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On the importance of an enlarged framework of ‘design for policy’ within the public policy cycle

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Abstract: This paper aims to reinforce the importance of looking at ‘design for policy’ in an enlarged perspective, encompassing the entirety of the public policy cycle. This is substantiated with a re-examination of ‘design for policy’ foundational literature, by highlighting a narrative which we argue to have set its expectations mostly on processes for (co-)creating new policies. In turn, the later stages of the policy cycle have not been getting sufficient attention, leading to an unbalanced ‘design for policy’ approach. We also contrast this interpretation with recent literature, further attesting to its fragmentation. Furthermore, this is analysed considering evidence emerging within the New European Bauhaus policy, while also seeing it as an opportunity to further strengthen a ‘design for policy’ approach. Ultimately, this fragmentation seems to lie both on the incipient nature of ‘design for policy’, but also on how design is understood, and is translated to the policy making process.

Keywords: Design; Design for Policy; New European Bauhaus

1. Introduction

Design is now becoming well established and accepted as a discipline offering added-value to a wide range of areas and issues. From communication, to fashion, or to grand societal challenges, design has been expanding its place through experimentation and practice across the globe.

The role and possibilities for design in policies has not been left out of this debate. Pioneering work by Christian Bason (2014) has been of great importance in structuring and advancing this field. This paper departs and draws inspiration from the book edited by Bason - ‘Design for Policy’ - for which he and other authors have been decisive to establish the foundations on the topic.

Moreover, this paper author's own experience researching the topic of ‘design policies’ (that is, in a very loose definition: policies targeting the potential of design), from a ‘design for policy’ perspective, proved to be an interesting context to explore this approach.



Such experience has been detrimental to observe the lack of a structured and stable ‘design for policy’ framework, and how it has been mostly acting at the early stages of the public policy cycle. This paper will therefore inspect some of the literature on the topic and reflect on what this might signify to a ‘design for policy’ approach.

We also propose to look at the New European Bauhaus¹ ‘design for policy’ approach. Accordingly, and as an on-going policy, still taking its first steps, this seems to provide a pivotal opportunity to collect further evidence and to reflect on the ‘design for policy’ framework.

2. Methodological notes

The methodology underlying the development of this paper followed a two-step approach:

1) Inspection of some of the literature on ‘design for policy’: By firstly recognising the importance to re-examine the foundations of this field, as it looks back at the ‘Design for Policy’ book; and by collecting and analysing a sample of insights from recent endeavours. This will allow us to contrast past and present perspectives.

2) Collecting evidence emerging from the New European Bauhaus: By describing and locating the policy making process used for the development of the New European Bauhaus. This will allow us to reflect on its use of a ‘design for policy’ approach.

These are then converged into a broader reflection of where ‘design for policy’ stands and points out possible gaps in need of future developments.

This paper also acknowledges and uses the public policy cycle model, namely its five-stage sequential configuration (Howlett, 2015), as illustrated in Figure 1. This will ensure a coherent analysis considering the selected ‘design for policy’ literature.

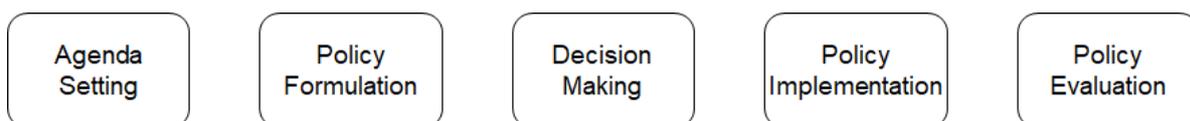


Figure 1. Policy cycle model, as referred by Howlett, 2015.

As explained by Howlett, ‘agenda setting’ appears when a problem is recognised and possible approaches to tackle it are delineated, ‘policy formulation’ is about getting into specificities of existing possibilities, just before ‘decision making’ when a course of action is adopted, followed by the ‘policy implementation’ focusing on getting things done, and finally ‘policy evaluation’ for understanding if the policy is achieving the desired results or not. This last stage may also lead, but not necessarily or always, to new or updated policies, thus starting a new policy cycle.

