



How did policy become an object of design? Towards a diffuse design culture in policymaking

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As policy challenges are systematically growing both in complexity and scale, design approaches and methods indicate novel paths for engaging a more comprehensive range of citizens and stakeholders in sensemaking and decision-making processes. Although the progressive adaptation of design principles to policymaking is a relatively recent inquiry object, the design discipline has a longstanding pluralistic tradition. Well-established practices such as Design Thinking and service design represent notable examples of transdisciplinary endeavours.

This article discusses how the formalisation of design culture influenced its progressive extension to other domains, mainly focusing on public policymaking and the emergence of Design for Policy. A significant accent is put on policies as objects of design, the principles underpinning their development and implementation, and the implications in practice. Peculiar characteristics of design in policymaking are analysed as well as continuities and divergences of related design approaches, to frame the cross-fertilisation of the two domains. The co-evolution of design and policymaking encompasses a transition of transformative processes towards longer-term horizons, preparing fertile ground for new governance scenarios.

Keywords: Design for policy, design culture, policymaking, design capabilities, citizen engagement

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Introduction

Throughout the last decade, many practices native to the design field have been increasingly integrated into governmental processes. This shift in perspective was heavily informed by methods and techniques matured in private and commercial contexts (Kimbell & Bailey, 2017; Kimbell, 2016) and is frequently associated with public service design and delivery (Bason, 2014). Although the methodological outlook to designing in public and governmental settings denotes continuity with service design approaches, the core principles ruling the two practices are profoundly different. Therefore, to illustrate why design approaches and methods can benefit policy practices, it is relevant to frame the path that led policies to become design objects.

The concept of *design* carries many different meanings and can be referred to as a product, practice, or process, depending on the application context (Bannon & Ehn, 2012). When discussing the relation between design and the policy field, we should distinguish *Design for Policy* from *policy design*. The latter is associated with conceiving and crafting a policy, regardless of the involvement of design approaches in its development (Howlett, 2014). According to Michael Howlett (2014), policy design is a well-established study area within policy studies. Its primary focus is on gathering policy actors to coordinate operations to improve the quality of policymaking. Here, the concept of setting up organised cooperation to obtain better outcomes aligns with the perspective of design studies, which are familiar with applying their approach to diverse situations and contexts (Deserti et al., 2020). On the other hand, the term *Design for Policy* is typically used to describe the intersection between the two disciplines. It is intended as an adaptation of design approaches to policy development and implementation.

Considering the design and policy areas, and even though they denote two bodies of knowledge with an extensive focus on practice, there is limited academic knowledge at the crossroads of the two domains (Whicher, 2021; Blomkamp, 2018; Bason, 2014; Junginger, 2014). However, what is not explicitly present in policy design is a dialogue on unlocking the policymaking process to make it more human-centred by including non-policymakers and external actors (Salmi & Mattelmäki, 2021; Deserti et al., 2020).

Design culture and policymaking

Design studies have a long-lasting experience in widening their research and practice spectrum, often by incorporating new objects of design. Throughout its development, and thanks to the contamination with other domains, design is increasingly absorbing intangible and complex objects and systems (Mosleh & Larsen, 2020; Norman & Stappers, 2015; Buchanan, 2001). Following this growth, policies have factually become an object of inquiry for design studies (Blomkamp, 2018; Kimbell, 2016; Bason, 2014), and consequently, policymakers are growing their interest in communicating with designers to synthesise processes and knowledge from the two domains and debug the current policymaking process. The situatedness of design activities can be identified as the disciplinary link to acknowledging to one end, the tight bond between policy design and related contextual factors (Jones, 2018), and on the other hand, the communicating balance between processes and outcomes (Eckhardt et al., 2021), and between design and implementation.

Design thinking and pluralism

Design Thinking (Brown & Kätz, 2011; 2009; Cross, 2006) represented one of the most widespread transdisciplinary endeavours of introducing design methodologies in organisational settings. Since the 1980s, design research started growing interest in the topic of Design Thinking. By borrowing methods, theories, and tools from various disciplines such as anthropology, cognitive sciences, education, sociology, and psychology, design scholars attempt to frame designers' problem-solving attitudes and investigate the core nature of the problems they face.

