page, to help stitch together the narrative. To begin with, we explain how we set out
Framing

At the outset we aimed to establish a network of participants and an identity to foster involvement. A workshop that gathered together low carbon community advocates and university researchers offered an opportunity for us to present a poster about the aims of our research project. Following this event, a design agency created a print and online identity for our project, which we called Energy and Co-Designing Communities, or ECDC.

Practitioners we had met at the workshop were contacted, and with their help we visited the communities where they had undertaken energy-demand reduction measures, and learned about their projects, infrastructures, and future plans. A workshop was convened at a museum of the home, where reduction practitioners, researchers and policy makers shared stories about energy and mapped imaginary communities. Cultural probes were made and given to community members, and their responses were arranged on the wall of our studio.

We experimented with demand-reduction practices, installing smart energy monitors, insulating our lofts and using software to visualise our energy use. The quantification and comparison of energy data seemed inescapable, though ultimately we embarked upon a lively re-imagination of smart monitors.
I hadn’t had much to do with the design department at Goldsmiths, but was introduced to design through Alex Wilkie, and later Tobie Kerridge. Alex approached me as a prospective PhD student; Tobie asked me to get involved in what was to become the Material Beliefs project. It was through them that I became aware of, and then visited, the group at the Interaction Research Studio, at the time housed in the old hut complex. My first impressions were that there was never much going on, although clearly something was happening as the place was littered with bits of technology, diagrams, models, and finished...
artefacts such as the Drift Table. I can’t remember the first meeting, but I do recall meeting Bill Gaver for the first time and hitting it off with him pretty much immediately. The same went for the other members of the Studio ... they all seemed such great people. No doubt this was helped by not infrequent visits to the pub.

If my personal encounter with the Studio was a happy and sociable one, my intellectual response to the work going on there was altogether more fraught. At base, I just didn’t get it. For instance, on being told about, and subsequently reading up on, Tobie’s project ‘Biojewellery’ (in which jaw bone tissue was cultured and combined with precious metals to produce jewellery), I responded (internally) with a mixture of confusion, frustration, and anger. This was supposed to be an exercise in something like Science-in-Public, and yet from my sociological/science and technological studies perspective it made no sense. Similarly, on hearing about the Drift Table, or the Plane Tracker, I was again struck by their strangeness – these objects simply didn’t make much sense to me.

Having said that, they did make me laugh – they affected me as things that remade the world in intriguing ways. Over many discussions with Alex, Bill, and Tobie (and later Andy Boucher, but also Matt Ward), I began to see some sort of promise in these objects and the processes behind them, though I couldn’t at the time specify what such a promise entailed other than some vague feelings that it might have implications for how social science gets done. In any case, in 2008, we decided to start up a joint seminar series – Design and Social Science – between the Centre for the Study of Invention and Social Process in the sociology department, and the Interaction Research Studio. I’m not sure we had much of an idea what we were doing other than thinking a seminar series would be an interesting means through which to explore the possible intersections of design and social science. Certainly, I just wanted to find out more about design, and in particular the version of design practised in the Studio.

In retrospect, this was as much about immersing myself in a design environment, absorbing some version of design’s ‘ethos’, for want of a better term. This was not an easy process – while I gave various presentations about the relation between design and social science, these were (again on reflection) embarrassingly misconceived: even at the time I was aware that I was missing the mark by quite some margin even if I could neither pinpoint the mark nor measure the margin. At the same time, I was having great conversations with my newfound design colleagues.

It was during that time that Bill Gaver and I decided to develop a research proposal on how design and sociology might work together to develop technologies that in mediating the experience of nature and ‘the sublime’ might also complexify that experience (rather than dissipate it). This was not funded. We also co-wrote a paper on the ideas of home and dwelling. For me, this was a pivotal moment when I seemed to ‘get’ (at least to my own satisfaction) the design that was being practised in the studio. Over the writing of this paper, and Bill’s gentle prompts (Michael and Gaver 2009), I got to see that the playfulness, ambiguity, and unpredictability of the Interaction Research Studio’s ‘threshold devices’ could enable people to engage with the ambiguous, unpredictable, and complex flows – flows that were at once social, technological, and natural – that composed the home.

Needless to say, my changing appreciation of the Studio’s work was also shaped by my reading at the time, especially of Whitehead and Stengers, but I suspect that it was also affected by a number of sociomaterial arrangements. The Studio had relocated from some rather dingy old campus huts to a wonderfully light, top-floor space in the Ben Pimlott Building. Having the seminars and meetings there made a real difference to the mood – the atmosphere – of our conversations. The visits to the pub also continued to lubricate my fascination with design. And my continued interaction with the artefacts themselves gave me a ‘feel’ for what they did, socio-logically speaking.

I can recall that by, I guess, late 2009 we had reached a point where we all felt that something ‘properly collaborative’ was on the cards. It was time to work together on a project. It was then that the Goldsmiths Research Office approached us. There was a colleague who wanted to develop a proposal for the not-so-recently advertised Research Councils UK programme on ‘energy communities’. As it turned out, the colleague’s interests didn’t map onto the programme’s parameters, but we saw this as an opportunity to develop a proposal that drew on our respective concerns. I don’t think any of us expected to get funded. For my part, I thought we could use this as a way of thrashing out what a collaboration might look like and how we might fold in the interests of designers and sociologists around a pretty well-defined topic – energy-demand reduction. From a standing start, we wrote the proposal in about two weeks. To say the least, we were delighted and not a little disconcerted when we heard the news that we had been successful.

References