¹ Put forward at the end of 2020, as one of the elements of the public response to the COVID-19 crisis at the European Union level, the New European Bauhaus aims to tap onto the potential of design (and other ‘creative’ fields) to support the implementation of the European Green Deal and to help solve the climate change emergency and environmental destruction we are facing (European Commission, 2020).

The relevance of this model is also grounded in its strength. As a model that has been in place for almost 70 years, evidence shows, as also pointed out by Howlett, that its stages can and have been used in a different order, sometimes are compressed, or even bypassed, but ultimately they still stand.

Therefore, its structure isn't going away anytime soon, for the same reasons it has not been so far dismissed: it works as a useful guideline. The point is then to look at this cycle model as a solid and stable framework, and focus on the content of each stage, from a 'design for policy' perspective.

3. Looking at the 'design for policy' foundations

'Design for policies' as a field has been slowly emerging for the past years. In this light, and aiming to provide an overview picture, this section affords particular attention to the 'Design for Policy' book. This is helpful to locate the field and to provide a first set of clues by re-examining 'design for policy' foundational literature.

The rationale for this book lies in the need to put forward new policies and new ways of developing policies that are in tune with twenty-first century needs. A context which seems to be framed around a set of key topics: an ever-complex world, the importance of systemic thinking, or the need for wider participation, to name a few.

Those same needs supported the arguments set-forth to use a 'design for policies' approach, on the premise and evidence that design is well positioned to embrace current challenges, given its role in fostering creativity and innovation. Indeed, the "*promise of design for policy*" as put forward by Bason sits on 1) the possibilities it offers to look into public problems through a different perspective, 2) the importance of collaborative approaches in those processes, and 3) the value of design to "*give form and shape to policy in practice*".

We can then find diverse examples on the ways in which design can be of use for policies, particularly regarding the multitude of existing design methods. What we can observe and conclude is how they were valued for their ability to capture and act on previously unknown blind spots.

What is also recurring, and is argued here as subscribing to the importance of re-examining this foundational book, refers to how 'design for policy' as a framework is mostly oriented towards the creation of new policies. In fact, the term 'new' is often used throughout the book. Proeminence seems to be given to the possibilities design can offer to establish new ways of kickstarting the policymaking process. New ways which are more participatory in nature, allowing the uncovering of blind spots not yet unveiled. And new ways to tackle those issues by proposing new solutions.

There are some giveaways in the book that show an underlying agreement that 'design for policy' is mostly positioned within the early stages of policy creation. Perhaps the rationale for the book can provide a first clue as it states that "*governments around the world are un-*

der unprecedented pressure to identify new, better and more cost-effective ways of producing public services and societal outcomes” (Bason, 2014). And it is here, Bason continues, where design can find its place in policies. And ‘here’ also includes the word ‘new’.

Another interesting clue comes from Bason and Schneider reflecting on initiatives taking place in several countries where design is seen and used as an important element to foster new policies. Special attention is given to the so-called ‘Policy Labs’ as places for experimentation popping-up, from where governments can request and receive new and innovative policy propositions, and where design is key for this process.

Last but not least, it is also relevant to recall how in this same book there is already a pointer to open-up the possibilities offered by design in the policy making process. In particular, Junginger (2014) suggests that design and policy making have essentially been reacting to problems, instead of being proactive and preventing them. In turn, Junginger continues, this ‘problem-solving’ mind-set is a limiting factor both to design and to policy making.

Junginger argues that to overcome this limitation we should ‘break free’ from the constraints of having to identify a certain problem as a first stage and should look beyond this ‘problem-solving’ mind-set. To do so, Junginger looks at design in its capacity, noting that available design tools would already allow us to explore such possibilities. An approach which has been further studied by several other scholars since then.

Simultaneously, and while opening-up design to other possibilities, from a policy making perspective, we argue this was also helping setting the tone for the creation of ‘new policies’. This is more clearly observed when Junginger states that *“designing becomes a means of inquiry and invention, of envisioning and of developing new possibilities for useful, usable and desirable policies”*.

That is, in a nutshell, we are arguing these initial clues do seem to subscribe to the importance of design in reshaping the ways policies take place, starting with how policies are created, by effectively setting the tone and expectations on ‘new’.

4. Insights from recent ‘design for policy’ reflections

With the design for policy foundations in mind, we are now in a better position to further analyse more recent perspectives on the matter, while recalling the policy cycle model.

