



# Natalia Radywyl: Complex Adaptive Systems and Sustainability

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Interviewer: Kendra Besanger

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# Complex Adaptive Systems and Sustainability

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As an advocate for the commons, Natalia Radywyl's research and project work span civic engagement, ethnography, urbanism, service design and digital media. She's currently a senior design researcher at Fjord (NYC), and Fellow at The Public Policy Lab (NYC), and has held honorary fellowships at the School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne, and The Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University (Melbourne). Natalia has also coordinated tertiary courses in new media and urban culture, co-edited *Nanotechnology and Global Sustainability* (2011), and regularly donates pro bono time to not-for-profits working in community-oriented urban design. [[www.astudioforallthings.com](http://www.astudioforallthings.com)]

## **Can you talk about your work with Project for Public Spaces?**

In New York, I work for an urban design non-profit called Project for Public Spaces. We do community centred urban design, which has a lot to do with stakeholder engagement processes and we work to make it easy to understand that people deserve input into how their cities are designed. I also have a couple of adjunct fellowships back in Australia. The first is with the Victorian Eco Innovation Lab at the University of Melbourne, which does a lot of work based around climate change. We help communities in suburbs and neighbourhoods become more resilient in the face of climate change: disaster planning scenarios, workshops - these kinds of things. I bring public space thinking and digital understanding to some of that. The other association I have is at the Institute of Social Research, at Swinburne University, which is more of a design, technology university.

That research is more to do with the social research, ethnography aspect of my work - but they come together. Basically, I maintain my academic hat by distance, through Australia. Being in New York is about having an urban laboratory at my fingertips and being involved and exploring different kinds of design practices for the social researcher and ethnographer in me.

### **What does mobilities mean to you?**

Because I'm an ethnographer, it's very much about understanding someone's own internal capacity. But, I'm also a systems thinker, so it's about thinking about a person within a system, whether it's social or urban. We are complex adaptive systems. Our cities are complex adaptive systems – they're all interlinked. So, mobilities, to me – it sounds a bit abstracted and perhaps a bit cold – is about a capacity for change, adaptation and regeneration, and understanding how that can be guided in really productive, sustainable ways – from the way you live your own life as a human being, to the way we're designing our cities, and how we are living in our natural environments. It's how all of those things interconnect with each other. That's kind of an abstracted description but it joins together a lot of the research happening at this conference.

### **How do you use mobilities in your research?**

My research recently has been about how communities can self-organize to have larger institutional support from governments and how the private sector can fit into that as well – to really make our cities more sustainable. There are some basic things that people are already doing or reaching for and realizing our current systems aren't

working, aren't sustainable, and are resilient in the wrong kinds of ways. There are huge economic crises, public health issues, and our systems are falling apart – including, often, the university system. In my own research, I think it's trying to identify the very small, niche innovations where there is a little seed of something that can scale. From an academic perspective, that comes from thinking in systems theory – and there's some really great work that comes out of ecological science to understand how that can be the case. For me, rather than talking about abstract models, we can ask, on the ground, how might this really manifest? How can we find those little moments of change, which are the leverage points? We can imagine a rudder – something that can have a larger effect on something. I think that is how we have to be thinking now.

Mobility for me is identifying niche innovation, but, very specifically, about people and how they do it, and how can they do it without realizing they are doing it. I think that is the entry point. For me, it's about walking around and observing and watching and living and breathing a city, and being in tune with it, and seeing where that might be the case. And it's not that hard to find – there are people everywhere doing great things. You just have to be open to it.