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Designing for Just and Sustainable Policies in the Space between Institutions and Experimental Government Practices

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Editorial: Designing policies in the space between institutions and experimental government practices

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Abstract: This track explores design’s role in the making of public policy by examining how it bridges the gap between actors within and outside institutions.

Papers for this track advance new knowledge on design’s contribution and interplay with policymaking processes and practices through methodological diversity and detailed descriptions of different policy contexts. The contributions discuss specific public initiatives, such as the New European Bauhaus, and general approaches to public sector innovation, like public sector innovation labs, thus ranging from highly contextualized to general views. Further, the works presented expand “design for policy” with perspectives emphasizing co-design, public service design, public organizations’ knowledge and engagement capacity, and placemaking. In sum, this track investigates design’s peculiarity as an approach for shaping positive change by fostering practices of collaboration, experimentation, and human-centeredness within institutional fringes and interstices.

Keywords: design for policy; public governance; public sector innovation; policy-making

1. Design changes nothing, or design changes everything? Calling for the next wave of “design for policy” research

About ten years have passed since “*design for policy*” carved out its explicit niche within the international academic dialogue on design¹. Looking back on this decade, it seems clear that

¹ The book *Design for Policy* (Bason, 2014), may be taken as a reference for defining this period. However, the nexus between “design” and “policymaking” had been addressed even before, both by design researchers (Tunstall, 2007) and,



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this research area has grown in importance primarily thanks to a growing academic reflection that looked at emerging *designerly*² practices in the public sector.

One main driver and entry point of those practices, as keenly noted (Julier, 2017, pp. 143-163), had been a general political pressure for “*innovation*” taking place during the austerity that followed the 2008 economic crisis. Under such circumstances, a growing number of professionals, either formally trained in design schools or using ‘*designerly*’ approaches and methods, entered in the public sector, especially as part of *public sector innovation labs*, and in particular to intervene in public services provision and fruition.

Designers, with their disciplinary and cultural backgrounds, increasingly interfaced with the existing governmentalities (Bevir, 2016), i.e., the epistemic perspectives, rooted in practices and routines, that underly public sectors’ work in the process of governing — and with no minor friction (Bailey & Lloyd, 2016). By looking at how this phenomenon unfolded, the discipline produced a first phase of reflection, mostly based on practitioners’ accounts, that primarily sought to investigate the *link between new designerly practices in the public sector and policymaking*.

What that decade-long work brought to us today seems a hard-to-decipher landscape. Designerly practices appear to carry with them positive new paradigms of policymaking (Bason & Austin, 2022) whose capacity to truly dent pre-existing governmentalities remains, however, questionable (Clarke & Craft, 2019). And if an answer to whether design changes things from a policy perspective remains elusive, it may be time to reconsider the initial questions that started the field.

Arguably, a new wave of “*design for policy*” research may abandon an entrenching attitude that attempts to legitimize or challenge “*designerly*” manifestations in government and instead seeks to understand how design practices are more or less suited than others to respond to contemporary public problems, that are increasingly pressing and no longer the same of ten years ago. We might discuss “*design for policy*” with a new diversity of conceptual lenses, bearing in mind the *phronetic approach* central to the discipline (O’Rafferty et. al, 2016) and that knowledge in the field should be developed together and not subordinated to other disciplines (e.g., political science)³. By rethinking the concept of policy and who are the actors involved in their making (McAulifee, 2023; Vaz et al., 2022), richly contextualized research can be developed about the unfolding of design in the space between institutional and experimental practices. This Track called for perspectives that could further the “*design for policy*” discourse in that direction — and, by doing so, challenge an instrumental and normative view that seems to have characterized it so far.

through the “policy design” perspective, by authors from other disciplines that represent foundational references for design (Roozenburg & Dorst, 1998; Legeby et al., 2018, p. 613).

² “*Designerly*” originates from “*Designerly Ways of Knowing*” (Cross, 1982, p.223) claiming “‘there are things to know, ways of knowing them, and ways of finding out about them’ that are specific to the design area”.

