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Past, present, and future: Understanding the expanse of design for policy and governance

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Citation

Editorial: Past, present, and future: Understanding the expanse of design for policy and governance

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Abstract: The DRS2024 track titled "Past, Present, and Future: Understanding the Expanse of Design for Policy and Governance" delves into the evolving intersection of design and policy disciplines, commonly known as "Design for Policy" or "Design for Policy and Governance". This exploration is structured around three main themes: an examination of the historical or theoretical foundations of this emerging discipline, an analysis of current global instances of successful integration, and a forward-looking perspective on how design can facilitate the development of innovative public policies and governance frameworks. This track marks the second consecutive year that the Design for Policy and Governance Special Interest Group (PoGoSIG) of the Design Research Society has curated a theme centered on Design for Policy, underscoring its growing significance within academia and practice.

Keywords: policy; design; governance

1. Introduction

The DRS2024 track titled "Past, Present, and Future: Understanding the Expanse of Design for Policy and Governance" offers insight into the evolving landscape where design intersects with policy and governance, commonly referred to as "Design for Policy" or "Design for Policy and Governance".

While many papers overlap into areas of theory, practice, and futures, the track is divided into an expanse of these three key areas:

1. Design for policy and governance theory
Here we examine Design for Policy and Governance by exploring the foundational elements of the discipline that can help scholars bring the past to the present. Authors in this section

discuss key initiatives that have demonstrated the value of and challenges for theory in Design for Policy and Governance. The papers provide understandings of where design for policy has developed and contributed across a broad range of policy areas.

2. Design for policy and governance practice

Here we examine examples of current practices that demonstrate a capacity for theory to become practical in an international context. What are current global examples of success in the field of design for policy and governance? The case studies discussed by authors highlight recent examples of designing policy (in multi-level governance settings, e.g., local, national, regional/global), as well as case studies of design methods being used in a range of scales.

3. Design for policy and governance futures

Here we examine Design for Policy and Governance to better understand where the discipline will continue forging a new path. The papers explore how design might support the emergence of a new generation of public policies as well as the future of government as an organization. Further, this collection explores how design methods/heuristics are being or might be used to create and implement policies in the future e.g., world building, design fiction, and how they help reimagine the future of policy-making.

In this positioning paper we have reflected on how selected papers and their authors have contributed to the development of these three areas. We also start each one of the following sections with a brief summary of the state of affairs for theory, practice, and futures as they relate to Design for Policy.

In total the track "Past, Present, and Future: Understanding the Expanse of Design for Policy and Governance" is composed of 13 papers authored by 40 researchers, practitioners, and academics representing 7 countries including Australia, Denmark, Israel, Italy, Netherlands, South Korea, and the United Kingdom.

2. Design for policy and governance theory

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the potential for design methodologies and approaches to enhance the development, implementation, and evaluation of public policies (Durose & Richardson, 2015; Kimbell & Vesnić-Alujević, 2020; Lewis et al., 2020). This recognition stems from a broader acknowledgment of the complex and interconnected challenges facing governments and societies worldwide, ranging from environmental sustainability and social inequality to digital transformation and technological innovation (European Commission et al., 2019). Although traditionally public policy-making has been the domain of politicians and civil servants, there has recently been a growing call to involve citizens, civil society, and other stakeholders more directly to provide to the wider public more structured and explicit ways to participate. One of the theoretical consequences of this phenomenon is the progressive convergence of policy studies and design studies with the aim to

offer an alternative approach to foster closer collaboration among policymakers, civil servants, and society.

Recent works such as the book Design for Policy (Bason, 2014) have helped usher in the much needed debate around the relationship between design and policy. However, this conversation has been taking place to varying degrees for a number of decades prior. As far back as the Bauhaus during the Weimar Republic design and its relationship to larger systems and even a reaction to political discourse was at play. Other schools such as the Ulm School of Design, or Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm (HfG), refined and defined the political nature of design and continued forward the question of how design can play a role in society (and policy) at large. Design, much like public policy, is an abstraction of a better imagined future after all. Towards the second half of the 20th century design-minded thinkers such as Herbert A. Simon (1969) and Donald Schön (1984) began to think of design from a more systems-based perspective and away from the tangible object. Simon stated in his The Sciences of the Artificial, 'Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones', opening the potential for the comparison of design to the policy-making process as - at an abstract level - both are processes aimed at producing a plan to reach an objective for the betterment of society (Bakir et al., 2024). Despite criticism of this deterministic approach to the design process, the academic world still conceives of it as a good starting point to build new theory on the convergence between design and policy both from a policy studies perspective as much as a design studies perspective (Mortati et al., 2022).

