

# **Governmentality and power in 'design for government' in the UK, 2008-2017: an ethnography of an emerging field**

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## Abstract

Over the last 15 or so years, design – as a practice – has become something one does in the public sector, a methodology one might deploy in pursuing the aims of the state. This thesis is an investigation of how and why design has become relevant to, and enmeshed within, government. I identify a rapidly emerging ‘apparatus’ (an assemblage of discourse, practices, knowledge, institutions, subjects, and objects) of *design for government*, and dissect it to see how it works, and what it functions to achieve.

To do this, the thesis makes use of data accumulated during several years of professional practice in this field in the UK from 2008 to 2017 (from the point at which I entered the field, to the point at which I temporarily left in order to focus on research), and with a particular focus on design projects undertaken from 2015-2017 while working for a design agency. This insider perspective is contrasted with a discourse analysis of the dominant narratives accounting for the development of the field. The methodology thus combines auto-ethnography with a ‘Foucauldian’ theoretical toolkit of discourse, technologies, practices and objects/ subjects. Building on studies that critically examine the construction of discursive formations, epistemic communities, disciplinary apparatuses, and regimes of practices, the thesis breaks away from an instrumental mode of researching and conceptualising design.

The original contribution of the thesis is, first, in treating design as a contingent, mobile, and discursively constructed idea through methodologically blending an insider ethnography of design with a theoretical account based in governmentality. And, second, through investigating and countering many of the existing claims made in design research for this practice and its instrumental value to the public sector.

The study finds that ‘design’ in such a context has been discursively and practically re-modelled and deployed to respond to, and align with, a dominant political dogma about the necessity of reforming the machinery of state to become more innovative. The popular claims made for the value and effectiveness of ‘design for government’ do not adequately capture its observable mechanisms and effects: ‘performances

of change' divert attention from the lack of it, users are not understood but invented, and, far from being innovative, the technologies of 'design for government' mainly reproduce the logics and ideologies coursing through its environment. Its most substantive achievement is the production of itself as a field of knowledge and practice, through the continual recruitment of new acolytes. In this way, the apparatus of 'design for government' can be said to have profound governmental effects. Not only – or even primarily – on the 'end user', but on the designers and civil servants re-modelling their professional selves in its image, and it does this predominantly via a positive strategy of seduction. Overall, the apparatus functions to achieve an embodiment of the political-managerial critique of bureaucracy, an ever-expanding market for design and those calling themselves designers, and the colonisation of yet another domain by the contemporary mythology that is design.

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# Preface

Whatever the question, design has an answer. (Design Council, 2019)

There probably are domains of contemporary life yet to be colonised by design. There must be people in the world who have still not been introduced to the idea that design is somehow relevant to them, but their numbers are dwindling. One could be forgiven for thinking that design is everywhere – and if not quite everywhere yet, it will be soon.

‘Design’ is a central value and idea in contemporary Western – and increasingly not just Western – society, naturalised as intrinsically good, hard to argue against. And of course it is not only an idea, it has a real physical presence. It is a cluster of professions and people, businesses, institutions and types of knowledge, practices, methods, and material, consumable things. Even further than this, it has come to be understood as an innate human practice; fundamental, perhaps, to human nature. As design scholar Ezio Manzini writes in his foreword to ‘Design, When Everybody Designs’,

the practice of design—making things to serve a useful goal, making tools—predates the human race. Making tools is one of the attributes that made us human in the first place. Design, in the most generic sense of the word, began over 2.5 million years ago when *Homo habilis* manufactured the first tools’ (Manzini, 2015, pp. vii-xii).

But if one is at all acquainted with the history of design, one encounters the slightly awkward truth that until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, design as we think of it, practice it, and speak about it today, did not exist. One hundred years ago there was no comparable concept for this thing we now regard as innate to human nature. How can we make sense of that? Did it exist silently? Was it called something else? Or, is it a thoroughly modern invention?

This PhD project started life motivated by a growing sense of unease about design in its engagements with the public sector: at the audacity of the things that get said about it, and the things that might be being lost or overlooked in the noise and excitement. However over time, although these concerns have not gone away, they

have been matched by a growing sense of curiosity: how have we become so captivated – and governed – by this alluring concept?

My suspicion is that it is more productive to regard design as a powerful idea – a contemporary mythology in Roland Barthes' sense of the word (Barthes, 2009), a structuring narrative about the world that does something for us, and that creates effects through its ability to govern things and people. Whereas Barthes was deliberately trying to expose the 'ideological abuse' hidden in the 'decorative display of what-goes-without-saying' (p. xix), railing against the 'enemy' of the 'bourgeois norm', historian Yuval Noah Harari has recently given myth a more functional role. His argument is that political and social order among large groups of human beings is *only* possible because of our ability to invent, communicate, persuade others of, and ourselves believe, powerful myths (Harari, 2015). Bringing these two notions of myth together makes for an intriguing proposition: we are governed by a mythology of 'design', and not because we are dupes but because the story turns out to perform a valuable function.

My aim with this thesis is to open up two avenues of inquiry, which are much bigger than the scope of this project. One is to find a way of researching design that breaks out of the present strictures governing how one can think and talk about it. The other is to begin to understand how and why design has been such a successful idea. This study is only a partial contribution towards answering these questions: I hope in future to add more to both with further research, as well as hoping that others find such questions as interesting as I do, and tackle them in their own manner.

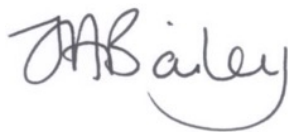
## Acknowledgments

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My thanks also go to: my supervisors, Guy Julier and Peter Lloyd, who set me on my way, and Damon Taylor, who propelled me over the finish line; to the many colleagues and peers whose company and conversation have, over the years, been essential to helping me figure things out; to my parents and grandparents, who instilled in me a love of inquiry (and a tendency towards contrariness); and to Alan Boyles who did a very good and patient job of keeping me fed and watered, and whose faith in my ability to complete the task was invaluable in those moments when I wasn't sure I could.

## Declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'J. Bailey'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized 'J' and 'B'.

23<sup>rd</sup> July 2021

## Word count

90,000 words (excluding abstract, references, bibliography and appendices)

# Chapter 1

## **‘An elaborate contraption that does something...’: problematizing ‘design for government’**

### **Introducing ‘design for government’**

This thesis is a problematisation, and investigation, of a recent development in the meaning and practice of design in its relationship to government.

In 1936, art and architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner published a book called ‘Pioneers of Modern Design’. It opens with the following lines:

‘Ornamentation’, says Ruskin, ‘is the principal part of architecture.’ It is that part, he says in another place, which impresses on a building ‘certain characters venerable or beautiful, but otherwise unnecessary’. Sir George Gilbert Scott amplified this surprising statement when he recommended to architects the use of the Gothic style, because its ‘great principle is to decorate construction’. How this basic doctrine of nineteenth century architectural theory worked out in practice could not be shown more convincingly than by retelling the story of the new British Government offices in Whitehall, London, as erected by Scott between 1868 and 1873. (Pevsner, 1986, p. 19)

There follows an anecdote recounting the tussle between architect (Scott) and commissioner (Lord Palmerston, Prime Minister) over whether the building should be in the Gothic or Palladian style.

Contrast that with the following more recent statement on design. In February 2018, the UK Design Council, ‘an independent charity and the government’s advisor on design’, published a short report on ‘the experiences of UK public sector staff using design approaches to develop, improve or recommission the services they provide’. In the introduction to this report, it is claimed that:

At a time when budgets are tight and resources are stretched, design is increasingly recognised as a vital tool to transform public services. The

growing movement of design thinking and innovation provides the skills and capabilities to explore radically different solutions to the challenges faced by the public sector and a growing number of practitioners have adopted design methods as they attempt to tackle these so-called ‘wicked problems’, in which ambiguity and complexity (a need for personalisation and systems thinking) requisite (sic) the use of more creative approaches. (Design Council, 2018, p. 3)

What has happened here? Clearly, between 1936 and 2018, the idea of what design is, who does it, what it is for – and its relation to the state – has evolved. In 1936, the title *‘Pioneers of Modern Design’* in fact heralds a discussion mainly of art and architecture, craftsmanship and ornamentation. In the 2018 account, design has become a ‘tool’ for tackling wicked problems, a thing that civil servants are supposed to do at work, and even an academic field of research (see, e.g. (Malpass & Salinas, 2020)).<sup>1</sup>

This is not only a discursive phenomenon: the Design Council’s text reflects (or perhaps calls forth) an apparent shift in practices. There is some evidence for the global dimensions of this movement.<sup>2</sup> The Design for Europe project (2014-2016) mapped ‘almost 150 organisations working in the field of design and the public sector, in Europe and beyond’<sup>3</sup>. Fuller and Lochard’s (2016) review of ‘public policy labs in European Union member states’ identified 78 ‘teams, structures, or entities focused on designing public policy through innovative methods that involve all stakeholders in the design process’. Recent Canadian (Centre for Policy Innovation and Public Engagement, 2018) and Australian/ New Zealand (McGann, et al., 2018) mapping activities have identified 40 policy innovation labs and 26 public sector innovation units in those regions respectively.

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<sup>1</sup> It has evolved in other ways too, of course, but the question of how it has become thinkable within the public sector is the focus of this study.

<sup>2</sup> Although we will go on to discuss the complicity of discourse – and particularly ‘mapping’ projects – in the construction of practices.

<sup>3</sup> The Design for Europe website has recently disappeared, however some information about the project is available via Nesta and other project partners (Nesta, 2021)

Within the UK, where this study is based, hard data on numbers is somewhat lacking, but there are piecemeal bits of evidence that hint at scale and scope. The Design Council's last major survey of the UK design industry identified that around half of the industry had the public sector as a client (Design Council, 2010).<sup>4</sup> In 2010 the UK government established the design award winning Government Digital Service, whose employees, which included an influx of designers, numbered 500 by 2015 (Government Digital Service, 2015). In 2014 the Policy Lab was established in the Cabinet Office with a remit to bring design thinking to policymaking (Policy Lab, 2021), and in their first years developed close working sub-contracting relationships with a number of design businesses and consultants. Developments in local government are harder to track because of the distributed structure, but both Nesta (Nesta, 2013) and the Design Council (Design Council, 2008; Design Council, 2021) have been running design-led innovation programmes for local authorities and public services for two decades now, brokering relationships with design practitioners. There is a growing design consultancy sector working on public service reform (Sangiorgi, 2015). There are sufficient numbers of designers in and around the institutions of government in London to warrant a regular series of 'meetups' (Meetup, n.d.). The Scottish (Scottish Government, 2019), Welsh (Nesta, 2015) and Irish governments (Department of Finance, n.d.) all have their own articulations of how they are using design.

A new field of design practice and research, a new type of design professional, and a new sector of the design economy has emerged. Design is tethered to policy development, public services redesign, organisational transformation, and citizen engagement. Design consultancies and experts are commissioned by the public sector to supply their skills to government; designers are employed within the institutions of government; civil servants are taking on design roles and projects; and there has been a flourishing of innovation 'labs' established inside organisations, making use of design practices, methods and tools. Throughout this

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<sup>4</sup> I have just been part of a team developing a methodology for the Design Council to assess the scale and nature of public sector design in the UK, as part of their next Design Economy research project, DE21, which should furnish more exact data on the numbers of people involved in these practices.

thesis, I will refer to the emergent phenomenon of public sector-focused design practice and research as ‘design for government’. The term ‘design for government’ was coined by Aalto University, Helsinki, in relation to a Masters programme – or at least that is the first time I encountered it. However it is not a term that is yet universally known or used. I have adopted it here as a useful shorthand for sub-fields and practices that share a family resemblance, but might be discussed under a multiplicity of other terms.<sup>5</sup>

These developments have been noted in the academic literature in design and policy studies (Julier, 2017; Junginger, 2014; Kimbell, 2016; McGann, et al., 2018; Clarke & Craft, 2019) and by think tanks and policy commentators (Design Commission, 2013; McNabola, et al., 2013; Fuller & Lochard, 2016). Some bold claims are being made. ‘Design’ is integral to the DNA of each and every public service’ (Design Commission, 2013, p. iv). ‘Design has to the power to dramatically improve public services, putting the needs of the user first to make services more effective and more efficient’ (Dahl, 2014). ‘The demand for smarter solutions by a new generation of citizen-centered services is leading to an increasingly systematic exploration of what design can do for public organizations’ (Deserti & Rizzo, 2015, p. 88). Could design ‘reinvent the art and craft of policymaking for the twenty-first century?’ (Bason, 2014, p. 2).

This thesis is an investigation of this emergent phenomenon – and a challenge to some of these bold claims – from a first-hand, insider (Mosse, 2006) perspective. It is grounded in my own professional experience within the UK – based in London – working for a Parliamentary group, a research consultancy, and a design agency, from 2008 to 2017, each of which have given me a different vantage points on ‘design for government’. The practice data I have drawn on is predominantly from design work with policy teams in central government departments, local government clients, and the NHS, in the UK between 2015 and 2017, although

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<sup>5</sup> Such as: public sector (service) design (Clarke & Craft, 2019), consultant social design (Julier, 2017) (Julier & Kimbell, 2019), design for policy (Bason, 2014), public design (Bason, 2017), design for public good(s) (Junginger, 2017), PSI labs (McGann, et al., 2018), strategic design (Miller & Rudnick, 2011), co-design for policy (Blomkamp, 2018), co-design for services (Pirinen, 2016)



during this time I also worked with some charities and philanthropic organisations. It is somewhat harder to draw clear geographic and temporal boundaries around the discourse – as I will go on to discuss – since it is a professional network and discursive phenomenon that has been building for some time, and operates across borders. The example I use to commence chapter 2 comes from an international event at the European Commission, but with a focus on the elements I personally facilitated. And in the discourse analysis chapter I work with texts from a slightly longer time period (2005 onwards) and include some that are authored by significant European players on this stage because I judge them to have been of significant influence within the UK.

## **The official narrative**

To anyone with a passing acquaintance with design, this might all sound quite strange – incomprehensible even. What does design have to do with governing? Aren't these rather separate spheres? Well, there is a popular account of this new breed of design that helpfully makes the connection. It goes something like this<sup>6</sup>...

In today's world, governments are facing some unprecedented challenges: complex problems such as climate change and environmental degradation, ageing populations and the growth of chronic illness, economic crises and ongoing social inequalities, and now pandemics. Change is happening at an ever-faster pace, and citizens are becoming more demanding, expecting more from their governments. But governments are struggling to keep up. The public sector is not all that well-equipped to deal with these sorts of challenges. Bureaucratic structures and processes can be slow moving, risk averse, reliant on what has worked in the past, and therefore not too good at adapting to change, or delivering innovation. The division of governments into siloed departments makes collaborative working on complex problems tricky. Civil servants don't habitually look at problems from the end-user's point of view. Today it is essential that governments are collaborative,

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<sup>6</sup> This is not based on any one text in particular; this is, rather, a rationale I now know by heart as a practitioner.

innovative, entrepreneurial, and responsive, but these are not qualities for which bureaucracies are renowned.

This is where design comes in. Designers, and the design processes and methods they use, can help to deal with these sorts of challenges and conditions. We are not talking here about designer handbags and chairs, but about the process that underpins the design of anything. The principles, ways of working – even ways of thinking – that designers apply in the creation of new products and experiences, can equally well be applied to the creation of new public services and policies.

Design is human-centred; it starts with people and their experiences; it utilises empathy to understand situations and problems. This is valuable for the public sector as a perspective and type of understanding that is not traditionally taken into account in the design of policies and services, but that is absolutely central to their effectiveness. Design therefore leads to more human-centred and successful interventions.

Design works through visual and material modes to help realise ideas, to put things in the world and foster dialogue about them. This can create change more rapidly than endless meetings and written documents. It helps visualise the future and think through the detail of how something might work, going beyond broad policy ambitions to the nitty gritty of reality.

Design is generative and creative; it creates new ideas and possibilities; it looks at a problem and asks not ‘what has been done in the past’, but ‘what might we do’? This attitude can help the public sector open up thinking about the range of possible solutions, instead of relying on old models.

Through early testing and ‘prototyping’, design ensures that poor ideas ‘fail early’, and good ones are iterated and improved. This can help identify what works and what doesn’t before too much money is spent on developing the wrong solution, smoothing the road to implementation.

Design is participatory: its methods bring together multiple types of expertise and perspective, including users’. In this way design can enable cross-silo working, supporting people to collaborate across boundaries, to create together. And it is democratising, bringing those seldom heard voices into the conversation.