In this sense, the SISCODE project, supported by the European Union from 2018 to 2021, seems to be a good starting point, having its theoretical grounds on the ‘Design for Policy’ book. In one of the project outputs, titled “Design for policy making”, the first sentence of the executive summary provides a clear indication on the state of the art driving the project as it asks, *“Can co-creation be a means of creating better policy?”* (Bruhn et al, 2021). The emphasis is then, once again, on the creation of policies through design.

But this also seems to point out how, 7 years after Bason’s book, a central issue remains: this same question might tell us how ‘design for policy’ continues to look for validation. Indeed,

there is an emphasis on the 'can?' and not, for example, on the 'how'?. It therefore seems reasonable to affirm it has not (yet) reached what seems to be a desired and increased maturity level.

Anna Whicher (2020) provides further thoughts on the design for policy field state of the art and Whicher's analysis couldn't be clearer: "*Design for policy is an emerging yet growing field of research and practice that currently lacks strong conceptual, theoretical, epistemological, methodological and empirical groundings*". A finding that Whicher observed when bearing in mind the diverse possibilities offered by a design for policy approach, and how these are not yet fully explored. The implication is, we argue, that only with a robust design for policy structure can we accomplish its potential.

This set of possibilities is a particularly useful exercise, as Whicher mapped a variety of available options based on existing evidence and literature, condensing them into possible design for policy future routes. The "*need for rapid policy prototyping*", the "*changing nature of evidence*", or a "*more meaningful public consultation*" are some of the proposed courses of action.

Another of these possibilities is especially useful for the context of this paper and refers to a "*focus on end-to-end policy-making*", where a clear reference is established with the policy cycle model. More specifically, the connection is established with the United Kingdom government model, called ROAMEF – Rationale, Objective, Assessment, Monitoring, Evaluation and Feedback. And while it does not position specifically where and how design can act, it opens the door to reflect and state on the multiple existing possibilities in this context.

Whicher's reasoning therefore proposes an increased usage of design from within the policy cycle. It does so by proposing ways that can further substantiate and reinforce the cycle process in line with twenty-first century needs and aspirations. Whicher also argues how a design for policy strength lies in its ability to bring the different policy cycle stages together in a continuous flow, preventing or minimising a siloed approach.

Accordingly, this is more in line with what is argued here, as Whicher proposes a future enlarged version of the design for policy framework within the entirety of the policy cycle. In turn, we argue this to also subscribe that, up until this moment, 'design for policy' has not yet taken the necessary steps to achieve such a position.

In this line of reasoning, we will now investigate two other references allowing us to reflect on contrasting perspectives. These two scholars have analysed on-the-ground evidence, placing them in a relevant position for the goals of this paper.

Research conducted by Vaz (2019) is, in this regard, telling. By engaging and surveying 30 existing Policy Labs in Europe, this study set itself to discover their perspective on how they would position their (design) activities in relation to the policy cycle model.

A six-stage version of the cycle model was used, by considering a slightly expanded form which includes a 'problem identification' stage zero, prior to 'agenda setting'. With this information we cannot conclusively affirm the findings to be fully compatible with the approach taken here with a five-stage model. However we can reasonably affirm they can provide relevant information, as the cycle models remain largely the same and in the five-stage model the 'agenda setting' stage includes the recognition of problems.

When asked to point at which stages they intervene, half indicated 'agenda setting', 'policy formulation', 'policy implementation', and 'policy evaluation'. These results therefore partially contradict what has been argued so far. Or at least, they don't seem to fully match what seems to be the narrative found in the conducted literature review so far.

However, there are other clues in this same data that we can argue to show this is not entirely the case. In this same question, with the possibility to select one or more of each of the policy cycle stages where the engaged Policy Labs act, one response clearly stands-out: 86,7% stated to intervene at the 'problem identification' stage.

Moreover, when Vaz mapped the usage of design and as well some non-design methods in each of the cycle stages, it becomes clear on the strong prevalence of applying methods in the first stages of the policy cycle. For the 'problem identification' stage, 9 methods were identified, for 'agenda setting' 7 methods, for 'policy formulation' 4 methods, for 'decision making', 'policy implementation' and 'policy evaluation' 2 methods for each.

