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What did we actually design here and what purpose did it serve? Some generative metaphors for understanding service design in the Swedish public sector

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Abstract

Building on the lead author’s experiences as a design practitioner in the Swedish public sector, we argue that Service Design as practiced today is, in many cases, failing to attend to the design and delivery of actual public services. We explore the blank space we perceive between the rhetoric of evangelists for Service Design in the public sector in Sweden, the reality of working as a Service Designer in the Swedish public sector, and the reality of materialising public services. To explore this blank space, we present a number of generative conceptual metaphors for what, if not actually designing services, Service Designers or those adopting practices in the name of Service Design might more materially be doing. We share a selection of these, in the hope of engaging the NORDES community in helping (re)integrate the rich tradition and conceptual frames of design as a materialising practice, with the practice of actually designing and materialising public services.

Introduction

Recent discussions amongst design researchers have highlighted that (service) design should more critically engage with the challenges of designing services in public sector contexts (Kimbell et al., 2022; Junginger and Bailey, 2017; Downe, 2016; Bailey, 2012). Specifically, recent work by Bailey (2021) analysing the growth of design-based approaches in the public-sector in the United Kingdom treated design, in this context, as a discourse. Which is to say, a language act. We interrogate this idea further and aim to explore the performativity and re-citationality (Hollywood, 2005) of Service Design in the public sector in Sweden. In doing so we pose the contention that Service Design as ‘languaged into being’ (Krippendorff, 2004) is something of an abstract metaphor (Marres, 2016; Gibbs, 2008). Through various acts of re-citation Service Design (Tjänstedesign) in the public sector in Sweden has, in many cases, become detached from its original meaning and purpose; the design of services. We suggest Service Design in the Swedish public sector has become a reified metaphor (Blackwell, 2007) for an amalgam of facilitation techniques and representational practices that often have little to do with either the design of services, or design for service (Kimbell, 2011), and in many cases have become entirely divorced from design as materialising practice. We argue that there is a significant gap between Service Design as metaphor and service design in practice. To outline our argument in the terms of the NORDES 2023 theme – this reification of Service Design and the resultant gap between abstract concept and the concrete reality to which it is supposed to relate, drastically undermines how Service Design is understood and practiced. This, we contend, is paradoxically undermining the ability of Service Designers to contribute to the design and materialisation of actual public services.
EXPLORING THE DIALECTIC OF GOODS VS SERVICES

A full review of the literature describing the transition to services has been documented extensively elsewhere (e.g. Blomberg and Darrah, 2015; Young, 2008). This makes clear that we live in increasingly servitised times. In the discipline of Service Research this transition has been articulated as a switch from a ‘goods-dominant logic’ to a ‘service-dominant logic’ (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). This ‘goods to services transition’ has had an extensive impact in terms of how Service Design as a practice has been framed theoretically and metaphorically (Wetter-Edman et al., 2014; Kimbell, 2011), especially in Sweden. In the public sector it is claimed that this transition demands a shift from the ‘factory-production mindset’ to ‘service co-creation’ (Durón et al, in Rasche and Pfannstiel, 2018, Osborne, 2017; Sangiorgi and Prendiville, 2017; Junginger, 2016; Fransson and Quist, 2014).

The goods-dominant frame, with its factory metaphor, has therefore been significant to much of what Service Research and Service Design has positioned itself in relation to. Using this factory metaphor as a starting point, how can we make more sense of what designing services in the public sector might mean? As we explore this, we ask the reader to consider whether abstract metaphors positioned in opposition to goods and products potentially represent an ‘overmining’ (Harman, 2013) or a neglect of the vital role of material design practices in the effective design and delivery of services?

