



Rethinking Design in the Public Sector: *A Relational Turn*

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Introduction

The public sector (PS) has long been a significant client for design, playing a crucial role throughout the history of the field. From public transportation to education, healthcare, and national defense, several areas of public service and administration have relied on and continue to require design expertise. Power has consistently manifested itself through design, with welfare states, for example, seeking various material and immaterial design solutions to ensure accessible public services. To achieve these goals, they have commissioned a diverse group of designers, including information designers, product designers, service designers, interaction designers, clothing designers, interior designers, and architects. While much of design's engagement with the PS has occurred through private firms that produce goods for public use—such as trams, dental chairs, school desks, and police uniforms—design requirements have always been shaped by the dynamics of public procurement, service provision, and public consumption.

Over the past few decades, the scope of design activity and the objects of design have broadened, shifting from the creation of physical artefacts to the transformation of systems and processes toward preferred states. Designers' creative, collaborative, explorative, experimental, and visual ways of working have been adopted by both private and public organizations, extending well beyond traditional design fields. Policies, services, experiences, and transformations are no longer merely planned and managed; they are increasingly designed. Alongside this shift, the role of design within the PS is continually evolving. Beyond creating artefacts for use by cities and governments, design has become more involved in the decision-making processes of the PS. The collaborative and participatory agenda many designers subscribe to is often seen as foundational for experimenting with new forms of democratic practices within the PS. Indeed, there are compelling reasons to seek renewal and change in the PS, opportunities that design is uniquely positioned to address. In an era marked by polycrises, new approaches that increasingly involve citizens in decision-making and public discourse are urgently needed.

Representative democracies are often described as being in crisis, but so is the private profit-driven neoliberal capitalist economy. Many designers are growing disillusioned with the corporate agenda and are increasingly seeking opportunities

in the PS, motivated by the desire to work for the public good. Focusing on sustainable development, social welfare, equality, and democracy offers ethically driven designers a meaningful avenue to apply and further develop their skills. This shift reflects the design field's broader ambition to engage with the complex challenges of public life, pushing its boundaries to address systemic societal issues. In this evolving landscape, new drivers for design are emerging, reshaping its values, ideologies, and practices. While this transformation holds significant potential, it also brings fresh challenges, uncertainties, and tensions.

This shift is also reflected in the extensive increase in research attention in recent years, as evidenced by special issues exploring the intersection of design, governance, and policymaking (Karpen et al., 2021; Kimbell & Vesnic-Alujevic, 2020; Mortati et al., 2022; Van Buuren et al., 2020). The potential of participatory design, co-design, critical design, and design thinking methodologies to reshape PS practices—particularly by fostering greater citizen engagement and participation—is widely recognized. However, this potential comes with substantial challenges that the design field has yet to fully address, such as transforming the way governments work, creating sustained impact, and effectively engaging diverse publics. Despite its rapid growth, the research remains emergent and fragmented, with limited conceptual, theoretical, and methodological coherence. This underscores the pressing need for a critical and comprehensive examination of the approaches, roles, possibilities, limitations, and implications of design within PS settings.

This special issue explores the evolving nature and the current maturity of design within the PS. It aims to shed light on the latest developments and to stimulate critical discussions on design practice, its adoption, and its impact. With the emergence of new design practices driven by the desire to address social, ethical, and political issues that were once considered outside the scope of design, it is an opportune moment to take stock and reflect on the

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current state of the field. The special issue presents case studies of design engagements across various domains of public service and PS decision-making in diverse cultural settings. Together, these cases suggest a shift in perspective, moving from viewing design in the PS as a set of processes and methodologies to recognizing it as a socially situated, fluid, and interconnected practice.

Design in the Public Sector: Challenges and Opportunities

Research on design in the PS can be traced back to Simon's (1969) assertion that public administration is inherently a design activity, as well as Schön's (1983) concept of *reflection-in-action*, which enables practitioners to navigate, to use his metaphor, the swampy lowlands of complex governance challenges. However, design in the PS only gained global momentum with the mainstreaming of *design thinking* as a broadly applicable methodology for innovation and with the movement toward innovative governance and administration (e.g., OECD, 2019). The push for design has also been propelled by the need for novel ways to address complex social challenges, navigate financial constraints, adapt to digitalization, and even restore public trust in governmental institutions (Bason, 2010; Julier & Leerberg, 2014; Tönurist et al., 2017). Several examples show that design in the PS today is applied at various levels—from downstream service implementation to upstream strategic decision-making (e.g., Salinas, 2022). It enhances existing solutions, envisions future services and policies, addresses complex service ecosystems, and fosters community engagement (Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011). From healthcare to military, design has entered nearly every domain of the PS. Applications span from short-term interventions like hackathons or single projects to long-term programs and the establishment of public sector innovation (PSI) labs. This wide swath of activities, however, takes place under a range of labels such as service design, policy design, participatory design, strategic design, and systems design—complicating efforts to build a cohesive understanding of design's evolving role in public administration.

