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Editorial: Design and the Public Sector: Contemporary Methods and Practice

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Abstract: The DRS2026 track titled “Design and the Public Sector: Contemporary Methods and Practices” examines the expanding relationship between design and the public sector, situating design as an active process in shaping public services, institutional change, and governance practices. Building on a trajectory established across DRS2022, DRS2024, and now DRS2026, this third Design for Policy and Governance Special Interest Group (PoGoSIG) hosted track reflects a shift from foundational and integrative concerns toward a more systems-based orientation. The following contributions are organised around four central themes: AI and New Technologies, Design and Infrastructure, Hope and Imagination, and Participation in Policymaking. Drawing on 34 papers from 15 countries, the track highlights how design is increasingly embedded within public sector contexts, mediating relationships between citizens, institutions, and technologies while advancing more reflexive, participatory, and future-oriented approaches to policy and governance.

Keywords: Public Sector Design, Design for Policy and Governance, Human-Centered Design, Civic Design, Public Policy, Governance, Planning

1. Introduction

Currently, governments around the globe are starting to embrace design to navigate urgent and complex challenges to address issues including but not limited to climate resilience, digital transformation, healthcare, and public service delivery. Contemporary discourse explores design as a tool within governance capable of aligning individual experiences with systemic and future-oriented approaches. We now find evidence of governing bodies and institutions through an international context applying design to change the conditions through which policies emerge, are shaped and enacted. This progression reflects a growing regard for human-centered design in fostering participation, generating legitimacy, and integrating data at the boundaries of artificial intelligence.



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From its inception, the Design for Policy and Governance Special Interest Group (PoGoSIG) has aimed to bring together researchers, designers, and academics to critically examine, promote, and explore the effect of design on innovation in policy and governance through an international context. Since 2020, we have examined, developed, and advanced the field of design-led policy and governance through research, practice, and pedagogy. DRS2026 marks the third consecutive Design Research Society (DRS) conference with a PoGoSIG track on the titular subject. The research agenda established by PoGoSIG through tracks for the DRS2022, 2024, and now DRS2026 is evidence of its growing systemic and institutional orientation.

PoGoSIG's DRS2022 track "Design for Policy and Governance: New Technologies, New Methodologies" sought to clarify the existing relationship between design and policy. Emphasis rested on the integration of co-creative methodologies and emerging technologies to improve policymaking and public service delivery. Two years later, DRS2024 track linked "Past, present, and future" to understand "the expanse of design for policy and governance" through a structured focus of theory, practice, and futures. From here we saw a consolidation of the field through the demonstration of its application across various contexts and scales. Building on previous tracks, the DRS2026 track "Design and the Public Sector: Contemporary Methods and Practices" offers a glimpse into the state-of-the-art in design research and its engagement with the public sector.

Our selected contributions report on real world projects and initiatives where real-time design has been sought to make an impact within government, policy development, planning, and public administration. After a double-blind review process of more than 100 submissions, we accepted 34 full papers representing roughly 100 practitioners and academics from 15 countries (Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Chile, China, Denmark, Finland, Guatemala, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, South Korea, Sweden, United Kingdom, and United States). Of the final papers, the following four themes emerged to guide the track at DRS2026:

Themes

1. "AI & New Technologies" examines the increasing integration of data-driven systems and AI into public services.
2. "Design & Infrastructure" examines the institutional effects that shape and maintain public life via the built environment.
3. "Hope & Imagination" explores how design in the public sector can serve as a practice of hope, using imagination to shape our futures.
4. "Participation in Policymaking" addresses how design can support citizen participation efforts within institutions.

2. Summary

2.1 AI & New Technologies

The rapid integration of data-driven systems and AI into public services is reshaping the landscape of policy and governance. These technologies promise enhanced capacity for analysis, prediction, and personalisation. Yet, they also introduce new forms of complexity, opacity, and asymmetry in how decisions are produced and experienced with consequences for their design. In response, design is investigating the possibility to assume a new critical role beyond shaping technological artefacts. Rather than treating technology as a neutral enabler, the contributions in this track highlight how design actively configures the relationships between institutions, citizens, and the infrastructures through which policy is enacted.

A first group of papers (Dell’Orto et al., 2026; Tiradentes Souto et al., 2026) examines data as a medium through which participation and public understanding are structured. Research on data visualisation in climate assemblies shows how visual artefacts are often mobilised to frame discussions rather than to support open deliberation, reinforcing top-down perspectives even within participatory settings. Similarly, work on infographics for public policies demonstrates both the potential and the limits of visual communication: while such tools can make complex policy information more accessible, they may also be misunderstood depending on how they are designed. Together, these contributions foreground the inherently political nature of data representation and the responsibility of design in shaping what becomes visible, legible, and actionable in policy processes.

