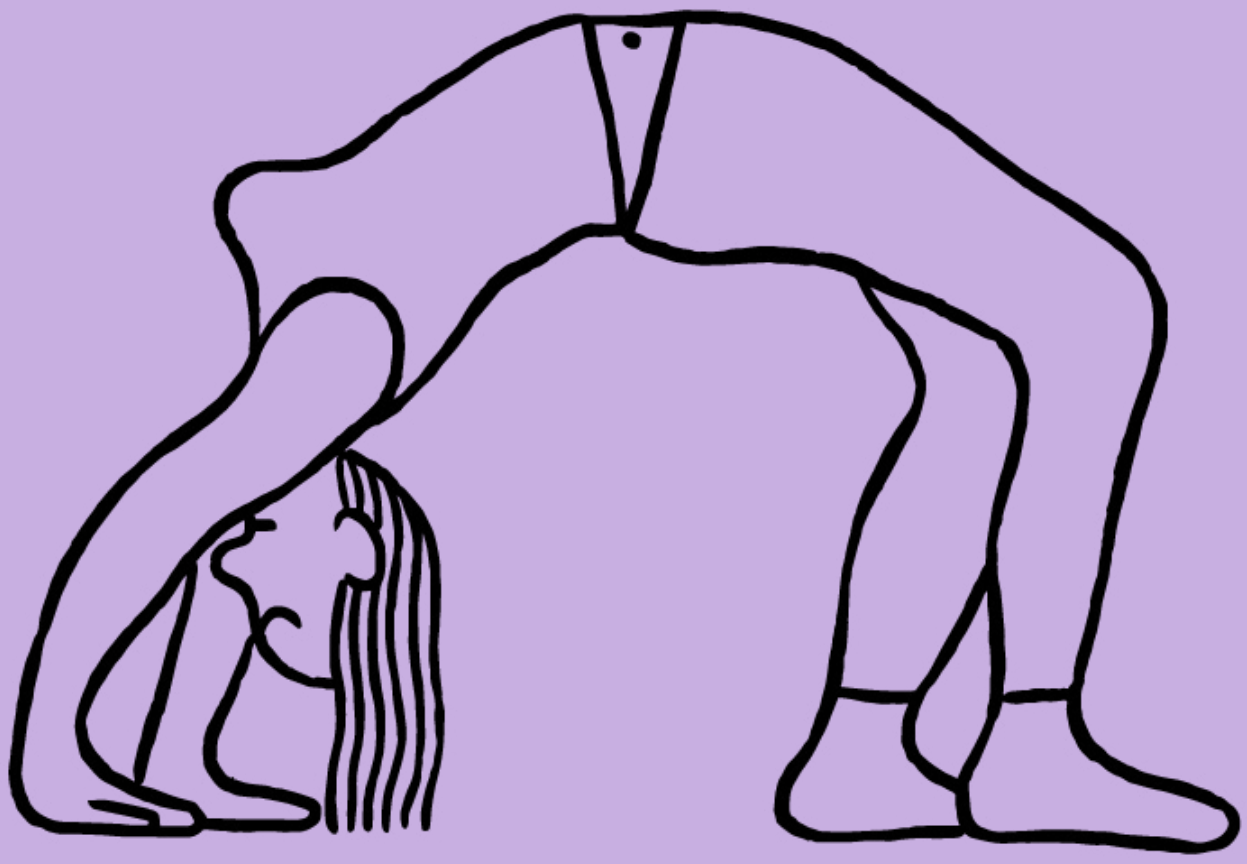

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How to Turn Wicked Problems Into *Ambitious Opportunities*

DDC

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The term wicked problems occur more and more often in our conversations and work areas – especially in public innovation. Wicked problems are, by definition, complex, dependent, and systemic. But do they call for wicked solutions? To start, we must ask questions and collaborate in completely new ways. The questions we ask determine the answers we find and the systems we build.

t's no news that the world is changing rapidly, and we are in increasingly volatile, uncertain, and ambiguous situations. The complex societal challenges are rising before our eyes and are no longer ripples on the sea's surface. They are meter-high waves that are difficult to capture and influence, and they wash away what we thought was safe and predictable.

As we turn to the news, we're constantly reminded of the widening gap between the supply of caregivers and the demand for labor, as well as the escalating prices for energy and food. A growing number of reports indicate that many young people are not thriving, and it's all too common to feel a sense of hopelessness and despair about the future. In fact, one in five Danes has stopped reading the news altogether due to the overwhelming negativity that leaves us with a feeling of fatalism and paralysis.

The questions we ask matter
Our challenges are complex and interdependent, and we cannot address them isolated. Experts and leaders have referred to them as poly-crises, and recently at the Davos Summit in January 2023, world leaders recognized that we need to address them in a new, more holistic way. But how can we understand, address and influence these problems? How can we create hope, possibilities, and dreams?

Untamable problems
In various places, both inside and outside the Danish borders, the concept of wicked problems has grown. We see it in many contexts, particularly in public sector innovation. The concept resonates. Wild or "wicked problems" are complex, coherent, and dynamic, spanning institutions, administrations, and systemic frameworks.

The theory of wicked problems was first put forward by Rittel and Webbers in 1973 in the context of social policy development. Wicked problems are, per se, intractable because the challenges they describe are unlikely ever to be fully resolved. However, this does not mean we cannot achieve positive, sustainable, long-term change.

But if the crises are interconnected, complex, and wild, do they require wicked solutions?

Our questions determine the answers we find
Now, you may think that solving wicked problems requires equally wicked solutions, but that's not necessarily the case. Whether simple or complex, solutions are merely a means to address specific needs or potentials. If we want to bring about radical and systemic change, it's more interesting to question the purpose of the existing systems. After all, the purpose determines the legitimacy and value of solutions and courses of action.

These answers may be simple and familiar solutions but placed in a completely different context, logic, and structure. What's certain is that wicked problems require coherent solutions that work together to address the problem and create new opportunities for action that didn't exist before.

The mission model for wicked problems
At DDC, we are committed to addressing complex and systemic societal challenges through design and mission-driven innovation. Working closely with foundations, businesses, public institutions, and non-governmental organizations, we are taking concrete steps to address various wicked problems, such as the growing number of young people not thriving, the need for a circular transition of society, and demographic development. In addition, we work with public organizations to strengthen their capacities, mobilize ecosystems, and set directions in various areas of the Danish welfare society.