Villa Alvarez (2022) has also conducted a carefully detailed and eye-opener study to identify the role of design in 46 'public innovation units', an alternate designation to the 'policy labs', in relation to the 5-stage policy cycle model. What is especially interesting is how it concluded that "*most design activities develop in the implementation stage rather than in early stages of the policy process*", a stark contrast to the narrative we are arguing for. Moreover, it states as validating to what previous scholars have argued for. Understanding what might be beneath this reasoning was therefore key.

When looking at what Villa Alvarez has collected from those previous scholars, we have found it intriguing as we were not able to observe systematic references to 'implementation'. Indeed, according to Villa Alvarez, these scholars point to the consistent use of design approaches related to 'problem identification', 'user-centred', 'idea generation', 'prototyping solutions', 'citizen engagement', among others.

Accordingly, we wondered if such opposite perspectives on the role of 'design for policy' in relation to the policy cycle, might lie on what ultimately are diverse understandings on the matter. That is, we posit there is not yet a shared agreement among 'design for policy' practitioners on what might effectively constitute policy 'implementation'.

Furthermore, Villa Alvarez provides an interesting reflection on the disparity of understandings on 'design for policy', 'policy design', or even 'design' itself. The case of design is paradigmatic and representative of such reasoning: it might be viewed in a generalistic manner

(i.e. an “*act of planning*”), as the application of design methods, in terms of design capacities, a combination of all these, among other possibilities. As such, we can even posit there might not be a shared agreement or understanding related to ‘design for policy’ and the ‘policy cycle’ as a whole.

At the end, we argue that existing evidence, both in terms of narrative and data, does seem to subscribe that ‘design for policy’ has been mostly applied in the first stages of the public policy cycle model. Effectively, and recalling the evidence collected by Vaz, when policy labs were asked to reflect on the role of design when in view of specific design methods, their answers leaned towards the early stages of the policy cycle. We therefore found this evidence as illustrative of what may be happening beneath the surface.

We argue this shows a mismatch between how policy labs position themselves in relation to the policy cycle model and how the actual application of methods takes place. It shows and subscribes to an unbalanced positioning of ‘design for policy’, pending towards the first stages of the cycle model (Figure 2).

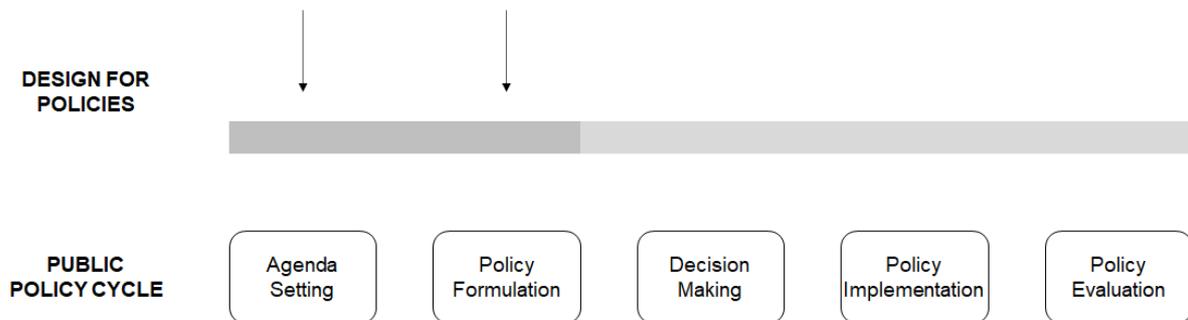


Figure 2. Positioning the current ‘design for policy’ framework scope within the policy cycle model.

When contrasting the literature review findings in a visual manner, this helps in clarifying how the ‘design for policy’ framework is mostly covering the first stages of the policy cycle. However, we do not know precisely where its boundaries are, nor in which initial stages act more prominently. But we also need to recognise how there is evidence of its application in subsequent stages. Which is also why we opted to indicate an emphasis of design for policy in the first stages of the cycle with a darker grey, while using a lighter grey for the remaining stages.

5. Looking for more evidence: The New European Bauhaus

For those working in the ‘design policies’ and ‘design for policy’ fields, the New European Bauhaus has presented itself as an opportunity to witness and analyse a new policy coming alive. Led by the European Commission, this new policy has been applying and testing, at large scale, a design for policy approach.