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Although the range of design activities is diverse, research consistently converges on the idea that core design principles and methods—such as the ability to tackle wicked problems (Buchanan, 1992), user-centeredness, experimentation, creativity, prototyping, visualization, and stakeholder co-creation—enhance both PS processes and outcomes (Bason & Austin, 2022; Blomkamp, 2018; Junginger, 2016). By focusing on citizens' needs and experiences, design enables public organizations to identify problems and create services and policies that are more responsive and better aligned with everyday realities (Bason, 2010; Junginger, 2016). Visualization and prototyping transform abstract policies or services into tangible forms, thereby facilitating greater citizen engagement (Kimbell & Bailey, 2017). Furthermore, design is increasingly viewed as a vehicle for building innovation capacity within PS organizations (Malmberg, 2017; Rizzo et al., 2017). By reframing problems, envisioning future scenarios, and devising human-centered solutions, design approaches have the potential to trigger transformation (Sangiorgi, 2011). To support this process, the centrality of design methods has been emphasized, and various resources, such as guidebooks offering practical advice and tools for enabling design in the PS, have been developed (e.g., Nesta et al., 2017). Design is also credited with enhancing democratic processes by engaging diverse societal groups in the co-design of public services, systems, and policies (Huybrechts et al., 2017). Particularly through its ability to empower citizens, foster social cohesion, and encourage community learning (e.g., Björgvinsson et al., 2012), co-design is increasingly recognized as a valuable approach in the PS.

The arguments for the value of design align with contemporary governance approaches, such as collaborative governance theories, which advocate for inclusive decision-making and active multi-stakeholder engagement (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Osborne et al., 2016). This alignment has given design significant traction in recent policy and public administration research, positioning it as complementing existing policy frameworks and theories (Van Buuren et al., 2020). A growing body of research, known as *design for policy* (Bason, 2014; Junginger, 2013; Kimbell et al., 2022), has developed along a distinct trajectory, focusing on moving design upstream in policymaking processes. This research aims to integrate design approaches into higher levels of policy formulation and decision-making within contemporary governance.

Despite these developments, doubts about the value of design and its compatibility with the PS persist. One concern is that adoption of design in the PS could inadvertently serve the neoliberal agenda of dismantling the welfare state, with design filling the void left behind (Julier & Leerberg, 2014). Additionally, rather than embracing a truly transformative approach, PS organizations may be drawn to the alluring narrative of design thinking—a rhetoric that proclaims the gospel of innovation without genuine commitment to systemic change (Bailey, 2021). In such contexts, there is a risk of oversimplifying design into a mere toolkit, trivializing the craft of making, and underestimating the effort required to build meaningful empathy with stakeholders. This reflects long-standing critiques of reducing design thinking to linear methodologies and overly prescriptive frameworks (Kolko, 2018).

Another source of skepticism stems from the lack of robust empirical evidence supporting design's long-term or systemic impact in the PS (e.g., Blomkamp, 2018). Compounding this issue is the challenge of measuring design's impact (Bason, 2010). Because design is often integrated with other organizational activities, isolating its specific effects proves difficult (Björklund et al., 2020). Also, current case-based and anecdotal evidence in design research often fails to yield generalizable or replicable conclusions, highlighting the pressing need for more rigorous research to better understand design's transformative potential in governance and policy.

Indeed, at this stage, there is still limited evidence to suggest that design has been standardized or scaled across the PS over sustained periods (Clarke & Craft, 2019; Olejniczak et al., 2020; Villa Alvarez et al., 2022). The promise of design often appears difficult to realize in practice, raising questions about its compatibility with the PS (Bason & Austin, 2022; Blomkamp, 2018; Lewis et al., 2020). A key issue in current research, therefore, is integrating design with structures, processes, and cultures of organizations, or what can be described as design's institutioning. This involves understanding institutions as sites of creation and transformation, where design has the potential to reconfigure the systems within which it operates (DiSalvo, 2022). Without this deeper understanding, the transformative potential of design may be diluted, reducing it to a mere tool for legitimizing existing power structures or simply improving efficiency.