Through continuous development and learning, we have developed a comprehensive model that moves from identifying a systemic, complex problem to a portfolio of interventions that address the problem incrementally with innovative approaches.

The model can be divided into four dimensions:
- Uncover logics and structures in the existing system and reframe the problem
- Develop alternative future scenarios
- Determine a preferred future and development of the mission
- Establish the governance model with an associated portfolio of opportunities and initiatives.

Understand the current system – then rethink your problem
To address and solve complex societal problems effectively, it's advisable to examine and understand how our current systems work. Re-discovering the origin and underlying behaviors allows us to be reminded of why systems typically are sympathetic. Today, many people find it hard to contribute and support young people in vulnerable positions, ultimately hindering our efforts to act on the growing number of children and young people who are not thriving. We prefer to have the most qualified – the professionals – helping our children.

That's sympathetic! And understandable. However, the treatment usually occurs outside the context where the problems arise or are expressed. Ultimately the undesirable situation remains when young people reenter the same context or situation once treatment is completed. Meanwhile, our tendency to diagnose and treat young people in distress strictly professionally makes it difficult for those close to the child in everyday life to offer help and support. We are afraid of causing harm. We become passive. No matter how benevolent the intentions are, they can also have unintended and potentially negative consequences for those we intend to help.

Through our work on our mission, Thriving Youth, it has become clear that thriving or the opposite is collectively experienced by young people. The question is whether it expresses increased mental illness or rather a natural and perhaps even healthy response to dysfunctional structures and systems. If the latter, should we continue to insist on treating symptoms in our healthcare system? Or should we instead work on the underlying causes and create frameworks that promote well-being?

Once we have a better understanding of how systems work, in what ways they are successful, and why they are sympathetic, we are in a better position to make suggestions for what to invest in further and what to wound up and close down. It helps us to see unutilized resources and potential. And perhaps even more important, the people and stakeholders we must invite into our work and collaborate with to discover and develop new or complementary systems. Systems that eventually might challenge and even replace the current ones.

The problems are just as attractive as the solutions

The argument for system innovation usually arises from a challenge or problem. However, system innovation can also be triggered and driven by an opportunity. Although both are not necessarily required for larger systems innovation, the case for change is all the more compelling when challenge and opportunity work together. The more urgent the challenges we face, the more urgent our search for new systemic opportunities. And the greater the potential for systemic opportunities, the easier it will be to reduce our dependence on existing systems and free ourselves from them.

At DDC, we simultaneously apply hands-on design methods to address problems and opportunities. By mapping the material of systems – including purpose, power structures, resource flows, and patterns of relationships – we examine and challenge prevailing understandings of problems.

The material composition is what defines a system and sustains its function. Mapping helps us understand two things: 1) the characteristics of the system we want to change together, and 2) how changes in the material composition turn the problem into an opportunity and open up new and unexplored possibilities.

Wicked problems in the City of Aarhus

In our close partnership with Aarhus municipality, we have introduced and shared system innovation as a method and approach to investigate and challenge existing and prevailing understandings of problems. Aarhus Municipality has identified seven wicked problems and turned them into strategic focus areas. Through our partnership and collaboration, the employees from Aarhus municipality working on the seven wicked problems have found a common language for how to work with wicked problems and system innovation. At the same time, they have recognized that the problems transcend existing systemic structures, frameworks, and administrations.

This insight implies that one of the main obstacles, but also the great potential for radical innovation, new solutions, and systems change under the municipal aegis, is that problems span across systems, logic, and discourses that are a natural part of a municipality. And most importantly, the municipality has realized that addressing these problems is not just a municipal task but a societal task that also requires great efforts from the business community, civil society – and even the citizens themselves.

We must believe we can create better systems

When we work strategically on long-term and wicked problems at DDC, we work simultaneously on three different tracks, strongly inspired by Bill Sharpe's work on the Three Horizons Framework.

1. A track that helps us define and maintain a shared focus on what a sustainable and preferred future might look like so that we avoid reproducing the logics and structures we want to abolish.
2. A track that helps us dismantle the structures working against the emergence of new or complementary systems.
3. Finally, a track that helps us create the conditions and infrastructure necessary to facilitate the turbulent transition from the current system to a better one.

Systems innovation theory is now an established field with a growing body of historical knowledge about how systems have changed over time.
However, there is still a lack of practical knowledge on intentionally changing systems and creating new ones. To address this gap, we are currently working with Aarhus municipality, The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS), and the

Local Government Denmark (KL) to connect theory with opportunities, practice, and people.

Systems innovation is more than just optimizing or fine-tuning existing systems in times of crisis. It is about boldly asserting that together we can create better conditions and systems than those we have today. Some may argue that systemic opportunities exist only theoretically until someone seizes and implements them. But one thing is for sure: we can not do it alone, not at the community level, not in the private sector, and not at the state level. Instead, we must collaborate in new ways, challenge the status quo, and share our important learnings. This requires that we seize the opportunities and insist that we can influence, even shape, the future we want.

Alternative Futures Can Give Us New Perspectives on the Wicked Problems of the Present

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Last year, KL – Local Government Denmark published an analysis that said that Denmark will be short of 16,000 care workers in the eldercare sector by 2030. That is, without a doubt, an immense challenge already causing significant consequences today. But is the problem just about a lack of 'hands' and the need for more people to enter the care sector, or is it time to reassess some of the foundational assumptions of our welfare state?

What if the crisis in the eldercare sector was about more than just recruitment and labor shortages? What if it was about our perception and appreciation of care and care work, our linear approach to retirement, and the transactional nature of our current welfare model?

Everywhere we look, we see widening cracks in the surfaces of critical systems while the elusive threat of collapse looms. A storm is brewing. Most Danes recognize the feeling that something is fundamentally broken, yet all too often, the conversation is about treating the symptoms rather than grappling with the underlying causes. We urgently need to see both the challenges — and our options — in a new light.

Seeing your blind spots

The lack of 'warm hands' in the eldercare sector is an example of a wicked problem. A distinct type of complex, entangled, and dynamic problem spanning institutions, contexts, administrations, governance systems, and systemic boundaries. The consequences are often shrouded and ill-defined while also devastating and unequally distributed. The term itself was introduced in 1973 by Rittel and Webbers and has since become a key concept, e.g., within design and systems innovation.

