

BEYOND USEFULNESS: EXPLORING THE IMPLICATIONS OF DESIGN IN POLICYMAKING

CONTROVERSIES, ENGAGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the convergence of design and power in the emerging trend of design being used within policymaking processes. The author's personal experience of working as a design consultant in this field in the UK is used to surface questions about the role design is playing in contemporary politics and governance, and how this might be understood. The paper reviews the growing body of literature around 'design for policy' and highlights the extent to which it is preoccupied with a purely instrumental account which neglects a broader political interpretation. Three possible alternative analytical approaches are then discussed – a critical design history, Foucault's governmentality lens, and Latour's account of the different political stages in the trajectory of issues – all of which have the potential to deepen our understanding of the present.

SCENES FROM SOCIAL DESIGN CONSULTANCY

3RD FEBRUARY 2016

I'm sitting in a hotel bar in Berlin, at about 10pm... I'm meant to be preparing my thoughts for a conference session tomorrow, but instead I'm working on a bid. It's

for a team in the Cabinet Office, and the Department for Communities and Local Government, who want to employ a 'design prototyper' to work alongside ethnographers, data scientists and policymakers to 'understand the drivers behind recent rises in homelessness ... and co-design and test solutions'; in effect, to come up with some new policy ideas in response to a homelessness crisis. The brief posits a range of possible drivers – 'personal factors that put people at risk of homelessness and ... wider contextual changes, for example changes in local government finance, rising house prices, changes to the benefits system and mental health funding.' (Policy Lab 2016). The brief asks the 'design prototyper' to focus on people at risk of becoming homeless, and understand their 'experience, behaviours and critical incidents in the process of becoming homeless...'. I'm very tired and slightly resentful of having to do this on a day off – but the effort to win work is non-negotiable.

7TH DECEMBER 2016

We're having what we call a methodology workshop to prepare a response to another bid. There are four of us mapping out a possible project process on large piece of paper on the wall. The brief is to support a council that wants to make a shift across the entire organization to focusing its services and strategies on 'prevention and early intervention', and building 'resilience' in residents and the community. I point out to my colleagues that this 'resilience' idea is 'political' – it can be interpreted as a more palatable way of saying that the government is going to do less for people – and that we might want to think about that. Silence – and blank or confused stares, including from my boss. Another colleague, who I know gets my point, jumps in and suggests that we could play that understanding to our advantage in the bid. The conversation resumes. Awkward moment passed. Later on, the fourth colleague in the room, who has recently joined from the civil service, confides over a glass of wine how pleased she is to be working in a place where we actually raise those questions.

4TH APRIL 2017

Getting dressed in the morning, I'm listening to Radio 4. There's a news item about Damian Green, the work and pensions secretary, announcing that the government will be pouring funding into relationship counselling, because of research that shows parental conflict is terrible for children and affects their 'chances in life'. (Guardian 2017). About a year ago we worked with the Family Policy team at the Department for Work and Pensions on exactly this issue, interpreting ethnographic research, and co-designing (with real people) some ideas around how the quality of parental relationships could be improved. At the end of the project, the policy team we were working with was disbanded, and shortly after that David Cameron (whose agenda the 'life chances' issue was) was no longer prime minister. Our months of work had gone nowhere. And now this. The government was already funding counselling – it's not new. But the one thing our project had clearly concluded was that counselling was an inappropriate and undesirable intervention for the majority of people the government is most worried about supporting.

MAKING SENSE OF PRACTICE

This paper responds to the question in the call for papers:

How are we to reconstitute relationships between industry, practice and analysis so that designer-researchers are able to produce appropriate, timely and even troublesome outcomes that have tangible and developmental social and economic impact?

I am drawing on my broader PhD study investigating an emerging form of and context for design: policymaking in government. I understand 'policymaking' as an activity that is closely entangled with traditional notions of power – the capacities and capabilities of governments and politicians in relation to the populations they govern. In this, I am somewhat conflating policy and politics, which some may object to. However, my view is that although conducted by different groups of people, they are after all concerned with the same set of issues (Stone 1988). In UK central government, which has thus far formed the main focus of my work and study, politicians set the agenda that policymakers work to. Policymaking is 'apolitical' only in so far as those enacting the policies are prohibited from expressing a view about them.

