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Design-led policy and governance in practice: a global perspective

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ABSTRACT

Presently, the relationship between policy and design is very much open for debate as to how these two concepts differ, relate, and interact with one another. There exists very little agreement on their relational trajectory with one course, policy design, originating in the policy studies tradition while the other, design for policy, being founded in design studies. The Special Issue has paid particular attention to the upcoming area of research where design disciplines and policy studies are exploring new ways toward convergence. With a focus on design, the authors herein present an array of design methods and approaches through case studies and conceptual papers, using co-design, participatory design and critical service design to work *with* policymakers in tackling challenging issues and policies. We see designers and policymakers working *with* communities to boost engagement around the world, with examples from the UK, Latvia, New Zealand, Denmark, Turkey, the UK, Brazil and South Africa. Finally, we offer a few reflections to build further this research area pointing out topics for further research with the hope that these will be relevant for researchers approaching the field or deepening their investigation and for bridging the academic/practice divide between design studies and policy design.

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1. Introduction: why a special issue on design-led policy and governance in practice: a global perspective?

Presently, the relationship between policy and design is very much open for debate as to how these two concepts differ, relate, and interact with one another. There exists very little agreement on their relational trajectory with one course, policy design, originating in the policy studies tradition while the other, design for policy, being founded in design studies. The former sees the need for policy to instrumentally embody a conscious design of its own making while the latter holds that design is a preexisting field of study unto itself that can be employed in accordance with policy formation (Bason

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2014; Howlett 2019). Building on its tradition to tackle wicked or ill-defined problems (Buchanan 1992), the design research community has developed knowledge useful to manage complex processes, characterized by the participation of actors with different interests and cultures, in which the final recipients often have an active role as co-creators and co-producers (Sanders and Stappers 2008; van der Bijl-Brouwer 2022). These approaches have later been adapted for adoption in the development of innovative services and governance models (Sangiorgi and Prendiville 2017; Mortati, Christiansen, and Maffei 2018) with a focus on either experimenting policy development through public service implementation (Deserti, Rizzo, and Smallman 2020) or on the enhancement of mechanisms for public/citizen engagement in the policy making process through design-specific methods like prototyping and materialization/visualization techniques (Kimbell and Bailey 2017). Design literature has focused extensively on helping policymakers understand how to deliver better outputs of policies (i.e. public services) or acquire new competences (i.e. design methods linked to user research to frame public problems). The approach called design for policy (Bason 2014; Kimbell 2015) mainly examines the use of design in policy teams and the ways adopted in practice to build design capacities often through *policy labs* (McGann et al. 2018) or *public sector innovation units* (Villa Alvarez, Auricchio and Mortati 2022).

Much of the investigations that can be found in the literature at present and that are contributing to building this research area, however, also bare limits. They refer mainly to Western cultures and specific types of democratic traditions, lacking a wider examination of how the very diverse array of political and administrative environments globally might apply and benefit from design and policy studies joining forces to propose alternative approaches to policy making. Further, often critiques point out the lack of a clearer understanding of the contribution of *design disciplines* to the field of *policy design*. Building on this fragmented landscape, this Special Issue has aimed at examining the emergence of a new (sub)discipline in design studies (design for policy and governance) taking a practice perspective (examining what is happening in real cases) and opening the stage to multiple geographies and administrative traditions. The ambition is to plant the seeds for further and stronger cross-disciplinary discussion continuing an effort began one year ago and sprang forth from the proceedings of the Design for Policy and Governance Special Interest Group (PoGoSIG) of the Design Research Society. For achieving this ambition, we believe that partnering with Policy Design and Practice has provided us a solid platform to spark dialogue with a policy and design based readership.

The Special Issue has paid particular attention to the upcoming area of research where design disciplines and policy studies are exploring new ways toward convergence. This has involved the examination of ways in which creativity-based methodologies (i.e. co-creation and co-production) are being used and the impact they are having in real contexts to deliver better policies and services. Further, the Special Issue has sought robust examinations of diverse ways in which—both in practice and theory—design and policymaking are contaminating respective practices to address complex challenges (i.e. climate neutrality).