While the first article in this series was about working with wicked problems, this article is about working with alternative futures to gain new perspectives. One thing we've learned over the last decade or so of working with long-term, systemic, complex challenges is that future scenarios and futures-oriented design approaches are incredibly useful for tackling wicked problems. Alternative images of the future can help us shine a different light on the challenges we're already seeing, on our blind spots, and on possible pathways for moving towards something better.

New approaches for addressing complex challenges

At DDC, we've committed ourselves to addressing complex and systemic societal challenges through design and mission-oriented innovation. In close collaboration with foundations, companies, public institutions, and NGOs, we're working specifically on the issues surrounding the dwindling mental well-being among young people, the need for an irresistible circular society, and demographic changes. In addition to this, we're working closely with public organizations on building capacity, mobilizing ecosystems, and setting direction within various areas of the Danish welfare state.

Based on our continuous development and learning work, we've developed an overarching thought model for moving from identifying a systemic, complex problem to a portfolio of initiatives that address the problem over time through new innovative approaches.

The model can be divided into four tracks:

1. Uncovering the logics and structures of the existing system and reframing the problem.
2. Developing and exploring radical alternative futures.
3. Negotiating the preferred vision of the future and defining the mission.
4. Establishing a governance model and seeding an associated portfolio of interconnected initiatives.

The model is illustrated as an extremely linear and simplified step-by-step model. Still, in reality, the work across these four dimensions in many ways happens dynamically and in parallel. The interplay between the four tracks, and the insights and nuance they each provide, help inform the shared frame of understanding that is continuously being revisited, expanded, and negotiated.

This perspective, and an insistence on maintaining complexity, is critical for us in our work with wicked problems, as they're dynamic and, in principle, impossible to solve because the challenges they describe are constantly moving. When we interact with the problem, it changes. New connections and entanglements arise. New resource flows appear. The appearance of the problem changes.

Even if new complementary or alternative systems that can overcome the structural conditions that create dysfunctional situations are successfully created, it would still be utopian to imagine that they would be flawless and able to solve such large-scale problems completely. The problem will continue to change its form, the understanding of it will grow and become more nuanced, and naturally, as a result, ambitions and goals will evolve too.

Therefore, it is not meaningful to talk about final solutions to wicked problems but instigate, accelerate, and guide a movement in a better direction.

Whereas systems innovation is concerned with mapping and understanding the materiality of the system, futures-oriented design is about opening portals to multiple possible future realities.

Whereas systems innovation is concerned with mapping and understanding the materiality of the system, futures-oriented design is about opening portals to multiple possible future realities. Whereas the system mapping described in the previous article supports new, sustainable systems, alternative futures allow people to explore the consequences of a change in practice.

Alternative futures show new possibilities

When you're a group of people charting a journey somewhere, it's generally a good idea to have a shared sense of where you're going. At least you'd want a shared direction, but ideally, you aim for the same destination. It doesn't have to be the final destination, maybe it's just a rest stop along the way, but it is somewhere.

For this, it is useful to work with what would often be called a preferred future, a subcategory of future scenarios that describe the future we want to see in the ever-growing field of disciplines that work with the future as a subject. The field continues to expand but includes directions such as strategic foresight or design approaches like speculative design (Speculative Everything (2013) by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby is a classic), design fiction (Julian Bleeker et al. from the Near Futures Laboratory just released the excellent Manual of Design Fiction last year), and transition design (Terry Irwin, Gideon Kossoff, and Cameron Tonkinwise are among the pioneers. The website for the Transition Design Seminar at Carnegie Mellon is a great place to start).

The concept of the 'preferred future' as a guiding star for the long term is gaining ground these years. It makes sense; a good story about a possible future where systems work differently and lives within them are better can encapsulate and communicate the hope and nuance we so desperately need.

In a time when you might feel like a passenger in a train car that is steadily moving toward the abyss, such stories are in short supply. Instead of only looking for technical answers in the here and now, we should think much more long-term. That requires us to set a direction collectively, focus on creating fertile ground for systemic change, and cultivate connected ecologies of experiments that can evolve and share learnings over time. A preferred future can become that trellis upon which our interventions in the present can grow.

The otherwise appealing concept of preferred futures is not the only, and often not even the first, type of future scenario to consider when working with long-term strategic perspectives. As Ursula K. Le Guin wrote in one of her Earthsea novels:

"It's a rare gift to know where you need to be before you've been to all the places you don't need to be."

The work mustn't just be about drawing a picture of where we want to go. It must actively explore the alternatives and examine their opportunities and challenges. In other words, consciously working with more than just a single rosy utopia (that a preferred future isn't and shouldn't be a perfect utopia is a conversation of its own).

There are at least three good reasons for this:

1. It helps us expand the opportunity space. When we explore multiple, diverse alternative futures, we push the boundaries of what we can imagine. This can open our eyes to entirely new possibilities and risks.
2. When we give life to alternative realities and their systems and logics, the logics of our system become more apparent. Invisible mechanisms, power relations, and relationships that we never imagined could be different suddenly become visible, and we can actively challenge them and think about them differently. Without this awareness, we risk building systems that look new on the surface but reproduce existing problems underneath.
3. It allows us to uncover blind spots. By testing our possible solutions in different hypothetical contexts, we can become aware of strengths and weaknesses that we wouldn't otherwise have seen.

There are several tools and approaches for working proactively with the future. They all try to mobilize our imagination and give us images of what alternative futures might look like.

In our exploration of alternative future perspectives on aging and care, we developed a series of very tangible 'future fragments'. Speculative artifacts from the future with a bit of story attached. Not necessarily attractive but rather thought-provoking. The tactile and physical qualities of the fragments made it possible for people to get closer to actually experiencing an alternative future in their bodies.

One of the most powerful fragments was, in many ways, one of the simplest: The Caregel. This biomedical gel gives the patient the sensation of being physically touched by another human. Due to the lack of human care workers, a synthetic alternative has been developed. Caregel is especially prescribed for lonely people in nursing homes and retirement homes. However, the product can also be used on children as young as three in consultation with your doctor.

Caregel is an example of an alternative future that sheds light on ethical issues, new opportunities, and problems. It raises questions we don't normally

deal with:

What is care? Is care a central part of our welfare society, or can you buy it at the pharmacy? Who cares — the individual, the municipality, the market, or the community?

