users and the issues, problems, and possibilities of energy-demand reduction. Finally, after
As we became increasingly familiar with the energy communities, we started to imagine what we might make for them – something we had left almost entirely open when we started the project. Sketches led to conversations that led to more sketches and eventually to collections of concept proposals. As our ideas flowed, a tacit consensus formed that we would not be designing to reduce energy per se, but rather to address the communities and their situations. The sketch proposal for an ‘energy babble’ seemed to capture the trend of our ideas and, along with its translation into a textual design brief, set the course for further development.

Over the next months, we worked on the software, electronics, sound, and product design of the system in parallel. This was not a matter of finding solutions to a technical specification. Instead it was more like sculpting in these media, working them to find the final form of the Data Catcher. The project took surprising twists along the way – impassioned conversations about coiled cables, deep thinking about simple musical jingles, the commissioning of laboratory glass blowers – until the final Energy Babbles, unexpected and idiosyncratic, became real objects sitting in our studio.
Workbooks

After the initial engagement we started to explore ideas for the systems or artefacts. These ideas and insights were captured in workbooks, which collated sketch proposals, insights, and articles, that together create a framework for the project. From energy tourism, and insistent activism to energy awareness, the workbooks highlighted areas of interest that helped us to identify potential directions and themes, creating a design space that led to the creation of the Babble design brief.

treatments, our thoughts started to turn towards what we might actually make in response.
We produced workbooks that collected tens or hundreds of design proposals, each an evocative
Workbooks capture insights and ideas that emerged from the initial engagement, often leading to evocative proposals.
organised, the dozens of proposals we produced allowed us to stake out and explore a complex
One of the recurring challenges of interdisciplinary work is in handling the interpretations of one’s work that come from those outside one’s field. This is probably true for any discipline (my wife continually needs to reassure people that she’s ‘not that kind of psychologist’), but seems particularly acute for design. This may be, in part, because design’s public face in shops and magazines gives the impression of being easily readable, and the basic activity of creation and development seems so universally human that saying we’re all designers is a well-worn trope (though to paraphrase Bill Buxton, if we’re all designers because we choose what clothes to wear, we’re all engineers because we can change a lightbulb). In any case, the hugely variegated practices that often lie beyond design’s immediately accessible face—differentiated in motivations, conceptual underpinnings, processes, values, expertise, audiences, outputs, and so on—seem to blur together from a disciplinary distance, so that it is not uncommon for our practice in the Interaction Research Studio (IRS) to be attributed with features we don’t recognise, or lumped together with practices to which we don’t relate.

So it was that we found ourselves, early in a very large project (not this one), working with a variety of computer scientists, sociologists, psychologists, and human computer design space for the project. Because our design ideas were typically playful, open-ended,
interaction specialists, having to explain that we did not just want to make their prototypes pretty. Instead, we explained, we could play a first-class role in the conceptualisation and implementation of new devices and systems, and moreover we might bring a distinctive approach to this that would complement the work of other disciplines. Later in the same project, we introduced ‘cultural probes’ – collections of evocative tasks distributed to elicit informative and inspiring responses – only to be told they amounted to nothing more than ‘ethnography in a dress’. Apart from the implicit sexism – we explained – this label overlooked the very different epistemological commitments of the probes, which balance the grounding offered by empirical encounters with the mutual confusion and interpretation created by open-ended and even absurd tasks.

Other claims are more irksome to counter. For instance, we have been credited with (accused of?) making art, not design, on the grounds that we: a) do not have clearly identifiable clients for our work; b) do not practise in a commercial context; c) do not seek to solve problems or address identifiable needs; and d) sometimes base our methods on artistic practices rather than those of social science. Although we can address each of these attempts to define borders around design, it is more difficult to define clearly the distinction between art and design, because of art’s extraordinary ability to annexe ways of working, or forms of output that have been suggested as quintessentially non-artistic. The most satisfactory response, we have concluded, is to point out that just as Duchamp’s Fountain is a urinal made art by its setting in a gallery, our work is design by virtue of its intention and circulation in communities of practice associated with design, but this still doesn’t always appease critics who base their judgements of art/non-art on appearances.

More problematic still is the identification of our design work with speculative or critical design (SCD), which has occurred frequently (and even in this book). Like many design genres, these approaches are defined largely by examples, practitioners, and somewhat sloganistic definitions. For instance, SCD explicitly sets itself in opposition to ‘affirmative design’, which ‘reinforces the status quo’. Critical design tends to work with the potential of current trends, creating ‘design fictions’ that explore implausible (and often dystopian) values for existing technologies; speculative design, in contrast, tends to extrapolate possible futures from present realities, creating fictional scenarios in those futures and finally populating those scenarios with designed artefacts that reflect their implications. In both cases, design is considered a ‘tool to create not only things but ideas’, and thus it is not necessary that an artefact actually function technically or be encountered by its putative users. Instead, critical and speculative designs are valued for their ability to be communicated in striking ways (e.g. in galleries or the press), and to provoke reflection and discussion about the assumptions they address. This is often achieved by creating a form of controlled ambivalence, in which the appeal of a well-crafted device temporarily masks more ominous and disturbing implications.

Given that IRS work also tends to counter assumptions prevalent in technology design, to privilege unusual values and activities, and to embrace playfulness and what James Auger refers to as ‘irreverence’, it is perhaps not surprising that it is often identified as a form of SCD. This obscures fundamental differences between SCD and our practice, however, that we believe are crucial to understanding the Studio’s work. For instance, technical function and lived encounters are of low priority for SCD. This is symptomatic of SCD’s agenda to, primarily, critique or at least interrogate current assumptions and their potential impacts in designs intended to be thought-provoking and even disturbing. IRS designs, in contrast, are usually intended to be usable by and engaging for their intended audiences, without any backstory or unpacking of the assumptions they address. Thus, integral to our work is the production of working research devices, and their deployment for long-term field trials involving extended participation periods. These trials anchor speculation to empirical encounters, allowing us to assess how people actually engage with our designs rather than leaving this to the imagination. Often, the role of participants in co-creating the meaning of our designs is enhanced by creating designs that are open-ended (rather than ambivalent), and capable of supporting many possible interpretations and engagements in ways that can be as revealing of their users as of the designs. Finally, through this commitment to fully finished, functioning devices that participants live with over time, the IRS disavows any supposed opposition with ‘affirmative design’, and instead seeks to expand the repertory of technology design to embrace new values, activities, and techniques.

Of course, one tactic for countering the all-too-frequent identification of IRS designs as speculative or even critical would be to subsume our design work under a distinctive ‘brand name’ of its own. (Situated Design? Open Design?) That we haven’t done this – apart from occasional, and now largely historical, references to ‘Ludic Design’ – is not just a reflection of our poor imaginations, however. (Exploratory? Unsettled?) Instead, it seems impossible to find a term that would capture a practice which, while arguably having a distinctive style, has ranged considerably. Such a term would most likely be too generic to communicate well, while conversely placing potentially unnecessary constraints on future evolution. Moreover, we are reluctant to join the competitive market of branded design approaches, vying for publicity and followers. Finally, drawing a boundary around our design work to distinguish it from others (including SCD) would also have the undesirable consequence of separating it from the ‘normal’ design with which we would like to interact, and which we would like to affect. Thus, we will continue to avoid branding our design approach, letting our methods and the things that we make speak for themselves.