A second set of contributions (Chen et al., 2026; Ilhan et al., 2026; De Gaetano et al., 2026) focuses on the design of data infrastructures themselves, revealing how design decisions influence not only interpretation but also participation and behaviour. Studies on data donation show that the framing of personal data through different visual and narrative strategies significantly affects individuals’ willingness to contribute to public-interest initiatives. In parallel, computational approaches to user research in public services illustrate how conversational data can be transformed into actionable insights for continuous service improvement, embedding data-driven feedback loops within governance systems. These works position design as central to the production, circulation, and operationalisation of data, highlighting its role in configuring the conditions under which evidence is generated and used.

Finally, the emergence of AI as a domain of policy design introduces new challenges that exceed traditional regulatory approaches (Khan et al., 2026). The development of participatory toolkits for AI policy design illustrates how collaborative and generative methods can support stakeholders in identifying risks, articulating values, and anticipating future implications. Here, AI is framed not only as an object of governance but as a catalyst for rethinking policymaking itself, as a “wicked problem” requiring iterative and reflexive design approaches.

Across these contributions, a common thread emerges: data and AI are not simply tools to be integrated into existing policy frameworks, but present infrastructures that reshape how governance operates. Design, in turn, is increasingly called upon to make these infrastructures legible, accountable, and open. This suggests a shift from designing for policy

outputs to designing the socio-technical conditions through which policy is continuously formed and contested. Looking ahead, advancing design for policy and governance will require deeper engagement with the ethics, politics, and materiality of data and AI, as well as the development of methods that enable more informed technological governance.

2.2 Design & Infrastructure

The second group of papers falls under “Design and Infrastructure” and is defined by the institutional effects that shape and maintain public life in relation to the built environment through both physicality and systems-based implementation. These papers examine the relationship between policy, planning, and design and their movement from the theoretical to the real world.

“Mapping design’s contribution to policymaking: A framework for understanding design’s roles across policymaking levels,” the authors demonstrate how design helps policymaking systems learn, adapt, and coordinate (Lee, 2026) while “Seeing systemic design through policy eyes: A framework to navigate complexities of policy contexts” argues that policy environments are shaped by competing logics. This relationship demonstrates how infrastructure within a particular context is not neutral but shaped by competing values and views (Wennekers, et al., 2026).

“Public participation infrastructuring for sustainability transitions” provides that participation depends on unique underlying systems that could potentially limit engagement while infrastructure serves to protect against these conditions (Valladares et al., 2026). Similarly, “From citizen innovation labs to social transformation: analysing the Conectando Cozinhas case through the lens of infrastructuring” demonstrates the difficulty faced by innovation labs in sustaining participation after initial beginning (Tarachucky, et al., 2026).

In “Frame excavation: Revealing and critiquing existing problem frames to improve migrants’ awareness of public services,” the authors explain how assumptions within a system can misrepresent how people see the world (Pakpour, et al., 2026). “Not another design that ends up in a drawer: mechanisms to legitimize design outcomes in the public sector” shows that design developed through shared understanding should be supported by legitimacy (Brinkman & Wennekers, 2026).

“Climate commoning and infrastructural care” argues ongoing attention beyond individual project care is required for any organizational change (Smedberg, et al., 2026). Likewise, “From critique to city council: A design framework for inclusive public discourse” focuses on designing civic relatedness through a participatory lens (Schuerman, 2026).

“When frames collide: Participatory frame navigation through co-design in policy contexts” and “From sustainable campuses to regenerative governance: A design perspective on participation and institutional learning in the Pays de la Loire university ecosystem” both provide how co-design helps provide original perspectives to better support institutions (Spencer et al.; Zajmi Avignon, 2026).

The throughline across this group of papers is that infrastructure is not simply conceptual but also an active, evolving way of doing that shapes public participation, how institutions learn over time, and how that manifests in the real world.

2.3 Hope & Imagination

A number of contributions to this track explore how design in the public sector can serve as a practice of hope and vision for the future. These papers show how speculative and relational approaches to design can reconfigure the relationships between publics, civil servants, and the systems through which policy and services are enacted.

A set of papers examines how imagination can be made operative inside civic and public-service design by rethinking both futures and the humans for whom those futures are designed. In “Civic imagining: Participatory speculative design and its opportunities in civic service design” (Meriales, 2026), the authors investigate participatory speculative design as an emerging approach that enables civic service designers and their partners to collectively explore long-term, resilient possibilities beyond the limits of policy cycles, constrained resources and deficit-based framings. Complementing this, “Images of humans in public sector design” (van der Bijl-Brouwer & Winhall, 2026) proposes a framework that maps archetypical images of humans in design across dimensions of depth, personal and social focus, and agency.