Alternative futures help us challenge the assumptions and logics we associate with wicked problems today. Ideas and hypotheses can lock us into a narrow and reductive solution space. That's why alternative futures are a central part of how we approach large, complex problems. By establishing tangible and plausible future scenarios, you can create a practical tool to analyze changes that may happen in the future and inform decisions made in the present.

That enables you to:

- Harness uncertainty with colleagues, users, and partners as a space for new opportunities to emerge
- Provoke and inspire new forms of dialogue and practices across actors, power structures, professions, and organizations
- Involve partners and enable them to shape a preferred future together – i.e., create strategies and initiatives that translate into action, even in the short term.

When we work with partners to investigate and explore alternative futures for mental well-being for young people, care, or aging, we use design methods inspired in part by the strategic foresight theories and methods that originated in the 1950s.

Part of what sets the design-driven futures approaches apart from traditional strategic foresight is the focus on materiality, sensing, involvement, and provocation. Therefore, the work is just as much about play and storytelling as experience design, installation, and performance art.

However, this doesn't change the fact that developing future scenarios is, to a large degree, an analytical, structured approach where weak signals of change, trends, tendencies, and big questions in the present are extrapolated and used as building blocks to create and explore several possible scenarios for the medium to long term future.

Where this work has traditionally been done by dedicated units in the military, government, or large corporations, we — and many others — see great potential in democratizing it.

The potential of design

In recent years, the design field has undergone a process of self-examination. It is now widely recognized that the design discipline has been a driving, aestheticizing engine in accelerating the major problems we face — and that it, therefore, must help do something about them.

The realization has accelerated the proliferation of speculative, critical, systemic, and sustainable design perspectives. As two examples of crystallizations of all this, Danish design professor Ida Engholm published the book Design for the new world – from human design to planet design earlier this year, and DDC CEO Christian Bason, with Jens Martin Skibsted published the book Expand: Stretching the future by design last year.

In both books, design work with the future as the subject matter is a central piece. We also see more and more design schools worldwide offering modules, courses, and entire programs with a long-term and systemic design perspective.

At DDC, we naturally see massive potential in a design-based approach to working with complex issues and wild problems. The design field works with visual, tangible, and collaborative methods that allow for joint exploration and testing of the future, as well as much broader involvement.

Design-based approaches focus more on democratizing, distributing power, involving, and experimenting. It is central to the designer's mindset to be in a constant flux between the exploratory and the propositional, where insights emerge through alternately exploring problems and attempting to intervene in them.

That is ideal in situations and challenges characterized by ambiguity and internal contradictions – just as the DNA of complex, systemic problems. And this is especially crucial in complex systems where many people, processes, and structures must come together.

A case: A city where young people thrive

In March 2022, we at DDC committed to addressing our society's complex and systemic growing problem: the increasing lack of well-being among young people. We wanted to challenge the dominant narrative and create a new unifying, visionary narrative where youth thrive. We insisted on understanding the problem in a new way, discovering the unknown possibilities a new understanding would unlock, and exploring how we could realize them with others.

We brought together a group of people with broad representation from the established ecosystem: Foundations, public organizations, NGOs, private companies, and other actors not traditionally associated with the issue. The aim was to gain radically new perspectives on challenges and opportunities and get insights that could form the basis for

shaping a new direction, a shared mission to work for a society where young people thrive.

We started by exploring the past and the present. We investigated why the mental health system looks the way it does today and the discourses and logics it is built on. We explored where in the system existing structures and frameworks create a collective experience of lack of well-being among young people and how the material of the system, the purpose of the system, its power structures, resource flows, and the relationship patterns that support the undesirable situation. This work highlighted how shifts in the system's composition could turn problems into opportunities and thus allow completely different types of solutions.

With our historical insights and an understanding of the present-day system, we moved our attention toward the far future. Among the many scenarios explored was a world where you have a legal right to thrive and can sue people for hurting your well-being. Suppose you think the local government, your teacher, your ex, your father, the supermarket, your classmate, Instagram, or your boss limit your well-being. In that case, you report them to the police and let the courts decide whether you are entitled to compensation.

The different future scenarios allowed people to experience and taste what it would be like to be a citizen in other future societies. Which elements, discourses, and logics were appealing, and which were downright repulsive? The experience widened the opportunity space and enabled the actors to negotiate a preferred future to dream of and strive for together.

The result of the work became the foundation and starting point for designing and developing a sensory manifestation of what a city where young people thrive might look like. We call the future universe Vorby. A city that you can step into and experience right here.

The futures-work has been a unifying sensemaking process that has fostered new connections and relationships in the system. From the very first sessions, it has pushed the understanding of the problem and possible actions. While creating a new direction has resulted in an actual manifestation of a preferred future where young people thrive, the process and the work of bringing it to life have been equally valuable for many participants.

Designing alternative futures is, thus, in our view, an essential step towards opening and claiming the spaces of possibility that wicked problems hold. They show us the possibilities — good and bad — and provide a shared, expanded framework of understanding that allows us to design a future that is truly worth striving for. A preferred future that we can use to guide and inform our long-term missions.

Missions Lead the Way to Action in the *Wilderness of Complex Problems*

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More organizations have to find the courage to work with mission-driven innovation if we are to succeed in solving the complex and wicked problems we face as a society and civilization. This approach is crucial to transitioning from merely identifying these complex challenges to achieving real impact. This article explores what a mission is and what it takes for organizations to work mission-oriented.

In July 1969, two American astronauts landed on the moon. The mission was accomplished: to bring two people to the moon (and, of course, return them safely to Earth). This mission took seven years to complete and required enormous investment, risk-taking, new technologies, interventions, collaborations, and partnerships. It was bold, ambitious, and dangerous.

Since then, the concept of 'missions' has been applied in many different contexts, particularly in management literature and strategic processes aimed at developing the purpose of individual organizations.

In recent years, the concept has demonstrated potential within social innovation. Particularly since the Italian-American economics professor Mariana Mazzucato highlighted mission-driven innovation as an approach to address complex, wicked problems in her book The Entrepreneurial State (2013) and later in Mission Economy (2021).

At DDC – Danish Design Center, we are committed to addressing complex and systemic societal challenges through design based on mission-driven innovation. Working closely with foundations, companies, public institutions, and non-governmental organizations, we work to solve the complex and systemic problems related to, e.g., the increasing lack of well-being among young people, the circular transition in our society, and demographic development. We also work with various public organizations to build capacity, mobilize ecosystems, and provide direction within several areas of the Danish welfare society.