My approach to this study has been largely autoethnographic, reflecting on and making sense of my own experience and position as a both a researcher and practitioner working in this context. For the last two years I have been employed by a design consultancy in London that practices a form of 'results-driven design' (Manzini and Jégou 2005), working closely with different parts of UK government, including the 'Policy Lab' in the Cabinet Office – a team set up to trial new approaches to policymaking, including using design.

Before that, I was involved in the field in a different way, working for an advocacy group that mediated between the design industry and parliament (The All Party Parliamentary Design and Innovation Group) raising issues that were of concern to the industry in a political arena, and, latterly, making the case for the use of design by government to improve its own effectiveness (Design Commission 2012). By plying design in a policy context, and advocating the use of design in leading and managing government, I understand us to be embroiled in political narratives and the enacting of political power.

I have documented my experience over the last two years in a number of ways: keeping a reflective journal, taking photos, periodically writing up fieldnotes, as well as drawing on the paper and digital trail that working life creates (emails, calendars, notebooks, documents, etc). I have primarily been relying on my own first-hand experience of practice, and through formal interviews and more informal conversations with other practitioners and civil servants iteratively testing my own thinking and analysis (Bailey and Lloyd 2016). I have also at times, with the support and collaboration of Policy Lab, taken the opportunity to step back from participating or facilitating to become more of an observer in engagements such as workshops and meetings. It should be said that although part of my consultancy work has involved working with policymakers on policy problems, the majority involves engaging as a designer with government in other (albeit often strategic) ways. So my thoughts about design in policymaking are naturally somewhat entangled with design in other political and governance contexts.

A key feature of my experience throughout has been the cognitive dissonance that arises from the conflict between being part of a small business trying to win work, generate income and keep clients happy, and my own personal feelings about the broader political environment and discourses in the UK, in which we are unavoidably enmeshed. I read and responded to the homelessness brief suspecting that 'changes to the benefits system' – more commonly labelled 'welfare cuts' (Independent 2016) – far outweighed 'personal factors' as reasons for becoming homeless; and that ethnographic research to understand the internal reasons constituted deliberately looking in the wrong place for answers. I am working on the 'resilience' project knowing that this goes hand-in-hand with councils trying to reconcile the ongoing budget cuts being handed down to them by central government. I facilitated co-design workshops with vulnerable people to come up with ideas for how their relationships could be improved while all the time wondering if it was any of government's business.

My gut feeling is that, as designers, we are not furnished with the tools, frameworks or understandings to ask – and answer – difficult questions about what role we are playing in power and politics, and the workings of contemporary capitalism. In theory, this should be an

area where research can help. However intriguingly, based on my reading of design research to date, and acquaintance with design discourse, this seems to be something of a blind spot (which seems worthy of further scrutiny in its own right). So, informed by the sense that there might be more going on than meets the eye, my epistemological starting point is a critical realist one: of analysing data generated through my own experience, and abductively testing out a range of different theories for their explanatory power, reinterpreting my experience using different theoretical propositions, to try and guess at the underlying structural causes. The rest of this paper discusses the ‘design for policy’ literature, and what it misses, before going on to speculate on some possible theoretical reinterpretations.

DESIGN FOR POLICY

The majority of writing about the emerging use of design for more strategic purposes in government, which has become labelled ‘design for policy’, shares a preoccupation with elucidating design’s usefulness – how best it can be applied in a policy context, and what that achieves. There is little at present that attempts to contextualize or critique the development as an symptom of underlying social, political or economic currents.

Partly because there is an agenda to build the field, much of what has been written to date is descriptive. One of the opening chapters to the ‘Design for Policy’ book (Bason 2014) charts the growth of the field, categorizing a number of developments as having something in common – making the case for considering it as a field. Bason and Schneider (Bason 2014: 23) map out the current terrain of design for policy, globally – looking at national and regional level, at digital and open government agendas, and at the growth of public innovation ‘labs’. They make a case for it being a ‘global phenomenon’, although predominantly in ‘advanced economies’. They suggest that links should be made more actively to spread the practice to other places – for example Latin America, Asia and Africa. (Statements like this immediately ring post-colonial alarm bells). Carstensen and Bason (2012) tell the apocryphal story of Mindlab, the Danish government’s innovation lab, charting three phases in its development, marking out an increasingly strategic role for design that broadly reflects a more general evolution.

