systems thinking
for brand designers.

29.02.2024

long-term collaborators.

AUTHOR

adrian jarvis

EDITOR

tim wild

playbook for thinkers and makers.
bridge a gap in systems thinking.
roots in digital design.
evolved for modern brand strategy.
flexible from start-ups to enterprises.

founded on practical projects.

ORGANIC

BBC

BRITISH LIBRARY

KIA

Hilton

R/GA

NIKE

IKEA

Unilever

Accept & Proceed

. . .

. . .

# some foundations of system thinking.

starting with a useful definition.

Systems Thinking is a perspective that views the world as a set of interconnected and interdependent systems, where changes in one part of the system can have ripple effects throughout the whole.

Donella Meadows, Academy for Systems Change

how does it align with design thinking?

TOP-DOWN: examines entire systems and their complexity — to find opportunities for change or advantage.

systems-centred design

SYSTEMS THINKING

DESIGN THINKING

user-centred design
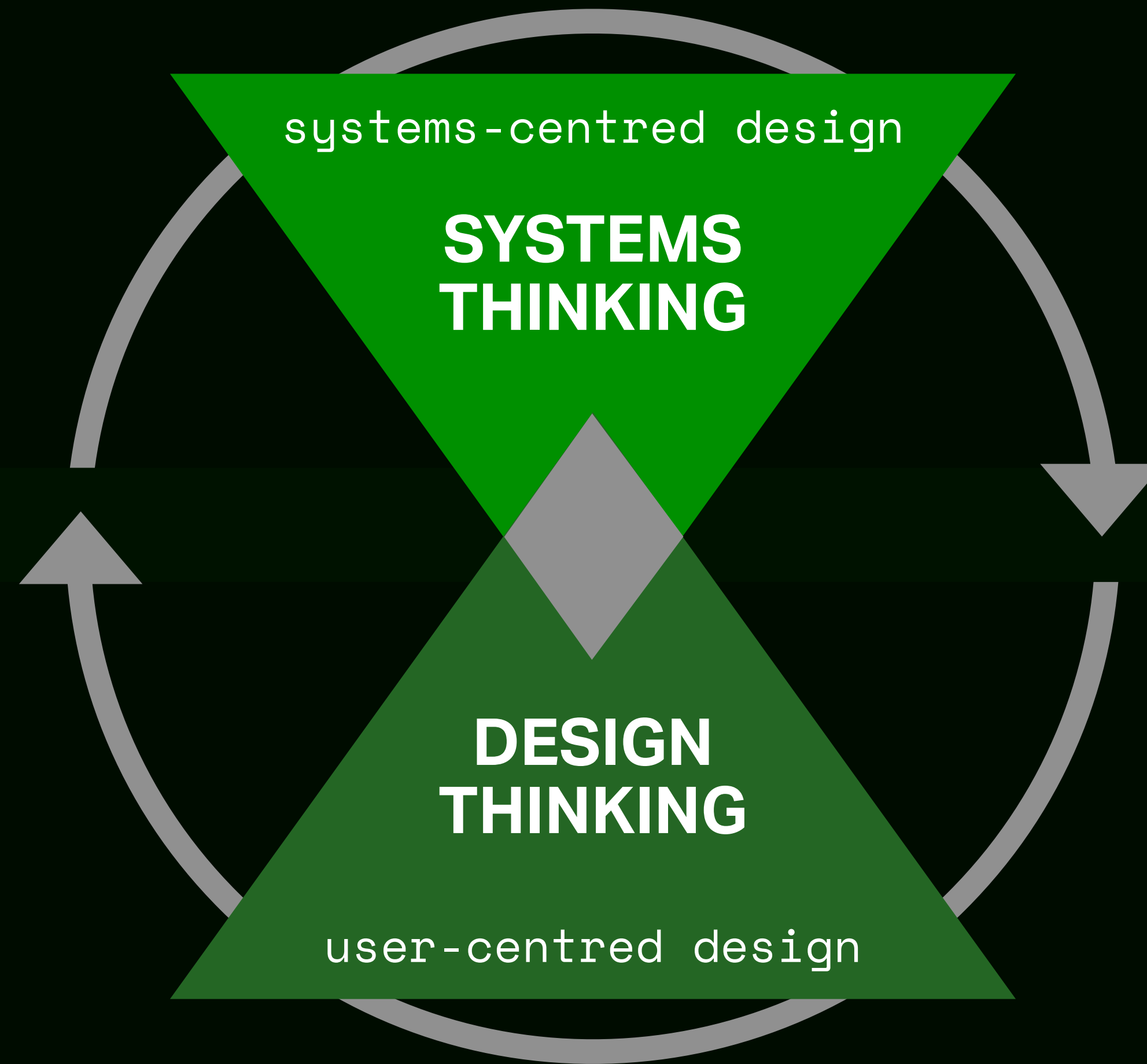
BOTTOM-UP: focuses on understanding people's real needs — to create human-centred products, services and processes.