METAPHORS WE DESIGN WITH IN PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANISATIONS

Just as abstraction aids the generalisability of ideas and their spread and communication (Robinson, 2022) myths and metaphors have always been one of the ways that humans make sense or construct meaning for themselves (Lakoff and Johnston, 2003). Working with metaphors has established precedent in many design disciplines (i.e. Murray-Rust et al, 2022; Lockton et al, 2019; Braedley, 2019; Cila, 2013; Hey et al, 2007; Blackwell, 2007; Benyon and Imaz, 1999) however, in Service Design a more detailed discussion on how metaphors shape design practice, or discussion of their utility in helping the translation of abstract ideas into concrete experience has been marginal. In order to “reduce the situation in all its complexity to a simpler, thinkable form” (Beckett, 2017) we draw upon Dorst’s concept of framing (2015), Morgan’s seminal Metaphors of the Organisation (in Örtenblad, Putnam and Trehan, 2016), and Gulari’s (2015) Metaphors of Design as a way of situating our own discussion of the role of metaphor in both understanding services as a concept, and to aid understanding of the public sector organisation itself as a site of the design of services. From this we propose a range of overlapping generative metaphors (Schön, 1979) for how Service Designers or those managing them might presently understand their roles in public sector organisations:

“Metaphors are a device for embellishing discourse, and they are also a way of thinking, seeing, and perceiving reality” (Morgan, 1986, in Örtenblad, Putnam and Trehan, 2016).

SERVICE DESIGNER AS HOLIST

Extending and reifying the factory metaphor employed by proponents of service-dominant logic, (Fransson and Quist, 2014), much like wider literature exploring public sector bureaucracy more generally (i.e. Dunleavy, 2014; Etzioni-Halevy, 2013), discuss New Public Management and its impact on the public sector. This discourse describes how services are increasingly experienced as fragmented or discontiguous. Such discontiguity it is claimed, results in loss of value and creates failures of some functional or aesthetic ideal of perfection or seamlessness, resulting in inconvenience and frustration for users. This framing, and its wider logic allows service designers to position themselves as ‘holists’, bringing together different stakeholders in new constellations, mapping and documenting and rebranding disparate and disjointed products and interactions as cohesive and coherently packaged entities: In the process, aligning user expectations with what the organisation delivers and pursuing some aesthetic ideal of the seamlessness of delivering upon user expectations and capturing such value. Thus, design in this frame is seen as a unifying or homogenic process and the organisation problematised as mechanised, fragmented, and disjointed.

SERVICE DESIGNER AS PLUMBER

Extending the idea of designers as unifiers and homogenisers is a related notion of design as a reciprocal process, between participants in dialogue or co-creation and consequently designers as experts engaged in acts of simultaneous or reciprocal analysis and synthesis (Kolko, 2010; Dubberly et al, 2008). This second conceptual frame draws on earlier Cybernetic notions of circularity and requisite variety (see Fischer and Herr, 2019), and casts designers as manipulators of dynamics and flow, crafting collaboration between ‘silos’ in the public sector organisation, through skilled manipulation of repositories of data, information and people.

This framing problematises the organisation as siloed and bureaucratic and metaphorically positions the service designer as ‘plumber’ or a ‘thermostat’ capable of, by either some magical or rational process, identifying imbalances within the thermodynamic organisational system and balancing them, or
integrating and blending the contents of these silos. In this framing the role of Service Designer is focused on creating interactions and identifying different stakeholders around interfaces, mapping and modelling the exchange or information and flows of footfall or knowledge through both social and digital materials across the organisation.

SERVICE DESIGNER AS MECHANIC

The idea of Service Design as a teachable and codified practice is something that has been embraced by the global Service Design community itself (Stickdorn et al, 2018; 2010) perhaps under the influence of the adjacent discourse of Design Thinking, (Brown, 2009). The Personas and Journey Maps, Blueprints and Canvases, themselves often metaphorical and adopted or appropriated from other design disciplines, have created an idea of Service Design as a tool-based discipline, and therefore of Service Designers as stewards or proprietors of a toolbox of ‘magic methods’ (Kolko, 2010). In this framing, and through different means of organisational learning, interaction, and interpretation of the environment; organisations build shared mental models that allow them to make sense of their environment and act accordingly (Daft and Weick, 1984). These shared models and processes can thereafter be codified as tools; replicable, repeatable and teachable as part of the wider ‘factory ethos’ of the public-sector bureaucratic system.

This idea of Service Design as a codified, procedural, teachable discipline has been further fuelled by metaphors like that dominant representation of Service Design practice the Double Diamond (Murray et al, 2006) and a New Public Management and consultancy-driven idea of organisational and governmental systems being ‘fixable’ by external actors using codified toolkits and processes (Collington and Mazzucato, 2023).