We see mission-driven innovation as a crucial approach to moving from identifying complex, systemic problems to achieving real and actual impact experienced by citizens, businesses, and institutions in our society.

Missions can be defined as:

- Specific, long-term, time-bound goals with a particular focus on creating positive value for society and citizens
- Meaningful, ambitious, visionary images of the preferred future that stimulate our collective imagination
- Relevant to many different stakeholders, inviting and engaging
- Cross-sector and interdisciplinary: missions transcend the individual organization's position within the sector, its key competencies, and what traditionally influences decision-making
- Top-down and bottom-up: Involving the political level as well as administrations, public actors, businesses, research, civil society, and citizens
- Realized through a portfolio of innovative interventions (projects, efforts, services, training, communication, etc.).

Innovation turned upside down

At first glance, mission-driven innovation may seem at odds with traditional innovation because this approach turns familiar processes, workflows, and logic on their head.

Building on and extending Mazzucato's model for establishing and managing missions, there have been exciting new developments in mission-driven innovation in recent years, both in Denmark and across the Nordic region. Inspired by Mazzucato's ground-breaking work, many organizations are experimenting with new ways of doing things.

For example, the Swedish innovation fund Vinnova has for several years worked to ensure that all Swedish children have equal access to healthy and nutritious school meals. This extensive mission encompasses a wide range of aspects – from imparting knowledge about food and food culture to streamlining food production and logistics, combating food waste, and improving conditions for farmers producing sustainable food.

The wild and complex problems that we all are increasingly aware of and affected by – such as the recruitment crisis, lack of well-being in the labor market, and the demographic composition of our society – are indeed complex and particularly wicked. And perhaps of a slightly different character than the incredible moon mission that succeeded in 1969. It was complicated but not complex or wicked.

Today, we are all increasingly aware of and affected by complex, wicked problems. Whether it is the ongoing recruitment crisis, problems with well-being in the workplace, or the changing demographic makeup of our society, these problems are indeed complex and wicked. These problems are indeed different from the historic mission accomplished in 1969, which was complex but not wicked.

However, the question arises: Can we work with the "wicked problems" in a mission-oriented way? Problems that cannot be defined as either/or – and problems that don't have clearly defined goals and outcomes. Yes, we can!

The moon landing was a mission focused on a specific event and was considered complete when Armstrong set foot on the lunar surface. Systemic problems, however, are different. They don't go away, and we must acknowledge that we may never fully solve them.

One example is our work with the Partnership for Radical Innovation of The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) in Norway. We are working with them to explore how they use a mission-driven approach to create better transitions from youth to young adulthood for people in vulnerable positions. Despite numerous well-intentioned and concrete measures, the scale of the problem has not changed significantly over the past 30 years.

Services and interventions alone have not been able to bring about the desired impact. That is partly due to the systemic structures, which lead to unnecessary and perhaps even counterproductive transitions. In addition, the systems' perception of these problems and their solutions have been quite one-dimensional. Also, there has been a lack of attention on how these problems and their interrelationships constantly evolve and change in form, manifestation, and character.

Change is inevitable. Thus, we must continuously learn about how challenges change and evolve. Also, we have to be willing to change our goals and indicators as we learn and get smarter. We must incorporate continuous learning loops to ensure we acquire knowledge and experience from individual initiatives and at the portfolio level. It's key to note when we intervene with systems, they change in character. The indicators of success within our mission will do the same.

Three Dimensions of the Mission
In recent years at DDC, we discovered that setting up and initiating a mission calls for a distinctive emphasis on three interrelated areas:

Setting direction
When guiding action and mobilizing participants toward change, it is important to set a common and ambitious direction. Given the complexity of systemic problems, we cannot create an all-encompassing theory of change that dictates exactly how to achieve our shared goals. In this regard, missions serve as a vector: they provide the direction we need to pursue together without prescribing the exact methods.

Mobilizing ecosystems
Changing a system requires the interaction of many different forces and resources. Mission-driven innovation, with its myriad possibilities, cannot be accomplished by one or a few actors. Existing system resources must be mobilized, possibly within new contexts and collaborations.

Building capacity
Building capacity is about establishing infrastructure and fostering competencies that enable continuous learning and evolution of the system. To work effectively toward a shared mission, all stakeholders must maintain the necessary capacity over time. Key components such as methods, knowledge, skills, networks, funding, and organizational components—including leadership—must be in place for the ecosystem to attain the shared goals of the mission.

Recognizing that these three areas are dynamic and constantly evolving is important. Therefore, a fundamental premise of mission-driven work is simultaneously and continuously addressing these three areas as the mission unfolds.

How to set a common direction
At DDC, we agree with Mariana Mazzucato that it is important to have a goal when working with missions. However, the approach to this common goal can be very different.

Our goal should be a stimulating and motivating beacon, sustaining our joint focus when daily hurdles obscure our headway. The direction or vision we collectively strive towards can function as a systematic guide or creative boundary, shaping our daily tasks and long-term strategic decisions.

An example of direction beyond mere declaration is seen in Vorby. A city that represents the future paradigm that guides our mission work focused on the well-being of young people, "Thriving Youth," here at DDC. In Vorby, you can explore areas and interact with people who embody the city's seven core values and principles.

These fundamental principles offer a vivid, tactile visualization of the future and describe the values that define the mission – proposing an alternative path toward change. A path that may seem utopian to some, yet for others, particularly those who want to break new ground, it is invigorating, engaging, and motivating.

Mobilizing towards the common goal
It's a fundamental truth in mission-driven work that no one can create change on their own. The magic often happens in the cracks between systems, companies, administrations, and sectors affected by the problems. Establishing a common goal of what success looks like is imperative to bridging knowledge across these different systems.

Also, agreeing on our destination is one thing; ensuring cohesion among the actors and maintaining

our shared ambition is another. Especially when there is no formal, central coordinating authority to supervise, lead, and distribute the work in a mission.

It requires that actors involved in the mission learn together. New connections and initiatives within and around the mission must be based on learning practices. That is the essence of the transition from competition under the traditional innovation approach to collaboration under the mission-driven innovation approach. Our goal must be constantly learning to the finish line rather than controlling the path to get there.