why should we apply systems thinking?

brands don't live in a vacuum.

active part of dynamic systems.

products, services, customers, communities, partners, regulators, activists, and more.

what are the tenets of systems thinking?

INTERCONNECTIONS

EMERGENCE

LEVERAGE POINTS

CHAOS

FEEDBACK LOOPS

COLLABORATION

COHESION

ADAPTABILITY

why should brand designers care?

decode trends and the drivers of change.

design 'connected' brands for a digital-led world.

help brands to grow in fast-moving markets.

why are we careful applying playbooks?

There are no general theories of brands. Brands are the opposites of a generic. Each brand is unique and each one has its own system, approach and meaning.

Mark Riston, Melbourne Business School

so let's get down to the framework.

principle 1: know your ecosystems.

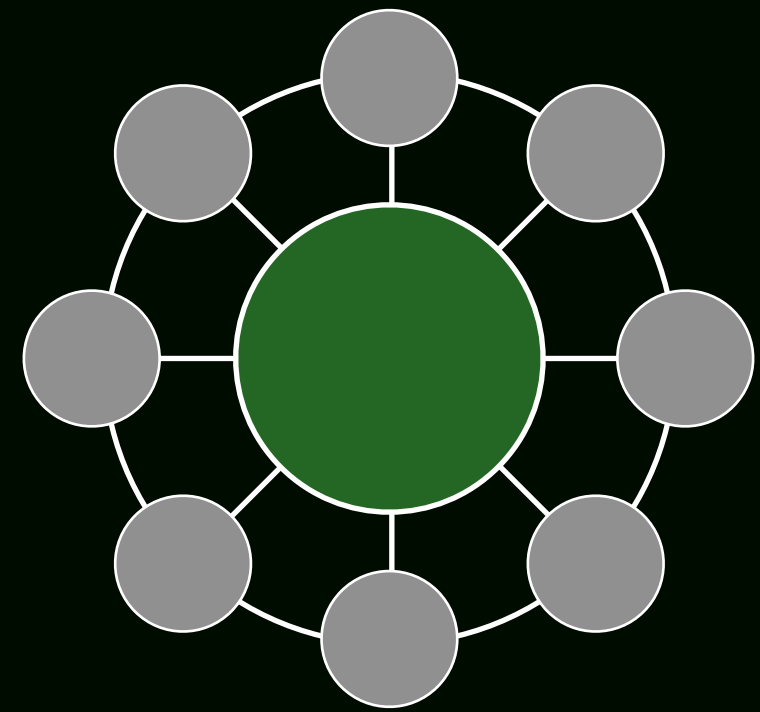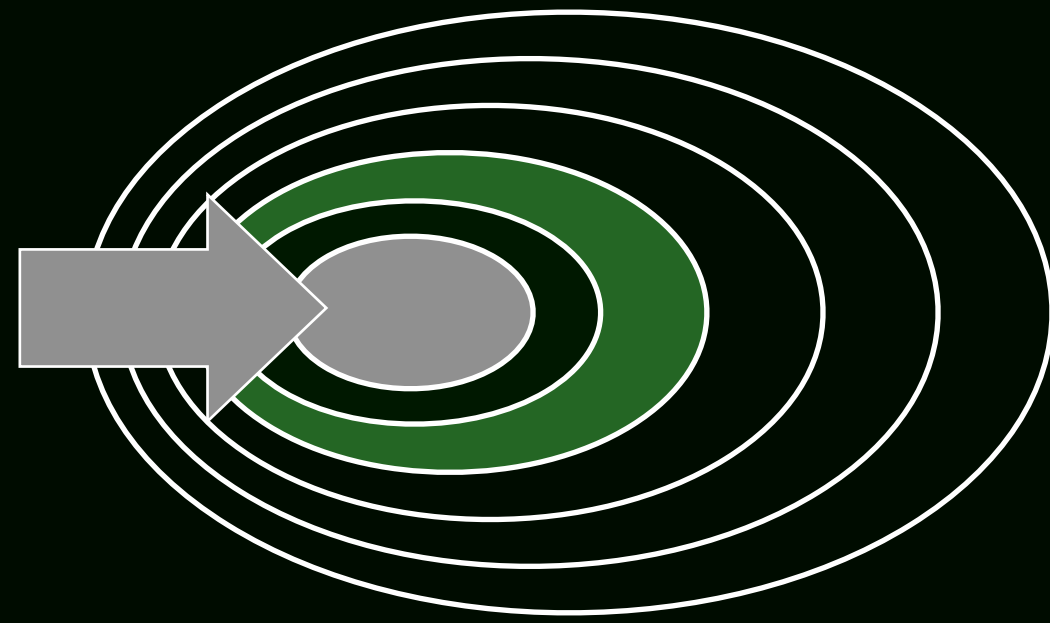|			
INTERCONNECTIONS	EMERGENCE	LEVERAGE POINTS	CHAOS
FEEDBACK LOOPS	COLLABORATION	COHESION	ADAPTABILITY