The following papers examine Design for Policy and Governance by exploring the foundational elements of the discipline that can help scholars bring the past to the present. Authors in this section discuss key initiatives that have demonstrated the value of and challenges for theory in Design for Policy and Governance. The papers provide understandings of where design for policy has developed and contributed across a broad range of policy areas.

In "Transformational Practices - Aligning Governance and Design", Galdon and Hall (2024) begin with a largely theoretical take on the further development of anticipatory strategies when addressing the often accelerated and novel problems societies face today. Through this they introduce the concept of "Transformational Practices", a prospective design-led multidisciplinary approach based on exchange and bounded by context and dynamics such as social, economic, and environmental. Through several real world examples, the authors demonstrate this form of practice as suitable in government and political systems when anticipating future risk.

Increasingly, interdisciplinary approaches have become necessary to address novel policy and governance challenges across public sector organizations. In "Navigating complexity: design facilitation for collaborative solutions to urban challenges", Starostka, Neuhoff, Morelli, and Simeone (2024) attempt to investigate how multi-organizational design facilitation can address complex urban challenges and expedite the adoption of sustainable solutions. The

authors examine three concepts that aid in the creative facilitation process including: the design mindset, futures, thinking, and experimental attitude. The paper is international in scope with 12 cities collaborating across public sector organizations to address innovative solutions for specific urban challenges.

Recent global events from war to pandemics have called for a reexamination of the way the public sector addresses challenges. In "What Do Designers Bring to The Table? Identifying Key Design Competencies When Designing for Societal Challenges in The Public Sector", Van Arkel and Tromp (2024) look at the growing value that designers bring to complex societal challenges in the public sector. They address the murkiness of this challenge by identifying in the literature four distinct competencies including integrating, reframing, formgiving, and orchestrating. The paper addresses several examples where these competencies serve the design process. They conclude by discussing how each competency can be developed to specifically address the public sector.

In "Using space and knowledge to confront power in design", Pol, Ely, and Geneste (2024) debate and examine the direction of future social design efforts as a way to confront power and enable innovation. Their review of the social design literature identifies several connected ideas they go on to address including power, systems thinking, and criticality. Through analysis they find that mechanisms such as systematic design practices and prototyping and infrastructuring in design provides opportunities for further inquiry.

3. Design for policy and governance practice

At its core, design for policy seeks to apply design methods and principles to address complex policy issues and societal challenges in practical ways. One of the most interesting aspects of this field is its focus on collaborative problem-solving and participatory decision-making processes (Mortati 2019; Mortati et al., 2022; Mortati et al., 2023). Designers work alongside policymakers, researchers, and other stakeholders to identify, understand, and address policy challenges through iterative processes of research, ideation, prototyping, and testing. By engaging diverse stakeholders in co-creative and generative sessions, designers can develop innovative solutions that are responsive to the diverse needs and contexts of communities. The stronger emphasis on participation in policy-making that design is supporting comes during a critical period of transformation in representative democracy, which has faced challenges in favor of more direct democratic forms. Diverse groups of stakeholders, which in the past had mainly exerted indirect influence on political decisions, are now seeking more structured and explicit ways to participate, often supported by new technologies. Nevertheless, these technologies have not fully lived up to their initial promise of providing greater transparency, informed decision-making, and respect for citizens' preferences. Amid these ongoing changes, the longstanding debate on policy-making has gained new momentum and expanded into new areas. Notably, the push for increased participation has extended into domains traditionally considered the realm of experts, like policies related to science, technology, and innovation (Saurugger, 2010). Simultaneously, policy studies and

design studies have started to converge to offer an alternative approach to foster closer collaboration among policymakers, civil servants, and society (European Commission et al., 2019; Kimbell et al., 2022). In recent decades, this relation has developed across Europe and worldwide within a political economy of new public management, public sector innovation, and digital and green transitions. This phenomenon involves treating citizens as 'users' of digital public services and actively involving them in co-designing those services, while public policies are thought of as objects of design (Julier, 2017; Kimbell & Bailey, 2017). In this context, design for policy represents a dynamic and evolving field with a few key areas of focus, including service design for public services, policy innovation labs, data-driven policy design, behavioral change, and participatory policy-making. The development of studies and experiments in each one of these areas is contributing to shaping the ways in which design can be adopted to bridge traditional decision-making processes with public participation and co-creation, to guide public service implementation and organizational culture transformation.