This policy adopted co-design participatory methods for its construction, through a wide co-creation process, engaging thousands of professionals from diverse contexts, such as the pri-

vate sector, academia, or non-profits, during the first semester of 2021. The diversity of collected inputs were then deciphered and systematised by the European Commission, resulting in an official ‘communication’ containing the policy strategic guidelines.

At the present time, in the early months of 2022, the ‘delivery phase’ as it is formally called, is beginning through the deployment of diverse funding possibilities for the coming years, based on the co-designed strategic priorities.

This policy also seems to be a clear example demonstrating the current landscape of the public policy process, namely how the public policy cycle as a model still holds as a valid guideline, while showing that the ‘substance’ of each stage is the changing element.

We can attempt to validate this by doing a contrasting exercise between the public policy cycle five-stage model with the existing evidence from the New European Bauhaus, as seen in Figure 3.

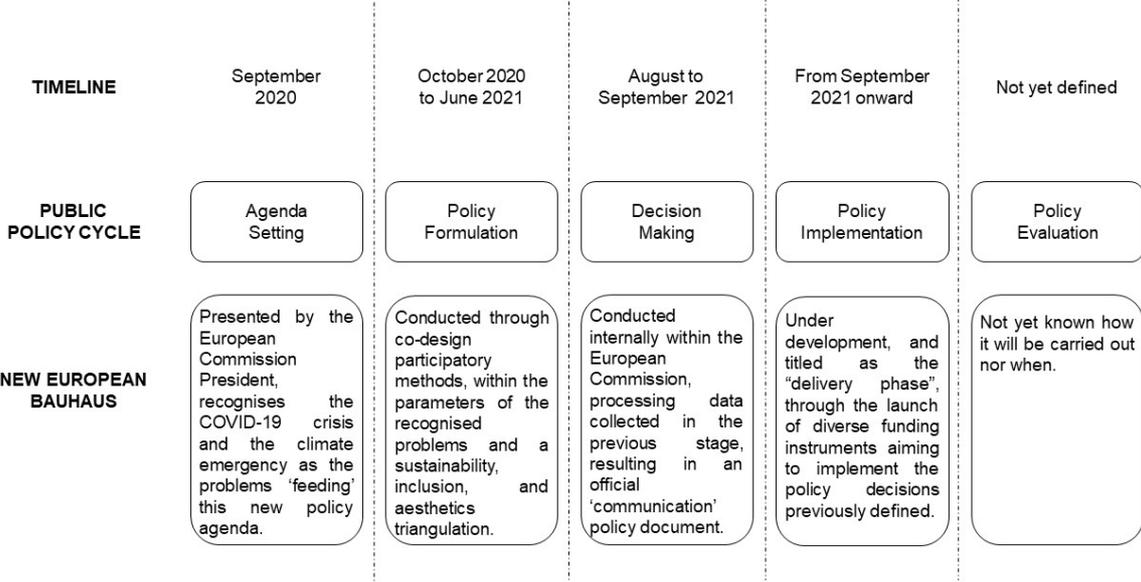


Figure 3. Comparing the New European Bauhaus policy deployment process with the public policy cycle five-stage model.

What we can observe is how the New European Bauhaus policy deployment follows very clearly the policy cycle model, at least up until this present moment, considering the policy has just entered the implementation stage and no evidence is yet available on its subsequent roll-out.

It starts with the recognition of the problems that need to be addressed, in this case a public response to the COVID-19 crisis and the climate crisis as framed within the European Green Deal, thus helping to set an agenda to engage ‘creative professionals’, as designers and architects in this process. This is followed by the ‘policy formulation’ stage, where the policy

specificities and possibilities are discussed in more detail, in this case through a wide co-design participatory approach. Then, a decision was made internally by the European Commission on which policy options would be adopted, with the publication of the official 'communication'. At this moment, it's beginning its implementation with the launch of diverse calls for funding. What is not yet known is exactly how and when the policy evaluation stage will be carried out.

This evidence also further subscribes to the notion that 'design for policy' is mostly applied to the early stages of policy creation. That is not to say that it may not be used in the future for the implementation and evaluation stages, but at this moment, as we have not reached the end of this policy cycle, we cannot yet take any conclusions on this aspect.