These principles can be applied to many kinds of problem. Crucially, this is a way of thinking and working that is open to everyone. We all have the potential to use design. Not everyone finds it easy at first, as it is different to how many of us are accustomed to working. But there are tools and methods that anyone can make use of with training. You don't need to have sophisticated skills in drawing and making, you just need to be willing to have a go. You could say it's more about the right attitude or mindset – a certain way of conceptualising and approaching problem-solving, spending time really understanding the problem, reframing it, opening up thinking about the solutions, and rigorously testing ideas.

Design is no silver bullet of course. But its potential value to the public sector is huge. Design can help save money, improve services, increase efficiency, and deliver innovation and transformation. In doing all of this it is becoming apparent that design represents not only the opportunity to improve citizen's experiences, but to fundamentally transform the way that governments work, to become systematically more innovative, responsive, and collaborative organisations, able to deal with complex problems and face the challenges of the future.

## **Theoretical frame and research questions**

Some version of this explanation – which is really more of a story, a tale that has been woven and added to over time by countless storytellers – can be found in policy and industry reports, in academic publications in design research and policy studies, and coming out of the mouths of the practitioners and promoters of design to clients, at conferences, at peer-group meet-ups, on social media, and so on. I admit, there is something very compelling about it. It sounds logical. It is inspiring, and optimistic. However we are going to set this account to one side for now, and approach the phenomenon from an alternative direction.

In his book, 'The Anti-Politics Machine' (a study of the development industry in Lesotho) anthropologist James Ferguson describes 'development' as a 'conceptual apparatus': an 'organising concept' and an unquestioned value that set the terms of debate and cannot easily be displaced; an 'interpretive grid' through which certain parts of the world become seen and known; and a discourse generated by

development institutions, which produces knowledge, shapes interventions, and has very real social effects. In sum, he says, 'development' might be regarded as 'an elaborate contraption that does something' (Ferguson, 1990, pp. xiii-xvi). This idea of 'apparatus' (or 'dispositif' in the original French) that Ferguson is working with comes from philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, who used it in his investigations of power to denote 'a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions... The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements' (Foucault, 1980, p. 194).

I propose that we regard design, in general, and this new field of 'design for government' discourse and practice specifically, as just such an apparatus: as a value, an interpretive grid, a discourse that produces knowledge and practice, a heterogeneous assemblage of material and immaterial things that has some very real effects upon people. The apparatus of 'design for government' is our object of inquiry. The aim of the thesis is to understand how it works, on a number of fronts. How has the field of design for government been constructed? How are people governed by it? And, what, strategically, does the apparatus function to achieve? Let's unpack these a little further.

### **How has the field of 'design for government' been constructed?**

At one time design was conceived, and practiced, in a way that would have made it hard to think of it as applicable to the machinery of government itself. And yet, in certain circles – in a particular discursive community – design has today become a proposition that appears to make sense, as a practice one might undertake within the public sector. How has this happened? How does the 'making sense' of design proceed? What is the work that is done to reformulate design as an idea, and a practice, that 'fits' this context?

Central to this question is the concept of 'discourse', the first item on Foucault's heterogeneous list of elements that constitute an apparatus. By discourse, he means the systems of meaning, time- and place-specific, within which statements

come to make sense, or to be regarded as true or false, and indeed which dictate that which is sayable and that which is not:

The term discourse can be defined as the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation... (for example) clinical discourse, economic discourse, the discourse of natural history, psychiatric discourse (Foucault, 1989, p. 121)

Discourse is not the same as knowledge. It is rather the structure that determines what counts as knowledge: an epistemic regime. It is the naturalised and internalised backdrop within which other things come to have meaning. Discourses are therefore 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1989, p. 54). Discourse invents objects of knowledge. To take this idea seriously in our case means starting from the assumption that (since things acquire meaning through discourse, and discourse is active in the construction of things) design itself has been configured within discourses, that it has no meaning – it doesn't exist, in fact – in the absence of such conceptualisations. Talking and writing about design has assembled it and made it intelligible as design, rather than something else. With this frame in mind we are not interested in whether the narrative recounted above is 'true' or not: we are interested in how it has been put together, what gives it salience, and what it does.

And we are interested in discourse not only as a system of meaning, but a productive practice. Because it is not just that design as an idea has been conceptually made relevant. Along with the idea comes a battery of practices, methods and 'toolkits', a whole new cadre of experts and professionals with a distinct sort of identity, and an increasingly recognised field of academic knowledge and research with all the usual trappings (papers and books, funding and research posts, conferences and events, and so on). 'Design for government' has coalesced as a discrete area of expertise and a set of interests. It is something one can know about, and know how to do, with varying degrees of mastery. It would probably be too much to regard it as a profession unto itself, but it is certainly materialising as a branch of the general discipline of design.

This materialisation has come about over a remarkably short period. It was only around 2006 that the UK Design Council began publishing pamphlets on the subject of design as a methodology *for* the public sector (Burns, et al., 2006).<sup>7</sup> But last year (November 2020), I spoke at an event held by the International Research Society for Public Management's Special Interest Group on 'Design-Led Approaches to Renewing Public Management and Governance' (IRSPM, 2020), at which there were dozens of speakers and participants from a range of countries. We have gone from non-existent to academic specialism in less than twenty years, which, by any measure, is rather quick. So: how has this apparently new field of knowledge and practice managed to rapidly establish itself as legitimate? What are the mechanisms and processes, the tactics and strategies, that have consolidated the apparatus?

### **How are people governed by design?**

Implicit in the rapid emergence, consolidation and growth of a field is the idea that people – in increasing numbers – are persuaded that it is a plausible proposition, and that it is something they would like to be involved with. Involvement might mean commissioning design, trying it out for themselves, retraining as a designer, or perhaps simply reading a few blogs and absorbing some of the ideas. It is not the case that there are a few lone proponents, establishing the field by slowly building up some principles and theories of practice. In fact the opposite is true, like a runaway train it seems to be perpetually threatening to get out of the control of those who have set themselves up as experts in design practice and research, through adoption and appropriation by other experts and disciplines. New devotees – or at least interested parties – are continually being recruited to the cause. People feature in another way, too, as the 'users' of public services and policies who come, through design's discourse and practices, to take centre stage.

Apparatus is a useful word here because it implies something that functions for a purpose, that does things in the world, and to people. People are made to speak

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<sup>7</sup> Also see (Weber, 2010) which references a now unavailable paper called 'Touching the State'

and think a certain way about design and to perform its practices, are configured as users through its tools and methods, or come to think of themselves – their professional and personal identity – in designerly terms. Here we are beginning to touch on questions of power and government.

‘Government’ in this thesis will not be used as a synonym for ‘the state’, nor governing to indicate something that only the state does. It will be used in its more expansive sense: as a matter of general management. One might govern oneself, one’s conduct, one’s children, one’s employees perhaps. The church governs souls. Patriarchs govern households. Landowners govern property. This is the definition that Foucault takes as his starting point in his 1977-1978 lecture series at the Collège de France, noting that between the mid 19<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was a flourishing of writing about the general problem of government (Foucault, 2007, pp. 88-89). This idea of government denotes the capability to ‘structure the possible field of action of others’ (Foucault, 2002, p. 341); to manage ‘a sort of complex of men and things’; to achieve ‘the right disposition of things so as to lead to a suitable end’ (p.96). Government is not only a matter for the state, it is ‘multifarious since many people govern’ (p.93), there is a kind of ‘upward and downward continuity’ from the self to the family to the state (p.94). The emergence of interest in the general problem of ‘government’ is in the question of how conduct and behaviour can be managed, civilly, and at one remove.

For Foucault government is not only a type of practice, it is a form of power, and one that has proven surprisingly durable (Foucault, 2007, p. 130). His genealogical approach traces the roots of governmental power in pastoral and spiritual power structures and practices in Western Europe, which ‘spread out into the whole social body’ and ‘found support in a multitude of institutions’ (Foucault, 2002, pp. 333-335), including political institutions, a process he terms the ‘governmentalisation’ of the state (Foucault, 2007, p. 109). Whereas previously, ruling simply meant ‘being able to hold on to one’s principality’, to possess ‘the art of governing’ means something altogether different (p.92). In this way, the type of subject constituted through pastoral power structures continues to be the foundation of the modern western subject. Pastoral power is ‘something from which we have still not freed ourselves’ (p.148). We are not like the Ancient Greeks, determining an appropriate

course of conduct through reasoned argument, critical self-reflection, and persuasion by the rhetoric of others (Foucault, 1990). We are the sort of people who intuit the rules, internalise and replicate them. We police our selves.

There is an inherent paradox in the idea of government, resting as it does on the premise that human conduct is open to shaping (Dean, 2010, p. 18), but at the same time that 'the governed are to some extent capable of thinking and acting otherwise' (p.23). Governmental power therefore has a specific flavour. It is not the same as reigning, ruling, commanding or coercing (Foucault, 2007, p. 116). It is a more complex question of relations and choices, rather than simply a matter of domination or strength. Consequently, governing is inherently caught up in the self, in who we think we are, what we want to do with ourselves, and how we think we ought to behave. Foucault argues that:

The contact point, where the (way that) individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves, is what we can call, I think, government. Governing people, in the broad meaning of the word, is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium. (Foucault, 1993, pp. 203-4)

Central to this question is a particular idea of power as not only repressive, but productive:

[it] doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but... it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be thought of as a productive network which runs through the whole social body. (Foucault, 1980, p. 119)

Power is at work in the shaping of what people can think and know, through discourse and epistemic regimes; in the structuring of what it is possible to do, through the material environments and technologies that discipline our bodies and extend our capabilities; and in the kinds of humans we can be or become, through the subjectivities and identities on offer. 'The very exercise of power relies upon the constitution of subjects who are tied by their sense of identity to the reproduction of power relations' (Knights & Willmott, 1989, p. 537). Power is not to be found somewhere else, it is 'immanent' in the mundane details of life (Foucault, 1998, p.



94). And so when we ask how people are ‘governed by design’, we are looking not for some edict from on high, but for evidence of the shaping of knowledge, acts, and subjectivity through a ‘microphysics of power’ (Gordon, 1991, p. 3).

One final – essential – definition before we bring the discussion back to design: in the 1977-78 lecture series, Foucault coins the term ‘governmentality’. At that point in time he gives it (somewhat confusingly) three interlinked definitions, the second of which is particularly pertinent for this inquiry:

by ‘governmentality’ I understand the tendency, the line of force, that for a long time, and throughout the West, has constantly led towards the pre-eminence over all other types of power – sovereignty, discipline and so on – of the type of power that we can call ‘government’ and which has led to the development of a series of specific governmental apparatuses (*appareils*) on the one hand, [and, on the other] to the development of a series of knowledges (*savoirs*). (Foucault, 2007, p. 108)

Governmentality in this sense, is the quality or state or condition of being governmental (as function is to functionality, or mode to modality).<sup>8</sup> It is the spread of governmental power and its techniques through myriad institutions and communities and material artefacts. In its take-up by subsequent theorists, governmentality has become a byword for a kind of inquiry that seeks to deconstruct how governmental power is at work in a specific context, usually through paying attention to the mundane details, the disciplinary practices, the knowledge that acquires authority, and the types of subjects that are enrolled. It has been used to analyse the nature of contemporary neoliberal states (Larner, 2000) that seek to manage things ‘at a distance’ (Miller & Rose, 1990) partly by redrawing the lines of responsibility and seeking to ‘activate, empower and responsabilise’ citizens (Clarke, 2005). It has been used to deconstruct a wide variety of objects: psychology (Rose, 1999), management (McKinlay & Starkey, 1998), marketing

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<sup>8</sup> It is common to read ‘governmentality’ as a portmanteau of ‘government’ and ‘mentality’, on the basis of which one then investigates ‘mentalities’ or ‘rationalities’ of government. I do not find that this interpretation of the word is justified by the original text in which the word emerges, or indeed present in any of the three definitions that Foucault himself gives to it.

(Skålén, et al., 2006), international development (Li, 2007), self-help (Mutch, 2016), self-esteem (Cruikshank, 1996) and communications design (Hepworth, 2018) – to name a few.

So what does all this have to do with design? Well, one could argue that design is inherently concerned with government. ‘Structuring the possible field of action of others’, or, ‘the right disposition of things so as to lead to a suitable end’, could very well work as definitions of design. At the level of economies, in its earliest instantiations design has been seen as an attempt to control industry and consumers (Dutta, 2007) (Hayward, 1998) (Thompson, 2008), to discipline an unruly market. We might therefore ask whether the adoption of design *by* the public sector is an attempt to discipline an unruly citizenry through new means? Or if the conquest of design *over* the public sector is an attempt to discipline an unruly bureaucracy? In fact, we will find both of these intents at work.

Second, governmentality is a useful concept for understanding the curious phenomenon of design’s rapid advance across multiple fields. Large swathes of people have been persuaded to believe certain things about design, have adopted ‘design’ practices, and have come to think of themselves and what they are busy doing (and being) at work as design. But no-one is being forced: we are willingly seduced. We subject our selves. We are not prisoners or soldiers or inmates of an 18<sup>th</sup> century asylum. We are (we think) free to choose, and people seem to be voluntarily gravitating towards design. We intuit and absorb the norms and practices, the language and the identities, and obligingly inhabit and reproduce them.

‘Design for government’ is thus a kind of *double (or triple) entendre*. In a straightforward sense it means design activity at the service of the public sector. In a slightly more abstract sense it means reconceptualising design as a technology for governing (broadly understood). But it also quite accurately describes what is going on in another way: people (and not just ‘users’) are being governed through the idea and the practices of design. So: how does this work? What are the mechanisms by which people are made to do and think certain things, to behave in

certain ways? How does design propose to govern ‘users’? What happens to people when they find themselves, all of a sudden, in the middle of its apparatus?

### **What – tactically and strategically – does the apparatus function to achieve?**

A key contention of this thesis is that there are some discrepancies between the official narratives about ‘design for government’, and what the apparatus actually produces and achieves. There is a mismatch between the stories that get told, and the things that are empirically observable, if you put aside your ideas of what is supposed to be happening, and pay attention to what is visibly occurring.

Understanding what that is, is made all the harder by the layers of talk that design comes wrapped up in. Things are obscured as well as revealed by the ways we have learned to speak about design. The discourse predetermines the interpretation of the practice. So, if we separate the study of design from the truisms circulating about it, if we treat the narrative as part of the apparatus, not an account of it, and if we approach sites of ‘design for government’ with an open anthropological gaze, what sorts of phenomena and effects are observable? And what does it all add up to? Here it is useful to bear in mind the difference between explicit tactics and ‘anonymous, almost unspoken strategies’ (Foucault, 1998, p. 95). As political sociologist Mitchell Dean characterises it in his book on ‘Governmentality’:

regimes of practices possess a logic that is irreducible to the explicit intentions of any one actor but yet evinces an orientation toward a particular matrix of ends and purposes. (Dean, 2010, p. 32)

Or, in Foucault’s words: ‘the logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no-one is there to have invented them’ (Foucault, 1998, p. 95). While the tactics of different actors may be various, and a multitude of effects may be observable, the apparatus as a whole ‘strategically’ achieves certain ends. What are they? And how might an unintended set of effects come about ‘behind the backs’ (Ferguson, 1990) of designers and civil servants? How is the dissonance between intents, official accounts and strategic outcomes maintained?

## Why these questions?

There have by now been plenty of studies subjecting scientific and technological fields of knowledge to sociological critique (Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Barry, 2001; Pickering, 1995), or deconstructing the human sciences (Foucault, 1996; Foucault, 1988; Miller & Rose, 1988), or even taking management and organisational knowledge apart in the same way (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Fournier & Grey, 2000) showing just how these disciplines, knowledges and practices are assembled, and how they exert power in the world. But who has done this for design? It seems long overdue. Some writers have certainly noted the contemporary hegemony of 'design': 'the rule of the designer is even broader than before' (Foster, 2002, pp. 17-18), 'design is heralded as the pre-eminent solution to all the complex and difficult conundrums of modern life' (Milestone, 2007, p. 177), it has become such an all-pervasive notion that 'people see themselves as engaging with their worlds through design-informed paradigms' (Garvey & Drazin, 2016, p. 3). As sociologist Bruno Latour noted in a keynote to the Design History Society, the concept has expanded radically, in both 'comprehension' and 'extension' (Latour, 2009). By these accounts, design as a concept is stealthily creeping into everyone and everything.