Building on previous research on the thinking process undertaken by designers in solving problems (Lawson, 1980; Archer, 1979), Peter Rowe (1987) promoted the term Design Thinking by describing the multifaceted design approach and the way in which they confront design situations. However, starting from the 2000s, the concept of Design Thinking shifted progressively from the controlled environment of the academic debate to a broader public, instilling the idea that companies and organisations can embrace it to address complex challenges and foster innovation in increasingly unpredictable markets. As such, Design Thinking was operationalised and moulded into a process that sums up the concept of human centrality, the problem-solving attitude, and strategies to deal with wicked, ill-defined problems. However, unlike the concept of design culture, which is "*situated and dynamic*" (Deserti & Rizzo, 2019, p. 40), it embodies "*an abstract design model applicable independently from the context and the object of design*" (2019, p. 40).

Consequently, Design Thinking has been mistakenly endorsed as a synonym for adapting design principles to businesses and organisations. As Kimbell (2012; 2011) notes, albeit Design Thinking represents a fundamental step for the adaptation of design principles and mindsets to different domains, it denotes an erroneous separation between design ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’. The narrative of a cognitive style that limits the design doing to the designer itself and merely strives to diffuse the procedural scaffold behind it does not align with the assumption that everybody can design (Manzini, 2015). In other words, the concept of Design Thinking does not have a self-standing identity within the design discipline. However, it represents a valuable resource when designers deal with other disciplines and vice-versa. Plus, in recent years, due to its popularity in the business field, Design Thinking has been criticised for being a prerogative of the domain and exclusively affecting the managerial sphere of creative processes (Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016), setting design capabilities aside.

Conversely, the pluralistic spirit of the design discipline intends to overcome the general understanding of a universal design mindset by contributing to a multifaceted system of design knowledge, skills, and attitudes. To that extent, this system should be able to adapt to different scenarios, more than to be replicated in similar environments, and to develop into an *“integral part of a surrounding whole by, at the same time, keeping its own logic and rules and, hence, intensively interacting with surroundings”* (Vetterli, 2016, p. 14).

Design culture is deeply rooted in the specific context in which it is applied, considering the situatedness of the design practice, and it does overcome a general innovation management concept or model.

Design culture and situatedness in policymaking

Several design scholars contributed to establishing the notion of design culture (Julier, 2014; Kimbell, 2012, 2011), intended as a system of competencies, knowledge and skills that can operate in a specific context to support the development of a product, service, or system (Deserti & Rizzo, 2014). The concept of design culture received many different interpretations over time. However, Guy Julier (2006) provided in its early endeavours a multi-layered reading key to the topic, developing it in three primary and communicating directions:

- Design culture as a process that is constantly informed by contextual factors
- Design culture as organisational or attitudinal that is part of the specific culture of an organisation
- Design culture an agency that critically investigate how design can be used to address relevant societal challenges

As such, when design culture is embedded in or adapted for an institution or organisation with generative purposes, it does not only focus on the outcomes of this collaborative effort but mainly challenges the culture of the system in which it operates (Deserti & Rizzo, 2019). In a policymaking context, the cultural adaptation – and eventual change – works on two distinct levels, namely the institutional and the societal one. While the two levels influence and determine each other, one can find it challenging to individuate a specific and distinct design culture peculiar to a given institution or to the whole society. Conversely, design approaches offer a lens for acknowledging a multitude of networked cultures, and they generate systematic change only if integrated and adapted to already-established processes (Bertola & Teixeira, 2003).

Following Julier’s definition of design culture and considering policies as products of the policymaking process, we can think of them profoundly influenced by their context of origin – the public domain – and the network of contexts they address in society. In other words, policies are designed to meet citizens’ expectations and absorb the capabilities and culture of the organisations or institutions in which they are conceived. To that extent, framing design culture within the policymaking practice implies providing a situated outlook on the policy problems that will be addressed by design and society.