Originally, we envisioned articles related to (but not limited to) the following questions:

1. Understanding and analyzing design-led approaches, methods, and practices that create value and transformation in policymaking from agenda setting to policy formulation and evaluation. *What makes design-led approaches specific to policymaking? What are the different practices that designers have developed when working in policy? How are design-led approaches for policymaking reconciling the perspectives of government, citizens and society (i.e. participation in policymaking)?*
2. Processes and organizational settings to adopt design-led approaches in policymaking. *What are the methods and processes that organizations have put in place to develop design-led public policy? What design skills and practices are public institutions adopting and how? What different competences are being integrated in policymaking teams to integrate design approaches? What organizational settings do public institutions (Government, Public Administration, and so on) adopt to incorporate/adopt design meaningfully and effectively?*
3. Data-driven approaches and new technologies. *What role is design having in exploring the uptake of new technologies to enhance policymaking and public service implementation? How is design helping complement a human approach into the typical need for quantitative evidence of Government?*

The editorial process for a Special Issue is long and filled with many twists and turns. What came out was better than we could have imagined and allowed us to look at the collected work in new ways. The final version of papers you will read throughout this Special Issue offer case studies and insights from around the world, at both a local and national scale. They explore a range of policy areas and wider governance challenges like for instance the engagement of communities and citizens in policymaking processes. With a focus on design, the authors present an array of design methods and approaches through case studies and conceptual papers, using co-design, participatory design and critical service design to work *with* policymakers in tackling challenging issues and policies. We see designers and policymakers working *with* communities to boost engagement around the world, with examples from the UK, Latvia, New Zealand, Denmark, Turkey, the UK, Brazil and South Africa.

The range of policy areas and agendas covered span healthcare and substance use disorder treatment, community empowerment and citizen engagement, cultural strategies, food futures, and the climate emergency. We also see the design of governance, and critical approaches to current structures, including understanding the complexity of levels found within governance and exploring how a more “bottom up” or participatory approach to governance might be institutionalized and work in practice. Whilst the papers examine different policy areas and governance structures with different underlying institutional layers and political traditions, they all seek to understand where and how design might play a role in the ambitious rethinking of governmental institutions and their governance practices, thus overall contributing to shaping the

emergence of a novel sub-discipline in design that we termed *design-led policy and governance*.

In this introductory article we offer an initial clustering of the diverse array of practice and research presented, mainly organized around the following themes:

1. Design interventions in policymaking processes and organizations for greater citizen engagement and participation: exploring where in policymaking cycles and organizations design interventions are being made and how design is being used to strengthen the collaboration between policymaking, societal stakeholders, communities and citizens.
2. Spaces and places for design in policymaking, examining the locations (physical and organizational) in which policymaking occurs, and the need to build new skills and capacities in both designers and policymakers to enhance dialogue and trust.
3. Engagement with design frameworks and methods within and for innovation in policymaking, understanding how specific design methods (e.g. co-design, participatory design) are being used to innovate in the policymaking process.

Finally, we offer a few reflections to build further this research area pointing out topics for further research with the hope that these will be relevant for researchers approaching the field or deepening their investigation and for bridging the academic/practice divide between design studies and policy design.

2. Theme 1: design interventions in policymaking processes and organizations for greater citizen engagement and participation

The papers around this broad theme explore the ways in which design can be used to formulate more equitable policies and enhance stakeholder engagement. They seek to explore and challenge in agonistic ways power dynamics between government and publics, to understand where and how design might enable greater participation/inclusion of the public in policy processes and provide visibility to the relationships between administrators and citizens. Understanding and challenging the power structures at work in policymaking and exploring alternative structures that give more power to communities “from below” is an area explored in the article “‘Design for Policy’ from Below: Grassroots Framing and Political Negotiation.” Here, Federico Vaz, Mikko Korja, and Sharon Prendeville (2022) present a framework through which we might understand and interrogate the practice of design for policy from the perspective of both social actors and governments. The authors examine the “conflictual power dynamics and negotiation-based approaches to influencing government policymaking process and model the messy interplay between government-led policymaking and the activities of social innovators aiming at changing policy outcomes.” This exploration is relevant as we begin to coalesce around the field of design in policy, in order to not only understand how governments might benefit from this approach, but also the complexities of power dynamics and the ways in which those working from “below” might be engaged more in this agenda.