But there are some clues that point how these last two stages, implementation and evaluation, might be carried out in ways that also use design-based methods. At least, they seem to show an aspiration to do so.

The 'NEB Lab' seems to be the mechanism to provide some hints on how this will unfold. Proposed by the European Commission in its official policy communication (2021), it states the following: *"In order to support the implementation of the New European Bauhaus, the Commission will establish the NEB Lab, the "think and do tank" to co-create, prototype and test the tools, solutions and policy actions that will facilitate transformation on the ground"*. Within the context of this paper, we can interpret this sentence as evidence of a motivation to further embrace the 'design for policy' framework. We argue it does so by clearly locating the NEB Lab in the implementation stage, and also by referring to a design approach as a way to accomplish it. Effectively, keywords such as co-creation, prototyping and testing resonate closely to the rationale and methods put forward in the 'Design for Policy' book.

However, we do need to state that existing evidence also points out that implementation shall be achieved through the attribution of publicly funded projects. This means that it will be up to the recipients of such funds to propose ways to implement the NEB policy. Ways that shall also follow what are the public funding call guidelines. Accordingly, we propose that such analysis, including how it ties with the NEB Lab, should be done in future research. This shall be important to understand how those recipients have addressed (or not) a design for policy approach.

But the NEB Lab aspirations do not seem to be solely located in the implementation stage. The same official communication already points out to its possible role in the evaluation stage by raising the questions *"How can the success of the New European be measured both in 2024 and 2030? What are the deliverables that we want to see at the different stages of the project? How can we evaluate the results in a meaningful way?"*. These interrogations are clear evidence of the goal to use a design approach also at the last stage of the public policy cycle, as they are framed within the same above-mentioned goal to use co-creation, prototyping or testing.

And while this process is still in an incipient stage, for the purpose of this paper, it seems to point out to this idea on the importance of extending the role of design for policies beyond its possibilities within the first stages of co-creation.

If the New European Bauhaus is apparently one step ahead of current academic undertakings, is not a discussion to be held here, but it seems safe to conclude how this policy is attempting to move on from a policy co-creation stage to a 'co-implementation' and 'co-evaluation' stages.

6. An enlarged 'design for policy' framework

It is within this context that we propose that research and practice efforts should be directed towards an enlargement of the 'design for policy' framework that equally embraces all stages of the public policy cycle, most especially considering this to be the right time to do so. Following the same visual reasoning as used before, we can now establish a same-level reference between the public policy cycle model and the design for policy framework (Figure 4).

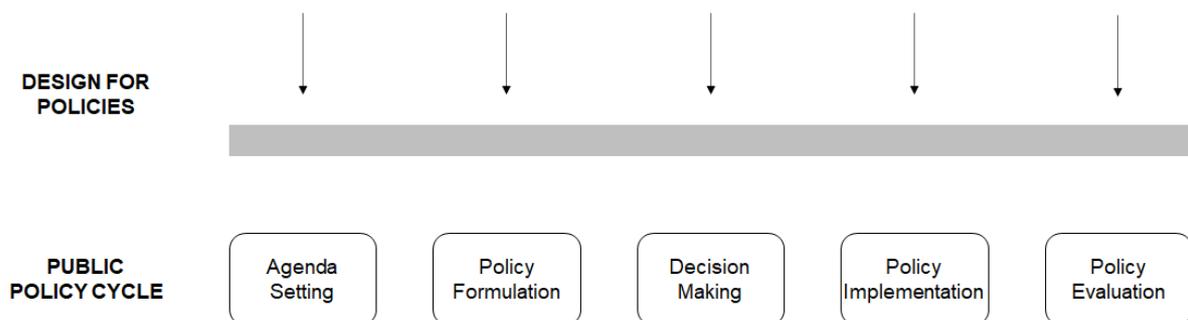


Figure 4. Positioning the 'design for policy' framework within the entirety of the policy cycle model.

This enlarged framework does not per se solve the fundamental fragilities identified by Whicher. But we hope and expect this paper will contribute to strengthening the 'design for policy' approach, by keeping in mind its current unbalance.