The following paragraph will illustrate the nature of policy and design problems to frame a common ground from which the two domains started their dialogue and collaboration. The two following sections will respectively cover the process that encouraged design research and practice to focus on policymaking and the peculiar characteristics of Design for Policy. The contents of this article are discussed to address the following questions:

- *How did policy become an object of design?*
- *How and why did design start focusing on policies?*
- *What are the elements of design approaches that could enrich policymaking processes?*

Policy and design problems: embracing complexity by design

The challenges of complexity in policymaking are undeniable; for example, David Hancock argues: “*Projects are essentially social interventions, conceived, designed, led and delivered for society through people.*” (Hancock, 2010, p. 42). In other words, the nature of public problems is per se dependent on a multitude of interconnected factors and is steadily moving towards more complexity, unpredictability, and ambiguity (Mortati, 2019).

Preliminary issues were raised in that sense by Rittel and Webber in their article “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning” (1973), in which the authors describe design, planning and social policy problems as ‘wicked’, meaning they cannot be tackled by adopting science nor engineering approaches. However, Rittel and Webber’s idea was later challenged for being focused on design as an exclusively rational process, which narrowly aims at delivering solutions (Buchanan, 1992). The criticism moved to the early definition of design and social problems and the renewal of the cultural and organisational environment, favouring a shift towards human-centred and participatory approaches in the Nineties. Throughout the years, dialogues on how designers could work in partnership with problem stakeholders in a creative process for problem-solving and innovation became central to the development of design sciences, which moved away from merely rational approaches.

Complexity is nowadays a well-known concept for businesses and organisations, and it entails a multitude of forces that can be controlled and eventually channelled (Fung, 2006) but are hardly foreseen. Many authors agree on addressing this challenge by connecting citizens and stakeholders with governance structures (McGann et al., 2018; Kimbell, 2015; Christiansen & Bunt, 2012) while at the same time taking action to make the latter more flexible, adaptive, and inclusive (Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020; Hillgren et al., 2020; Kimbell & Bailey, 2017; Bason, 2014). For the last decade, the public domain has embraced concepts such as agile project management, service design, and co-creation. The mentioned approaches share a common element at their heart: an iterative process, which consists of learning through continual testing and close involvement of end-users and stakeholders at every stage.

The public sector is currently shifting towards an outward-looking approach to policymaking, seeking partnerships with scholars and practitioners from the design field to address open, complex, dynamic, and networked problems (Dorst, 2015).

How did design start focusing on policy?

In recent years, a branch of design studies seems to emerge with a clear focus on practical approaches to sharply engage with public organisations (Huybrechts et al., 2017). However, a clear tendency to adapt design to policy has been recognised within the policy domain since the second half of the Eighties (Pilemalm, 2018; Howlett, 2014). At that moment, the works of political and social scientists primarily represented preliminary explorations of the setup and the features of policy design and outlined the processes adopted by policymakers (Schön, 1992; 1988) rather than exploring novel political dimensions.

New streams of research are paying extreme attention to how design should support governmental institutions in transitioning towards new courses of action to address public and social issues. This aspect seems to be prominent nowadays. It demonstrates that the design discipline acknowledges its transformative potential and impact by replicating action-based, iterative, and experimental methods (Whicher, 2021; McGann et al., 2018; Chindarkar et al., 2017). However, some questions remain open regarding the key competencies that design can import into policymaking. To one end, a myriad of empirical studies and practical models advocate for embedding design methods and tools into governmental structures to boost policymaking practice (Bason, 2017; Junginger, 2017; Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016). On the other hand, designers’ capabilities to thoroughly address policies are criticised because their tendency of focusing on formal and functional aspects might not appear in line with the abstract character of policies and governance (Rosenqvist & Mitchell, 2016; Junginger, 2014). Moreover, many authors question whether design is comprehensively able to prompt inclusiveness, participation, and efficiency in public services.