There are localised accounts of what is happening – practitioners describing their work, the policy challenges, projects, design responses, and teams. Design for Policy (Bason 2014) brings together essays from practitioners and academics working in the field, and presents design as an opportunity to ‘reinvent the art and craft of policymaking for the twenty-first century’. It is intended as a resource for practitioners – a sophisticated ‘how to’ guide – and discusses the current and emerging public policy context for design, a

number of cases demonstrating the diversity of the application of design for policy, and the tools, approaches, methods and practices that embody design as a tool for policymaking. Other descriptive accounts of practice include an edited journal issue by Staszowski and Brown (2016), Kimbell (2016) on a year of observing the UK policy lab, and O’Rafferty (2016) on design for policy practice in the Irish government.

Some of these are more focused on the ‘promise’ of design for policy, making a case for why it might plausibly be useful to policymakers. Although there are nuances and variations in their accounts, Christiansen and Bunt 2014, Bason 2014, Bason 2017, Mintrom and Luetjens 2016, Hobday, Boddington and Grantham 2012, and TACSI in Staszowski and Brown 2016 (for example) all understand design as bringing something different and potentially valuable to policymaking. They cast current policymaking practices as inadequate or ineffective – overly rational and technocratic, disconnected from the real world of people, and front line public service delivery, unable to work collaboratively or innovate – and propose design as an ameliorating response. Considine (2012) draws on cognitive theory and discusses types of expertise, to propose that an interpretation of policymakers as designers might add to our understanding of policymaking.

Some look more forensically at the impact – at what actually happens in specific engagements between design and policymaking. Kimbell 2016 finds that design operates in a range of modes (service, partner and challenge) not all of which are perceived as helpful. Bailey and Lloyd 2016, O’Rafferty 2016, and Staszowski and Brown in Bason (2014) all highlight organisational cultural or epistemological challenges in delivering value through design in policymaking contexts.

Finally, there is some overlap with the field of ‘policy design’ (Junginer 2012 and in Bason 2014, Mintrom and Luetjens 2016). Policy design as a field derives from the study of politics and public administration, and is concerned with the processes by which policy problems are identified and analysed, and the ways options are generated, selected and implemented (Howlett 2015). A recently established Annual of Policy Design attempts to bridge the policy theory and design worlds, bringing together ‘classic papers’ and inviting contributions from both.

COMMONALITIES, LIMITATIONS AND SILENCES

What links all of this writing is an interest in the instrumental value of design: what is it achieving, or what might it achieve? How can we do it more or better? It argues that design can help government do what it is trying to do more expediently, effectively, compassionately, etc.

Perhaps because of design’s preoccupation with problem-solving, research about design seems to also

adopt this narrative. It is a commonplace for design for policy accounts to begin with reference to Rittel & Weber's notion of 'wicked problems', assert that these have come to plague the public sector, and to propose design as a coping mechanism.

This framing is a result of the research background of some of its founding players. For example, Bason (2017)'s account in 'Leading public design: How managers engage with design to transform public governance' builds on Boland and Collopy's understanding of design as an approach to management (e.g. Boland and Collopy). A scan of bibliographic references in Design for Policy turns up contributions from policy design, management theory, public management/ administration, policy innovation, public strategy, and a range of ideas from service design, design thinking, design management, human centred design, design-driven innovation.

I see three main limitations to this body of scholarship.

First, if one's interest was purely in understanding the instrumental value of design in policymaking, there are grounds to question some of the conclusions. In constructing the sense of a global phenomenon, design is assumed to be the same everywhere. This seems to me to be highly unlikely. This kind of practice is being invented by practitioners, now, in response to the needs and preferences of policy teams, and based on their own experience and skills. How it works – and what it achieves – in each instance is dependent on the (institutional) context, the people involved, and the nature of the problem in question. Such a homogenizing tendency has indeed been challenged in respect of other fields of design (Avle, Lindtner and Williams 2017). But in the race to establish authority over the field, generalisations are being drawn, and in so doing they overlook both the nuance of context, and some conflicting conclusions from other research. For example, Bason summarises the differences between design and traditional policy approaches in a binary way:

Government	Design
Analysis	Synthesis
Rational	Emotional
Logical	Intuitive
Deductive	Inductive
Solutions	Paradigms, platforms
'Thinking it through'	Rapid prototyping (think through doing)
Single disciplines (e.g. law, economics)	Multiple disciplines, T-shape
Elegance	Impact, value, diffusion

Source: Inspired by Banerjee (2009), Brown (2009), Martin (2009).