'connected brands' are ecosystem catalysts — supporting the design of more valued experiences and sustainable ways of doing business.
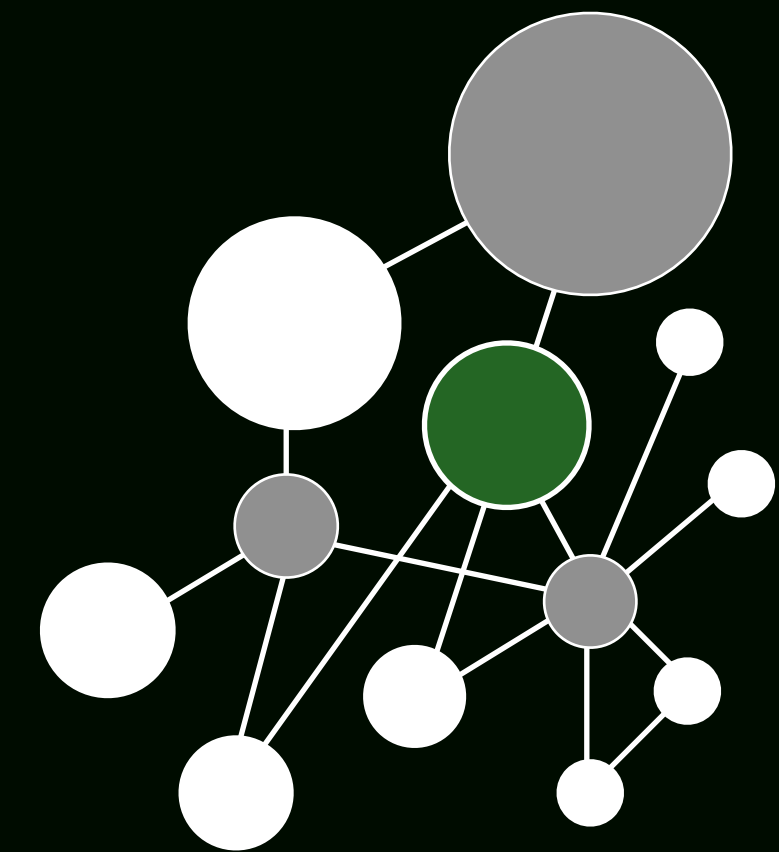
how can we view the different types of ecosystems?

BRAND

how a company's people, products and services are functionally integrated.

DIGITAL

how technology transforms lifestyles, cities, industry, and sustainability.

BUSINESS

how each player connects, collaborates, and competes in a market.

IKEA: INTERCONNECTIONS

- Affordability and sustainability appeals to eco-conscious consumers.

- Reshaping supply chains, and commitment to being climate-positive.

- Leadership in brand, digital, and business transformation.

- Setting new benchmarks for the category.

principle 2: connect all the elements.