³ See as an example Alvarez & Wellstead, 2023

2. Designing policies in the space between institutions and experimental government practices

The climatic crisis, global ecological decline, algorithmic intelligence's influence, and geopolitical upheavals have raised public awareness and collective concern on the creation and implementation of just and sustainable policies. Governments are attempting to prioritize/make room for policies that encompass and are driven by innovative perspectives and practices. This includes empowering other societal actors, accounting for the socio-material impact of public decision-making, and incorporating lived experiences as policy knowledge. Awareness shows in cases such as the New European Bauhaus, which will concretize the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019) through inclusiveness, participation, and quality of experiences. As a field that advocates for and works with human-centeredness, design aligns with this new policymaking orientation and might play an increasingly important role. However, most research on "*design for policy*" to date has regarded design's contribution from an instrumental and procedural perspective.

This official track of the Designing Policy Network (DPN) sought to collect and act as a platform for research highlighting how design can influence institutions and challenge existing governmentalities in the public sector by introducing new concepts and practices. Assuming that designing and policymaking practices are co-evolving at the periphery of institutions, we looked for contributions demonstrating which public issues, policy areas, and service systems they are transforming and how. We invited theoretical and empirical analysis from academics and practitioners inside and outside the design field, from the Global South and Global North, that could nurture novel ideas and approaches to drive action.

3. Paper selection process: How did we get to them?

The submissions received for Track 9 of the Design Research Society Conference 2024 (DRS 2024) were, at the first stage, evaluated through a peer-review process by a group of international design scholars. Reviewers were selected for their knowledge of the "*design for policy*" field and the practical application and implications of design to innovating the procedural aspects of policymaking (e.g., design methods for citizen engagement). As this Track intended to explore the contextuality of "*design for policy*," its chairs considered it of primary importance to engage with reviewers with solid domain knowledge regarding the substantive policy problems addressed within the papers received, e.g., circular economy, climate neutrality, and the diffusion and impact of Artificial Intelligence.

Track 9 also signaled a clear opening to the contribution of practitioners since the call for papers as track chairs recognized the importance of how many "*design for policy*" practices are contextual in their application, and therefore, much can be learned from a real-world context. In order to adapt and provide a fair ground for all submissions, together with academics, the pool of reviewers was arranged to include practitioners with a strong curriculum and interest in research. By establishing academic quality across the parameters

indicated by the DRS 2024 Conference, the peer-review stage would leave a narrower pool of articles. The following selection stage required the Designing Policy Network to reunite and deliberate on which of the remaining papers would best align with the idea behind the Track's design. Discussion ensued as submissions were measured against the following:

The explanation of the contribution to the realm of design is clear.

The connection to design practice was outlined, which entailed utilizing methodologies traditionally associated with the practice of design, such as design thinking, participatory design, co-design, co-creation, or systems thinking. Additionally, methods related to design practices were delineated in the papers, including visualizations, workshops, mapping exercises, affinity diagramming, prototyping, and usability testing, amongst others.

Evidence of design-induced changes to policymaking

Design — as a specific approach, a set of practices, a culture — can intervene in a novel way within the complex socio-political settings where policies are constructed. In liberal democracies, the hand of politics molds policies through bargaining and power-play dynamics among elected representatives. The selected papers showed the capacity of design to influence these dynamics by affecting public sector organizations and practices and modifying existing values that underlie policy goals.

Methodological diversity: Embracing design in the making of policies

The common idea that policy or institutional innovation can be achieved by design linearly or progressively seems to be an oversimplification. Papers selected from Track 9 showed ways to move past and beyond the current approach in “design for policy,” addressing the lack of diversity that affected the field so far. By following varied conceptualizations of “policy,” the authors developed innovative research methodologies and methods, advancing the current understanding of how design can drive innovation in the policy space.

Detailed description of relevant policy contexts and their contextual characteristics

Chosen papers thoroughly described diverse policy contexts, including descriptions and variations across nations, political systems, and policy domains. Additionally, they avoided abstract or universal descriptions of “design for policy,” instead focusing on nuanced and specific contextual characteristics. The papers selected could clearly describe those distinctions and subtleties that allow a deeper understanding of the circumstances and conditions.

Lived experience collection and equitable engagement approaches

Track 9 emphasized the need to bring multiple views of “design for policy” that enable pluralistic action within policymaking and continued to highlight the need for a “design for policy” *from below* approach (Vaz et al., 2022), which moves from an intra-governmental lens to a negotiated exchange between social actors and government. We were particularly

interested in papers that described how design could enable positive change, benefit vulnerable populations and diverse worldviews, and describe experiences of collaborations between organizations to influence policy.