In “Blurred boundaries: Muhtarlık as the Right Space for Policy Making in Turkey,” Betül Şahin and Gülname Turan (2022) explore the blurred space between Turkey’s autonomous unit, Muhtarlık, that spans rural and urban locations and its possible role as both policymaking incubator and an accessible space for relevant stakeholders. The paper presents a model for a “dynamic policymaking process that provides a participative approach.” By bringing together the analysis and observations from this work, the authors explore “the possibilities of a space by combining valuable experiences of citizen engagement, governmental tradition and designerly thinking.” (2022)

Key to Cara Broadley and Brian Dixon’s (2022) paper “Participatory Design for Democratic Innovation: Participation Requests and Community Empowerment in Scotland,” is the practice of Participatory Design. Set within the context of Scotland, in the UK, the case study presented explored how participatory design (PD) might enable communities to better approach participation requests. This process is a mechanism that allows groups to engage with public authorities on local issues relating to infrastructure and services. They present a Participatory Request Toolbox, which is the outcome of the research.

The papers presented in this section explore physical and contextual spaces in which design is being used, or could be used, to interrogate both the processes and practices of policymaking and to ensure greater engagement with citizens and/or stakeholders while forming publics as a core element to its practice in the contested space of public issues.

3. Theme 2: spaces and places for design in policymaking

A significant and important area of work in design for policy is understanding where design and policymaking come together, in terms of physical locations such as policy or innovation labs, and the governance level at which these innovations are occurring, e.g. local and municipal, national governments or other public organizations. This theme includes understanding the kinds of skills those working in policy design/design policy might need to develop in order for the “discipline” to become established and evolve, within and beyond the academy. As we build a body of case studies and evidence, through Special Issues such as this, of where these interventions are occurring, we see a growing body of explorations of the types of capabilities and skills required by both designers and policymakers to apply creative approaches to innovate and disrupt the ways public organizations work. Papers in this Special Issue specifically offer case studies and examples of where policymaking happens, within bounded organizations like policy/innovation labs, and explore the kinds of skills and capabilities that might help enable a better dialogue between policymakers and designers.

Following Bason’s suggestion that the “policy designer should be a new job title” (2014) Anna Whicher and Piotr Swiatek (2022) explore how and where designers and policymakers are developing skills and capabilities, predominantly within the policy profession. The authors examine the rise of policy innovation labs in two countries highlighting key lessons for how this might happen, and offer insights and suggestions about the skillset, attributes, challenges and opportunities for those carrying out policy design within those spaces.

Building capacity within local government and communities is examined by Willhemina Wahlin and Emma Blomkamp (2022) in the context of New South Wales, New Zealand. The authors bring together co-design principles, a design thinking model and a public policy arc to understand whether this approach can build capacity of council staff and community representatives, for strategic planning. This case study synthesizes the discussion of design methods, using them to bring about greater community engagement and to explore how capacity needs to be built within both community and government.

In “Design thinking in the public sector – a case study of three Danish municipalities” Justyna Starostka, Amalia de Götzen, and Nicola Morelli (2022) examine the difference in how public organizations engage and introduce a design approach. Their work focuses on three municipalities in Denmark and identifies the way design is understood and implemented in each separate organizational work environment. Their investigation led them to understand how design is operationalized while also uncovering barriers of design implementation. In their work they explain that their intention was to provide a more realistic approach within the confines of the policy and design interface. This struck at the heart of a number of papers throughout in their attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice which was precisely the motivation of the guest editors in the pursuit of this Special Issue.