Figure 2: table comparing government and design characteristics (Bason 2014: 6).

This is a neat formulation, but possibly reductive. It doesn't engage with research in design thinking about how designers with differing levels of expertise and experience think – see for example Dorst 2008. And it overlooks the role of analysis and logic in design practice, and pragmatism and serendipity in policymaking.

Second, at present the contributions to this newly defined field are coming from a limited range of

sources, and there is a close interrelation between peer-reviewed literature, and a lively discourse and body of writing which mainly sits outside of academic publishing and in some cases borders on design advocacy (some of which I have participated in myself) (Julier 2017: 157). The discourse here is disciplined by a specific set of interests. The following extract from my fieldnotes illustrates the point:

As I'm writing this, I've just received an email from a colleague, reporting back on the Design Council's response to some futures work we have done for them. We have proposed 'ethics' as an area of uncertainty and challenge for the design industry in coming years. According to my colleague, "they made a point that the current level of debate within the mainstream design industry actually wasn't talking a lot about points like ethics, political implications of service design etc – and that as a result, although they want to be leading the debate, they also need to be careful about exactly how to introduce these questions in a palatable way so as not to alienate the profession." (Fieldnotes 10.02.15)

Third, the design for policy literature conforms to what Ezio Manzini has observed is an unfortunate narrowness in design research in general. He laments the lack of means by which to evaluate the products of contemporary design culture, other than via 'mechanisms and effectiveness':

the conversation tends to deflate into narrowly solution-oriented discourse— a mere narration of the techniques used and the effectiveness of its results, suggesting that this field is the only one on which discussion is possible (Manzini 2016).

In this case, this means the literature has little to say about my original preoccupation, which is how to negotiate working as a designer in such explicitly political contexts. Scholarship to date sheds little light on the complexities of the examples given, and the question posed at the start of this paper. There is barely a nod to the political – no particular perspective on how and why policy problems are named and framed, and the broader political project they might participate in. In sum, a lack of reflexivity and criticality. Or rather, criticality takes a certain form. Dilnot (2008) argues that criticality should come naturally to design, because design "begins from an understanding that it is possible to critically discern amongst the potentialities existing within a situation those that can form the basis of a new (preferred) entity". However criticality here seems to be limited to discerning which approaches are the most effective. The gap appears more acute when comparing research around another contemporary phenomenon, 'nudge' (Benedictus 2013). As a tool that policymakers are assimilating into their practice, researchers have interpreted and critiqued its entanglement in political agendas in a way that is somewhat lacking for design at present (Curchin 2017, Leggett 2014).

BEYOND USEFULNESS

So how to open up a broader research agenda?

Some design research explicitly discusses the relationship to politics: participatory design (e.g. Björgvinsson et al 2010, Binder et al 2015), design activism (Fry 2010), adversarial design (DiSalvo 2012). There are also examples of designers thinking through the implications of different political ideas and their embodiment in designerly forms. Knutz et al (2014) act out different notions of democracy in a patient-doctor interaction. Koskinen and Hush (2016) lay out three different conceptions of ‘the social’ in social design: utopian, molecular and sociological, which leads to design work grappling differently with social questions. However the context of design practice here is either as an explicit form of resistance, or anyway outside of strategic governance environments.

Writing in design culture provides a useful starting point, outlining the interdependencies between forms of design, economic patterns and trends in government administration. Dilnot (2008) locates the explanation for this lack of criticality here: ‘despite the remnant of the ideology of public service that still accrues to design, in practice we encounter only its almost complete replacement by the concerns and values of the market’. And Julier outlines the ways in which neoliberal forms of government – through deregulation, financialisation and austerity – have created the context in which design is now being bought by governments as a form of expertise (2017:12).