A powerful example of a proactive approach to mission-driven innovation at DDC is the Learning Forward model. The model accommodates the complexity and steers clear of oversimplifying the experimental and trial-and-error aspects of mission work. It recognizes that different initiatives should be evaluated on various parameters and paces and promotes cross-learning within the mission portfolio.

Each project within the mission portfolio contributes to changing the nature of the problem and bringing about positive change. Therefore, we place more emphasis on the overall impact of the mission portfolio as a whole than on demonstrating direct and causal relationships between cause and effect within single initiatives.

That means we should invest more in learning, particularly collective learning within the mission, rather than just reaching predefined milestones within our initiatives. 'Learning Forward' is a framework that allows us to intensify our focus on the many diverse aspects and objectives of our mission work without constant evaluation. We should be able to learn at different paces while staying alert about when it might be necessary to mobilize additional mission stakeholders.

The closer we are to a particular initiative, the faster we should learn from it, ensuring necessary adjustments, scaling, or possible termination.

1. *Learning from our actions* and making necessary adjustments should be part of our routine practice without initiating extensive processes. This manifests through individual initiatives and calls for work processes that promote learning over mere execution.

2. *Changing our approach*, learning from it, and eventually modifying it is not meant to happen at the same pace. This could potentially change the entire basis of our actions. At DDC, for example, our efforts would have a very different character if design were not part of our DNA. Instead, we should incorporate a variety of approaches to mission work, as this will lead to a broader spread of initiatives.

3. *If we change the course of our strategy*, it will (naturally) affect a broader spectrum of the mission portfolio. For example, changing the principles in Vorby would be a significant strategic shift. If we, for instance, replaced the principle of focusing on prevention with a focus on treatment, the mission direction would take a substantially different approach, resulting in entirely distinct initiatives.

4. *Reframing the purpose* affects everything that happens within the mission. The purpose itself is deeply value-based. Thus, the goal is not to be renegotiated frequently. However, as we gain new insights and expand our understanding of the problem, it becomes essential to make room for renegotiation, particularly when specific evidence suggests that the overarching purpose needs to change.

Beyond changes at the portfolio level, we should also allow for the possibility of terminating or replacing initiatives or actors that aren't adding value to the mission. While this seems logical, it can lead to conflicts, as it may involve closing research projects, reallocating funds between projects, or changing the partner group. Thus, learning also becomes an integral part of a mission-oriented management model, requiring a significantly different approach from the people and organizations involved in the mission than traditional management models.

Both UNDP and the Centre for Public Impact offer valuable insights into how to demonstrate learning across a portfolio.

How do we align ourselves, our organizations, and our systems to work mission-driven

What does it take to maintain innovative strategies while fostering necessary systemic resilience?

We need a new kind of leader – a 'mission manager' committed to addressing and consistently driving the required change in mission-driven work. The responsibility of a mission manager is to realize the long-term goals of the mission rather than catering to the individual interests of individual companies or organizations. Mission managers navigate at different levels and speeds, as described in the Learning Forward Tool; they facilitate learning among the various groups involved in the mission.

The ROCKWOOL Foundation's employment initiative, NExTWORK, targeting young people in vulnerable positions, is a concrete example of a project that has explored and experimented with designing and implementing a sustainable

management model and learning mechanism. Within this initiative, three all-encompassing, guiding, and value-driven principles have emerged:

- Shift the Power – transitioning from case workers to young people and businesses
- Many-to-many relationships – as opposed to one-to-one relationships
- Work identity – as opposed to personal development.

Instead of designing the initiative around pre-set activities and events, the employees in NExTWORK had the flexibility to continually adjust specific actions within the initiative as long as they aligned with these three core principles. In addition to the principles, a collective, design-inspired learning mechanism is at the heart of the initiative. That supports the NExTWORK team in experimenting with new ideas, collecting feedback, and making necessary adjustments.

The mission manager focuses on leadership and learning mechanisms and is responsible for creating awareness of the mission outcomes. That brings us to a crucial question: What are the most suitable methods for documenting the results of the individual solutions in the portfolio and their collective impact?

While randomized control trials are often considered the best standard in evidence-based impact assessment, we encounter some fundamental challenges with this method here at DDC.

Firstly, the systemic problems we address are of such complexity and intricacy that individual solutions can't resolve them alone. That diminishes the significance of the impact of isolated efforts.

Secondly, a fundamental principle of randomized control trials is that the type of treatment or intervention must remain unchanged throughout the trial. However, our environment and our systems are in a constant state of change. They are dynamic, often meaning that treatments or interventions may be obsolete when an impact assessment occurs.

Lastly, randomized control trials are based on existing data and specific measurement logics. This approach cements the existing understanding of the problem and thus freezes the purpose of systems, the potential for change, and particular solutions considered legitimate, meaningful, and desirable.

In mission-driven work, the power to transform systems lies in the collective effort of public, private, civic, and volunteer stakeholders who unite to create change. That requires a shared direction and the mobilization of ecosystems, mutual understanding, and new collaboration methods. Also, it calls for a standard set of tools and a shared language.

That is why we at DDC have launched a new Scandinavian course and community of practice focusing specifically on system innovation. While the course aims to bring together people from different backgrounds and lay the groundwork for shared dialog, the real goal of the community of practice is to foster the ongoing exchange of insights and facilitate new collaborations. That may even expand to cross-border missions in the coming years.

After all, these wicked problems affect us all, and we can only solve them by working together.

Creating Real Impact: Why We Must Work Portfolio-Based With Missions

By Sara Gry Striegler & Anders Erlendsson,
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For the past year, we have been able to read terrifying headlines and stories about gang-related violence, explosions, and shootings in our neighboring country Sweden. When we read the analyses, there appears to be a realization in the Swedish population: something radical must be done. The violence must stop. The killings must end.

Danish media report that Swedish politicians recognize that they have been naive in their approach to accepting refugees and, perhaps, particularly in their effort to enable people to integrate into Swedish society. The Swedish politicians squint at Denmark and highlight Denmark's harsh immigration policy, legislative changes – which make it easier to set up surveillance equipment – and the introduction of visitation zones as best-case examples of how to deal with gangs.

But the question is, is Denmark the right place to look? The Swedish decision-makers could use several examples of hands-on and successful approaches from past comparable complex challenges.