PS organizations are known for evolving into large, siloed structures that adhere to century-old Weberian principles of bureaucracy, which prioritize rationality, efficiency, predictability, reliability, and procedural fairness (Du Gay, 2005). These principles often result in cumbersome ways of working that are at odds with the more flexible, human-centered, and iterative nature of design (Bason & Austin, 2022; Brinkman et al., 2023; Lewis et al., 2020). The alternative ways of seeing and solving problems that lie at the core of design do not align well with the top-down, linear decision-making processes that dominate the PS. Additionally, risk aversion, short-term thinking, and a lack of incentives to innovate contribute to the barriers design faces within the PS (Bason & Austin, 2022; Lewis, 2021; Pirinen et al., 2022). In practice, these tensions often manifest as resistance from civil servants, who, accustomed to clear rules and processes, may find the ambiguity and bottom-up approaches of designers challenging (Boztepe et al., 2023).

One way to address these incompatibilities has been the creation of the so-called PSI labs, which are intended to serve as safe spaces for experimentation and act as *independent change champions* (Tönurist et al., 2017). The growing body of research on these labs suggests that they offer designers a degree of autonomy and immunity from traditional bureaucratic constraints, allowing them to explore new ways of working in a more flexible and protected environment (Lewis, 2021; McGann et al., 2021; Tönurist et al., 2017). In this capacity, PSI labs are often instrumental in jump-starting and driving novel, participatory public service innovations. However, their isolation from broader organizational dynamics frequently limits their ability to scale

and sustain the innovations they generate (Lewis, 2021). This sandboxing of design (Lodato & DiSalvo, 2018) makes these labs vulnerable to political interventions, defunding, closures, or abandonment of their innovations, particularly during times of political transitions and shifts in power.

PS organizations can do better by learning to manage tensions that arise when integrating design, such as balancing innovation with stability or managing the risks associated with new approaches (Starostka et al., 2021). Ultimately, design can only succeed with the support of the relevant organizational structures. Without institutional backing and the appropriate conditions, even the most well-conceived interventions will struggle to take root and make a lasting impact.

The design community, on the other hand, is developing an evolving understanding of the dynamics within the PS. Clarke and Craft (2019), for example, argue that design, as it currently stands, still falls short of functioning as a robust theory for policy design because it fails to sufficiently account for the institutional and political realities inherent in the PS environments. Despite the growing interest in applying design methods to policymaking, only a limited number of studies have explored the specific roles design could play in this context (Junginger, 2015; Trippe, 2021; Villa Alvarez et al., 2022). A critical concern is the limited awareness within the design community of alternative approaches to policy formulation, as well as the political and administrative factors that may affect the feasibility of proposed design solutions and their potential impact (Howlett, 2020). Due to its *naïve blindness* to the politics of policy work, Clarke and Craft (2019) argue that design in the PS often tends to focus on efficient service delivery, rather than addressing the deeper, more complex, policy-level solutions needed.

Design must therefore adapt to the existing policy tools, structures, and competences within the PS (Deserti & Rizzo, 2014; Sangiorgi, 2011). Studies exploring how design interacts with institutional logics, scaling challenges, and systems perspectives demonstrate that design in these contexts is not simply about improving surface-level interactions. Rather, it involves reshaping the underlying norms, rules, and beliefs that govern the PS (e.g., Vink & Koskela-Huotari, 2021). This necessitates a sensitivity to the political, procedural, and social realities of the PS. It requires an understanding of the complexities of organizational legacies, political dynamics, power relations, and the broader political and organizational context of policy work (Junginger, 2015; Lewis et al., 2020).

This, in turn, requires viewing design not merely as the application of tools or methods, or as a problem-solving activity, but as a situated practice that is deeply contingent on the specifics of context, as well as the social and power relationships within which meaning is locally constructed and continuously negotiated among multiple stakeholders (e.g., DiSalvo, 2022; Suchman, 2002). Engaging a diverse array of stakeholders—including communities, third-sector organizations, universities, municipalities, government agencies, and other public-sector actors—design must also be understood as part of a broader network that transcends the boundaries of individual organizations. This networked and situated

approach embodies what has been termed the relational turn, which carries significant implications for design in the PS and its potential to address complex, contemporary challenges.

This special issue critically examines the relational perspective, reframing design within the contexts of governance, policy-making, and public administration. By emphasizing relationships, interactions, and networks, it raises key questions about the roles, processes, and impact of design in the PS.