We have also seen how existing and validated design methods can offer diverse possibilities when looking at policies, and how they can uncover what was not seen before. This seems to indicate that solid grounds exist from which to act in relation to all cycle stages. In this sense, we also favour an understanding of 'design' that is grounded in concrete methods and capabilities. A position that we take considering not only previous reflections by this paper authors on the importance of clarifying what are core design capabilities (Monteiro, 2022), but also on our reasoning throughout this paper. Indeed, we observed how general design definitions can lead to diverse understandings.

However, and even though we argue for a 'design for policy' positioning mostly located in the early stages of the cycle model, we haven't set ourselves to fully explore what could be the reasons underlying this understanding. An endeavour which we suggest should be pursued more deeply in the future.

Nevertheless, there are some clues worth reflecting on. Firstly, we argue that, since its foundation, an emphasis on 'new policies' might have played an influential role in setting its expectations, even if in a latent and involuntary way. Moreover, and perhaps deeply connected to this previous argument, the recognised ability of design in identifying problems and proposing solutions might have led its professionals to find a similar 'comfort zone' in the policy making field. That is, if we draw a parallel reasoning, the initial stages of the policy cycle are also about identifying problems and building-up solutions. Perhaps then, design for policy has not yet fully 'break-away' from such constraints.

And it could also be here where Villa Alvarez reasoning comes in. It would not be unreasonable to look at this problem-solution mind-set as intrinsically connected to policy implementation. And, therefore, it would not be unreasonable to think this might lead to diverse perceptions by 'design for policy' practitioners, such as policy innovation units, on how and where design is translated into the policy making process. Moreover, it also seems that 'design for policy' has not yet passed a set of thresholds allowing it to reach a mature position. In turn, that may be the reason why it dedicates its efforts to validate its value through diverse and fragmented experiments.

Interestingly, the New European Bauhaus seems to showcase a 'typified approach' within the policy cycle model, as it departs from two well identified problems. Perhaps, in this case, given the intensity and dimension of the issues at hand, these two problems - COVID-19 and climate crisis - have not given any other option to policymakers, but to act on them. And while this seems to prevent breaking away with the 'usual ways' of kickstarting a policy process from a departing problem, it has not prevented a design for policy approach in the policy formulation stage. And has not prevented to indicate the objective to also use a design for policy approach in the implementation and evaluation stages.

We therefore argue that if 'design for policy' aims to explore its full potential, it needs to tackle its own weaknesses, and the identified unbalance seems to be one of them. Indeed, a recurring attention to the early stages of the policy cycle risks becoming a negative reinforcement loop. And while recognising there is strength in the diversity of multiple understandings on how design can be translated to the policy cycle, this same diversity does not seem to have yet been captured to the advantage of a robust 'design for policy' framework.

We can therefore imagine an enlarged framework, and perhaps even a 'tool box' of design for policy methods, evenly positioned according to each policy cycle stage, and their added-value both in relation to the policy in question and in relation to other disciplines. Moreover, we also suggest the importance of promoting wider debates that can lead to a renewed, strengthened, and co-designed 'design for policy' foundation, grounded in a set of principles that can be systematically applied by its practitioners. Most importantly, a set of principles that can be consistently understood by all engaged stakeholders.

Moreover, and recalling the point made by Whicher, design for policy is in need of serious reflection and solidification; the New European Bauhaus could then not only be a place to

collect evidence to substantiate this process but could also gain with a structured and stable framework.

7. Conclusions

We have seen how the ‘Design for Policy’ book and framework has been critical for launching and structuring the debate on the role of design for policies since 2014. We have also seen how the public policy cycle still holds as a valuable guideline for understanding the public policy process, and how ‘design for policy’ has been mostly located in the early stages of policy creation.

This has been leaving later stages of the policy cycle uncovered when it comes to the use of design in these contexts. The emergence of the New European Bauhaus, and particularly the NEB Lab, also reaffirms the importance of covering the entirety of the policy cycle from a design perspective. There also seems to be no particular evidence suggesting not to use a design for policy approach in all stages of the policy cycle. On the contrary, existing arguments and evidence suggests that design may play a relevant role at each stage of the full cycle.

However, evidence also suggests there is a lack of understanding and knowledge on how this can take place. This unbalance is seen here as a fragility of the ‘design for policy’ approach.

We therefore argue on a way forward that explores, tests and validates possible design roles for all of the policy cycle, being reasonable to expect this to reinforce the ‘design for policy’ framework.

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