Participatory design and inclusive design processes

The application of participatory design to public policymaking has gained scholarly attention since the ‘90s (Whicher, 2021; Bason, 2014; Howlett, 2014). However, designers and policymakers have been experimenting with applying design principles to public sector initiatives and services since the late 1960s (Whicher, 2021; Kimbell, 2016; Sanders & Stappers, 2008).

Although many techniques and methods were previously developed within a commercial context, a shift in mindset happened thanks to the dialogue with participatory design (PD henceforward). The participatory movement originated in Scandinavian trade unions in the '70s, with the initial aim of democratising the workplaces by introducing the right for skilled workers to co-design solutions to ameliorate their job and make them act in public decision-making within their companies (Björgvinsson et al., 2010). However, due to historical transitions in the last two decades, such as globalisation, the latest IT implementations, and significant changes in the political landscape, participatory design has dramatically broadened its scope. Simultaneously, PD has been scaled up to a broader context: the human public and relational sphere in cities.

Participatory design is primarily informed by the political commitment to involving workers (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013). It was then progressively adapted to engage citizens – in this case, the targets of a policy – and policymakers involved in developing and delivering a policy. Greenbaum and Loi (2012) noted that a successful aspect of participatory design should be identified in its core characteristics, which are still standing nowadays. The authors individuated six leading concepts: (i) *equalising power relations*, (ii) *situation-based actions*, (iii) *mutual learning*, (iv) *tools and techniques*, (v) *alternative visions about technology*, (vi) *democratic practices*. However, participatory design primarily focused on how people interact with their surroundings throughout its development, and it did not focus on policies or services as design objects. Conversely, especially during the 2000s, it was mainly concerned with experience. Participatory design and co-design are particularly aimed at tackling the aspects of inclusion and participation, being disciplinary approaches “rooted in an activist tradition aspiring to increase democratic participation of diverse societal groups in design activities related to public space, services, systems or policy” (Huybrechts et al., 2017, p. 45).

Moreover, participatory design contributed to the development of debates on the political role of design. Aspects such as the formation of publics and the concept of *infrastructuring* have been discussed as core practices through which design can put citizen engagement in the spotlight and support public deliberation processes (Le Dantec & DiSalvo, 2013; Björgvinsson et al., 2012; Björgvinsson et al., 2010). Nevertheless, in recent times, research in this area seems to turn from strengthening the interconnection between citizens and public institutions to narrowing down to local communities. This zoom-in gathered plenty of criticism towards participatory design, mainly for losing the opportunity to connect the micro-level processes with the bigger picture. Moreover, political scientists even argue that PD and co-design should recover their political spirit to upscale the local-level interventions toward changes at the institutional level (Blomkamp, 2021; Huybrechts et al., 2017).

In parallel, service design has lately grown its focus on developing public services with citizens and in close contact with the public sector. Following the experiences matured in the commercial realm, that largely explored and finetuned methods for user experience and service interaction (Cornwall, 2008; Hollins & Hollins, 1991), service design has been adapted to the public sector and suggested as an approach to bridge public services and citizens' culture, needs and know-how. To that extent, service design has been indicated by Junginger (2017) as a possible disciplinary channel to tailor policy outputs - namely public services - to citizens' needs by transferring human-centred strategies to policy design processes.

Lastly, an additional element that is central to the debate happening within the design discipline is related to design capabilities and how to make policymakers proficient with relevant skills and attitudes. This argument is supported by the demand for a more experimental approach oriented towards a comprehensive understanding of policy problems (Hobday et al., 2012) through optimal management of the complexity of contemporary challenges (Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016). Hence, design methods can be presented - in an efficient manner - as devices able to add a citizen-centric lens to policy design and, in turn, to make policies tangible and relatable for designers both in approach and jargon (Tello et al., 2018; Kimbell & Bailey, 2017; Bason, 2014).