INTERCONNECTIONS	**EMERGENCE**	LEVERAGE POINTS	CHAOS
FEEDBACK LOOPS	COLLABORATION	COHESION	ADAPTABILITY

the magic when purpose, people, platforms and products all work together — a brand becomes greater than the sum of its individual parts.

RAPHA: EMERGENCE

- From niche cycling apparel to icon of cycle culture.

- High-quality products, community, and design rooted in cycling heritage.

- Amplifies value through innovation, collaborations, and events.

- Combine to create a positive halo for the brand.

principle 3: find your leverage.

INTERCONNECTIONS	EMERGENCE	**LEVERAGE POINTS**	CHAOS
FEEDBACK LOOPS	COLLABORATION	COHESION	ADAPTABILITY

the places where focused effort can produce transformational change — such as an inconvenient truth or unsolved frustration.

RAPANUI: LEVERAGE POINTS

- Leveraged ethical sourcing and transparent manufacturing.

- Building presence and premiumisation in Fast Fashion.

- Eco-conscious consumers + don't usual buy sustainable clothing.

- Scaled without large media spend.

principle 4: embrace uncertainty.

INTERCONNECTIONS	EMERGENCE	LEVERAGE POINTS	**CHAOS**
FEEDBACK LOOPS	COLLABORATION	COHESION	ADAPTABILITY

changes to marketing, product design, or customer service are unpredictable — embrace uncertainty, rather than trying to mitigate it.

NIKE: CHAOS

- Marketing and innovation is renown for the attention it receives.

- Modest swimming apparel for Muslim women and 'Dream Crazy' campaign

- Exemplifies their embrace of uncertainty in action.

- Positive effect on brand equity and growth.

principle 5: actively seek feedback.

INTERCONNECTIONS	EMERGENCE	LEVERAGE POINTS	CHAOS
FEEDBACK LOOPS	COLLABORATION	COHESION	ADAPTABILITY

systemic designers are always observing, testing and learning — using data from valued customers, competitor audits, and even a dialogue with anti-brand activists.

tools & methods: User Surveys, Usage Data, Social Listening, A/B Testing.

NETFLIX: FEEDBACK LOOPS

- Data-driven approach helped the ongoing success of Stranger Things,

- Incorporating viewer data and preferences into content design.

- Directly influencing changes to the storyline, characters, and themes.

principle 6: build more networks.

INTERCONNECTIONS	EMERGENCE	LEVERAGE POINTS	CHAOS
FEEDBACK LOOPS	**COLLABORATION**	COHESION	ADAPTABILITY

brands need to actively build networks within their ecosystems — connecting with customers, partners, suppliers, and even competitors.

tools & methods: Co-creation Spaces and Workshops, Digital Platforms.

CARHARTT: COLLABORATION

- Expand without alienating their core customers — blue-collar workers.

- Work In Progress (WIP), a collaborative platform with fashion designers, artists, and cultural influencers.

- Partnerships help to build a premium, respected streetwear brand.

principle 7: design for flexibility.

INTERCONNECTIONS	EMERGENCE	LEVERAGE POINTS	CHAOS
FEEDBACK LOOPS	COLLABORATION	**COHESION**	ADAPTABILITY

all the elements working together to maintain a united brand — moving past consistency to an identity that's flexible and reactive.

CITROËN: COHESION

- Vehicles like the ë range and their DS line demonstrate cohesion.

- Introducing new electric technologies and luxury features

- Preserving their trademark comfort and unique French design.

- The brand effectively evolved, while retaining its DNA.

principle 8: stay tuned to change.