Building on this understanding of design as produced by socio-economic, political and cultural contexts, in what follows I propose three theoretical frames through which to reinterpret the ‘design for policy’ phenomenon, as I have experienced it.

A CRITICAL HISTORY OF DESIGN FOR POLICY

‘I have a question about time. Lots of design ways of thinking, and bits of ethnographic practice, come from HCI, testing something in the moment. But what about longer timeframes? What about a system like pensions that a person interacts with for their entire life?’ (Fieldnotes 28.02.17)

This question, raised by a social researcher in the Department for Work and Pensions during an informal discussion of ‘design for policy’, was querying the provenance of design practices and what we might be unthinkingly importing into policymaking with them. As pointed out by Clarke (2016), the ‘post-thing narrative of 21st century design’ has become ‘untethered from historiographical underpinning’. Or in other words, social design practitioners are not habitually aware of the genealogy of their professional identity, methods, discourse and ideas. At a conference on design policy in 2015, following a presentation by a Philips executive, the conference convenor, who works predominantly with public sector organisations trying to embed design practices, commented, “It’s great to see a

big company like Philips using design tools that we can recognise.” (Fieldnotes 10.02.15) which suggests a peculiar forgetfulness about where design as a professional practice comes from.

But placing developments in design practice within a historical economic and political framework highlights the extent to which socially conscious design that’s trying to work with government risks being swallowed up and mobilized by the forces of contemporary capitalism and ‘neoliberalisation’ (Julier 2017). For example, I work with lots of socially-motivated designers, keen to ply their skills to help solve society’s ills, who wouldn’t easily be able to define neoliberalism, even though our work is only possible as a result of the marketization of public services. Crudely put, without some historical awareness, well-meaning designers could be (and probably are) unknowingly mobilized for political ends.

Although, taking a long view, current social design practice is informed by the work of the radicals of the 1960s and 70s who detached design from its ‘modernist, rationalist paradigm’ and introduced an anthropological approach (Clarke 2016), the exploitation of design ethnography to locate (returning to my first example) the causes of homelessness in the decisions of the individual rather than the policies of governments would go very much against the values of those original design activists – and is a perfect example of capitalism’s capacity to absorb and dismantle critique (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005).

A GOVERNMENTALITY LENS

Foucault’s notion of governmentality (Foucault 1991) opens up a number of perspectives on design in policymaking.

First, how do governments think about what they are doing? What is the current ‘formulation of the art of governing’? (Rose, O’Malley and Valverde 2006). The use of design, and the types of analysis and conversation it enables - the depiction of people as ‘users’, the attempt to get ‘under the skin’ of citizens, the mapping of an individual’s journey or pathway – suggest things about how government thinks about the people under its watch (namely that they are savvy and need to be out-thought). It also indicates a shift further along the spectrum from a whole population view to being able to see and respond to (or pre-empt) individuals in a granular fashion, no doubt supported by increases in data collection and analysis capabilities. In this way the deployment of design is tied up in, and emblematic of, a contemporary shift in political rationality.

Second, the idea that governing, and the disciplining of the individual, is not only done through the bodies of government so-named, but through techniques that work through myriad institutions, networks, discourses and relationships, is helpful for seeing more clearly the ways in which individuals are being mobilized to achieve the ends of governments: what Swyngedouw refers to as

‘governance beyond the state’ (2005). The funding of relationship counselling, and the prescription of what constitutes a ‘good’ parental relationship, is a case in point. In this policy development process, ethnography, co-design and prototyping methods were used to develop a suite of indirect techniques of governing, or the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Foucault 1991): a peer-to-peer advice service, a social media campaign aimed at young men, a website bringing together and promoting life skills courses, and resources for key workers to signpost families to relationship-based services. Design capabilities reveal more about the individual and their context, that can then be co-opted as a means to achieve a certain outcome, which is particularly appealing if the political administration in question is minded to pursue an austerity agenda of public service retrenchment.