Service design and new framework conditions

The origin of service design represented a fundamental step for introducing design approaches to policymaking, and it settled the establishment of services as objects of design (Sangiorgi, 2015; Junginger, 2014). This design research and practice stream introduced new framework conditions in organisational settings. In other words, the new procedural outlooks brought by the adapted methodologies laid fertile ground for novel processes and set conditions to ensure their application. Whereas the policymaking approach focuses on applying a policy for a relatively long timeframe - usually years - and observing its effects retrospectively, the design approach in the policy context introduced a diverse attitude. Specifically, the interventions related to a policy are prototyped, designed, and evaluated contextually to a specific framework while testing the policy itself. As notable with the advent of tools and methodologies related to service design, the prominent difference resides in the experimental

outlook, which is the keystone of a different and open conceptual framework, often with related guidelines to guarantee its application. Service design also introduced in the general equation approaches such as co-design and co-production, along with new designing tools. Co-design is mainly aimed at defining the problem space, whereas co-production is oriented toward implementing a proposed solution. A more comprehensive disciplinary approach is represented by co-creation because it covers both the problem and solution space (Dorst, 2015), enabling a holistic engagement of citizens and stakeholders in the process of crafting and delivering policies. Service design was proven to be a successful adaptation of design principles to organisational practices since it shifted services as design objects. The main converging elements that facilitated this transition were the co-design approach and the design of specific tools to fulfil an exact scope. Design approaches tailored to business strategies with the support of service design facilitated a transformation of organisational processes by rethinking the relationships between stakeholders and providing new models (Boland et al., 2008). The principles of designing together not only brought companies and organisations a ground-breaking approach to product development. They primarily instilled in their context of application a collaborative and transdisciplinary perspective. Every stakeholder must be included to increase the value and meaning of both the outcome and the process (Blomkamp, 2018).

Policy teams experimented for years with including designers to carry out user research about citizens and stakeholders and set up co-design workshops. However, policymakers have recently acknowledged the power of approaches such as system thinking (Blomkamp, 2021; Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020; Jones, 2018) and policy prototyping (Kimbell & Bailey, 2017; Bason, 2014) in bridging the gap between policy design and implementation in practice. Whereas system thinking ensures a thorough exploration of the policy context, an iterative approach reliant on prototyping and testing guarantees a critical assessment of policy options. Together, the two approaches directly touch public institutions' organisational and institutional capabilities, ultimately reframing their political agendas and commitment to society.

The proposed perspectives aim to synthesise the different viewpoints on design in policy to frame the perimeter of the emerging study area at the crossroads of design and policy studies. The underlying themes fundamentally connect to the pledge for more tangible policies and more reachable governments. The necessary conditions are an all-encompassing design of public services and the diffusion of design skills to all the relevant stakeholders.

Designing policies and change in policymaking

Design supports organisations in responding and adapting to change. In turn, sound policymaking requires a thorough exploration of problems and the effectiveness of policies to meet and react to people's needs. There are countless examples of how design supported businesses and scientific organisations in expanding their operational and methodological power and solid evidence on how it can replicate a cultural change with policymakers (Kimbell, 2016; Bason, 2014). It would suffice to think that policymaking deals with problem-solving and, particularly now, crafting new opportunities by envisioning sustainable and long-lasting strategies. Here design seems to align with the mentioned goals by generating novel ways of engaging citizens and gathering different people and knowledge.

Bason (2014) emphasises the potential that design has in offering an alternative interpretation of policy issues due to its cross-fertilisation with other disciplines like sociology and systems thinking.

Moreover, factors like collaborative approaches and framing strategies – both intrinsic to the design field – seem relevant for shaping a policy in an accessible way. On the policy implementation side, design can support the process by adapting divergent strategies for idea generation to specific policy problems (Christiansen & Bunt 2014) and codifying experimentation for complex scenarios (Dorst 2017, 2015; Kimbell 2016; Mintrom and Luetjens 2016; Sanders and Stappers 2008).