4. Theme 3: engagement with design frameworks and methods within and for innovation in policymaking

Case studies that present how different modes and methods of design are being used with and for governments and public organizations at all levels help us to build deeper understandings of what works, how it works and why it works. Innovation in policymaking can help engage broader communities, as we see in the previous theme, and can also be embedded in the processes used by policymakers.

The use of service design has been key to the development of design for policy, where it is a tangible method through which to engage all levels of government in the creation of new services. The use of Critical Service Design, as explored by Lara Salinas (2022) in “Designing for local policy: exploring alternative futures in the UK,” has been used to help policymakers at the local level, understand possible futures and design future services. The use of world-building as a speculative method can enable policymakers to understand the potential benefits and issues with new services, and to see the policy through a critical lens. The author presents an approach to participatory, place-based and local policymaking through the collaboration between design education and local government, and explores the development of training programmes in design for policy.

In their paper “Tapping into Community Expertise: Stakeholder Engagement in the Design Process,” Elham Morshedzadeh, Mary Beth Dunkenberger, Lara Nagle, Shiva Ghasemi, Laura York, and Kimberly Horn (2022) use community engaged participatory research and design interventions to empower a community comprising diverse stakeholders. Through the design of a backpack to meet the needs of people with

Substance Abuse Disorder and homelessness, the authors present their reflections on how this work can intervene with the policy process and engage with stakeholders.

The notion of community centered practice is also explored by Nidhi Singh Rathore (2022) in “Community-centered design practice in local governance.” The notion of policy innovation through design is explored through a case study and explores how design “gives us mechanisms that activate a government by the people, of the people, and for the people” through challenging and exposing power structures. Through comparing the role of design and community-centered design, the paper presents a challenge to how we might use design in policymaking processes.

5. Beyond: setting a research agenda to advance design for policy and governance

Design for policy is not a homogeneous field of inquiry or practice yet. The design activities that relate to designing for public policy are still suffering from issues related to two main factors: *method and merit*. In terms of *method*, what is discussed in the literature often appears as mere adaptations of traditional design practices only lightly modified to be suitable to the concerns and constraints of public administrations; in terms of *merit*, the impact of these activities on governmental and governance practices as well as on political and democratic life is largely to be investigated and proven. Limits also exist to the pull of documented cases in terms of four main factors: geography, scale, breadth, and depth. Cases and applications mainly address the global north and cultures where democratic values are not questioned. Even if a few authors have suggested that “design has moved upwards within governmental hierarchies and upstream in policymaking processes” (Mazé 2021; Kimbell et al. 2022), the question remains on the extent to which these evolutions are institutionalized and capable of transforming policy practice, or just a temporary patch aimed at giving an idea of evolution externally while leaving core policy and political practices unspoilt.

Despite limits and criticalities, the idea that design might be one of the important levers to transform Government and governance is gaining traction. Recent contextual changes have reinforced this hypothesis, deeming transformation necessary because of several factors, including the lasting effects of the 2008 financial crisis, the rising political divides (e.g. Brexit), the Covid-19 pandemic, and the environmental crisis. These events are pushing governmental organizations to develop new capacities to design new types of programmes as well as new capabilities to implement them. Consequently, transformative innovation policies, often labeled as “mission-oriented” or “challenge-led” (Mazzucato 2018; McLaren and Kattel 2022), are increasingly relevant in policymaking. Crucially, these transformative frames recognize the cross-cutting, multi-expert, and dynamic nature of both societal issues and their solutions, thus pushing governmental actions to be systemic as well as people- and planet-centered (McLaren and Kattel 2022; Grillitsch et al. 2019). However, this new generation of innovation policies has found Governments somehow unprepared to design and implement new programmes. The approaches and mindsets required are, however, expertise that design might offer, thanks to its consolidated work with ill-defined issues (Buchanan 1992) and its widely recognized people-centredness for innovation

(Beckman and Barry 2007), showing how the convergence of design research and policy studies is now a field ripe for practice and investigation. Many design practices are already applied at different governmental levels and are experimenting with different methods and tools. One example is service design becoming increasingly involved in public sector innovation to help achieve several goals (i.e., translate strategic plans into new public services, establish a better connection with civil society, and make public services more transparent and accessible to citizens and society). However, many of these practices are also isolated experiments still needing a more robust academic and institutional grounding.