But how has this come to be the case? Why is the idea of design persuasive? How is it reshaped to fit new questions and contexts? How does it colonise new domains and extend its reach into every corner of life? These questions are yet to be addressed, and indeed imply a much larger project than a single thesis. One could take on everything and anything that has come under the rubric of design in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries: one could investigate any number of sites. This study is concerned with design's extension into the organisations, practices and discourse of the state, in the UK, over the last 10-15 years. This however, might not be a bad place to start. In studying epistemic regimes, it is such moments of rupture and transformation that can be the most enlightening (Foucault, 2002, pp. 113-5).

## **Standpoint and positionality**

The motivation for this thesis comes equally from personal experience. Given the methods I have deployed, it is necessary to say something up front about the insider perspective from which this investigation has been conducted, and to acknowledge my own situated interpretation.

I graduated from a BA in Architecture in 2007 and, after a year working for an architectural firm, changed direction and joined a think tank. In my role I was responsible for running the secretariat to the All Party Parliamentary Group for Design, and then something called the Design Commission, a mixed group of design industry heavyweights and Parliamentarians, who shared an interest in advancing the cause of design. My job was to liaise with the design industry, organise events, and write briefings about design, in order to support the development of design-friendly policies and practices in government. In 2012-13, a few years into the period of ‘austerity’ that followed the global financial crash and a change of government in the UK, the Design Commission produced a report (drafted by me in collaboration with the Commissioners) examining the benefits of design for the public sector, which it characterised as ‘meeting needs, saving money, humanising services, engaging citizens’ (Design Commission, 2013). Although when I started at the think tank, the language of design I met in this professional milieu was foreign to me (coming from architecture), by the time I had drafted this report I was becoming fluent.

After I left that role, having been through several cycles of the Parliamentary calendar, I worked for a research consultancy, BOP Consulting, and whilst I was there the Cabinet Office Policy Lab commissioned us to evaluate their first year, which involved interviewing a number of civil servants and designers who had participated in their projects using design methods on policy challenges. Then in early 2015 I was approached by a designer I knew who ran one of a handful of agencies that were regularly contracted by the public sector. I joined the design agency in the summer of 2015, and spent two and a half years working as a design consultant with various government and third sector clients, using design to address all manner of problems – creating new policies and services, changing

behaviours, helping organisations establish more innovative ways of working – and turning my theoretical understanding of it into practical know-how. Since leaving the agency I have continued doing freelance design consultancy work for different clients, all broadly in the same public sector, policy or governmental space. Tables 1 and 2 show the sequence of these roles, and the details of major projects undertaken in each. The list of projects I worked on at the design agency give a flavour of the kinds of brief we received from public, third and occasionally also private sector clients.

*Table 1 Sequence of professional roles*

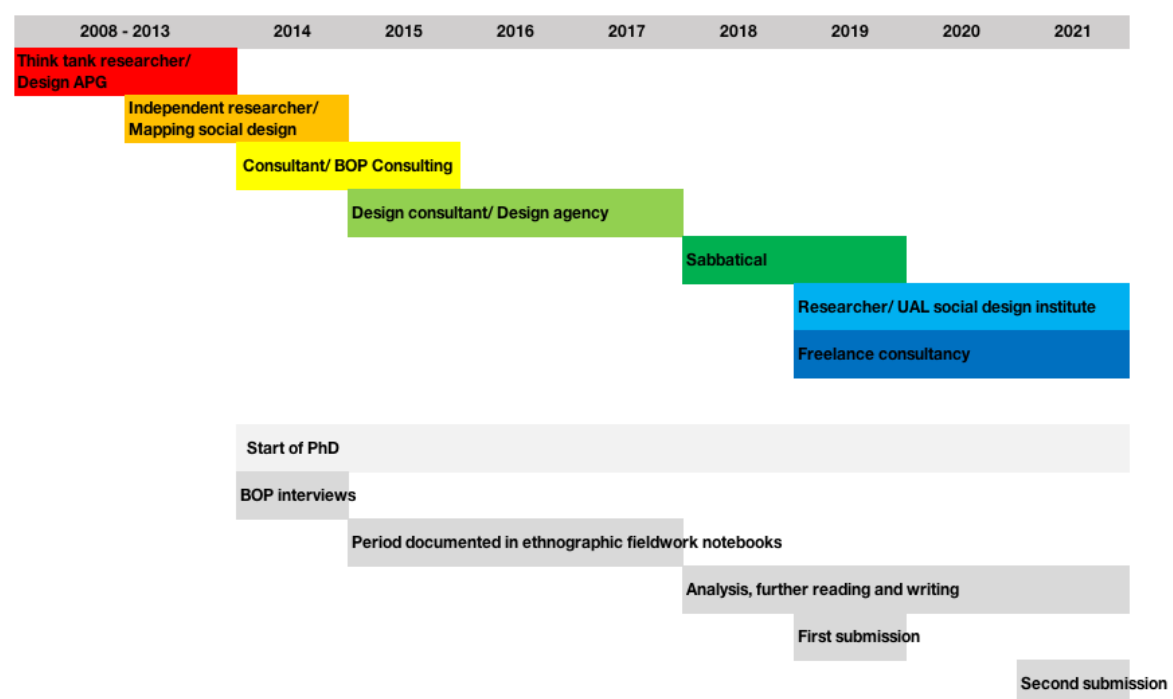


Table 2 Details of main projects undertaken in each role

<b>Think tank researcher/ Design APG</b>
Design education inquiry
Design and public services inquiry
Social Design Talks
<b>Freelance researcher/ Social design mapping project</b>
Report and recommendations to AHRC ('Social Design Futures')
<b>Consultant/ BOP Consulting</b>
Design for Good' report on Student Design Awards
Design futures report
Evaluation of Cabinet Office Policy Lab
<b>Design consultant/ Design agency</b>
Co-designing a network of quality improvement professionals in health and care
Designing communication strategies to encourage early access to antenatal care among non-attending populations
Designing family policy to better support parental relationships and improve child outcomes
Designing a healthcare improvement and innovation lab
Designing an interactive guide to CBT for psychosis
Designing a social finance self-assessment tool
Training international policymakers in design for policy
Report on design for ageing and disability in the UK
Designing approaches to prevention, early intervention and resilience programme for a local authority
Evaluating a data project for a cancer charity
Running a 'change academy' (capability-building programme) for a clinical commissioning group
Coaching 'change teams' to innovate at work and improve the working environment for a private mental health hospital
Designing preventative approaches to homelessness for a local authority
Evaluating a publicly funded grants programme for supporting design-driven innovation
<b>Sabbatical</b>
Reading, analysis of data and commencement of writing up
<b>Researcher/ social design institute</b>
Projects on childhood obesity, knife crime and social care
Teaching design thinking to MBA students at CSM
<b>Freelance consultancy</b>
Coaching healthcare improvement teams in design
Rapid review of the 'policy labs' landscape
Running 'lab' workshops as part of a policy research and advocacy project
Designing interventions to advance the clean cooking agenda

Alongside these professional roles, I continued pursuing academic interests. I completed an MA in History of Art, part-time. I co-organised a series of talks on 'social design' with Guy Julier and Lucy Kimbell (Social Design Talks, 2015) with whom I then collaborated (also with Leah Armstrong) on a mapping report for the

AHRC, reviewing social design research and practice in the UK (Armstrong, et al., 2014). And in late 2014 I started this PhD, aiming to research design's emergence within the public sector. Since May 2019 I have been a research fellow with the Social Design Institute, at the University of the Arts London, which to date has involved a mixture of research and design consultancy-like practice with external organisations.

Although I have ended up working in a field of design that Pevsner would probably not have recognised as such, I have never abandoned my interest in more 'traditional' forms of design. I help out friends and family with small architectural and interior design projects, I have developed an interest in design and dress history, and become quite a skilled dressmaker, working part-time for a slow fashion business in Dorset where I now live. My partner is a carpenter who designs and makes material objects on a daily basis. So I come at design from multiple angles: or perhaps it would be more accurate to say I have first-hand experience of many different things that have somehow become grouped under the same banner.

I say all this for three reasons. One, to note that I am deeply professionally embroiled in the apparatus I am posing questions about, and this is a complicated position to be in. The spirit in which I approached this study was not as a researcher seeking an object of inquiry, but as a practitioner (or perhaps just a person) seeking greater understanding of some situations I found myself in, and quite frequently found perplexing, troubling, sometimes comical, but always meriting closer attention. My research interests and my professional life have often been at odds, producing a dissonance that has pulled me in different directions, and has undoubtedly coloured the analysis as it has evolved in tandem with life. Two, to acknowledge up front that my starting point is a sceptical one. I have, over a period of years, watched 'design for government' being talked into existence. And not just watched: I have played an active role in constructing it. Like a stage hand, I can see the strings being pulled behind the scenery, which makes it hard to take positivist academic accounts of 'design for government' seriously. Having now spent several years working in this field, the experience of practice itself has made certain research questions hard to sustain, and others seem more appealing for their potential to account for some of the things I encounter. And three, to



foreground some suspicions and concerns motivating the inquiry. The field might be dressed up, discursively, as ‘design for good’ (McNabola, et al., 2013) (Junginger, 2017), but it seems ever more apparent that this is a disingenuous characterisation. One of my primary hopes for this thesis, therefore, was to produce an account of the field that feels – to me and hopefully to others – more truthful; a rendition that more accurately reflects and explains my actual experience.

## **Research methodology**

Eventually, this thesis should probably be regarded as a kind of history of design. However it will be noted that the second half of the title is ‘an ethnography of an emerging field’, which is because the ethnographic (including auto-ethnographic) method has been central to trying to capture the apparatus at work. This is a history of the present conducted not solely on the basis of an analysis of texts (although we will do that), but also on observation of a social world.

In terms of source material, much is available in the public domain: toolkits and method decks, blogs and reports, academic publications, industry events and conferences, websites, films, etc. The proponents of design for government are not shy in speaking and writing about it publicly. However, this world is also my own professional home turf, and the purpose and process of the PhD has really been as a kind of extended investigation of (my own) professional practice, an attempt to think critically about the working environment I have found myself in, and to make sense of the things I was seeing and hearing around me. It is a meditation on what has been happening (to me) at work: the situations, the projects, the things I found myself doing and saying, phrases overheard at conferences, conversations with clients and colleagues, briefs received, materials designed and reports written.

The thesis is therefore the result of a coming together of two kinds of research practice: a reading of the literature on ‘design for government’ (both academic and other kinds), and auto-ethnographic observation and writing based on reflections on my own professional life.

## **Reading the literature on ‘design for government’**

The experiences I recount above have set me up to have a particular relation to the literature. Well-versed in its agenda and schooled in its tactics, I found it difficult to take much of it at face value. Frequently spotting my own lobbying efforts for the Design Commission quoted as supporting argument in academic work (Deserti & Rizzo, 2015; Pirinen, 2016) was something of a red flag. Working out how to deal with the ‘design for government’ literature has therefore been a central challenge of this study.

Initially, I attempted a straightforward approach, undertaking a traditional literature search<sup>9</sup> and reviewing it as exhaustively and forensically as possible. Something I was already aware of, but that became even more apparent through this search, is the body of highly accessible (no paywalls) grey literature of various kinds that is the written counterpart to practice, events, projects, discussions, and lobbying. I’m talking about policy documents, industry publications, think tank reports, advocacy efforts, and practitioner blogs that discuss, promote and attempt to theorise ‘design for government’. Reading the academic literature on its own left a question mark over what to do with this grey literature. Undoubtedly it felt significant, not least because – inhabiting the world of practice – I suspected the pronouncements of Nesta, the Design Council, MindLab, and the charismatic proponents of design in the public sector to be far more influential in disciplining the field than the academic research. In fact I thought that the grey literature was heavily influencing the academic work itself. Clearly there were echoes between the two, which felt problematic. I knew exactly how and why the grey literature accounts had been constructed, having been the author of one myself: as deliberate lobbying efforts to promote design, by those who had an interest in seeing the expansion of design into new markets. But I could see exactly the same arguments being taken up in academic texts, which consequently made them hard to credit. Further, there is a confounding incoherence to the body of literature as a whole, a bewildering number

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<sup>9</sup> I include an account of the process in the Appendix, and a ‘design for government’ bibliography separately from the list of referenced works.

of things design is said to be or to do. I could not make it add up to any sort of sensible conclusion, or resolve it into a clear set of findings to build on.

So in order to make sense of it in a different way I had to jump outside of design and into other disciplines and domains: I discuss the literatures that have stepped in as the theoretical foundations for this thesis in chapter 2. The ‘design for government’ literature I treat as discourse to be analysed as part of the apparatus. Switching the analytical lens in this way helped things fall into place. The echoes and the incoherencies, the entanglements and conflicts of interest: what had been frustrating when trying to conduct a traditional literature review became quite interesting when parsed with a discourse analysis lens.

### **Auto-ethnography**

My reading of the design literature has thus been unavoidably coloured by my standpoint. The second element to my methodology actively exploits that position. As someone fully entangled in the apparatus, my own professional life, experience, practices, sense of identity, and so on, presents a potentially valuable source of data. However, in the spirit of John Van Maanen’s ‘confessional tales’ (Van Maanen, 1988), and also because it will help the reader understand some of the choices I have had to make, it is important to say something about the way in which this element of the methodology came about – by evolution and necessity, rather than design.

As mentioned, I was actively working in this field when I set out on my research. Instead of having a research question, grounded in the literature, and finding a site in which to explore it, I was already immersed in a site, in search of a research question, methodology and literature. What I can now see is that I set out, following an intuition, in an investigative mode (Douglas, 1976). I wasn’t sure what I was looking for, but I just felt that something was not quite right about what we were busy doing as designers in this new (to us) world of policy and public services. If I had had to specify what this was at the time, I might have said something like:

“We talk about design for public good, but *is* that what we’re doing - aren’t we’re just expediting an austerity agenda?”

“Our projects never seem to go anywhere – there’s all this expenditure of effort, but is anything really changing?”

“Why is it so hard to pin down what design means, in this context, and are we just making it up as we go along?”

These things, and others that made me uneasy became clustered together (and muddled up) and they became points of departure for my inquiry. This eventually evolved away from simply trying to figure out what was ‘bad’, to a more disinterested attempt to untangle how the whole edifice of design for government functions. And while initially I was probably on the lookout for some villains to track down and target, what I finally realised – of course – was that there aren’t any (or perhaps, we’re all villains). It’s not a matter of levelling accusations at anyone. There is no grand conspiracy. Understanding the things that I have found problematic as a practitioner – in effect a value judgment on my part – is really a by-product of understanding how the apparatus functions as a connected contraption of moving parts – discourse, knowledge, ideology, practices, technologies, subjects, objects, and so on – that we are all caught up in.

But to go back a step: for a long time, matching an appropriate research strategy to the initial investigative impulse was the major challenge of this project. It was not until I quit my high-pressured, fast-paced job as a design consultant that I had the time and headspace to do the necessary reading to figure it out. Up until that point I was simply collecting data, in as structured a way as I could manage, and in the hope that at some point I would reach the clarity of knowing what to look for in it, and what to do with it.

My method might therefore be called ‘opportunistic auto-ethnography’ (Sambrook & Herrmann, 2018). I went about my work in a busy design consultancy as normal, whilst also keeping in mind the question of my research. I accumulated the range of materials that working life naturally generates, which have helped with recollection (notebooks, materials produced for projects, reports, photos taken and tweeted during co-design workshops, and so on). I also kept a diary where I made minimal notes each day, or every few days, recording what I had been up to and how I was feeling. Occasionally, I wrote about specific events or moments within projects in

more detail, committing what had happened to the page while it was still fresh in my memory. As I was coming to the end of my time at the design agency, I wrote some longer more reflective memos about my experience of working there.

Alongside this auto-ethnographic dataset are notes from a number of interviews. The majority of these date from when I was working for the research consultancy, BOP Consulting, and we had been commissioned to evaluate the Cabinet Office Policy Lab. In order to make an assessment of the impact and value of Policy Lab's work, we interviewed a selection of the civil servants (from a mix of departments and roles) and designers who had interacted with them in different ways. The interviews asked about the nature of the civil servant's engagement with Policy Lab; what they thought of any design tools they could recall; their assessment of the approach in general (what was beneficial or problematic); what they had learned; and their confidence in replicating design methods in other projects. Half of these conversations were recorded and transcribed – the other half (conducted over the phone) were not, and I only have my own field notes to rely upon. There are also some field notes recording a small number of interviews/ conversations with a client team of policymakers, during a post-project wash-up in the spring of 2017.