SERVICE DESIGNER AS ENTERTAINER OR JESTER

This conception of Service Design tools as teachable and replicable can be considered alongside recent trends in Human Resource Management focussing on employee engagement and specifically affective engagement with work (Röttger-Rössler and Slaby, 2018; Hochschild, 2012). This sees Service Designers asked to lead or facilitate workshops, conducting or engaging in acts of public performance. This approach might also involve audience participation and is fuelled by Service Design’s embrace of the frontstage and backstage theatrical metaphor of the Service Design Blueprint. In this frame the Service Designer is cast in an extrovert, ‘happy clappy’ role, and Service Design as some sort of activity for boosting employee affective engagement at work. However, these theatrical ideas can themselves become embodied in the daily practice of Service Designers. Discursive workshops aimed at co-creation or user engagement instead becoming light relief or novel or amusing sideshows or respite from the daily grind of public sector care or administrative work. This framing sees the role of Service Designer as entertainer and Service Design as some sort of novelty act.

SERVICE DESIGNER AS EVANGELIST

Closely linked in both its performativity and material superficiality to the framing of Service Designer as extrovert entertainer, and of Service Design practice as theatre, is the framing of Service Designer as evangelist or as a missionary. This framing sees the Service Designer or a new proselyte to Service Design, perhaps fresh from having participated in a recent two-day training course in Service Design methods, trying to convert ‘heathens’ amongst their fellow public sector workers who have not yet seen the light. Service Design at its most coherent in this framing is seen as an embodied or ritualised practice which aims to re-engage frontline or bureaucratic public sector workers with iconic representations of users. In so doing, Service Design is framed as the practice of reconnecting public sector workers empathically with the emotional and social lives of the customers or end-users they are supposed to be serving.

SERVICE DESIGNER AS ICONOLATRIST

Building on the above ideas, one of the ways that Service Design thus claims to reduce the complexities of designing public services is in utilising the library (if you read) or toolkit (if you act) of Interaction Design. Chief amongst these tools is The Persona (Cooper, 1999) and the Journey Map. This focus on iconic representations of the user, together with often methodologically superficial interviews and observations, supports a process of telling ‘users stories’ and the introduction of first-person narratives into the public sector organisational discourse (see Vink, 2019). This sees Service Design metaphorically as a humanising practice, and the service designer as humaniser, creating and forming human representations as part of their approach to simplifying and democratising complexity.

In this frame, perhaps especially if Service Designers are situated in “Development Departments” or attached to Human Resource functions in public sector organisations – an emerging trend – the Service Designer is cast as a diviner of humanity within the public sector bureaucratic system, and one that can help public sector workers to reflect or learn through meditations on service users and their journeys. This frame and its related concept of the ‘User Story’ often sees service design align itself with Agile methodologies. Another professional practice that when employed in the public sector is often re-cited and re-
instantiated in much more superficial forms than those suggested by its original proponents.

SERVICE DESIGNER AS VISUALISER

The complexity posed by the ‘layers’ of policy within public sector organisations or the aforementioned idea of the silo-ed public sector organisations, points to another of the pre-eminent rhetorics found in the discourse of public sector Service Design. The idea that like services themselves, many of the challenges that the public sector face are intangible; we can see the effects of homelessness for example, but it is harder to observe the causes, or trace the causality. How do we solve complex problems if we can’t see (in the case of a generative frame of visual design), or fully grasp the issue (in the case of a generative frame of material design or somaesthetic design), or if we can’t understand the actors implicated in the conceptual frame of Social Design). These frames, channelling wider New Public Management logics of quantification and managerialism, attempt to legitimise design in the public sector by asking; how can we (re)solve the complex issues we face if we are not able to perceive them?

This idea of a designer as visualiser, socialiser or materialiser is further elaborated with reference to the mythos amongst proponents and theorists of servitisation that now there exists intangible services where once there were mere tangible products. With their tools for mapping and exploring causality and un navigated journeys between touchpoints the Service Designer can utilise the practices of Graphic Design and thus claim to help visualise previously unseen patterns or synthesise hitherto unimagined solutions to such problems. Drawing on the material tradition of Product Design and colonising and operationalising a variety of interpretive artistic practices Service Designers can also fashion themselves as ‘prototypers’, able to produce material prototypes to test their proposed solutions and bring intangible ideas or human needs to life in more engaging material forms: Making such ideas and concepts easier for users to understand, engage around, and test in practice.