In this Special Issue, we uncovered a few main areas that provide an overview of where the research community is heading. These pertain to three areas of focus: (i) spaces and places for design in policymaking, (ii) design adoption in policymaking processes and organizations (mainly to enhance stakeholder engagement), (iii) engagement with design theories and methods within and for innovation in policymaking. If these practices do not lack the vision and will to experiment with new ways to transform government, they still seem far from scale-up and institutionalization. Our collection seems to suggest that applying design to transforming policymaking and governance is not a standard recipe, but rather a way of approaching daily practices over time. This can be done both via the advice of external professionals and by acquiring a new mindset by civil servants, public officers, and policymakers. Hence, capability building and upskilling are activities that are gaining traction. Focusing on the upskilling of the workforce in the public sector, the European Commission is investing greatly in long-term actions to pursue the Digital Decade's objectives (European Commission 2021), such as training 20 million new ICT specialists. The twin (digital and green) transition expresses a political commitment in this direction. Under this, several actions are experimenting with creating hybrid specialists (multi-disciplinary) able to rely on digital technologies to shape public administrations, companies and society within the decade. Building on this, UNESCO and Nokia recently released a jointly developed Digital Competency Framework shaping the characteristics of the new digitally-literate workforce for the public sector (Broadband Commission 2022). The framework underlines the importance of linking people-centricity in public services, technical (data governance, AI techniques, privacy, and security), and managerial skills (digital leadership and agile execution). Different approaches to digital capacity building for the public sector and in public administration are also being implemented worldwide, the Executive Master in AI for Public Services (<https://ai4gov-master.eu/>) being one. Funded by the European Commission, this aims to bring advanced digital skills closer to non-technical people working in the public sector, putting design theories at the core of AI adoption in public services. This certainly represents one of the tactics to introduce and institutionalize design practice in the public sector and government, taking advantage of the opportunities for change highlighted by the Twin Transition.

The collection of papers in this issue offers a way to evolve the discourse on design adoption in policymaking, both academically and in practice. Although the path to achieving maturity is still long, a more consistent multi-disciplinary collaboration to support the co-creation and co-development of a new sub-field of investigation might

be the best way forward. On the side of the practice, experimentations need robust methods of reflection to aid learning and avoid replication of initiatives that have no legs to scale up because of failure to establish new governance models.

Advancing reflections, a few main areas of focus could support the development of an international research agenda, critically looking at:

- *Data* to inquire about the potential and effectiveness of the introduction and use of different types of data (i.e. open data, big data, small data, etc.) for governance and the appropriate design techniques to make sense and translate these data;
- *Materialization* of policies and public decisions, largely linked to prototyping and other techniques in design that might help reshape how public value is created and democratic discussions carried out;
- *Competencies and skills*, to investigate new capacities and roles for policymakers and civil servants in light of the hybridity and uncertainty of contemporary public challenges and the uptake of design principles and approaches;
- *Participation through design* (i.e., codesign, participatory design, etc.), looking at ways to increase the quality of interaction between citizens and State through shared and safe public spaces, understanding new public legitimacy, but also the effectiveness and limits of people's co-ownership of public goods and services.

Finally, a focus on complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty encompasses all these topics and explores ways in which design practice might influence the transformation of policy and governance (also in connection with other approaches and disciplines—i.e. complexity theory). The goal is to overcome innovation barriers in the public sector and experiment with alternative ways for policy and governance transformation in light of the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Disclosure statement

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