However to describe these interview and field notes from practice as my only 'dataset' is of course misleading. Although I did begin with a grounded analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of my field notes, my interpretations are also a result of my broader primary experiences – of seeing longitudinal patterns in a professional life over a period of years (from 2008 to the present). Ethnographic data is both hard (documents and artefacts) and soft (memories and impressions), and the soft is essential for the interpretation of the hard: for achieving ethnographic insight (Pool, 2017). I have used my theoretical reading as a set of provocations for recasting and reinterpreting both the hard and the soft data, for re-reading things I wrote at a particular moment in time, and as prompts that have re-called to mind things that were never written down.

However this re-reading only really became possible with a degree of critical distance. Proximity to the field could present methodological difficulties in any auto-ethnographic study, but there is something unique about the design practitioner/

researcher dualism. Critiquing, or suspending judgment on, a practice one is immersed in, indeed actively selling, requires a high degree of cognitive dissonance. Freilich (1970) talks about the psychological strain of being a 'marginal native' – both part of the group and not – but it also presents problems when it comes to analysis. How easy is it to see a range of other interpretations when one is in a practitioner headspace most of the time? Making the familiar unfamiliar, seeing beyond accounts structured by pre-existing ideas of design, is harder when one is constantly rehearsing one particular narrative, keeping on-brand and on-message. I thus struggled with distancing myself sufficiently from the quotidian concerns of practice to be able to see it in other terms, until the point at which I took a sustained break from that professional environment.

I stopped working for the design consultancy in October 2017. This wasn't necessarily part of the plan, in terms of the research methodology: it was a life decision taken with my partner to move away from London and take a sabbatical from work. But it opened up the space to move away from instrumental and practical questions, and proved productive in terms of analysis and writing. Up until that point I had made intermittent attempts at analysis, and produced a few conference papers. These moments of reflection and consolidation undoubtedly helped moved the research forward, sometimes because they proved fruitful, or because they didn't. For example, reflecting on the limitations of (Bailey & Lloyd, 2016) helped me to understand a distinction I was searching for between types of design research. Trying various theoretical ideas on for size in (Bailey, 2017) helped me test out some ideas that promised to be productive and drew me back to governmentality. Paying attention to aesthetics in (Bailey & Story, 2018) catalysed some of the analysis of 'techniques' of governmental power. However I failed to do any sustained analytical work while immersed in practice, mainly for reasons of time and headspace. Returning to the task whilst taking a pause from consultancy, I developed my theoretical/ analytical framework and, working through my memos, as well as returning to the original raw materials (notebooks, project reports and design materials), began to build and iterate a set of insights.

The process of writing therefore was not so much one of 'writing up', but an ongoing act of inquiry and analysis (Richardson, 1994), of iteratively building an

understanding of the apparatus I have been caught up in, slowly arriving at a greater sense of clarity. I looped back and forth between writing ethnographic accounts, reading and assimilating new theoretical concepts, applying them to the ethnographic data and writing analytical passages. The final set of insights presented here have revealed themselves slowly and painfully as a result of multiple writings and re-writings: and indeed I could probably carry on. This version represents a snapshot of my understanding and interpretations as of January 2021. In terms of presenting ethnographic material, although the thesis rests on a much larger body of writing,<sup>10</sup> only a fraction of that has made it into the final text, interspersed throughout a mainly analytical discussion. It is presented in a variety of ways: reconstructed design templates, regurgitated arguments, fictionalised vignettes, extracts from design publications, a first-hand account of a conference, personal reflection and introspection, and quotes, things overheard, recollections peppered throughout the text as illustrative evidence.

There are some recognised challenges and weaknesses with such an approach to research, which I discuss further below and in chapter 2. However auto-ethnography also has some striking advantages. One doesn't actually always need to take an accurate record, or to work from memory, when one can produce a method or regurgitate a narrative (such as the one above) on the spot. I am my own informant: I know how to talk the talk, how to write a winning bid, how to plan a design workshop and knock up some materials. I even know how to train other people in doing all of these things. I am, in a completely different sense, an authority on the field. It's those practices and logics, the scripts I have learned and the gestures I have adopted, the experiences accumulated and the stuff in my head, that I am putting under the microscope as a means of accessing what goes on in practice. In this way, auto-ethnography can transport us right into the middle of the apparatus. We don't just have a ring-side seat, we are in the ring.

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<sup>10</sup> See Table of Auto-ethnographic Material in Appendix

## **Epistemological standpoint**

The epistemological position underpinning the methodology I have pursued, and the argument I am making, is a critical realist one. Critical realism represents a kind of third way between positivism and constructivism, accepting the existence of an independent ontological reality, but recognizing that our understanding of it can only ever be situated and partial (Sayer, 2004). This furnishes us with the concept of multiple levels of reality: that which is empirically ‘observable’, the ‘actual’ (the whole world of what is going on), and the ‘real’ (the underlying structuring causes), (Archer, et al., 2016). This means I am assuming that empirically observable design practices are underpinned by a deeper and less visible set of things (discourse, for example) and that there might be mechanisms and drivers that are not necessarily transparent to those being swept along by events. Accounts given by actors – even primary proponents and recognised ‘experts’ – within the field are not the only possible version of the truth.

But neither is mine. Critical realism acknowledges the provisionality of conclusions: ‘knowledge ‘will never be more than an increasingly accurate approximation of a dynamic reality’ (Sprague, 2016, p. 46). Our aim should be to rather ‘maximise the adequacy of understandings’ (p. 46), in order to provide a solid enough basis for taking informed action: ‘the ability to engage in explanation and causal analysis ... makes critical realism useful for analyzing social problems and suggesting solutions for social change’ (Fletcher, 2017, p. 182). This has implications for the knowledge claims one can make: my intention has not been to establish objectively verifiable facts, but rather to advance a plausible explanation. In seeking such an explanation, critical realism offers an abductive approach to analysis called ‘theoretical redescription’ – a kind of thought experiment where ‘empirical data are redescribed using theoretical concepts’ (Fletcher, 2017, p. 188), which is exactly the sort of bouncing back and forth between ethnographic data, personal recollections and theoretical concepts that I have engaged in. The abductive practice of trying theories on for size helps us get ‘beyond thick description of the empirical entities’, while at the same time recognising that the chosen theory is inherently ‘fallible’ (p. 188). So, what I am offering up here is a theoretical account – inevitably only



approximate to the truth – that nevertheless seemed to me to be the best ‘fit’ when measured against the data of my own experience.

## **Ethics**

Perhaps the most significant challenge with auto-ethnography is its ethical complications. As explained above, there was a degree of retrospectiveness to this research. This is not uncommon in autoethnography; often, researchers are reflecting on first-hand experiences that may have happened years ago, and indeed in the case of some social phenomena – typically, abuse – this is the only way that such sociological insight could ever be produced (see e.g. Olson (2004), Lee (2018), Ronai (1995), Brison (2002), and McLaurin (2003)). However this also makes the practice of anticipatory ethics (Tolich, 2010) more complex, if not impossible. One might conclude, then, that retrospective auto-ethnography simply is not ethical research. However authors writing in this mode find this to be yet another form of oppression of already-silenced and marginalised voices (Lee, 2018; Muncey, 2005; Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

If we accept that any ‘research involving human subjects starts from a position of ethical tension’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 271), and indeed much more traditional modes of qualitative social research, such as interviewing, even when informed consent has been obtained, may still be manipulative (Wray-Bliss, 2003), ‘ethically questionable’ (Kellehear, 1996), and compromisable in all sorts of ways (Fine, 1993) then the question is not so much one of designing out the possibility of ethical dilemmas in advance, but rather of conducting research ethically as an ongoing reflexive practice. Such a position is consonant with the account of ethics Foucault develops in his second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality*, as the

process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself (Foucault, 2020, p. 28).

Understood this way, the PhD project as a whole might be seen as an ethically-motivated problematisation of (my) professional design practice, in as much as it has been a quest for self-enlightenment, fuelled by a suspicion that harm was being done (by and through me) in the name of design. The driving force has been my awareness that I did not fully know what I was busy doing, and the desire to better understand what I have been enacting, participating in, and producing through my work. Or perhaps the research is the result of my trying to make sense of – and construct myself as an ethical subject within – the two conflicting regimes of design consultancy and academic research (Barratt, 2003, p. 1074).

However this is not really what is meant when one is asked to account for research ethics, and indeed, well-intentioned ends do not excuse unethical means. Ethical practice in research is a matter of ‘knowing and thinking as well as of choosing and everyday action’ (Scott, 1990, p. 5), of what one does when confronted with ‘ethically important moments’ in the course of researching (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).<sup>11</sup> So, how have I conducted myself as an ‘ethical subject’ in the delivery of this research? Marilys Guillemin and Lynn Gillam distinguish two dimensions here – procedural ethics and ethics in practice – to which Carolyn Ellis (a central figure in the development of autoethnography) has added a third – relational ethics (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Ellis, 2007). I shall address each of these dimensions in turn.

At first, the procedural ethics of this project seemed relatively straightforward, because the project has been a reflection on my own professional practice. In contrast to a more traditional ethnographic endeavour, I have not entered the field, interview questionnaire in hand, and recruited informants or participants. I have not made anyone do anything for the purposes of my research that they were not already doing in the course of working with or around me as a designer. No-one has been at any risk of harm as a result of research methods, because no-one has been subjected to any. I completed the University’s mandatory ethics review without any

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<sup>11</sup> A number of authors have also, perhaps not surprisingly, used Foucault to explore how ethical regulation governs and disciplines researchers and research itself (Hammersely & Traianou, 2014) (Hammersley, 2009) (Koro-Ljungberg, et al., 2007)

issues being raised. In fact, the University of Brighton's 'Research Ethics Policy' (October 2019) notes that 'where researchers are also working in professional-based roles, and may be engaging with members of the public in order to inform professional practice, it may be considered that such activity is not research and is therefore not subject to ethical review.' In terms of data protection, I have kept those records which are digital on a password protected computer. Those which are hard copy (notebooks for example) are safely locked away in my own study.

However, the 'ethics in practice' of this project have been rather more complex because, of course, other people are inherently involved. As Tolich (2010) points out, 'the word auto is a misnomer', because 'the self is porous' (p.1608). We do not exist, and our stories are not made, in a vacuum (Chang, 2008). We are not the sole owners of our narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). There are three significant issues here, then, in relation to other people: that of informed consent, of protecting confidentiality and anonymity, and of the potential to cause harm (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, pp. 264-275).

Although all of my colleagues and most of my clients knew that I was undertaking a PhD alongside work, obtaining explicit and documented informed consent has been challenging for multiple reasons: the sheer number of people I have interacted with over the years of work life I am reflecting on; the impracticality of informing, and repeatedly reminding, everyone I worked with as a designer that I was also a researcher; the fact that I myself did not know enough of what the research was about in order to adequately 'inform' those around me of what, precisely, they were consenting to<sup>12</sup>; and the potential coerciveness of seeking retrospective consent from them now at the point of publication (Tolich, 2010).

In view of this, I have had to be very selective about who I include in my narrative, how, and about which real examples to use. One option, of course, would be to not present any ethnographic data at all: then the risk of causing harm to anyone referred to or depicted would be largely removed. However omitting all such data

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<sup>12</sup> This is not uncommon in ethnographic research generally, given that when pursuing a grounded approach, 'good ethnographers do not know what they are looking for until they have found it' (Fine, 1993, p. 274).

would have a negative effect on the reliability and ‘trustworthiness’ of the text (Le Roux, 2017). It is necessary to provide evidence that ‘I had actually been there’ (Pool, 2017, p. 284), and without some ethnographic detail the analysis could become overwhelmingly generic. Fortunately, some of the things I am discussing are already in the public domain – things written and published, or things said in public (at a conference for example), in which case there is less need to worry about preserving anonymity. In the case of less obviously public material (although it is not always clear where the borders between public and private fall (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 267)) I have used any illustrative quotes anonymously, I present extracts from my field notes in such a way that the projects, clients and participants cannot be identified, and I have re-constructed some visual design materials – rather like Humphreys and Watson’s suggestion of using fictionalised or semi-fictionalised accounts (Humphreys & Watson, 2009).

Unfortunately, one of the consequences *auto*-ethnography is the impossibility of totally obscuring the identities of others. Given that it is about oneself, one’s friends, family, and colleagues are relationally identifiable in a way that an anonymised set of subjects unrelated to the author would not be (Roth, 2009; Delamont, 2007). In my case, the identifiability of others varies. Participants in workshops, if not named, are not likely to be recognised by anyone else, mainly because there have been so many of them. The impossible thing to keep anonymous is the design agency I was working for. Anyone who can find me on LinkedIn would be able to work it out. There is also the challenge of internal confidentiality, where the risk is not with the researcher exposing confidences to outsiders, but confidences exposed among the participants themselves (Tolich, 2004). In my case, the risk here would be that colleagues and clients would recognise themselves or each other, and so I have only used extracts from my field notes that, if connected with individuals, are extremely unlikely to be upsetting, or harmful to anyone’s standing or career.

With regard to the early interviews, which were undertaken for the purposes of BOP Consulting’s evaluation, I obtained verbal consent from each interviewee to use what they said – anonymously – for my own PhD research. In some cases participants were explicit about certain things not being attributed or published, which I have of course respected. In line with the premise that participants should

have control over the words that are attributed to them (Christians, 2005), I shared transcripts with participants who asked to see them, and amended them according to their wishes. Although there is no documented written informed consent for these texts, I have taken the judgment that using selected, anonymised quotes is ethically acceptable, for several reasons. One: the conversations – or at least the parts I am interested in using – were not about anything politically sensitive or personally incriminating; the subject matter was what the interviewee thought about design – information that is unlikely to cause harm even if it should be connected to a specific individual. Second, I have protected the anonymity of interviewees by omitting details that would allow the person or project to be identified. Third, these interviews took place several years ago, and time itself has made both the conversations less sensitive (if any of it was politically sensitive, policy and organisational agendas have now moved on and administrations changed, more than once) and the interviewees less identifiable (given the regular rotation of civil service roles, it is extremely unlikely any of these people will still be doing the same job). Carefully selected extracts from field notes, and quotes from interviews, are deployed therefore in chapters 5 and 7, to support the discussion of material technologies and processes of subjectification. They appear in italics in order to distinguish this kind of data from quotations taken from academic sources.

The concern with preserving privacy and confidentiality is largely about protecting individuals from any harm that might ensue from publication. Indeed, many ethical codes of practice now go beyond ‘do no harm’, to requirements of beneficence, justice, promoting well-being of research subjects, and so on (Hammersley, 2009; Koro-Ljungberg, et al., 2007). Stephen Andrew, in his book, ‘Searching for an Autoethnographic Ethic’, lists fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement, and non-maleficence as a grid of ideas and duties for analysing the ethical implications of involving others in texts (Andrew, 2017). While I think being guided by a requirement to *promote* the well-being of others over and above any other research objective may be unrealistic if not actually undesirable (I will discuss this further below), I have followed Kristina Medford’s (Medford, 2006) and Carolyn Ellis’s (Ellis, 1995) maxims of writing as though everyone that features in the text will read it, and not writing anything I wouldn’t be prepared to share with them

directly myself. Although several authors acknowledge the potential therapeutic benefits of auto-ethnography (Roth, 2009; Ellis, et al., 2010; Lee, 2018), this principle serves a helpful reminder that research should not be a platform for settling scores. My primary purpose here is analysis not catharsis, but I have had to write through more than one version of this text to reach that more disinterested position.

It is also helpful to remember where the emphasis of the study falls: it is not actually a study of the human beings that appear in it, but of the relational ontology of discourse, technologies and practices, and processes of subjectification. It's an analysis of a disciplinary apparatus, undertaken from my vantage point which was necessarily within some specific organisations. But it is not a study of a particular consultancy or its employees. It is about the material detail of practice, the hands, gestures and bodies, the 'things said' (Foucault, 1989, p. 123) and done, rather than the individuals saying or doing them. Ultimately, the likelihood of real harm resulting from publication is, I believe, very small. I am not exposing any malpractice or shady dealings, and I am not accusing anyone of anything. The projects I discuss are now several years in the past and the sensitivity of the content has lessened with time. The design consultancy I worked for has since been bought by and amalgamated into another, and consequently no longer officially exists. It would, therefore, be literally impossible to materially harm it as a business. I suppose there would be a degree of harm wrought to individuals if by some strange series of events this thesis brought the whole disciplinary apparatus crashing down; but if Foucault couldn't bring down psychiatry I doubt I can bring down design.