4. Selected papers

The papers in this track highlight the expanding role of design in shaping public policy. They explore design's contributions to policymaking processes, the value of Design Research Labs (DRLs), and the importance of user-centered approaches and public engagement. By showcasing diverse design practices and their impact on real-world initiatives, the track emphasizes design's potential as a powerful tool for creating positive change and achieving just and sustainable policies.

In 'The New European Bauhaus, a Designer's Perspective,' Rancati offers an insider's account of how design thinking and practices shaped the New European Bauhaus initiative from its inception. The author, formerly employed at the European Commission, highlights "design for emergence" as a valuable approach for navigating the fast-paced and collaborative policy development environment. This paper provides a practical example of how design can influence policy at a supranational level.

Also centering around spaces for public sector innovation, 'Fostering Design Research Labs for Public Sector Innovation' by Augsten and Harles investigates the growing role and synergies of DRLs and public sector innovation labs. The authors argue that DRLs, focusing on experimentation and user-centered approaches, can offer valuable perspectives and methodologies to traditional policy labs. They analyze five DRLs in the German context to identify key characteristics that can enhance public sector innovation.

Similarly, through a case study on Zet in the Netherlands, van de Ven explores 'if organizational transformation enhances policy and public sector innovation labs impact potential'. The author examines how transitioning from a government-funded entity to an independent lab affected the lab's influence on policy. The study suggests that the independent model allowed for longer-term partnerships with clients and increased knowledge of government dynamics, ultimately leading to a greater potential to inform policy.

On the other hand, in 'Designing as infrastructuring to impact policy,' Yee, Spencer, and Defeyter broaden the definition of "design for policy" to encompass design work that happens outside of formal policy spaces. The authors present a case study of co-design workshops conducted with young people to influence national policy around after-school programs. They frame their work as "designing for policy" because it aims to impact policy development through the user-centered design of public services. This paper expands the conversation on how design can influence policy beyond formal policymaking processes.

Herfurth's contribution ('Exploring the role of design for organizational learning in community interactions') examines how the COVID-19 pandemic exposed limitations in traditional public engagement methods. The author argues that these methods often fail to

reach the communities most affected by the crisis and explores the potential of design to improve communication and foster more inclusive and effective collaboration between public institutions and communities. This paper connects to Hurtig and Nielsen's 'Relational workshopping: exploring a placemaking approach to urban governance' as they address challenges and opportunities in public engagement and participatory approaches.

In their paper, Hurtig and Nielsen examine the challenges of integrating participatory placemaking with bureaucratic structures in urban planning. The authors also identify communication gaps between citizens and city officials as a key obstacle and propose using design tools to facilitate collaboration and bridge the gap between these perspectives.

Notably, the contributions in this track highlight the expanding role of design in shaping public policy, exploring its contributions to the policymaking processes, the value of Design Research Labs, and the importance of user-centered approaches for public engagement.

5. Future possibilities for “design for policy” research

As evidenced by the examples in the papers presented in this track, design is positioned to bring about significant changes in policymaking processes, impacting public sector organizations and practices while striving to reshape underlying values and governance structures. Methodological diversity and a nuanced understanding of policy contexts are essential for advancing this field; innovative research methodologies and diverse policy contexts will contribute to a broader understanding of how design can integrate into policymaking (Leoni, 2023; McAuliffe, 2023). Furthermore, embracing equitable engagement approaches and amplifying lived experiences can promote pluralistic action within policymaking, ensuring that vulnerable populations are not further marginalized and incorporating diverse worldviews.

As the Designing Policy Network, we also acknowledge the challenge of bridging academic expertise and research with professional practice. Yet, we remain committed to creating spaces to facilitate conversations, collaborations, and learning across these different settings, disciplinary traditions, and epistemologies. Echoing the call for future research (Kimbell et al., 2022), this track showcases the diverse applications of design in policymaking.

By exploring various approaches like service design and co-creation, this track highlights the need to investigate further the specific impacts and interactions of design within policy contexts. This will certainly address the need of the field to engage with political thinking and theory (Bosch Gomez & Qazi, 2019) and align with the recommendation for collaboration between researchers and existing policy design teams. Such partnerships, as this track suggests, can foster knowledge exchange and utilize government expertise and that of practitioners working in policy from external organizations as valuable research sites.

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