As the field continues to evolve, there is a growing need for interdisciplinary collaboration, evidence-based practice, and critical reflection to ensure that design-led approaches contribute meaningfully to positive social change. Further exploration into the capacity of futures-oriented design interventions might shed light on how to guide socio-technical public interventions and controversies. For instance, the application of speculative design techniques can help exemplify this approach. Putting controversies at the center of the public debate and using design techniques to steer conversations around them might help enable sense-making and collective agency. Helping citizens materialize the implications of policy decisions in their lives, as well as to explore alternative policy options is one of the upcoming areas of focus of design for policy in practice. This area of research is contributing to steering public decisions towards responsible development, and it is inspiring the experimentation of creative engagement methods to inform decision-making and policy development across diverse domains. In parallel, reflections are also emerging on how to use critical service design for public policy formulation. This is an evolution to the establishment of policy labs, as innovation units into governments. Capacity building and anticipatory innovation units are more recently shaping the practices of policy labs after their first ten years of evolution.

The following papers examine examples of current practices that demonstrate a capacity for theory to become practical in an international context. What are current global examples of success in the field of design for policy and governance? The case studies discussed by authors highlight recent examples of designing policy (in multi-level governance settings, e.g., local, national, regional/global), as well as case studies of design methods being used in a range of scales.

In "Why we failed: Exploring the context of establishing a living lab in Korea", Kim and Park-Lee (2024) focus on a single case-study where design researchers attempted to develop a smart mobility living lab in Korea. Their findings determine that while the iterative nature of the living lab is incompatible with the operational model of the Korean public-sector, it is be-

ing developed by ministries via distribution of funding for grass-roots projects and R&D projects. The paper discusses the shortfall of living labs due to funding schemes, frequent job rotation, and bureaucracy of public-sector organizations.

In "Qualitative mapping and design strategies for taking care of marginal areas", Bosco, Lessing, and Ciaramitaro (2024) focus on Quero Vas municipality in Belluno, Italy, known for its historical heritage and population decline. The authors utilize qualitative mapping to identify environmental heritage as a key strategic focus for designers to operate. The governance is committed to regeneration of the area to aid in tourism while users of the landscape see it as a mutual resource for experiences. The overall project proposes to bridge the gap between recreation and economy while promoting the care of the territory.

In "Unleashing collective imagination through controversies: lessons from a smart city project", Matos-Castaño, Baibarac-Duignan, de Lange, Geenen, and van der Voort (2024) investigate the practice of futures-oriented design interventions for collective imagination. They study the framework of Future Frictions, a design intervention that utilizes controversies to mobilize communities, to develop a framework for implementing sensors in Amsterdam. They argue that through making space for collective agency collective imagination is nurtured to form counter narratives for alternative outcomes. This allows for design to serve as an agent for reimagining cities by informing policy-making in addressing societal challenges.

In "Critical service design for government innovation", Salinas, Yarrow, and Lagedamont (2024) delve into the roles and pedagogy of design through a case study of government-academia collaboration. The study is aimed at developing anticipatory innovation capability within the UK's Government Digital Service while exploring critical service design for its potential to contribute to the development of public policy and services. The paper provides an account for how critical service design creates opportunities for designers to contribute to policy formulation.

4. Design for policy and governance futures

The domain of design for policy is continuously developing while also still needing further grounding concerning both approach and influence. Concerning approach, existing literature often depicts design endeavors in government as minor modifications of conventional design practices aimed at better aligning with the priorities and ways of working of public administrations. In terms of influence, there is a need for further exploration and validation of the impact of these initiatives on government operations, governance structures, and the broader political and democratic landscape. Documented cases have constraints related to their geographical scope, scale, comprehensiveness, and depth. Moreover, while some scholars argue that design has gained traction within government frameworks and policy-making procedures, uncertainties persist regarding the extent to which its integration is institutionalized and capable of genuinely changing policy implementation, as opposed to merely offering a temporary solution that gives the impression of external progress while

leaving processes unchanged. Despite these challenges, there is an increasing acknowledgment that design holds the potential to profoundly reshape the public sector. For instance, the adoption of design principles seems to reshape how value is perceived and created in the delivery of public services and the definition of governance models. While traditional definitions of value often revolve around economic efficiency, design suggests introducing a shift towards prioritizing people's needs and experiences, while prompting public organizations to reconsider their processes, striving to create citizen-centered policies and services. However, a consistent adoption of citizen-centricity is still not effective in the practice of policy-making.