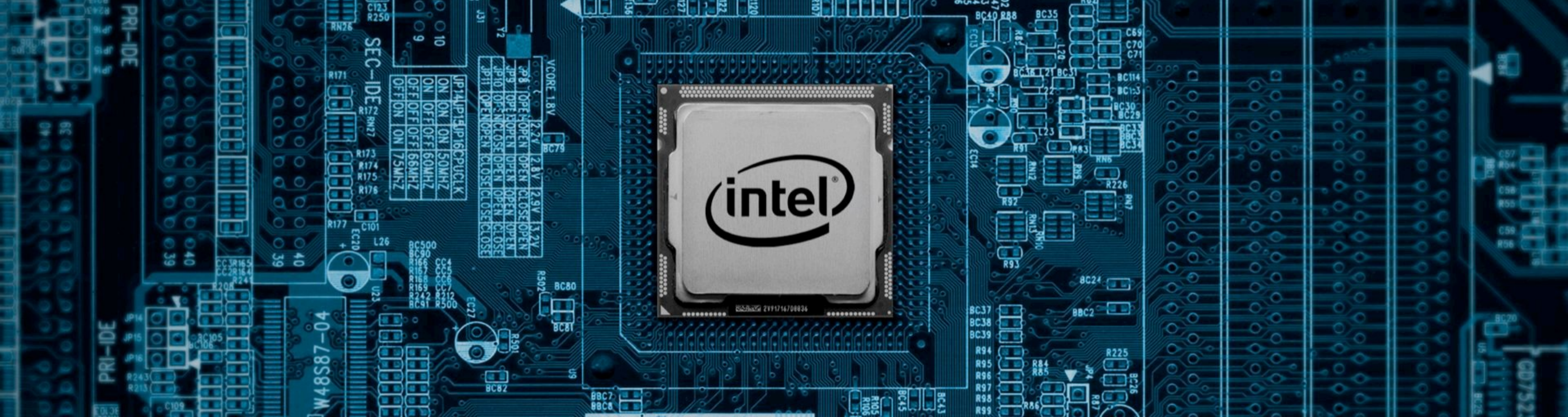|			
INTERCONNECTIONS	EMERGENCE	LEVERAGE POINTS	CHAOS
FEEDBACK LOOPS	COLLABORATION	COHESION	**ADAPTABILITY**

making informed choices to future-proof the brand — staying tuned to cultural dynamics and educating ourselves about the world.

INTEL: ADAPTABILITY

- Effectively adapted to smaller processors and cloud computing.

- Significantly underestimated the scale of smartphone adoption.

- Importance of understanding the real drivers of change.

- Especially in markets where tech rapidly disrupts business models.

SYSTEMS THINKING
FOR BRAND DESIGNERS

INTERCONNECTIONS

1 | KNOW YOUR ECOSYSTEMS

The role of the brand in its ecosystems; brand, digital and business.

What role can your brand play as a catalyst for positive change?

Ecosystem Mapping

EMERGENCE

2 | CONNECT ALL THE ELEMENTS

The magic when purpose, people, platforms and products all come together.

How can you integrate these to create a connected experience?

Brand Narrative and Journey Maps

LEVERAGE POINTS

3 | FIND YOUR LEVERAGE

The points where design can lead to significant, transformative effects.

What are your leverage points, such as as a truth or frustration?

Stakeholder Interviews and Ethnographics

CHAOS

4 | EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY

Complex systems, such as markets, are sensitive to a wide range of factors.

Which past outcomes have been unexpectedly positive / negative?

Scenario Planning and Risk Management

FEEDBACK LOOPS

5 | ACTIVELY SEEK FEEDBACK

Feedback informs choices about brand perception, innovation and trends.

What are your current and potential feedback mechanisms?

Surveys, Usage Data and Social Media

COLLABORATION

6 | BUILD MORE NETWORKS

Partners help to align with culture, solve problems, and be more sustainable.

How can you build networks of like-minded people and parties?

Co-creation Spaces and Digital Platforms

COHENSION

7 | DESIGN FOR FLEXIBILITY

A cohesive brand is unified, while allowing for iteration and flexibility.

How can you better balance consistency and adaptability?

Brand Archetypes and Brand Playbooks

ADAPTABILITY

8 | STAY TUNED TO CHANGE

Keep track of the trends and drivers that are changing behaviours.

What trends are driving change in your category? Why?

Trend Watching and Insight Safaris

ELECTRO

SYSTEMS THINKING
FURTHER READING

11

10x10

Brands as Patterns

— Marc Shillum,
Principal

Redefining Consistency

Brands are no longer definitive. They are temporal.
Brands are informed by multiple voices, and they exist
in multiple mediums and through multiple contexts.
The media that a brand inhabits is no longer fixed or
linear, it is iterative, with no beginning, no end, and
little permanency. Adherence to a big idea and
endless repetition of centralized, fixed rules can make
a brand seem unresponsive, mechanized, inhuman,
and out of step with its audience.