However, what I am doing is putting forth an account of a shared professional world that others inhabiting it may not like or agree with. What is at issue here is not my reading of others as research subjects, it's the divergences in our understandings of what we were all busy doing in our work as designers. Which brings us to the third dimension: relational ethics. On one hand, auto-ethnography – and critical research generally – is valued precisely for writing in what has been silenced (Brewis & Wray-Bliss, 2008), for countering hegemonic narratives with personal stories that contradict (Lee, 2018; Muncey, 2005). And although I do not consider myself 'oppressed', I do consider this thesis as a kind of counter-narrative, an act of

resistance within a discursive milieu. So what, then, does one do with the perspectives and interpretations of others when they accord with the official narrative? There will always be an asymmetry of knowledge and knowingness between researcher and others, unless one adopts a feminist communitarian methodology (Christians, 2005) that prioritises the questions and interests of participants. But, if one's starting point is that there might be more going on than practitioners typically understand or are able to articulate (which was my own embodied experience *as a practitioner* at the outset of this research endeavour), that individuals might be rendered subjects through discourse without their own consciousness of the fact, this suggests limits to what can be learned or gained by privileging emic interpretations. We cannot only rely on practitioner – or even academic – interpretations if our premise is that those narratives are by definition representative of dominant, discursively available explanations. Or, rather, they can only tell us about that which is discursively available – they will not advance our development of other, possible, yet unspoken (because outside of the discourse) explanations.<sup>13</sup> Here the risk of appearing dismissive and academically superior is acute.<sup>14</sup> In response to this, I can only say I am not claiming some objective truth to which only I am privy, but playing devil's advocate, making use of the opportunity I have had to read more widely and think more deeply about this than others to offer up an alternative account.

Marilyn Strathern notes that differences in understanding, and developing ideas that are not typically held by the group in question, are a natural consequence of researching as well as participating (Strathern, 1987). These differences between myself and my peers – and the question of how to 'navigate multipositionality' (Vernooij, 2017) – have been an ongoing ethical question throughout the research.

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<sup>13</sup> This also has methodological implications when it comes to data collection: there are limits to what can be learned through interviews and conversations with those 'inside the tent'.

<sup>14</sup> This is a little like the 'paradox of emancipation' that Ted Benton (Benton, 1981, p. 162) finds in socialist scholarship – the tension between a commitment to 'collective self- emancipation' and 'a critique of the established order which holds that the consciousness of those from whom collective self-emancipation is to be expected is systematically manipulated, distorted and falsified by essential features of that order'.

My approach while still working in design consultancy was to be as open as possible about my views. I made no secret of my concerns and critical thoughts regarding design practice, I even gave presentations to the team on different bits of critical theory and research, and my reputation in this regard was reflected both in formal feedback (someone referred to me as 'ideological' in a 360° performance review) and in jest (on leaving the consultancy I was given a T-shirt with the words 'Um... it's actually a bit more complicated than that' printed on it). Hopefully I cannot be accused of wilful deception or betrayal (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

In writing this text I have also thought about how I would like it to come across. I don't want to unduly offend or upset anyone working in this field, or make them feel like I am singling them out for condemnation. What I would like is for peers to read it and feel it has shone a light on something – not to be antagonised. I like and respect many of these people, and there is a risk here of alienating myself, or hurting them by appearing to denigrate what they might think of as a joint endeavour of progressing a field of research and practice. But disagreement – holding a different view - is not in itself unethical. It might be uncomfortable, of course. So, returning to the earlier point about beneficence, I do not believe the only ethical way of proceeding in research and writing is in the attempt to promote wellbeing. The aims of fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement, and non-maleficence (Andrew, 2017) are simultaneously too narrow and too grandiose.

One final ethical consideration to note is the potential consequences for the researcher. Auto-ethnography has been likened to the process of 'outing' oneself (Flemons, 2002), there is a vulnerability to revealing yourself, 'of not being to be able to take back what you have written or having any control how readers interpret it' (Ellis, 1999, p. 672). This may have consequences for social standing, relationships and job prospects, among other things. This is perhaps a greater risk with the more personal, evocative mode of auto-ethnographic writing – there is a limit to the intimate detail about myself that I have had to include here. And in terms of committing to print a critical, counter-hegemonic viewpoint, on that count I suspect I 'outed' myself quite some time ago.



## Structure of the thesis

So, with these theoretical and methodological premises established, how will the thesis proceed? How will we answer those research questions?

Chapter 2 elaborates the theoretical foundations for the thesis, expanding on those fundamental Foucauldian insights about power and government already discussed. We look at the idea of discipline – its dual nature as a boundaried domain of knowledge and a technique for governing bodies and actions – and draw inspiration from other critical studies of disciplines that excavate their governing effects. We discuss ethnography as the discipline within which this study is situated and through whose lenses we are seeing our object of knowledge. And finally, although we are not inhabiting the discipline of design as the platform from which the inquiry is launched, we discuss design itself as an object of (anthropological) knowledge, a body of work to which this thesis is a contribution and a critical extension.

Chapters 3 to 7 then go about the work of dissecting the apparatus. First, we look directly at the discourse, at the ‘things said’ about design. How has design been constructed discursively? And how does the contemporary discourse of ‘design for government’ structure the way we can think and talk about it? What can be said – and what cannot be said? What are the ‘truths’ of design, how are they produced, and what rules are they governed by? How does knowledge about design acquire authority? Second, we look at the more material elements of the apparatus, the artefacts and practices that are the physical manifestation of the discipline. We will refer to these as ‘technologies’, to indicate again the fact that they are not merely artefacts, but artefacts that discipline and govern. Chapter 5 looks at how design’s technologies ‘discipline bodies’, shape perception, ‘govern souls’ and materialise discourse. Third, we will look at what happens to people when they find themselves in design’s tractor beam: not only at what they are immediately persuaded to do or to think in a design workshop, but at how they are made either objects of knowledge or subjects of practice. What sorts of knowledge about people does design produce? How do people appear through these devices? And who does ‘design for government’ allow us to become? What does it do to our very selves?

What new identities and possibilities for being does it create? And how are we seduced by them?

The research questions run through these inquiries: the discourse, the material technologies, and the construction of objects and subjects are an interlocking set of elements that work together to construct and establish the field (1) and to govern people (2). Answers to the third question of what the apparatus functions to achieve emerge as a result of these studies of discourse, technologies and subjects. The conclusion summarises the findings of each of these strands of inquiry, and draws them together to reflect on what is at stake in a final ethnographic example, and discuss the implications of the study.

## **Findings and contribution to knowledge**

In brief, the argument presented by the thesis is that ‘design for government’ – as it emerged in the UK between 2008-2017 – is a product of ‘design’ being discursively remodelled to align with a dominant contemporary truth about the necessity of fixing a broken public sector. The deficit logic that has long infused British design discourse (and finds an inevitable and problematic lack of design everywhere) has been turned on the public sector, with commercially advantageous results for the professional design industry. A range of pre-existing practices and artefacts are assembled under a new banner and performed to constitute the field.

By the evidence of my experience in the field – again, in the UK, and mainly London, from 2008-2017 – ‘design for government’ does not (as the popular discourse has it) reliably produce innovation and change, although it certainly does a good job of performing these things. It does, however, rapidly produce material and visual embodiments of discourse: ideas, rationalities and naturalised assumptions that are floating around the public sector are channelled into tangible form, and become all the more performative for it. Users are not so much empathised with, as ‘made up’ in the image of the state.

If anything has been changing as a result of ‘design for government’ in the UK, it is experiences of work in the public sector, and the figure of the civil servant whose

person becomes central to the challenge of fixing the public sector. Design presents an alternative idealised subject, a contingent other to the bureaucrat. New subjects are readily enrolled – predominantly through participation – because the apparatus presents a seductive opportunity to ‘upgrade’ oneself in line with the prevailing values of creativity, entrepreneurialism, innovation, and change itself.

The originality of this work lies, first, in its methodological approach, which takes governmentality and a connected cluster of theoretical ideas (disciplinary apparatus, discourse analysis, technologies of power, and subjectification) and uses them to parse experiences of design practice. Combining an insider perspective with a critical, denaturalising and anti-performative stance is novel in the world of design scholarship. Design is rarely problematised as a discursively constructed phenomenon. And certainly in the emerging body of research examining design for government the vast majority of work tends toward instrumentalism.

Second, the findings outlined above represent an original contribution to understanding this emergent phenomenon and new site of design, which diverge from, and in some cases directly contradict, claims made elsewhere in design research and the popular discourse for the instrumental value of design for the public sector. In short I find that it is not, in fact, doing many of the things it says it is, but rather the discourse serves to detract attention from some of its more potent effects.

Third, beyond the field of design scholarship, this thesis represents a contribution to anthropologies of design, by subjecting this specific site of design to an anthropological gaze, and at the same time pushing further towards critical (rather than an instrumental) research agenda. And it adds to the cluster of studies that combine an anthropological method with a Foucauldian framework to take aim at a range of different disciplinary apparatuses (development, policy, management, and so on). In doing so it proposes that design be added to the list of targets for dissection as an apparatus of power.

Who is this research for? Of course, for other researchers inquiring into this space, perhaps particularly for those outside of design (within policy studies for example)

seeking to make sense of this disciplinary newcomer. But beyond that I hope it will be of interest to practitioners – designers, and non-designers who might find themselves in this world – although absolutely not for the usual reasons of providing helpful tools and methods. This is both for practitioners and also deeply un-practical, in the sense that I hope to show, through deconstructing the present, how the things that we take as natural or inevitable are not so. And, by implication, that different futures, different ways of being, are possible.

## Chapter 2

### **‘We are disciplined by our disciplines...’: inhabiting and studying fields**

#### **Introduction**

So, how might we get our teeth into ‘design for government’? What is the nature of our quarry – our object of inquiry? What sort of thing is it, and how might we study it? In this chapter, we will look at how one might take the apparatus of ‘design for government’ as an object of study, by mobilising some concepts – emerging from Foucauldian and from ethnographic literature – that allow us to treat this heterogeneous assemblage as a connected site. We will explore some critical<sup>15</sup> approaches to research derived from analyses of other disciplinary objects. We will look at how, in spite of its vulnerability to critique, auto-ethnography might be particularly well-suited to capturing the experience of someone right in the middle of that site. And finally we will look at where this study sits in a broader landscape of scholarship on design. Collectively these literatures represent the theoretical foundations for the thesis.

#### **‘Design for government’ in action: ‘Lab Connections’, October 2016**

We begin by putting the object of study under the microscope, with a short ethnographic story. In this section I present an account of a conference/ workshop I attended in Brussels in October 2016, written in the days following the event. I offer up this story in order to give a flavour of the apparatus: what it looks, sounds, and feels like. It is not so much the nature of the policy problem that I want you to pay attention to here, but rather the way of working, and the language and descriptors this mode was wrapped up in. It could be argued that such an example is not

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<sup>15</sup> There is a longer discussion of what ‘critical’ means, and the trouble with criticality in design research, in the Appendix

representative, given the artificiality of the situation. But this is precisely why it makes an efficient illustration: the practices and discourse are actively, deliberately being performed, the subjects rounded up. It is a helpfully condensed demonstration, which we will return to reflect upon as we proceed through the thesis.

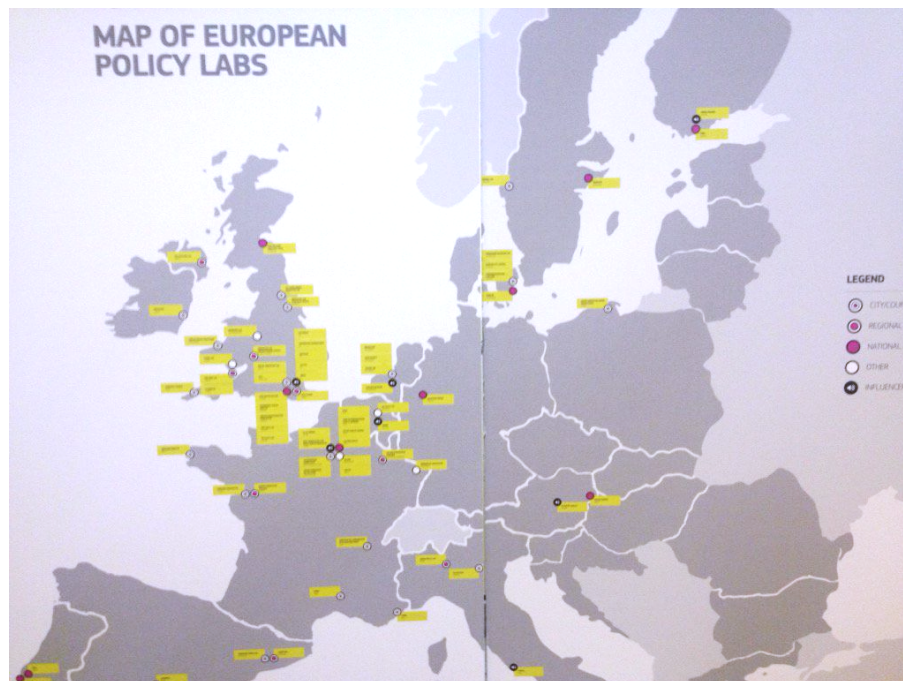
## **Context**

In 2016 the European Commission had recently established the EU Policy Lab (European Commission, 2021) within the Joint Research Commission, which described itself as ‘a collaborative and experimental space for innovative policymaking... a way of working that combines foresight, behavioural insights and design thinking’. The lab held an event in Brussels convening a number of other European ‘labs’ and policy innovation teams and experts, as well as staff within the European Commission they were keen to persuade of the benefits of an experimental design-led approach to policy innovation. The design agency I was working for had an entry in the exhibition of ‘innovative lab projects’ staged as part of the conference, and the conference organisers were looking for facilitators for the event, so I went along to represent the agency, act as a volunteer facilitator, listen, learn, and network. The conference ran over two days, with around 100 participants from multiple European Commission directorates, plus representatives from EU member states and ‘labs’. It all took place in the ‘piazza’ and conference space of the European Commission’s Berlaymont Building.

### **Extract from account written in the days following the event (notes 19.10.16)**

...The rows of chairs facing the podium were full when I arrived, so I sat on some steps at the back, cup of conference coffee in hand, notebook balanced on my knees. The convenor was explaining that this would be no ordinary conference: ‘this is going to be more like a cooking class. Because we know we need some new ways of cooking.’ Proceedings were inaugurated with a number of speeches from various European officials and dignitaries. The responsible MEP explained why he had the idea for a Policy Lab and why he thinks we need new European policies,

touching on recent high profile issues such as migration. The Vice President said that ‘the political world is ready for more innovative policy approaches’...



*Figure 1: Map of European 'policy labs' exhibited at the event (author's photo)*

After initial speeches there were two panel discussions. The first, with representatives from Portugal, Estonia, Finland and France, who were introduced as ‘frontrunners in public policy modernisation’, discussed public sector innovation in general. The Finnish delegate spoke at length about her government’s move to a more experimental culture, which she characterised as: ‘allowing failure, learning to do new things’.

The second panel, with representatives from the UK, France and the OECD, focused on ‘labs’ in particular, as ways of being experimental, creative and citizen-centred in policymaking. The French representative commented that in France ‘la modernisation de l’action publique’ in general, and the work his team does, is seen as valuable partly for ‘giving a voice’ to the civil servant, responding to years of frustration at ineffectual policy, and lending meaning to the work of the civil servant by connecting their efforts to impact. The design mode gives permission to people to be more ‘action-oriented’. A representative from the UK spoke about how they were ‘experimenting on real policy problems’, and mentioned speculative design as a method they had trialled. She said, ‘projects work well when we go into

prototyping straight away'. And 'we need to make it possible for front line workers to be flexible and agile'.