The Articles in This Special Issue

The articles in this special issue examine the complex interplay between design, institutional practices within PS organizations, and community needs. They focus on how design navigates these to drive sustainable change, enable citizen engagement, and address the systemic challenges confronting the PS. Spanning political and cultural boundaries across five continents, the studies illustrate the global penetration of design into the PS as well as the persistent struggles that accompany it. Collectively, the papers portray design as a deeply situated practice that occurs in the messy reality of the PS, emphasizing the often-invisible relational work of design.

In a study of the child welfare system in Norway, Hay, Vink, and Sangiorgi, drawing on relational sociology, propose what they term as *relational adaptation* in public services—a collaborative process through which child welfare service providers adapt service scripts in a way that they make sense to actors. This approach, they argue, helps mitigate the rigidity of service standardization since scripted services often fail to attend to the idiosyncrasies of actors' needs. They propose a set of design principles to help designers and service managers achieve sustainable change and produce better outcomes for all actors involved.

In Ferreira's study of a PSI lab in Uruguay, designers frequently find themselves negotiating power relationships and managing expectations with actors both within and outside the organization. She identifies (*re*)negotiation and *maintenance* as ways of managing tensions arising from resistance to change, designers' limited understanding of governance and policymaking, and uncertainties created by shifting political landscapes, organizational restructurings, and budget cuts. Maintenance refers to the ongoing efforts by designers to anticipate and proactively adjust their practices in response to systemic pressures, acting as a preventive or adaptive measure. These activities reflect a set of relational skills that designers must cultivate to effectively navigate and transcend the tensions and uncertainties.

In their study on the evolution of design in local governments, Kim, van der Bijl-Brouwer, Mulder, and Lloyd, borrowing from Suchman (1995), propose that embedding and sustaining design within organizations requires establishing various forms of legitimacy—pragmatic, moral, and cognitive—as well as developing organizational processes and structures that would support design. The research emphasizes the long-term nature of this process and the sustained efforts it requires. Kim et al.'s work provides an alternative and a more nuanced view of building organizational design maturity than well-known models such as design ladder (Design Council, 2013).

Other studies in this special issue extend beyond the organizational boundaries, presenting design as an activity embedded within a broader network of stakeholders, including communities, policymakers, and private and third-sector actors. Ehrenberg, Hergatacorzian, and Keinonen explore the challenges of public-private collaboration in the development of public library digital services in Finland. Libraries often serve as intermediaries, facilitating the integration of top-down and bottom-up approaches to reconcile conflicting stakeholder objectives of public benefit and market value creation. This role presents challenges, such as balancing competing goals and managing operational constraints. Despite these difficulties, libraries can effectively address the needs and interests of their local communities while promoting collaboration with private sector entities.

Su, Ji, Su, and Chen outline the complexity of integrating design thinking into rural development in China. In their study, the design process grapples with institutional inertia, caught between the conflicting priorities of diverse stakeholders and constrained by power dynamics within community and government entities. To overcome these challenges, the authors argue that a delicate balance must be struck between policy directives and community needs. In response, Su et al. adopt a *community-centered design* approach, emphasizing the importance of mobilizing local participation, co-creating shared visions, and fostering collaboration among a wide range of stakeholders.

Huybrechts, Van den Eynde, Kimaro, Kabendela, Knappen, Magina, and Muhoja's study on sustainable urban transitions in contexts of resource scarcity examines the role of designers in facilitating collaboration between local communities and governments. Through case studies in Tanzania and Belgium, the study highlights the critical role designers play as intermediaries in *institutioning* grassroots initiatives to innovate government's ways of working. It underscores the socio-materiality of institutioning, which involves both human and non-human actors, and identifies key actions for navigating resource scarcity while fostering collaborative innovation.

The theme of frictions between stakeholders is explored by Sivakumar, who proposes the concept of *agonistic arrangements* as a means of maintaining productive conflict in design. Unlike traditional participatory or deliberative governance models, which often prioritize consensus and procedural compliance, agonistic arrangements highlight and engage with underlying tensions and inequities. This, the author argues, pushes for transformative and justice-oriented engagements between state institutions and marginalized communities, fostering a dynamic and inclusive democratic participation.