It remains unclear what reasons underlie their decisions, but we are tempted to ask: Are knowledge and know-how too difficult to access and too difficult to translate? Are the solutions, services, or interventions too complex and too long-term for the politicians to implement and use the expected positive outcomes in their next election campaign?

Is it too uncertain to invest in innovations that are trying to address issues with a level of complexity that makes it impossible to demonstrate causal effect using traditional impact measurements, or is it something entirely different?

The number of people killed by gunfire in Sweden has exploded, reaching 63 in 2022. In 2007, 63 young men died in gang-related killings in the Scottish city of Glasgow, the city known as The European Capital of Knife Crime. It is startling that the number of dead is identical, but even more glaring is the degree to which the underlying situations and social dynamics resemble each other.

Where Swedish politicians look for and invest in solutions traditionally associated with crime prevention, such as surveillance and higher prison sentences, Glasgow did something radically different – and with significant success! Over a 10-year period, the number of murders was reduced by 50 percent, while cases of weapon possession and gang-related violence decreased by 85 and 73 percent.

So what did they do in Scotland, led by former nurse and psychologist Karyn McCluskey, that was so successful and groundbreaking? How does it differ from what the Swedish government is currently doing?

They invested, and probably without even realizing it, in a portfolio of collective and holistic care. forventede energibesparelser som følge af øget energieffektivitet (Ruzzenenti et al., 2019).

Points of reference in DDC's work towards impact

In this series of articles, we try to demonstrate how we understand and work with large and complex problems, *wicked problems*. The problems highlight paradoxes in our social construction and articulate the necessity of fundamentally changing the way our systems are designed and operate if we are to succeed in creating long-term and sustainable impacts for people, society, and, ultimately, our planet.

We keep coming back to three important realizations in our work: 1) that we will never succeed in solving the problems completely, 2) that they are deeply rooted in and cut across existing administrations and systems, and 3) that they are amorphous and change expression, character and form as we influence them.

These three realizations guide our change work in DDC to:

- Mobilize for change – because no stakeholder can solve the problems themselves
- Build capacity in the existing systems – so that the systems can be changed and, in some cases, closed down
- To set direction based on the knowledge and learning we acquire through our work – so that we together iterate and co-design even more effective expressions of the solutions as we become smarter.

In the first article, How to Turn Wicked Problems Into Ambitious Opportunities, the concept of the material of systems was introduced, inspired by Jennie Winhall and Charles Leadbeater from System Shift's green paper on systems innovation.

The concept highlights how the composition of a system's material, consisting of its purpose, power, relationships, and resources, defines the system and maintains its functionality. Simultaneously, changes in this composition are what bring about systems change.

The second article highlighted how we work with scenarios and alternative futures as a method to uncover blind spots and become aware of our

own hypotheses and assumptions in order to spot new opportunities. The third article presented our perspectives on what it takes to initiate, launch, and drive missions.

In the final article in this series, we explore what it means to work portfolio-based and how each intervention in the portfolio contributes to fulfilling the common mission. We will discuss how changing the purpose of systems will allow us to reframe the problems we are facing and open up new possibilities.

The example from Scotland is very interesting in this context because there are obvious overlaps between the strategies, approaches, and methods presented throughout the series of articles and what unfolded in Glasgow.

Over a 10-year period, the Violent Reduction Unit in Scotland, led by Karyn McCluskey, succeeded in changing the material composition of the Scottish police force. As a result, the unit prevented the premature death of many young men.

Just as Swedish politicians are currently investing in more surveillance and harsher penalties, authorities in Glasgow tried to address the problems in a similar way without significant effect. The traditional solutions had been depleted.

The sum of the portfolio creates the impact
It can be difficult to see that systems are changing when they are in the midst of change. It's always easier in retrospect. The accounts from Glasgow suggest that many ideas, new initiatives, and collaborations arose more or less by coincidence. That the process was emergent and chaotic. Fifteen years later, it is clear that the positive changes cannot be solely attributed to Karyn but are the result of the sum of various initiatives, partial solutions, and people who made it possible for young men to choose a different path in life.

In other words, the sum of initiatives in the portfolio.

Although the approach and process may not have been planned from the beginning, not originally intended as a portfolio approach, but emerged along the way and were influenced by the people involved, we see it as a prime example of what it means to work portfolio-based and the impact it can bring about.

What truly enabled new responses to emerge as part of a portfolio was a shift in the system's fundamental purpose. Where the traditional system viewed gang crime, violence, and murder as crimes to be punished, McCluskey insisted on viewing the problems in a different light – as an epidemic. The objective of stopping the violence and the killings remained unchanged, but the shift in the way problems were perceived significantly changed the system's purpose, its logics, and what responses and solutions which were considered legitimate.og sådanne produkter.

In our mission, Thriving Youth, we have taken a similar approach to create a future where young people thrive. We started out by exploring what has influenced the development of the mental health system, why it looks and operates the way it does today, what discourses and logics it is built on, and what is characterizing the system's material composition.

Just like in Glasgow, it was clear that the existing system could not meet the challenge and counteract the increasing distress among children and young people. The system was stuck in the medical paradigm, which defined what legitimate responses and solutions and what human and organizational resources could be utilized.

The dominating logic from Denmark's mental health system is in many ways identical to the logic in the text box above: To detect, diagnose, and treat people when their symptoms are severe enough to qualify for a diagnosis.

Every third woman and every fifth man between the ages of 16-24 experience anxiety, stress, and loneliness in their everyday context. In other words, unhappiness is experienced collectively. Several people in the research world are working to change our view of mental health, and in this relation, Jonathan Schaefer's research is interesting: a study from 2021 shows that a large part of us will experience mental illness, and only 15 percent will avoid mental illness in our lives.

With inspiration from the ground-breaking work from Glasgow, we started, in collaboration with the ROCKWOOL Foundation's Intervention Unit, to identify overall shifts in the traditional and dominating understanding of the problem, which could turn the problem into an opportunity and thus release unutilized resources and disrupt the existing power dynamics.

What is well-being?
According to the WHO, health is, by definition: "A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease, pain or other infirmities." A definition that individualizes the concept of health and makes health the responsibility of the individual.

At the same time, the definition underpins an unfortunate trend that one of the authors of this article, Anders Erlendsson, experienced while

conducting fieldwork in a previous job at the ROCKWOOL Foundation's Intervention Unit: That a great many young people understand and describe well-being as a state one can only reach if one performs 100 percent on all parameters in one's life at the same time.