Third, and linked to the above, the neo-liberal model of rationality ‘encourages individuals to give their lives a specific entrepreneurial form’ (Lemke 2001:202). The organisational focus on building ‘resilience’ in my second example, whether concerned with council employees or local residents, indicates that the source of social problems is not socio-structural factors - ‘capitalism, racism, the patriarchy, etc., but... the wrong way of governing ourselves’ (Lemke 2001:202). In this way it becomes possible to facilitate austerity strategies such as a reduction in welfare spending through demanding individuals take more personal responsibility for their welfare. Similarly, council employees enduring yearly rounds of redundancy are asked to locate the source of their insecurity not in the external factors of their work environment, but in their own ability to cope. Designers have been working on this agenda for some time, deploying ethnography and behavior change techniques to promote certain forms of citizenship. Julier (2017:152) quotes designer Ben Reason as saying (in Bichard 2008), ‘we need to change our relationship with public services, from one where we just expect things to be there for us, to one where we’re more engaged in ensuring we don’t need them.’ One wonders if this statement is politically informed, politically naïve, or simply opportunistic.

POLITICS, PUBLICS AND ISSUES

How to take a nuanced view of the nature of the political in this kind of work? Although colloquially the civil service is referred to as being apolitical, it is of course deeply implicated in politics in the lives of issues and their publics. Drawing on Marres (2005, 2007) and the Lipmann-Dewey debate, Latour offers a definition of ‘the adjective ‘political’ as ‘qualifying certain moments, stages or segments in the erratic destiny of issues’. (Latour 2007: 814) He later goes on to define five types of political moment in the trajectory of an issue.

Table 1: An adaptation of Latour (2007:818)

Political-1 New associations	New associations that force everyone to redefine how everything relates to everything else (what he calls cosmograms) e.g. a new medicine
Political-2 Publics and problems	A new, concerned and unsettled public is created around an issue e.g. a new medicine that benefits some but is highly expensive
Political-3 Sovereignty	When the machinery of government tries to turn this problem into a question of common good and public will and fails to do so e.g. NICE and Parliament disagree
Political-4 Deliberative assemblies	Problems to be solved by one of the many procedures invented to produce consensus among citizens - the public as a solution e.g. co-production, CCGs with lay members
Political-5 Governmentality	When an issue has stopped being political (for a while) because it has become part of the daily routine of administration and management e.g. the running of the NHS

What’s interesting about this typology is what it misses when compared with my own experience of working with issues in a policy space – and the one-sidedness of it. In the case of the Family Policy project, government had defined an issue which the corresponding public struggled to see as a matter for politics. The policy objective was intent on constructing a reluctant public and then designing interventions that coerced it to behave in particular ways. And with the homelessness project brief, although undoubtedly a highly political issue, the framing of the issue for policymaking purposes is pre-determined by the powerful, and not open to challenge by its corresponding public.

In general, the curious politics of the policymaking moment – when the tangle of agendas, publics and machinery of government is temporarily held in suspension while a new strategy is formulated – seems to be missing from this typology. Perhaps because it usually happens behind closed doors, shielded from the view of publics. But that doesn’t mean that its publics don’t exist. Design – by in multiple ways attempting to talk to people outside of the ‘protected’ policy space, is risking a public being created around an issue – politicizing it. But at present the negotiation of issues

and inclusion of publics in the development of responses to issues, mediated by design, is highly selective, and dictated not by those publics, but by the politicians and policymakers in charge.

CONCLUSION

In academic accounts of design practice in policymaking, and strategic decision-making in government, there is at present a dominant focus on a public management narrative – how to govern more effectively using design – which has been driven by a particular set of research interests and industry agendas. For practitioners and researchers seeking to understand the political nature of this kind of practice, there is a space and a silence which rapidly needs filling. My proposition is that a critical realist approach of theoretical redescription, trying different interpretive lenses on for size, and testing for their explanatory power, can help deepen our understanding of the present. I have attempted here to indicate what new perspectives can be gleaned from three such approaches, although undoubtedly there are others, and indeed deeper analyses of the ones I have briefly discussed, some of which I hope to extend through my own future PhD study. The purpose of all of this is not to paralyse action by critique, but rather to work towards a more ethically and politically informed design practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this paper for their helpful comments, and gratefully acknowledge support for my PhD from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of the Design Star PhD Consortium.

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