The topics discussed by the authors in this track are diverse, hinting at possible new avenues for research in design for policy. Some emphasize the use of design to facilitate the integration of disruptive technologies into public services, particularly Artificial Intelligence, along with approaches and methods for experimenting with their implementation. This technology presents both opportunities and challenges. For example, it can enhance the effectiveness and customization of public services, enable more informed decision-making through data analysis, and improve citizen engagement. However, it requires careful consideration of the risks associated with AI-generated content, such as errors and biases. Other authors underscore the peripheral role of design expertise in government, emphasizing the need for further clarification of its added value for policy-making, like the potential to envision future scenarios for improved decision-making and the integration of lived experiences into policy formation. Furthermore, there is a growing recognition of the interconnectedness between the transformation of governmental processes, the adoption of new technologies, and the evolution of administrative models. This interconnectedness highlights the need for a holistic approach that integrates different trajectories of transformation, including co-creation and user-centricity in public services, the development of responsible data governance strategies and of processes that use algorithms responsibly to support evidence-based decision-making.

The following papers examine Design for Policy and Governance to better understand where the discipline will continue forging a new path. The papers explore how design might support the emergence of a new generation of public policies as well as the future of government as an organization. Further, this collection explores how design methods/heuristics are being or might be used to create and implement policies in the future e.g., world building, design fiction, and how they help reimagine the future of policy-making.

In "Governance in Silico: Experimental Sandbox for Policymaking over AI Agents", Kera, Navon, Wellner, and Kalvas (2024) introduces the concept of "governance in silico" which summarizes recent integrative design experiments with emergent machine learning technologies in policy-making. The paper acknowledges risks in inherent bias within machine learning models; it focuses on exploring prompts and the need for fostering political agency through direct representation of such processes. The authors conclude that "governance in silico" is an exploratory approach that allows for public engagement and serves as a valuable alternative to the promises of evidence-based policy.

In "Future in Place: Participatory Future Scenario Planning for Place-based Local Policymaking", Newton, Rindt, and Calvo (2024) write about challenges to the body of evidence that supports recent design-driven innovation in policy-making due to the emergence of Public Sector Innovation Labs. However, the authors write that a focus on design at a national level leaves local policy-making in the trenches of legacy processes thus limiting their ability to respond to unique challenges. The paper offers a case study where a participatory future scenario planning method is deployed to inform local policy.

In "Design x Non-Profits: Towards an understanding of design integration in the Australian Non-Profit Sector", Gulbransen-Diaz and Hepburn (2024) write about the intersection of non-profit organizations and the design discipline as an integrated force for societal change. The authors delve into where and how design practices may benefit non-profit partners through a thematic analysis of the strategic position and core activities of such organizations. The authors conclude by mapping out the Australian non-profit ecosystem and speculate on design's potential for integration.

In "Reframing Design Maturity: a New Perspective on the Development of Design in Public Organizations", Brinkman and Kim (2024) argue the lack of regard for design in public organizations as a fundamental activity that is not addressed by existing design maturity models. Thus, the authors propose four ways in which a new perspective on how design can be fostered in public organizations including creating awareness, cultivating reflexivity, establishing connections, and letting go or changing ways of doing things that have had a traditional path.

In "Policy Design, Lived Experience, and Speculative Futures", Mintrom, Sumartojo, Grocott, Korsmeyer, and Doughty (2024) examine the shortfalls of policy design to properly address those people most likely impacted by policy change. They argue that the pursuit of analytical and predictive behavior through the framing and assessment of interventions may not account for notions such as lived experience, etc. To address this the authors introduce the "Tomorrow Party", a broadly applicable tool for advancing policy design, as a design method for generating novel stakeholder insights in regard to desirable futures.

5. Conclusion

The insights gleaned from the collection of papers discussing current theory, practice, and futures in design for policy continue to underscore the transformative potential of design in government settings and offer valuable lessons on the roles and pedagogy of design in driving innovation within public institutions. They also underline the need for a critical review of current practical endeavors to understand pitfalls, such as an excess of participation, lack of representativeness, and imbalances in existing power dynamics.

Overall, considering policies as objects of design opens several new research opportunities related to at least four areas: (1) the examination of the historical origins of the connection between policy studies and design studies, (2) the investigation of the unique ways in which design contributes to the policy-making process, including its evolution alongside shifts in

public administration theory, (3) the analysis of the obstacles encountered when integrating design approaches into policy-making, considering both historical impediments and current factors that facilitate or hinder progress, (4) the reconsideration of the skill set required for designers and civil servants to effectively work together.

Despite the promise of design for policy, significant barriers remain, including the fragmentation of approaches, languages, and methods. The potential in fostering cross-pollination between co-creation methodologies, algorithmic tools, and traditional policy practices lies in making governments and public institutions more capable of navigating the complexities of contemporary governance, ultimately leading to more responsive, inclusive, and effective public services and policies.

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