Toward Relational Design in the Public Sector

Design began to gain traction in the PS only after design thinking emerged as a prominent approach outside the design community in the late 2000s. While the research presented in this special issue does not discount the value of the skills central to design thinking, it puts the often-invisible nature of design as a situated

practice under the spotlight. The selected works position design and designers within a complex system of agency, power, and influence, involving a broad array of stakeholders. Research on the intersection of design, power, and politics has revealed gaps, frictions, and tensions in how designers collaborate with PS actors (e.g., Lewis et al., 2020; Pirinen et al., 2022). The design cases featured in this issue are not characterized by seamless success; rather, they highlight the challenges and complexities involved. The emphasis on the interrelationships among diverse actors underscores the *relational* dimension as a critical area that warrants attention for further research.

While earlier studies acknowledged the significance of the relational approach in public service design—emphasizing meaningful interactions and collaborations between service providers and citizens to foster mutual trust, cooperation, and co-creation of value (Cottam, 2019; Cipolla & Manzini, 2009; Nielsen & Bjerck, 2002)—the broader implications of relationality in PS design remain largely unexplored. A notable exception is in the field of participatory design (PD) where the relational approach has been more extensively developed—projects often address challenges stemming from grassroots-level issues within communities or emerge through the formation of publics across various societal levels. PD has evolved from addressing “issues of ‘democracy at work’ onto broader democratic matters of citizenship and public engagement” (Binder et al., 2015, p. 152). This shift carries both ontological and epistemological implications. It suggests that design now focuses on socio-material networks of people and technology, where technology is deeply embedded within communities of practice, and the relationships between actors take center stage.

The origins of these ideas can be traced back to theoretical traditions such as actor-network theory (Latour, 2007), entanglement (Frauenberger, 2020), and feminist theories (Haraway, 2006). These frameworks challenge traditional dualisms, such as subject vs. object and human vs. non-human, emphasizing the interconnectedness and mutual influence between humans and non-humans. They propose a rethinking of the relationships between humans, technology, and the material world, highlighting the complexities and interdependencies that shape these interactions. In essence, the relational turn advocates for a design approach grounded in a relational ontology, where the human (both designer and user) is decentered, and agency is distributed across networks of relationships that involve both human and non-human entities. This constitutes a rejection of the dualism between subject and object, or user and system, suggesting that the role of design in the PS is not only to bring agency and influence for relevant stakeholder groups but also to forge long-term relations between actors where tensions are not avoided but rather agonistic positions are maintained (Sivakumar, this issue) or renegotiated (Ferreira, this issue). The articles in this issue treat this role not as secondary backstage work, but as integral to the institutionalization of design in the PS. By carefully interweaving design practices with those of civil servants, politicians, communities, and other actors, design is embedded in the PS. This approach operates on the assumption that the

PS is not a set of static structures and processes but a dynamic domain in which design can shift power balances and transform organizations. From this perspective, the incompatibilities between design and the PS are not mere barriers hindering design but objects of design work.

The relational approach also affects the way we view transformation in the PS. As Suchman (2011) points out, large-scale or radical interventions often fail because they overlook the nuanced, situated, and contingent nature of human practices. The articles in this issue propose relatively modest changes which are iterative, responsive, co-created, and contextually grounded. For example, Hay et al. (this issue) suggest that, by focusing on smaller, incremental changes that emerge from within systems, design interventions are more likely to resonate with and adapt to the lived realities of the individuals involved, leading to more sustained and meaningful transformation of the PS.

The contributions in this special issue present indicative examples of what we consider a relational turn in design within the PS. However, this new direction has raised more questions than it has answered. What specific skills are needed to effectively use the relational approach? How do material practices of design, such as prototyping, come into play? What implications exist for participation, agency, and power? In addressing these questions, design research could identify several points of intersection with research in public policy and public administration, offering new insights into how design can shape and be shaped by governance processes. These fields have already seen a growing interest in relational aspects, particularly focusing on how political negotiations and reciprocal adjustments play a crucial role in policymaking and other governance processes (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020). This interest arises from the recognition that policymaking is a reflexive, uncertain, and often ambiguous process, in contrast to the more deterministic depictions found in policy handbooks (Lewis et al., 2020). By exploring the relational dimensions of design from a broader perspective, new opportunities may emerge for more deeply integrating design into the fabric of the PS.

Building on the relational turn, we aim to inspire future research to further investigate the dynamics of relational design within the PS. Specifically, future studies should explore the various entanglements, power asymmetries, and roles and actions of designers in these contexts. It is also crucial to examine how modest, contextually grounded interventions can scale to foster systemic transformation while maintaining their situated responsiveness. Further exploration of these dimensions could deepen our understanding of how relationality influences design’s capacity to create inclusive, adaptive, and resilient PS systems.

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