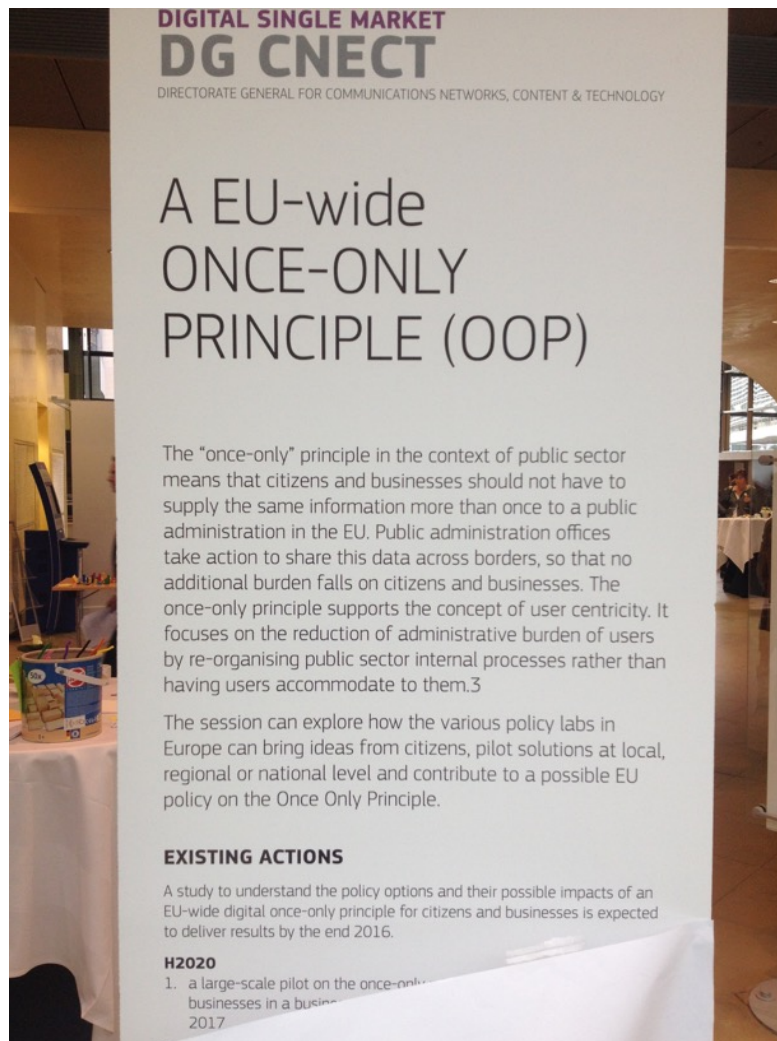
After lunch – during which we were invited to look at the exhibition of lab projects (including the one from my agency) – there was an introduction to the policy challenges that participants would spend the rest of the conference working on. These had all been put forward by policy 'owners' from different directorates, and ranged from social ('address public perception on migration') to business policy ('assist European start-ups'), and from very open-ended challenges ('connecting digital, physical, natural and social solutions for cities') to highly specified solutions ('a citizen charter for digital public services'). It was mentioned more than once that coming forward with these problems was a big step for policy colleagues in the Commission, for whom it would be 'challenging to admit they don't know how to solve' such problems.

Earlier in the day I had been taken aside, with the other facilitators, to be briefed on our role in the afternoon session, and we were each allocated to one of the challenges. We were to guide our groups towards identifying some collaborative 'actions' by the end of the afternoon. Then the facilitator and the policy owner should decide which idea to pursue in the next breakout workshop the following morning, where the draft idea would be explored in more detail, ultimately coming to a set of activities to take forward, and a 'kickstarter' action – the thing we could 'do tomorrow' to get going. Ideally, as part of this process, we would produce 'visualisations' of the problem – drawings or models – and plenty of craft materials (play-do, coloured pipe cleaners, wooden building blocks) had been provided to this end. The tables were covered in paper, we had whiteboards and lots of pens and post-it notes.

I was allocated to facilitate the 'Once Only Principle' (OOP) challenge – a policy area I knew nothing about. The OOP refers to the ideal that, for any citizen or business, a piece of information only has to be submitted to a public authority once, thereby eliminating the need for citizens to repeatedly hand over the same information to different bodies. This is a policy the European Commission is currently working on – the information supplied on a banner stand listed a number of studies and trials



underway – and the aim of my workshop was to generate fresh ideas and perspectives on how this principle could be implemented.



*Figure 2: information supplied to the breakout group working on the 'Once Only Principle' challenge (author's photo)*

In preparation for the workshop, I planned a process based on the 'double diamond' model of design, and some co-design methods I've used myself before or seen others use, with activities intending to alternately open up choices and then make decisions or conclusions. Participants arrived at my table (there were around 10 altogether from public sector organisations across Europe, as well as from the Commission itself), and after a short overview of the challenge from the policy owner, we went straight into co-design activities.

1. Unpacking the problem. I posed a series of questions (and wrote them down on the table) and asked participants to brainstorm their answers by writing on post-it

[illegible]

2. Identifying a challenge question. Through the preceding discussion I noted down what I thought were some recurring themes, and presented these back to the group. I asked them to add any others, and then in small groups, pick one and formulate a challenge question - phrased as 'how might we...?' The three questions they came up with were:

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3. Generating ideas. I set the little sub-groups off on a 2 minute 'idea sprint' – coming up with as many ideas as possible, of whatever kind, in answer to their challenge question, in 2 minutes. I gave them some prompts such as 'what would you do tomorrow with no money', 'what would you do if you were starting again from scratch', 'what would you do with unlimited funds', 'who would be in your dream team and what would they do', 'what would this look like if it was a social movement', 'what would a dictator do'?

4. Developing a solution. Each group then had to discuss and agree on one idea to take forward, and add detail by filling out a sheet responding to prompts such as 'what will you do?', 'with who?', 'what experiences would you learn from?', 'what initiatives could you link up with?'. Interestingly, all three groups converged on a similar solution: to 'change the model', and make citizens responsible for their own data, keeping everything in one place and granting access to public authorities when necessary.

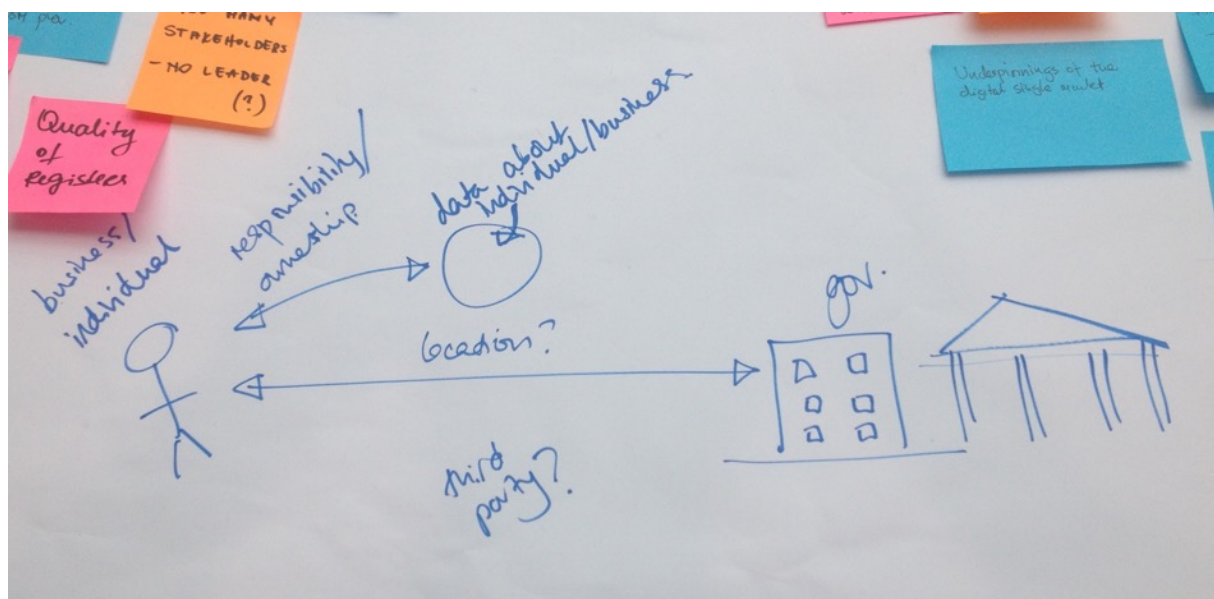


Figure 4 My sketch diagram at the end of the day representing the idea the group had come to (author's photo)

On the second day we continued working on the solution. I gave them the option of 'visualising' the idea, or working through Edward de Bono's '6 thinking hats', as a way of progressing. They chose visualising, but seemed unsure how to make a start. I initiated it by making a play-do person and sticking it in the centre of the table. After that, they got stuck in – and it became clear that we all had quite different understandings of what this idea meant in reality. For example – would the



The image shows a workshop table with a large white sheet of paper. The paper is covered with a complex diagram and numerous sticky notes. The diagram features a central path with a black and a pink figure, leading to two small wooden houses. Various hexagonal sticky notes contain handwritten questions and ideas, such as "What is the biggest risk?", "What is the data?", and "What are the benefits/positives?". The table also holds markers, scissors, a cup, and a bowl of colorful geometric shapes.

To round off the workshop, we had another sheet from the Policy Lab to fill in: what activities would we do to progress this solution, and what would our ‘kickstarter’

action be? We were few in number by that point, but four participants plus myself and the policy owner identified a few 'actions'.

After lunch on day 2, we did a collective tour of all the tables/ groups, with each one presenting the actions they had identified. I noticed that quite a few tables had done a persona somewhere along the way. The 'users' were very present in the conversation, figuratively. I was struck by how users were being talked about by one group – as having 'assets' and resources, that should be made the most of. The challenge they had identified was 'How do we safeguard the entrepreneurial mindset of refugees before they get beaten down by the system?'

Reflecting on how it had all gone, afterwards, I couldn't decide if I had done well or badly. In one sense, having had very little information to go on, no formal structure and no prior experience of dealing with this problem (as a group), we did come up with some plausible ideas for learning more about how to implement the 'once only principle'. But on the other hand, it didn't feel like it went brilliantly. Most of the activities didn't quite work as I had intended. People participated enthusiastically in the 'unpacking the problem', but everything after that felt like hard work. When it came to the idea sprint, one group threw themselves into it, one group sat and thought about it and came up with two ideas, and the third group opted out in various ways – by going to the toilet, or checking emails on their phone. One participant commented at the end of the first day that the three final ideas generated were not as valuable as the issues and thoughts that had emerged through the first 'unpacking the problem' discussion, and we should make sure we captured all of it, which I felt as a criticism of the activities I had made them do. Perhaps with such a complex problem it's somehow more comfortable to linger in the zone of diagnosing, rather than proposing what will inevitably be inadequate solutions? Or perhaps it was difficult for people to see the ideas we converged on as 'valid'? ...

After a post-event debrief between the facilitators and the Policy Lab (a lot of discussion of what went well/ what could have gone better), I had a few hours to kill before my train, so I took the opportunity to do some Art Nouveau tourism, and went to the Horta Museum. This is a house where the architect's hand has touched

almost every single feature. No surface or element is left plain or in its raw state – everything has very obviously been ‘designed’. You might love it or hate it, but there is no denying the effort, skill, expertise, and time that must have gone into making it. Given what I had just spent the last two days doing, this visit posed the very obvious question of what on earth might be the common thread between a two day workshop with civil servants and post-it notes, and the painstaking construction of a gilded house that allows us to call them both design. In what way are they classifiable as they same thing?’...

### **Our object of inquiry**

So what are we looking at here? This is a complicated mess of stuff. Treating it as a ‘design’ process and methods means ignoring an awful lot of other information and experience, sanitising the ‘overspills’ (Michael, 2012). Picking out one discrete kind of object is problematic. It makes more sense to treat the whole as a kind of apparatus: a heterogeneous assemblage of discourse, ideas and values (‘experimentation’ and ‘allowing failure’), people and identities (‘academics’, ‘designers’, ‘policymakers’, ‘lab practitioners’), practices (‘how might we...?’), material things (play-do and post-its), and objects of knowledge (‘users’). We will pick up, later, how we might make sense of this disciplinary apparatus as an object of inquiry with some anthropological concepts. In the next section we start by exploring the concept of discipline itself.

### **Dissecting discipline/s**

Discipline is a useful word for our purposes, comprising as it does a number of meanings, and thereby bringing together what might otherwise be seen as quite distinct objects (academic literature, professional identities, popular discourse and socio-material practices, for example). ‘Discipline’ can refer to the division of knowledge into discrete fields or domains, to the training and regulating of mind, body and habits that leads to self-mastery (Shumway & Messer-Davidow, 1991, p.

211), and to a larger set of strategies and techniques of control that have come to dominate much of modern life (Foucault, 1977). This is not a coincidence:

power and knowledge directly imply one another... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (p. 27)

In Foucault's work, knowledge and power are intrinsically linked. Knowledge is not only a product of power but also is itself a non-neutral form of power (Messer-Davidow, et al., 1993, p. 4). Foucault scholar James Bernauer sees his work as being preoccupied with three interrelated questions: how a field of knowledge is constituted, what forces are in operation in relation to it, and how self-formation is tied to it (Bernauer, 1990, p. 4). Foucault himself in looking back over his series of studies, reflected that collectively what they amount to is a history of how humans are made subjects through a threefold process: how humans are turned into objects of knowledge, how those objects are categorised and divided, and how humans turn themselves into subjects (Foucault, 2002, p. 326). Discipline, as 'an ensemble of minute technical inventions' (Foucault, 1977, p. 220), is the bridge between these things. Bodily discipline, social discipline – and the disciplines of knowledge – are therefore intimately connected to government. 'We are disciplined by our disciplines' (Messer-Davidow, et al., 1993, p. vii). The 'disciplining of bodies' and the 'government of souls' are two faces of a single process of normalisation (Senellart, 2007, p. 386). Discipline is essential to governmental management (Foucault, 2007, p. 107). In our case, what this means is that the field of knowledge and practice of 'design for government' (the discipline) has some bearing on how individuals do, think and become certain things (it disciplines, and governs).

'Disciplinarity' itself has become an object of study (Shumway & Messer-Davidow, 1991), with theories developed to account for 'the way modern disciplines control the organization and production of knowledge'. The contemporary disciplines (in the sense of subject-domains) produce knowledge and facts, practitioners, economies of value, and the very idea of progress itself (p. vii). There are methods and techniques for constructing the field, for defining what gets brought to light, and how (and what doesn't) (Preziosi, 1993). Groundbreaking studies of science and

technology, for example, demonstrated that natural scientific ‘facts’ are constructed through social, cultural, historical, and political processes (Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Woolgar, 1992; Pickering, 1992; Pickering, 1993). Disciplines are then socialised through practices (Messer-Davidow, et al., 1993, p. 15); ‘individuals have to learn to be bona fide disciplinary practitioners’ (p.5). And practitioners engage in ‘boundary work’ to demarcate and defend their territory (Gieryn, 1983). On this view there is no clear separation between the knowledge that is produced and the identities and interests of knowledge producers, no objective view from nowhere: it is all part of the same disciplinary mash-up. As Messer-Davidow and colleagues note in their edited collection on the theme of ‘disciplinarity’, ‘if we think of disciplines as groups with members, it is much harder to regard them as neutral enterprises wherein minds discover pure truths about various phenomena’ (Messer-Davidow, et al., 1993, p. 5). On this view, design as a discipline is a controlling force, shaping how and what we see, and producing practitioners who defend their turf. This suggests that, one, it is legitimate to consider design research, design practitioners, and design promotion efforts as a connected ‘site’; and two, that much design scholarship should be taken as part of the object of inquiry, rather than the intellectual basis from which to launch an inquiry.

In Foucault’s own work the connections that make up a disciplinary apparatus are drawn out through studies of specific kinds of knowledge (psychiatry, medicine, psychoanalysis, political economy), the practices and material technologies they are embedded within and produce (asylums, hospitals, the therapeutic relationship, population statistics), the ways they render individuals as objects and/ or subjects (the mad, ‘I am mad’) and control what comes to be accepted as ‘scientifically true’ (Foucault, 2002, p. 114).<sup>16</sup> He targeted in particular those fields he regarded as ‘dubious’ sciences, within which he thought the effects of power might be particularly conspicuous (p. 111). And there are good grounds for regarding design

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<sup>16</sup> For example, ‘Madness and Civilisation’ (Foucault, 1988), ‘The Birth of the Clinic’ (Foucault, 1996), the three volume ‘History of Sexuality’ (Foucault, 1998) (Foucault, 2020) (Foucault, 1990), and the lecture series ‘Security, Territory, Population’ (Foucault, 2007).



as being in a similar category, vulnerable to being buffeted about and transformed through political and strategic games, as this thesis will go on to demonstrate.

These works of Foucault's<sup>17</sup> introduced a range of concepts for deconstructing a power/ knowledge apparatus: the idea of discourse as an epistemic regime, governing what counts as 'true', and what is sayable and thinkable at any given time and place; 'regimes of practices', those coherent ways of doing things that possess their own logic, rules and reason, producing knowledge and action; 'technologies' as physical and material instantiations of epistemic and practice regimes, targeted at bodies and minds; and the idea of what happens to human beings caught up in these things, becoming objects of knowledge or subjects of power (and also resisting these processes) in different ways. In the chapters that follow, we apply these ideas to 'design for government', examining the discourse through which it has come to life, the practices and technologies it comprises, and that do the work of disciplining and governing, and the mechanisms by which human beings become objects of design, or the subjects that are changed through enrolment in its regime.