In “Designing hope: Civil society, empathy and peace or, avoiding World War III”, (Ely, et al., 2026) draws on peace studies and empathic design to argue that design for policy and public services has largely overlooked peacebuilding as a domain of innovation, despite escalating global tensions. Similarly, “Weaving relational dynamics: Civil servant agency in service design collaboration” (Svanda, et al., 2026) locates hope in the everyday practices of public officials who navigate complex, often contradictory expectations, showing how civil servants “weave” relationships with designers, communities and other institutional actors to open more hopeful trajectories for services at the margins of bureaucratic scripts.

“Sustained Memory for Public Design in Latin America” (Bosch, et al., 2026) explores how visual and narrative artefacts in public organisations can either reinforce narrow, technocratic imaginaries or support more value-laden visions of collective life. Additionally, “Holding paradoxes together: Navigating institutional complexity in public design” (García & Brinkman, 2026) investigates collaborative processes in which designers and public actors co-construct future scenarios and organisational stories.

Taken together, the papers in Hope & Imagination suggest a shift from designing for better policy outputs to designing the socio-material and relational conditions under which hope can be sustained, and futures can be collectively imagined, negotiated and contested in the public sector today.

2.4 Participation in Policymaking

Participation remains a central theme in policymaking and policy implementation with almost one third of the accepted papers in this track for 2026 touching on the issue. Our contributors offer insights into why, how and whether participation has a role in policy and public design. Together, they outline how, where, when and why designers currently apply participatory approaches. The arguments they put forth allows us to assess what constitutes policy work in the mind of designers, how designers link services with policies, and how their work influences - or does not - the development of both.

An initial group engages with issues of participation in the context of systemic transformations. “Frictions and constraints of institutioning: Facilitating equitable participatory design with migrants in municipalities” (Varanasi, et al., 2026) explores participatory design in the context of institutioning in their work with migrants and around migration in a Finnish municipality. Employing participatory processes, “From Participatory Processes to Systemic Transformation: a Service Design perspective on four Italian Case Studies” (Gracci, et al., 2026) seeks to address the gap between participatory aspirations and their implementation with four Italian case studies involving citizens, public institutions and the third sector. In, “Driving Public Service Innovation Through Internal Ecosystem Development: Reconfiguring the Internal Management and Service System of Nanhai Bus Station” (Zhang, et al., 2026) the authors reflect on the ‘inside-out’ approach in their case study of the Nanhai Bus Station Consultation project. “Designing safer school routes in Busan, South Korea: Living Lab approach to child-centered traffic safety” (Lee, 2026) shows how a Living Lab approach based on participatory methods has been used in South Korea to improve traffic safety for elementary school children. “A systemic design approach to supporting children with different language parents” (van Boxem & Gruyters, 2026) engages ‘different language parents’ through a participatory and playful product-systems-service approach with their neighborhoods.

A second group of authors (Schaeffer et al. 2026; Pouwels, van Turnhout and Ferri 2026) look at participation as a way to support and strengthen the agency of citizens through citizen participation and citizen engagement. And still another set of papers (Ferrer-Mavarez et al. 2026; Klip and Kuijk 2026; Broadley 2026) takes participation into organizations and institutions to embed participatory methods and mindsets within public sector organizations.

“Erased By Default: Reorienting Digital Welfare Systems with Care and Participation” (Holden, et al., 2026) demonstrates the downside of active participation requirements in her study on young people where users navigate and resist platforms that presume universal digital competence. “Countering tokenism in e-participation: Potentials of participatory design in democratic policymaking” (Liu, et al., 2026) is a return to the bigger question of participation as mere lip service (tokenism) and the requirements for an actualized commitment in practice.

We find a lot of concepts both mixed together and also rather superficially engaged with: The systemic approach thus covers everything from a parent to migrants to institutions and policies. The systemic views applied in the papers mostly rest on the embedding of a person within their lived experience in-situ (Suchmann) and extensions of what started out as contextual inquiries (Beyer Holtzblatt). We are still thin on critical engagements with Sherry Arnstein’s concepts still haunting current participatory approaches in the public sector.