CALL FOR DISCUSSION

Our primary concern in this paper has been to draw attention to the implementation gap, or shortcomings of Service Design as practiced in the Swedish public sector to actually (re)design, (re)shape or (re)develop services. We speculate that this perceived failure might be because of differing generative metaphors employed by subsets of the design profession and in how these frames are then adopted, embodied, and re-cited by other stakeholders who might also lack formal design training but who have otherwise been exposed to the rhetoric and been engaged in the performativity of Service Design in the public sector. We consider that such observations might also be a result of the uncritical and inexperienced way Service Design as practiced has absorbed or assimilated different conceptual frames and adopted tools from other design disciplines. We question whether it is this ‘magpie-like’ approach to implementing a variety of design-based perspectives and reciting and redeploying them in the ‘design of services’ that is typical of the ‘everything as a service’ generative metaphor? If the practice is design, and ‘everything can be a service’ then – this simplistic logic appears to be suggesting – we can use any design method or tool, and simply talk of Service Design, whether we are designing or intending to design services or not? We feel the same conversation could and should be had of other Capitalised Abstract Noun + Design discourses such as Policy Design or Systems Design, that in their re-citation in public sector discourse appear to lose many of the links to the original practices, research literature or expertise on which they were based, or out of which such discourses originally grew.

In the Swedish public sector, and despite the rhetoric of Service Design and its proponents, there exists very little evidence – to paraphrase Friedman and Stolterman (in Höök, 2018) – of design ‘addressing human needs, or acting on the physical world’. If no services were designed here, what needs did get addressed and what transformation of the physical world or social world occurred? And if it occurred, what form did it take? In many cases it might be possible to argue that some discussion, collaboration, or consultation was performed through (service) design, such as using ‘design games’ and employing design-based approaches to conduct qualitative research. However, if materially, this just amounts to people sitting around in a room talking with the aid of a scattering of post-its on a whiteboard or one of two printed journey map ‘canvases’, or people sitting on Zoom talking around a Miro board – what materially is the difference between ‘design-based approaches’ in this context and any other forms of semi-competent ‘facilitation’, ‘participatory citizen engagement’ or for that matter any number of non-design based public-sector ‘development’ or ‘consultancy’ methodologies?

CONCLUSION

In a bid to conclude this exploratory paper and provoke further discussion, we observe that much of what is conventionally referred to as Service Design as currently practiced in the Swedish sector might in fact be nothing more than ‘facilitation’ or ‘stakeholder engagement’ or some form of loosely defined and poorly operationalised ‘qualitative research’. Such qualitative research and experientialism can form a critical component of the service design process. However, conflation or reification of superficial...
qualitative research, or participatory ‘design games’ (Schuler and Namioka, 1993) as Service Design potentially erases much of the potential of design and of designers’ potential to redesign public services. Superficial approaches or understandings of Service Design as a materialising practice neglect attendance to much of the service-orientation and value generating potential of the discipline as a professional practice. It is furthermore often unclear what purpose many of these design games serve, or how the research insights they generate contribute to the design of services. In this paper therefore we have begun to sketch some ideas that might help make sense of this confusion, and shared several ‘concrete metaphoric vehicles’ (Ontony, 1993) or ‘generative frames’ (Schön, 1979) for how, what now passes as Service Design as practiced in the Swedish public sector, can instead be understood.

If we are serious about advancing the use of design-based approaches in the public sector in Sweden what more as designers and design researchers do we need to do to ensure that our tools and expertise are not simply being misappropriated to provide gimmicks or “roliga timme (happy hour)” for bureaucrats, and are employed instead in the design of actual services and in creating real value and addressing real needs?

Can we use the identified generative frames or others that they provoke, to advance a new more critical research agenda exploring how design methods are currently being employed in Swedish public sector organisations? Can such generative frames also help highlight particular logics or ways that certain types of design problems are language, embodied or materialised into being? Through greater sensitivity to citational practices within the discourse of Service Design, can we ensure that the rich material tradition of design that gave us these practices is perhaps better (re-) integrated and (re-)engaged in supporting the design and materialisation of actual public services?

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