Therefore, it is perhaps not so surprising that young people in various well-being surveys express that they do not thrive.

Life is never 100 percent on all parameters. Difficult situations shape us and influence who and what we grow up to become. It develops our inner compass and helps us to understand and navigate failures, disappointments, and worries.

At DDC – Danish Design Center, we believe that well-being is the notion of being able to navigate the complexity we encounter in life. Well-being is a state of balance that gives one the experience of surplus, courage, vigor, and joy in life. Well-being is expressed through interactions between life, structures, frameworks, communities, and social relations. Well-being is neither constant happiness on all parameters nor the absence of diagnoses.

Because we see well-being as a contextual phenomenon, it made sense in our mission work to shift the focus from mental health to a focus on mental well-being. And because well-being results from interactions with life around us, it does not make sense to see well-being as the individual's responsibility but as the community's.

Therefore, our mission, Thriving Youth, aims to design structures that actively promote well-being. But also to revise the basic narratives and understandings of well-being in society, to nurture the collective imagination, and to shape our systems to open up more possible and meaningful paths through life.

It is no longer only health professionals who can contribute to promoting well-being, but a responsibility and an opportunity that resides with all people in our society.

We are currently working on launching an inter-municipal partnership program to kickstart this intent. In this program, municipalities will collaborate to develop, support, and operate a portfolio that provides opportunities to create frameworks where young people thrive.

A portfolio of opportunities

As described in this series of articles, we are working to influence and address the complex and difficult – even wicked – societal problems in our society. In this work, we believe there are key tools and approaches that can be put into play to initiate the transformation of broken systems. Once the work has been initiated it's about maintaining the alternative direction, using it as a benchmark for new initiatives, and as a compass for the overall portfolio.

Briefly, if we return to the situation in Glasgow in the early 2000s, we find strong examples of exactly that. The redefinition of the system's purpose and the alternative logics challenged the dominant understanding of the problem and made alternative solution models and opportunities legitimate.

Suddenly, people in professions not traditionally associated with the prevention of violence and gang crime played a key role in successfully achieving the system's redefined purpose. New relationship patterns were established. New resources were utilized.

A new effort that emerged in the portfolio was that veterinarians treating injured animals could inform social authorities if there was suspicion that the injury was due to violence or neglect. Simply because it could be an indicator of violence in the home. An indicator that was suspected and later proven to have a strong influence on whether boys themselves would commit violence later in life.

And professions that previously worked to solve gang crime in the traditional ways got completely new functions. For example, police officers who used to spend most of their time solving and proving crime were given another function due to the shift in the system's purpose – namely, to prevent crime through building relationships with young men in the gang environment and by insisting on inviting dialogue and cooperation.

Remember to turn on the light

In Denmark, wicked problems are hot stuff. It's a good thing. It is necessary to see the major societal challenges, wicked problems in a different light and to give us a language so we can insist that they require collaboration across the board.

At the same time, there are voices that state that precisely this shared ownership makes decision-makers passive and paralyzed. Some believe that a narrative is spreading: "If the problems don't live within my domain, I can't do anything anyway."

It is true that wicked problems are neither easy nor quick to solve. And changing systems will inevitably meet both systemic and human resistance. For obvious reasons, very few have the courage and desire to tell other people to change the approach they feel they are good at and have been practicing for the past 30 years.

Even fewer have the courage to relinquish the power that needs to be relinquished so that new relationships can be established, completely new organizations can gain influence, and new resources can flow – for the systems to ultimately change.

In our work, we meet passionate individuals who make a difference for people in vulnerable positions every day and succeed in hacking the systems that, according to them, are broken. They talk about how they experience decision-makers being passive and appear to be lagging behind the development and innovation that sprouts in many places locally.

These stories make us all easily tempted to point the finger at the government, making them responsible. But the issue is significantly more complex than that.

Firstly, it is as good as impossible to scale zealots – at least as long as the announcement of the act on cloning and genetic modification of animals, etc., is applicable – and secondly, the frameworks, arenas, and contexts in which passionate individuals operate are rarely comparable.

Therefore, we also believe that both zealots and national politicians have essential roles to play in creating long-term and sustainable change. Where the narrative for change arises from the problem, the people, organizations, and companies show another possible path for dealing with them.

Politicians have an essential role to play in supporting the work and creating the space for change. At DDC, we believe that mission work – the common narrative – can bring together all stakeholders and thus both drive change top-down and bottom-up.

In recent years in Denmark, we have seen examples of how some foundations, including Bikubenfonden, have fundamentally changed their purpose. They have become impact-driven. This means that they are concerned with the overall change for people in particular situations rather than focusing on the change that is created for individuals through activities or events.

Most recently, through our partnership with KS Kommunesektorens interesseorganisasjon PRI – Partnership for Radical Innovation in Norway, we have experienced that the work of redefining the system's material, exploring alternative futures and establishing a common direction and mission has contributed to two Norwegian foundations fundamentally changing their way of understanding and investing in impact.

In article three of the Wicked Series, we described the Mission Manager's role and responsibility to succeed with the mission's long-term objectives and not with the individual interests of companies or organizations. We sincerely believe there is a need for this new type of leader who, like Karyn McCluskey, can create connections and collect and distribute experience and knowledge across the portfolio. A leader who can and will insist on the concrete change of purpose and thus also works to change the way we understand and measure change.

Last but not least, we believe that it is central that new cooperation models are established in our political system, which enables long-term investment – beyond an election period of four years. The mission-driven approach is like running – not just a marathon, but an ultra race. It calls for constant adaptation to pace, terrain, and weather changes. It is the long, cool move and the persistence that is absolutely decisive.

It is neither easy nor cost-free, but the question is, can we afford not to?

These four articles are our attempt to shed light on how we work to create positive changes – from identifying systemic problems and developing scenarios and a common mission to establishing a portfolio and learning mechanism.

In our belief, working to create positive change requires that we insist that the future is bright for our children, our society, and our planet.

The article is available in Danish here.

This article is the fourth and final piece (so far) in the Wicked Series:

- How to Turn Wicked Problems Into Ambitious Opportunities
- Missions Lead the Way to Action in the Wilderness of Complex Problems
- Alternative Futures Can Give Us New Perspectives on the Wicked Problems of the Present

The articles explore and explain how we work with wicked problems from a design- and mission-driven perspective.