3. Conclusion

While the call for this track set out an ambitious and balanced agenda spanning institutional reform, emerging technologies, and participatory approaches, the submissions reveal a more uneven and telling picture of the current state of design for policy and governance. Most notably, selected contributions on participation in policymaking significantly outnumbered

those in other areas, confirming participation as the most widely adopted terrain for design researchers engaging with the public sector. Across the papers, participation is mobilised at multiple levels, from service interactions to systemic transformation and institutional embedding. However, it is often applied in expansive and sometimes conceptually diffuse ways, with relatively limited critical engagement with longstanding and critical debates in participatory governance. This reveals conceptual and methodological blind spots that are a consequence of a lack of sustained engagement with participatory governance. In fact, we wonder if participation has come to provide a comfort zone for design researchers, one they have created for themselves in the realms of public design and policy work to demonstrate action but avoid the hard issues of policymaking and implementation.

This would explain why the anticipated focus on design as a driver of institutional reform remains less explicitly articulated. While several contributions engage with infrastructures, legitimacy, and organisational learning, they tend to approach institutions indirectly, through systems, practices, and conditions, rather than engaging with people of policy authority or decision-making powers about change more directly. Design research continues to operate comfortably at the level of mediation and facilitation (i.e., participation) at the service and implementation level but keeps a distance from institutional powers. At this lower level, its role remains insufficiently legitimised within public administrations and among policymakers.

Similarly, the sparse papers submitted for this track on AI and new technologies for public services reveal this as an emerging area. The limited number of contributions in this domain may indicate that design research is merely beginning to engage with data and algorithmic systems as infrastructures of governance. Rather than focusing on technical innovation, the accepted papers point toward a more reflexive role for design in making such systems legible, participatory, accountable, and contestable. They suggest a shift from designing services to designing the conditions under which data-driven governance operates and challenge advancing technical or methodological innovations at scale. This is a relevant focus and conceptual positioning for design research that deserves to be further explored.

Coupled with more in-depth accounts of how design intervenes in the lifecycle of public sector technologies – procurement, standards, maintenance, decommissioning, and the everyday labour of operating data-intensive systems – would connect design research more explicitly to governance and implementation questions. It might move design beyond isolated prototypes and toward durable transformations in how data and AI are governed.

Doing so will require design's relationship with institutional organization to change. Design is often positioned as an intermediary that supports framing, coordination, and experimentation. It is rarely considered for its role in the design of constitutional arrangements, regulatory mechanisms or budgeting processes themselves. This raises questions about the limits of design's current positioning: to what extent can design research speak to the "hard" instruments of governance, and how might closer collaboration with political science, law, and public administration strengthen its capacity to do so?

We see promise in the contributions that gesture toward longitudinal perspectives, but these have yet to be more fully developed. Institutionalisation, democratic backsliding, and the afterlives of design interventions in the public sector are recurrent concerns, yet most studies remain tied to project-based timeframes. There is considerable room for research

that follows policies, infrastructures and relationships over longer periods, tracing how design practices sediment, mutate or are co-opted within changing political and administrative environments.

The contributions that centre on hope, imagination, and speculative practices signal an expanding frontier and may be reason for optimism. These works indicate a growing interest in how design links with positive change. Design can operate at cultural and political levels, envisioning and enabling alternative futures and reconfiguring relationships between publics and institutions.

A more critical and cautious stance notices that working on public services and policy relevant challenges with members of governments across the different levels is now en vogue. With the consequence that a lot of work is repositioned within a public and policy context without appreciation of the complexities of these engagements. Is it sufficient to work ‘with’ staff in a government organization or ‘with’ citizens? If a project is conceived as a one-off intervention, what impact can design claim? If we engage with policy and public management to test a method, are we serving design or the common good?

There are essential questions emerging from the papers that challenge us to take a hard look at how we build the kinds of relationships needed for long-term changes in complex organizational contexts. Policy work and the public sector remain tedious work for anyone who dares to make a difference. It is an area where we find the nexus of user experience, service design, strategic design and design management. It is also an area where policy cycles collide with election cycles, and production cycles clash with legal mandates. The developments we are witnessing from the works of our contributors show that design is eager to tackle these issues in a holistic way but that we still have ways to go.

In summary, the papers in this track reflect a new confidence among design researchers and educators to reach out and into the public sector. As Andrew Knight, Head of Policy Design and Head of the Government School of Design for the UK's Civil Service writes: “A few years ago, policy design was still a relatively niche idea in government. There were talented people doing good work, but they were often isolated. Many had no obvious peer group, no formal training and no clear career path. That picture is starting to change” (UK Policy Blog, 2026).

Taken together, these patterns reflect both a consolidation and a transition. Compared to the inaugural PoGoSIG track at DRS2022, the field has clearly grown in volume and confidence. Yet, as already anticipated in DRS2024, design researchers continue to negotiate the position of design among participation, institutional transformation, and technological change. These promise to be key areas for future development.

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