But without repetition, how does a brand create
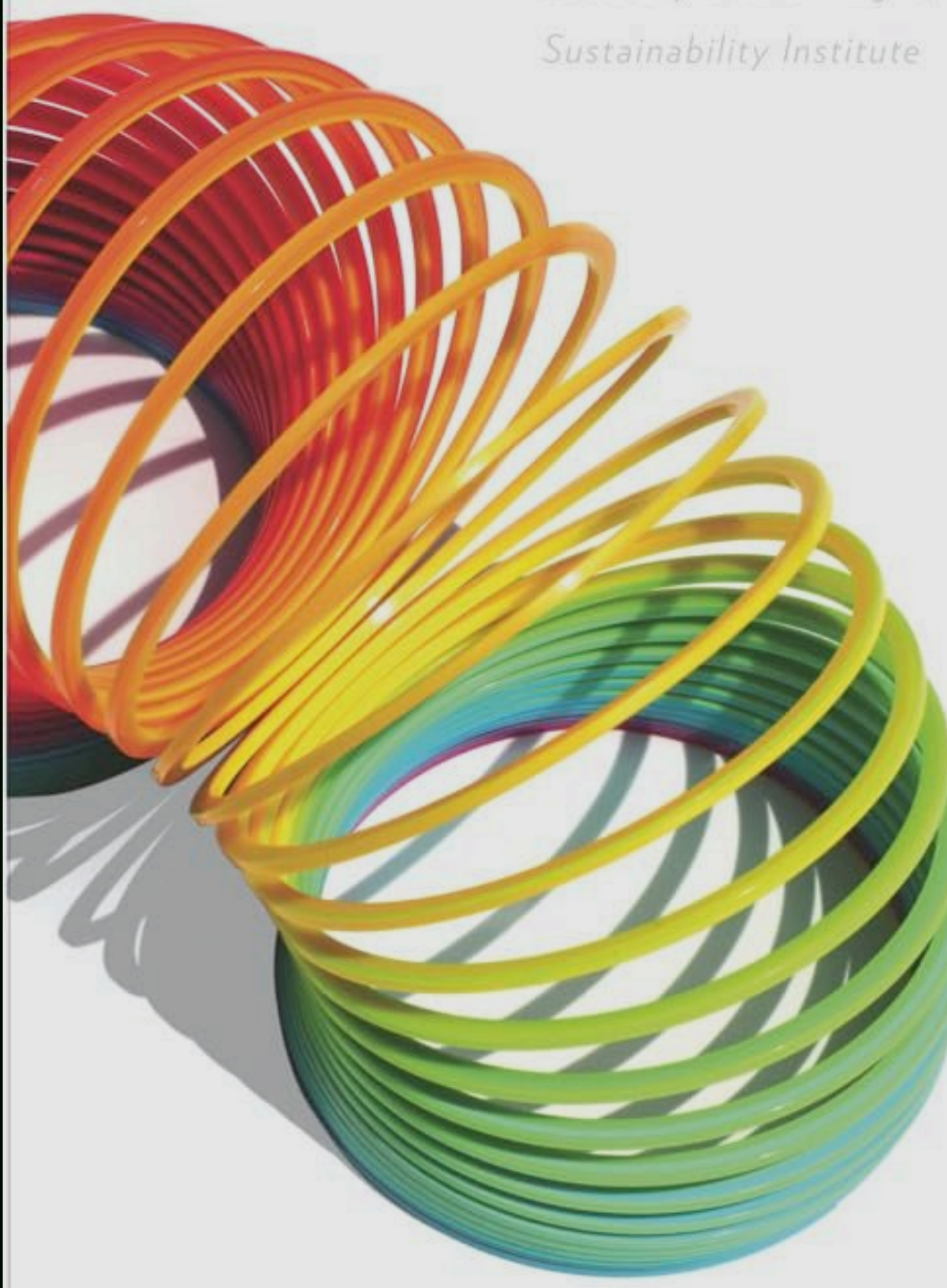consistency? And without consistency, how does a
brand maintain value?