Reframing engagement

In his book 'Leading Public Design', Christian Bason (2017) emphasises the need for engaging citizens differently and more compellingly. Iterative and experimental processes native to the design field can lead this transition towards a more inclusive and collaborative approach to policymaking and, eventually, inform co-design and co-production activities. The critical approach is to engage citizens and stakeholders early in crafting a policy rather than serving them a half-prototyped and possibly partial solution.

Design for policymaking orients towards providing an array of new tools and methods and bearing a creative mindset to the domain. Two primary advantages brought by engaging with citizens and stakeholders in design activities for policymaking which both scholars and policymakers have widely recognised, are:

- The legitimization of citizens as active and proactive collaborators in the policymaking process, in countertendency with the general commonplace of the citizen as a passive policy target (Pilemalm, 2018; Benington, 2010).
- The improved fit of a policy intervention to a specific situated context, measured in terms of ease of implementation, consistency with previous and future solutions and sustainability (Deserti et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2020; Voorberg et al., 2015).

Good (policy) design

One common aspect of the different branches of the design discipline is that good design must work for people. Therefore, when designing a policy, the role of policymakers is to deeply connect and understand the ones who are going to benefit from it. Once an idea for a policy is shaped, design methodologies can provide reliable and adaptable tools to test ideas and processes by prototyping them. Moreover, an often-underestimated aspect is the visual nature of design thinking and doing. From a sensemaking and decision-making perspective, this feature can help communicate processes and information within a network or system in a glanceable way. Understanding how information connects within a network and how operations are articulated creates a unique advantage for people to collaborate and aligns visions and expectations.

Last, the collaborative effort of more people working to address the same problems can expand the creative potential by exponentially multiplying the ideas generated in smaller timeframes. This aspect positively influences both the quality of the outcomes and the procedural effectiveness, and it provides stakeholders with the perception of working on different knots of the same network.

Concluding remarks

The leading questions discussed in this article are: *How did policy become an object of design? How and why did design start focusing on policies? What are the elements of design approaches that could enrich policymaking processes?*

Designing policies nowadays requires special attention to new governance systems and open-ended outputs and reframing the democratic principles of efficacy, effectiveness, and efficiency. To that extent, the government should play the role of enabler, rather than simply managing in-house processes, by facilitating the interests of interconnected systems and empowering actors to take the lead when a particular capability is required. In turn, policies should be able to introduce and develop capabilities within communities and networks. In that sense, policies can be considered an object of design. They result from a process that materialises the mediation between societal values and the design culture of the promoting institution to generate a systemic cultural change. The new framework conditions brought by design in the policymaking field provide structured strategies for engaging citizens and ensure value creation in highly dynamic and networked contexts, eventually challenging the cultural assets of public institutions.

To that extent, the value of design for policymaking lies in its leading role in mediating policy visions and implementation in practice. The research tools and thinking strategies associated with design empower policymakers with new techniques for data gathering and interpretation of the contextual dynamics. Moreover, the facilitation component, which is intrinsic to design, helps in stimulating groups and singular stakeholders to be more creative and, in turn, generate tangible and appealing solutions to apparently abstract problems. One can argue that the somewhat abstract nature of policymaking, considerably influenced by politics and ideology, could make it unsuited to design practices. Indeed, the role of design is not to replace pre-existing social constructs but rather to acknowledge them and provide practical, usable, and replicable tools and methods to accomplish the interests of all the parties involved in the process. What seems to be the greatest challenge is to encourage policymakers and civil servants to recognise policymaking and policy implementations as a unique and unbreakable process. Once this gap is filled, the development of a policy will no longer appear as a fragmented course of non-communicating actions but more like the iterative and inclusive process currently familiar to business and IT organisations when designing a new product or service.

To conclude, policymakers and policies should align with the context and rely on it to be informed by contextual conflicts and changes and eventually react to these stimuli. This result cannot be achieved by merely steering a few

policy features retrospectively or dialoguing with citizens and policymakers. The resilience of a policy depends on an assessment of its life cycle, and implications performed a priori. The situated outlook of design practice promises a suitable approach to designing policies that can survive and be effective over time.

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