As a starting point for examining design, this is quite unusual. Studies of design do not usually begin by calling into question the discipline itself. The inspiration for asking these sorts of questions in this way has come from (apart from Foucault) studies of other objects, which are nevertheless not so far from our target here. In particular I want to touch on the related fields of 'creativity', 'policy', 'development' and 'management', and scholarly critiques that have problematised them as disciplinary or governmental apparatuses.

Genealogical and discourse analysis studies of creativity have identified the ideal of creativity as a major social force that is expressed not only in art, but in industry and the economy more generally, as well as in psychology and self-help (Reckwitz, 2017). Creativity has been discursively deployed to manage people at work, enrolling the individual's desire to 'be creative' in pursuit of corporate objectives (Prichard, 2002). Young people are exhorted to become creative selves through the

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<sup>17</sup> See also 'The Archaeology of Knowledge' (Foucault, 1989), and 'Discipline and Punish' (Foucault, 1977)

practices and discourse of creative education (Bill, 2008). The desire to ‘be creative’ (McRobbie, 2016) produces certain ways of being a person, which is not just about what one thinks, but about some quite material choices, as Lily Chumley notes in her book about art students in China:

these students perform creativity by generating a recognisable self in and through a style: a multimodal complex that links modes of speech and behaviour, texts and verbal narrative to plastic and graphic form (Chumley, 2016, p. 9).

Creativity is not just a word: it makes things happen in education, at work, to people’s feelings towards themselves, and to their wardrobes. Its tentacles reach a long way, perhaps preparing the ground for design. After all, design is taken to be (or rather, as we will see, has been constructed as) a creative endeavour. We might suppose therefore that some of the mechanisms and logics of ‘creativity’ as an operant idea, might be equally visible in design.

While we might be more used to the idea that ‘policies’ make things happen in the world, quite deliberately, critical anthropologies of policy (as distinct from the more instrumental anthropology *for* policy, and policy studies) are valuable to us here for the way that they destabilise their object, beginning from the premise that ‘policy’ is itself ‘a curious and problematic social and cultural construct that needs to be unpacked and contextualized if its meanings are to be understood’ (Shore, 2012, p. 90). Cris Shore and Susan Wright argue in their book on the ‘Anthropology of Policy’ that policies act as discursive formations and legitimating narratives (or ‘myths’) that create new categories of subject (Shore & Wright, 1997), and are ‘reflective of the cultural systems in which they are embedded’ (Shore, 2012). Anthropologies of policy shade into ethnographies of neoliberal governmentality (Brady, 2014; Ferguson & Gupta, 2002), which explore how people are affected – directly by the state and beyond – by the logics of neoliberalism. This is both about how people are made subject, and how they resist: how they might perceive the limits of the market and act on a different kind of self-understanding, for example (Greenhouse, 2010; Richland, 2009). These studies again draw connections between a general cultural context or structuring rationality, and the quite personal effects on individual human beings.

Critiques of 'international development' policy and practice highlight the divergence between publicly stated values or intent, and the actual (unacknowledged) governmental effects and strategies. Anthropologist Arturo Escobar, in his book, 'Encountering Development', demonstrates how development discourse, rather than generating parity and independence, has been just as effective as colonial rule as a mechanism of control over the 'third world' (Escobar, 2012). Ferguson's study of the development industry in Lesotho (Ferguson, 1990) finds that it evacuates the field of politics. He explores how certain unintended effects might occur 'unconsciously' as a product of the commingling of intent, unacknowledged structures and chance events, produced 'behind the backs or against the wills of the planners'. He finds that the outcome of the development apparatus designed to engineer economic transformation seems to have been, paradoxically, the expansion of state power. Also targeting the 'development' power/knowledge apparatus is a collection of essays by Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (Cooke & Kothari, 2001), who explore the divergence between the rhetoric around 'participation' in development, and the realities of practice, arguing that at best it is naïve about power relations, and at worst the discourse functions to mask the reinforcement (rather than overthrow) of inequalities. These studies identify and explore the divergence between official narratives, and that which is empirically observable (as we are doing here). In a journal paper, David Mosse probes into how, exactly, this dissonance is sustained, deploying the anthropological gaze to challenge instrumental accounts of policymaking (Mosse, 2004). He reveals an interesting mechanism whereby practitioners work hard to represent their work as conforming to the official theory:

authoritative interpretations have to be made and sustained socially.

Development projects need 'interpretive communities'; they have to enrol a range of supporting actors with reasons to participate in the established order as if its representations were reality (p. 646).

He finds that the vagueness and ambiguity of the metaphors floating around policy discourse ('participation', 'partnership', 'governance', 'social capital') do important work in concealing ideological differences (Mosse, 2004, p. 663). As we will see,

similar mechanisms are detectable in the 'design for government' discourse and practitioner community.

Finally, there is a large body of work, collectively known as 'critical management studies' (CMS) (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Adler, et al., 2007; Alvesson & Deetz, 2000), where critical means 'critical not of poor management or of individual managers, but of the system of business and management' itself (Adler, et al., 2007, pp. 126-7), and 'system' is a shorthand for management and organisational knowledge, mainstream academic research about management, and the techniques and practices within organisations (which we might otherwise think of as an apparatus).

To name just a few contributions: Stanley Deetz explores how cultural and normative controls operate as alternative technologies of power to bureaucratic regimes and direct oversight. Normative control seeps into the workplace in all sorts of unspoken and material ways (Deetz, 1998). Mike Savage looks at the invention of the bureaucratic career as a mechanism for disciplining a large and dispersed workforce, first pioneered by the nineteenth century railway companies (Savage, 1998), bringing employees into line by appealing to their own ambition. Ed Barratt (Barratt, 2003) and Barbara Townley (Townley, 1994) look at human resource management as an objectifying power-knowledge system, with a suite of disciplinary mechanisms that construct their knowable object (the behaviour and performance of employees) as they measure and manage it. David Knights and Hugh Willmott demonstrate how a Foucauldian understanding of subjectivity provides a more satisfactorily explanatory account of what actually goes on at work than other labour theories (Knights & Willmott, 1989). Paul du Gay, with a focus on the state, looks at the effects of 'bureaucracy-bashing' within contemporary managerial discourse (Du Gay, 1994; Du Gay, 2007).

Each of these critical endeavours, in macro and micro ways, have provided numerous parallel examples and 'lightbulb moments' that have informed the analysis within this thesis. At the micro level, there are specific insights about creativity (the extent to which it reaches inside the self), policy (the invention of policy as a deceptively simple concept), development (the difference between intent

and effects, the strategic vagueness of language, the work practitioners do to ‘make sense’), participation (the masking of coercion by consensus) and management (the idea of submerged and subject-producing control, and the force of the managerial discourse) that have come together to enrich my understanding of my site. At the macro level, these studies collectively demonstrate a way of going about a critical inquiry that problematises not only a practice or industry, but also the mainstream ways of thinking about and researching it. There are a number of common elements to this: a recognition of the power/ knowledge nexus; an anti-performative or anti-instrumental intent; denaturalisation – or questioning the taken-for-granted; reflexivity (Fournier & Grey, 2000; Grey & Willmott, 2005; Adler, et al., 2007; Spicer, et al., 2009); and a concern with *how* not whether things work (Mosse, 2004; Ferguson, 1990). Let’s briefly run through these strategies and discuss how they relate to design.

Performativity has been characterised as ‘the optimization of the global relationship between input and output’ (Lyotard, 1984, p. 11), and the resulting ‘subordination of knowledge to the production of efficiency’ and effectiveness (Fournier & Grey, 2000, p. 17). We will refer to this as instrumentalism, as we will go on to use performativity in a slightly different sense later in the thesis. An instrumental logic has two effects. First, within practices, the point of management, anthropology, policy, creativity and so on, is understood to be to contribute to the delivery of the system’s desired outcome. In the case of management for example it would mean to ‘organize the factors of production, including human labour power, in a way that ensures their efficient and profitable application’ – or in other words, everything is subordinated to the profit motive. Things that do not fit within the means-ends calculation are rendered irrelevant or invisible (Adler, et al., 2007, p. 129). In the case of design, it means that the point of design is its service to organisational objectives, whatever they might be. Second, the rationale for studying practice is to contribute to its effectiveness. The ‘acid test of whether knowledge has any value [is] if it can, at least in principle, be applied to enhance the means of achieving established ends’ (Grey & Willmott, 2005, pp. 5-6). All research should be assessed on the basis of its contribution in this regard – all research articles should end with ‘implications for managers’ (Adler, et al., 2007, pp. 129-30) (or policymakers, or whoever). Design

research in an instrumental mode shares the same set of interests as design practice, which typically then results in a preoccupation with studying and accounting for 'what works'. With each of these objects of study (creativity, policy, development, management – and design) there are large and mainstream bodies of academic work in an instrumental mode that the smaller number of critical inquiries we have discussed here are setting themselves up in opposition to.

Critical research resists this kind of instrumental straitjacket: it assumes there might be other things to be discussed, other ways of thinking about things, and it is not interested in being in service mode to practice.<sup>18</sup> There are arguments about whether an 'anti-instrumental' rhetoric is disingenuous (Spicer, et al., 2009): research always has some instrumental purpose, even if it is simply to further the career of academics, and some kind of effect in mind (Fournier & Grey, 2000). Instead one could aim for 'critical performativity', an 'active and subversive intervention into ... discourses and practices' (Spicer, et al., 2009, p. 538). What is perhaps most useful to take from these debates is the simple principle that it is constraining to the spirit of inquiry to always have one eye on producing something that can be operationalised by practitioners, and that there are clearly more ways of interpreting design discourses and practices than a reductive means-ends framework.

Denaturalisation refers to the simple move of 'questioning and opening up what has become seen as given, unproblematic and natural' (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992, p. 13). It is the act of pointing to norms and assumptions that may be so embedded as to have become invisible, and asking questions about them. Does design really deliver innovation? Does participation really empower people? Must the state really become more like a business? Is design inherently a good thing? (And so on). It is through doing so, through revealing the precarious and contingent construction of the present, that one can begin to identify the alternatives 'that have been effaced by [dominant forms of] knowledge and practice' (Fournier & Grey, 2000, p. 18). Critical research is a process of 'counteracting discursive closure' (Alvesson &

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<sup>18</sup> It seems almost a too-obvious point to make, that there might be more reasons to research design than, putting it crudely, to explain practice back to itself. Nevertheless it does seem to need stating.

Willmott, 1992), of 'writing in what has been written out' (Fournier & Grey, 2000, p. 18)

Reflexivity is an increasingly common expectation within social research, having moved from the feminist margins towards the mainstream. Non-critical writing is characterised by the lack of reflection on epistemology, ontology, or methodology (p. 19). In critical work we expect to find 'the capacity to recognise that accounts are mediated by those... who produce them' (Grey & Willmott, 2005, p. 6).

These three tenets – anti-instrumentalism, denaturalisation, reflexivity – are all underpinned by the fundamental Foucauldian assumption of a constitutive relation between knowledge and power: 'forms of knowledge, which appear to be neutral, reflect and reinforce asymmetrical relations of power' (Adler, et al., 2007, p. 121). By resisting the pull towards instrumentalism and constructing other bodies of knowledge, by questioning what is taken to be common sense, and by reflecting on the conditions of the production of knowledge, critical research actively and knowingly engages in the power/ knowledge struggle.

Finally these studies are all preoccupied by a certain kind of question: which is not whether or not the object in question 'works' effectively, or whether it is 'good' or 'bad', but rather *how* it operates. The power/knowledge apparatus is assumed, the challenge is to understand what it is doing, to whom, and how. Ferguson deploys the analogy of vivisection: it is not a question of arguing against the frog, or finding out how well it does at being a frog, but rather of dissecting it to find out how it works (Ferguson, 1990). Vivisection is a useful metaphor for our purposes: 'design for government' is something that has dimensions, characteristics, mechanisms, and real material and social effects, and we want to find out what these are. The challenge is to take off the blinkers of design discourse, in order to see the object of inquiry anew.

This section has only skimmed over a small handful of contributions in these respective fields, however what I hope it has served to demonstrate is a kind of form in critical research that I intend to emulate here and thus bring to bear on the apparatus of 'design'. Indeed, given that there is no shortage of examples of how productive and revealing this kind of analytical mode can be, it is remarkable that it

has been so little applied to design to date. But perhaps this is because to sustain a critical approach to design scholarship, we need to question the very idea of design itself, and certainly destabilise our common assumptions about it, ignore the interests and needs of design practice, recognise our own complicity and entanglement in the production of knowledge, and see mainstream design research as part of the apparatus to be studied, rather than foundational research to be built upon. All of which may be challenging for those inhabiting – as many design researchers do – the disciplinary world of design practice.

## **The ethnographic discipline**

So, if our object of inquiry is the (disciplinary) apparatus of ‘design for government’, which necessarily includes the academic field of design research, this implies that in order to successfully make it our object of knowledge, we need to step outside the disciplinary confines of design, and give ourselves a different disciplinary vantage point (or points). We are already well on our way with our Foucauldian conceptual toolbox<sup>19</sup>, and with the critical principles of denaturalisation, anti-instrumentalism, and so on. However, a number of the studies outlined above deploy these tools and principles in tandem with ethnography or anthropology. In our case, our research questions require a strategy that allows us to look at the site holistically, at close quarters and in real time. We want to know about more things than are captured in text alone – how the practices work, what happens to people, what effects are visible, and so on.

If all disciplines have their own fields of visibility, their particular ontological assumptions, then ethnography in its broadest sense sees social worlds, which is its primary attraction for this inquiry. There are many variations, but a common thread is the practice of taking part in, observing and recording of life in some particular context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 1) in order to shed light on a

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<sup>19</sup> Foucault himself characterised his work as ‘a kind of tool box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area . . . . I don’t write for an audience, I write for users not readers.’ Quoted in (Defert, et al., 1994, p. 136).



research question. This is an approach to research that tries to study the world in as close to its natural state as possible (p. 6), and to develop understandings of people and cultures, revealing the meanings that animate social worlds. It is 'not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning' (Geertz, 1973, p. 5), an inquiry into the 'interpretive, institutional and relational makings of the present' (Greenhouse, 2010, p. 2). Given the size of the ethnographic domain (it has been described as the dominant form of qualitative inquiry of the last half century (Lofland, 1995)), there is a great deal of methodological variety. In the preceding section we discussed a sample of ethnographic objects of study. In this section we will look at arguments around *ways of doing* ethnography that have informed the methodology outlined in Chapter 1.

### **'At home' and multi-sited**

Historically the research practice of ethnography emerged as part of the West's colonial endeavour to scientifically understand (and no doubt tame) the foreign 'other' (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 1). This typically involved immersion in some far-flung tribe in order to write descriptions and interpretations of their life and culture (see for example Bronislaw Malinowski's genre-defining texts on the 'savages' of Melanesia). As a research tradition which presumes the authority of The West to represent other societies, this has subsequently been roundly critiqued (Rosaldo, 1989; Clifford, 1986). There have been calls to 'study up' – to scrutinise elites as well as the less fortunate (Nader, 1972) – and to move closer to home, to turn the anthropological gaze on one's nearest environment and home culture (Rosselin, 2009; Augé, 1995; Strathern, 1987; Alvesson, 2009). One doesn't need to go abroad to study the other: 'strangeness does not start on the other side of the ocean, but at the tip of the nose' (Krause-Jensen, 2010, p. 168). The unspoken 'hierarchy of purity' of anthropological sites that privileged such exotic locales as the African village has been challenged (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997) and, by now, more or less inverted, as studies of 'urban elites, scientists, activists, professionals, technocrats and specialists' have proliferated (Sorge & Padwe, 2015).