Method

method.com

Thinking in Systems

A Primer

Donella H. Meadows

Edited by Diana Wright,
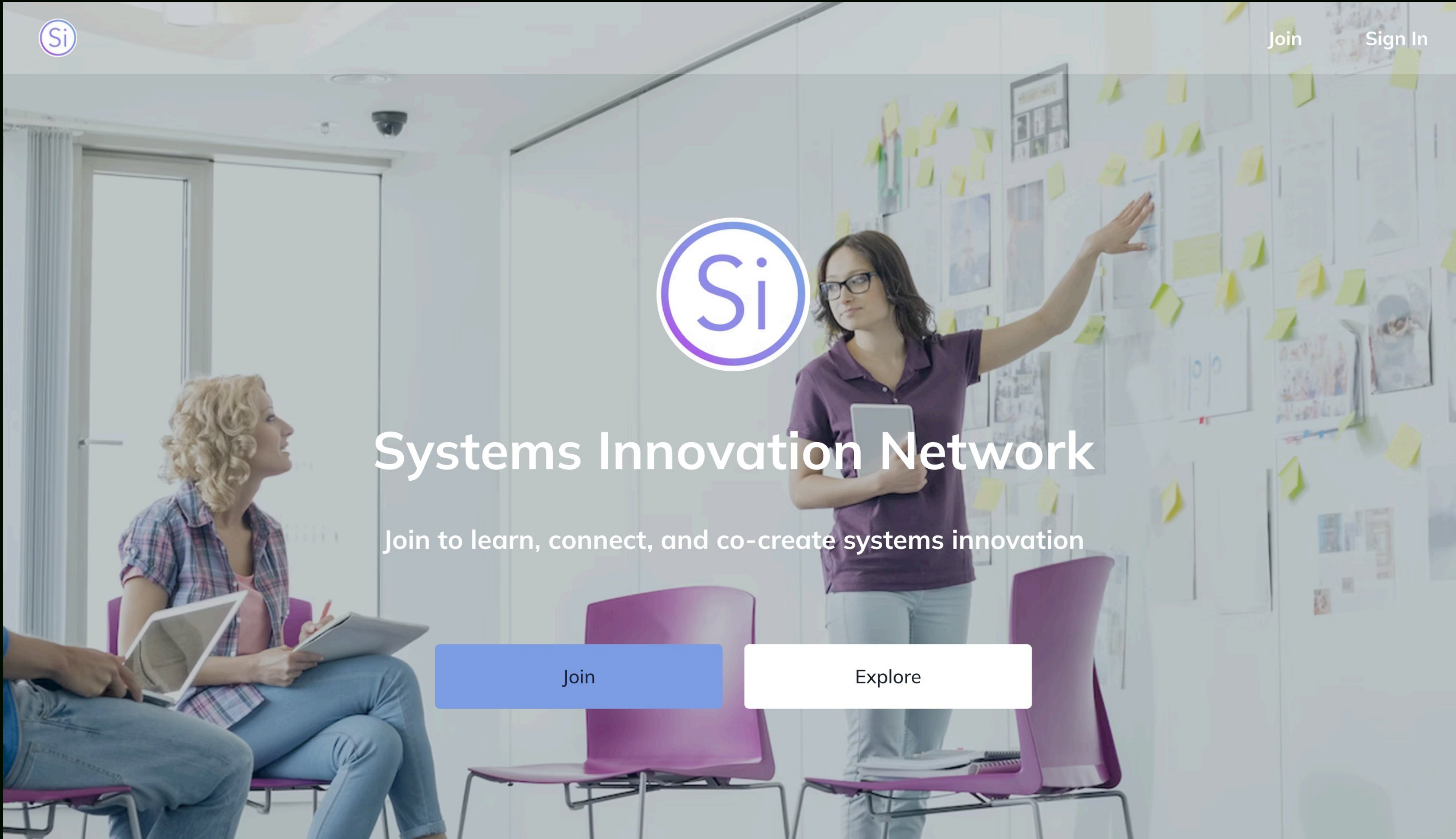*Sustainability Institute*

Jay W. Forrester

Principles
of Systems

SYSTEM DYNAMICS SERIES

PEGASUS
COMMUNICATIONS

SYSTEMS THINKING
ONLINE RESOURCES

Si

Join   Sign In

Systems Innovation Network

Join to learn, connect, and co-create systems innovation

Join   Explore

thank you.

thoughts?
reflections?
questions?