As ethnographic sites moved closer to home they also splintered. Although some resist the idea that the traditional single-site location of anthropology was ever understood in such bounded, static or isolated terms (Marcus & Okely, 2007; Mitchell, 2010), a feature of ethnography's transformation over the last decades has been a 'decentering of locality' (Coleman & von Hellermann, 2010), and a shifting of the sense of what 'a site' is, away from 'the village' and towards 'systems of relations that constitute more globally holistic realities' (Sorge & Padwe, 2015). George E. Marcus coined the concept of 'multi-sited ethnography' to accommodate the fact that experiences of contemporary life are rarely confined to a single place (Marcus, 1986; Marcus, 1995) and to allow for the possibility of research 'following' its quarry across such dis-located things as 'commodity chains/ productive processes, migration networks, plots/narratives, metaphors, or circulations of ideas'. Eva Nadai and Christoph Maeder conceptualise the field as a 'social world(s) constituted by a set of actors focused on a common concern' (Nadai & Maeder, 2005). Not dissimilar is the idea of 'field-level ethnography' (Zilber, 2014, p. 97), an extension of organisational ethnography (Watson, 2012; Ybema, et al., 2009) designed to get some purchase on phenomena that cut across and between organisations. Helena Wulff notes that the multi-site does not dictate a particular methodology, but is rather a 'conceptual topology that opens up spaces for experimentation', a productive concept for scholars researching in many domains, permitting the exploration of phenomena that cut across locales (Wulff, 2014).

Taken together these concepts are well-suited to capturing our object of inquiry here, 'design for government', which is at once a structuring idea, a (globalised) discourse, a set of practices, and a social and professional world. This idea and apparatus of 'design for government' can be found and studied in the design studio, in government departments, in workshops with all manner of participants, at industry events, on social media, in the academic and grey literature, at conferences, and so on. It extends beyond a single consultancy or a single team within government, to a wider world of practice and discourse, an amorphous network of people and organisations that share something, think they are engaged in a similar set of things, have the same methodological reference points, tools of the trade and artefacts, come together for conferences and other gatherings, read

each other's blogs, draw on each other's experiences for validation, pick up and regurgitate certain formulations, and even dress alike. This is a globalised discursive phenomenon that plays out in some culturally specific ways in different locales. Therefore the site of this study is both de-localised (the layer of discourse that cuts across sites) and highly geographically specific (the practices and events I have experienced in the UK in the last 5-10 years). In terms of attempting to 'capture' the field, then, a mix of kinds of data are desirable. I am bringing together an ethnographic record of practice – from a site that has inevitably moved across organisations, and sometimes national borders, as my work has taken me to different places – with the things that get written down in various ways in blogs, think tank publications, academic research, and so on.

### **Opportunistic auto-ethnography**

As well as the shifting idea of 'site', the role of the researcher in the research has also been problematised within ethnographic practice. On one level, the researcher is always inherently present in the text: 'all ethnology presupposes the existence of a direct witness to a present actuality' (Augé, 1995). The researcher's mind and body are the primary research instrument (Conquergood, 1991), and the writing down (or up) is an act of representation by a specific individual: 'the ethnographer's interpretation of phenomena is always something that is crafted through an ethnographic imagination' (Atkinson, 2006, p. 402). Given this recognition, although anthropologists have traditionally often featured in their own fieldnotes, accounts and 'confessional tales' of how the research got done (Van Maanen, 1988; Anderson, 2006), the goal of reflexivity, and the attention paid to the role of autobiography, has become increasingly prominent over time.

Auto/ethnography (Reed-Danahay, 1997) (or autoethnography, or auto-ethnography, depending on where the emphasis falls, (Ellis & Bochner, 2003)) goes one step further, where the researcher becomes part of the phenomenon to be studied. The researcher's role in the field is not simply that of a detached observer, but a full participating *member* of the social world under study (Adler & Adler, 1987). Accordingly the approach to inquiry of that social world includes self-observation

(Anderson, 2006). In a paper reflecting on the characteristics of organisational autoethnography, Clair Doloriert and Sally Sambrook note that it may come about as a result of a researcher wishing to investigate their own context (higher education, in most cases) (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2012, p. 86), or opportunistically taking advantage of a previous or 'other life' context (Sambrook & Herrmann, 2018). Or one might make oneself a member in order to do the research: '*becoming* as ontological investigation' (Luvaas, 2017). In my case, where the site crosses between consultancy and research environments, where I have had a foot in both camps, and as I have changed roles in connection with the research, and reoriented the research in response to professional experience, it is a little of all three.

Auto-ethnography is one way of responding to postcolonial concerns with objectifying and representing 'the other'. It can also (as in this case) be driven by a critical concern to address the 'disjunctions that occur between one's own experience and the official narratives set out to explain it' (Muncey, 2010, p. 10). However it has not been an uncontroversial idea. Critics have dismissed it as navel-gazing, unethical, lacking analytic outcomes, focusing on the wrong side of the power divide, a lazy form of inquiry where the academic does not even have to leave their desk (Delamont, 2007), and representing 'the climax of the preoccupation with self' (Gans, 1999). It does indeed present some challenges: how does one achieve rigour and reliability in 'opportunistic' autoethnography when drawing on recollection, for example? How does one protect the people around the researcher who may be unavoidably identifiable? How does one make the 'familiar strange' (Clifford, 1986, p. 2)?

We have already talked a little about critical distance. This can partly be achieved through confronting one's experience with the kind of theoretical ideas and toolbox we have been discussing, with histories and ideas from other fields, setting out with the intent to 'denaturalise'. Trying to apply Foucault to one's own life is quite an effective de-familiarisation tactic.

What about reliability? Ethnography – the writing of culture – is always an interpretive and intersubjective enterprise, the representation of a world through writing about it. Our accounts always distort – there is no unmediated alternative

(Ellis, 2007). I have sometimes been working from recollection, creating a record after the fact: but whether recording events at the moment of their happening, or some time later, one is always actively choosing where to direct one's attention. Some detail may be lost in the delay, but on the other hand, as a full member of the field, I have no shortage of raw material. In any case, if I am acting as my own informant, answering the questions as though I was another practitioner being interviewed, the challenge of reliability is no different than if my research strategy was to interrogate other informants about their experience. Subjective interpretation is inherently unavoidable. Field notes are not a perfect record: they are an experience to be reflected upon. And given the indeterminacy of our object – not a quantity to be measured or a controlled effect to be observed, but a shifting social world with as many possible interpretations as members – there is no research instrument that could faithfully capture it all. Indeed: what would be the point in simply reproducing everything? The interpretation is the point. And whatever the research, whatever the strategy for data capture, the final account is always written by a person, from a particular (subjective) point of view. As Hammersley and Atkinson note,

writing is not a transparent medium allowing us to see reality through it,  
but rather a construction that draws on many rhetorical strategies  
(Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 14)

So, there is no absolute objective 'Truth' to be sought. Whether it's ethnography or auto-ethnography, our aim is an interpretive account, that nevertheless achieves a degree of validity, reliability, and rigour (Richardson, 2000).

In relation to preserving anonymity or protecting sensitive data, there are possibilities within the act of representation itself. Ethnographic writing styles can vary enormously, from the traditional disembodied voice of authority, where the author is a hidden and seemingly omniscient presence in the text, to autoethnographic accounts that put the author and their subjective experiences centre stage, and everything in between. Fictionalisation (Watson, 2000) and semi-fictionalisation (Humphreys & Watson, 2009) can be useful strategies for preserving anonymity. After all, the intent is to 'extract meaning from experience rather than to

depict experience exactly as it was lived' (Bochner, 2000, p. 270), to achieve 'truthfulness' rather than 'The Truth' (Medford, 2006).

There are also some clear advantages to this approach in relation to my research questions. There is the access to an insider view that auto-ethnography provides, which means a window on to some things that might otherwise remain hidden from an inquiring researcher, and a kind of 'speeding up' of the research. There is no need to worry about 'passing' (Goodenough, 1956). One knows how to decipher a wink from a twitch (Geertz, 1973). There is tacit knowledge at one's fingertips. Further, given the likelihood of detecting the effects of governmentality on 'subjectivities' and self-government – 'the practices by which we endeavour to govern our own selves, characters and persons' (Dean, 2010, p. 20) – one's own internal world and self-management is as good a place to look as any for the signs of power at work. So this is not just sharing for sharing's sake: 'the self-narrative ... is used, in part, to develop and refine generalized theoretical understandings of social processes' (Anderson, 2006, p. 385). This can be particularly valuable when insights derived from self-narrative enable the reader to go somewhere they couldn't otherwise go. In my case, this means 'bearing witness' to some aspects of design for government practice that are not normally discussed.

Both ethnography and studies of governmentality/ power relations run the risk of academic superiority: a claim to some kind of truth about the other that they have not been able to see themselves. This is also where the auto-ethnographic can prove itself valuable. Putting one's own experiences under the spotlight helps avoid the risks of drawing reductive or over-simplifying conclusions. Becker notes that 'the sociological view of the world necessarily deflates peoples' view of themselves... something precious to them is treated merely as an instance of a class' (Becker, 1964, p. 273). Making reductive generalisations is somewhat harder when it is your own life experience, with all its nuances, in question. And, again, one is not claiming some more privileged access to the truth, but putting forward an alternative narrative.

So while it may be possible to level accusations of lazy self-absorption at auto-ethnography, what it does do (in the case of this particularly inquiry) is put us right

into the heart of the apparatus we are seeking to understand. It opens up a viewpoint that would otherwise probably always remain hidden, sanitised or tidied up for public consumption. Bringing a Foucauldian theoretical framework to bear on this window into (my own) practice has enabled me to ask and entertain questions not typically thinkable within the limits of design discourse.

### **The place and use of theory**

Beyond the basic assumption that what one is looking at is some kind of social world, ethnography has the advantage of being compatible with a broad spectrum of theoretical lenses. However there are debates as to the appropriateness of narrowing one's gaze through the imposition of a theoretical frame. If ethnography is supposed to be an 'unfettered' kind of inquiry (Lofland, 1995), does too rigid a commitment to testing a theory limit what one might find? Is it possible to inquire openly while still investigating a particular set of ideas? (Wilson & Chaddha, 2009). In keeping with truth to social worlds, should we resist the urge to move from description to explanation, to 'oversimplify the complexity of everyday life' (Denzin, 1971, p. 168)? Or, on the other hand, is an analytic agenda essential to good research (Lofland, 1995)? Isn't the purpose of research not simply to represent, but to make connections between 'particularistic accounts and more general understandings' (Snow, et al., 2003, p. 184), going beyond mimicry, 'not only truthfully rendering the social world under investigation but also transcending that world through broader generalization' (Anderson, 2006, p. 388)?

Proponents of auto-ethnography fall into two broad camps: evocative (Ellis, et al., 2010) – where the self and one's experiences are the object of research, and the ambition is emotional affect – and analytic (Anderson, 2006), where the effort is in service of something beyond understanding the self and one's experience. The argument for an *analytic* autoethnography has been contested by some proponents of evocative autoethnography as an attempt by traditional social research to neutralise a more radical research technique (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). However it is not inevitable that these two approaches are mutually exclusive – each might be more or less appropriate depending on the research question. This study therefore

sits at the analytical end of the auto-ethnographic spectrum, simply because it seems the most appropriate mode for tackling the research questions. I am less interested in helping readers ‘feel’ what my experience has been like, than taking advantage of the unusual perspective that experience affords to support an original theoretical discussion.

In any case, I believe it is impossible to absolve oneself entirely of theoretical framings – all data are structured within some kind of theoretical presupposition (Hanson, 1958), even if unconsciously so. If one accepts this, that a frame is inevitable, then one might as well try and be self-conscious and deliberate about it. And so, there are three main ways of building or connecting with theory from a foundation of fieldwork – *extending* or *refining* existing theories from other domains, or *discovering* entirely new concepts (Snow, et al., 2003). In fact, theories have swept through the anthropological field like fashions: symbolism and structuralism, Marxism, practice theory, feminism, postmodernism (Ortner, 1984; Barnard, 2000). Certain theories seem to have become particularly tied to places and specific cultures (Appadurai, 1986). And as noted above, governmentality and discourse analysis has proven popular among those anthropologists seeking to critique policy, the state, neoliberalism, development, and so on, perhaps because these sites are so evidently riven with power relations.

In my case, I initially tried to combine a degree of openness with an analytical intent through a strategy of successively trying different theoretical frameworks on for size, as it were – testing their explanatory power against the data. In the end I came back to an idea whose salience had struck me early on: governmentality. In exploring this theoretical domain, I began to see how it might account not only for what happens to ‘users’, and the sorts of solutions that get proposed through ‘design for government’ projects, but equally for the dynamics and forward movement of the field as a whole. By adopting a power/ knowledge lens I am extending this kind of theoretical frame, well-tested on other kinds of object, into the world of design, and specifically ‘design for government’.



## **Design as an object of inquiry**

I have argued that we need to set to one side much of design research, as being too close to the object of study, complicit in its construction. However there are two fields of design-related research worth mentioning. If this thesis is positioned anywhere within design scholarship, it would be within (or perhaps on the edge of) design culture studies, and anthropologies of design.

### **Design culture studies**

‘Design culture’ is a response to the demand for a broader comprehension of design, and a more plural approach to its study, ‘an attempt to ‘break the stand-off between design history and a larger culture of design research’ (Julier, 2006, p. 73). The term is used to refer to both the object of study and the field of scholarship (Julier, 2014). Conceptually, it creates space for thinking about the constitution of design itself as a contemporary category of object and action, and for problematising new ‘disciplinary constellations’ (Julier & Munch, 2019, p. 2), as we are doing here.

As an object to be studied, the notion of ‘design culture/s’ implies a networked and amorphous understanding of design. The term has been deployed variously: to mean the organisational cultural context of the production of designs – the ‘way of doing things’ round here (Deserti & Rizzo, 2015, p. 45); as the intensification in recent history ‘of the dynamics between design production and consumption’ (Julier, 2013, p. 216); or as the culture of expert designers – the whole that is more than the sum of their tools and methodologies (Manzini, 2016, p. 54). What these meanings have in common is the notion that ‘design’ is something more than skills, processes and products. The ‘cultural’ view of design incorporates these things as well as practices, beliefs, values, and so on.

As a field of inquiry, ‘design culture studies’ implies a broadening view of how designing and designs exist and operate in the world, ‘paying attention to the networks and relationships between the domains of design practice, production and everyday life’ (Julier & Munch, 2019, p. 1). There are some slight differences of

emphasis in approach. First, there is a cultural studies approach to the designed-ness of the everyday, displacing the centrality of ‘designer’, ‘product’ and ‘extraordinariness’ to investigate ‘the thoroughly entangled nature of our interactions in the material world’ (Highmore, 2009, p. 2). And then there is the seam that is concerned with studying, holistically, the interlocking domains of ‘designer’, ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ (Julier, 2006, p. 15). Responding to the tendency within material culture studies to focus on the ‘consumption’ side of the production-consumption binary – on the entanglements between people and things (Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 1987), on the social life of commodities (Agha, 2011) and on processes of commodification (van Binsbergen, 2006, p. 11) – design culture attempts to reunite circuits of production and consumption, designing and consuming, things and people. Within this mode there is a growing collection of loosely connected studies of contemporary design cultures (Julier & Munch, 2019), focused on the ‘new densities, convergences, mediations and disciplinary constellations both inside and beyond the professional cultures of the designers’ (p. 2) that have intensified since the 1980s. The design culture we are studying in this thesis is part of this intensification,<sup>20</sup> and indeed it is within design culture that we find the most disinterested analysis of ‘design for government’. Guy Julier’s book ‘Economies of Design’, situates the intensification of design cultures over recent decades as a product of neoliberal policies and rationalities, and places the emergence of ‘design for government’ as a realm of commercial design activity alongside neoliberal practices and trends in public administration, such as New Public Management, marketisation, austerity, networked governance and behaviour change (Julier, 2017, pp. 144-59). This is a valuable contribution, however the economic framing only gets us so far in our quest to make sense of this disciplinary apparatus. Indeed Foucault himself noted that while ‘economic history and theory provided a good instrument for relations of production’, they do not fully capture relations of power (Foucault, 2002, p. 327). In any case, the frame of production/ consumption doesn’t

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<sup>20</sup> This definition is not too dissimilar from the concept of disciplinary apparatus that we have established, the difference perhaps being that ‘apparatus’ implies an assemblage that does some work, or has a strategic function, whereas power relations are less explicitly present in the notion of ‘constellation’.

sit easily here. These terms imply a direction of travel, an order of things, a conveyor belt of industry that leads ultimately to a product: a mental model of design that close observation of this site calls into question.

That said, if this study sits anywhere within design scholarship it is design culture studies. First, because 'design culture' implies the holistic encompassing of methods, tools, artefacts, environments, meanings, ideas, values, beliefs, people, policies, discourses and so on, that we have said comprise our object of inquiry. We don't need to separate these things out, but can regard them as parts of a single phenomenon. Second, because understanding what we are looking at as a kind of design culture is necessarily quite anti-instrumental. It doesn't make sense to ask if a culture 'works'. It creates the possibility to talk about design practices (as well as designed objects) in socio-cultural terms, beyond 'functional, solution-oriented discourse' (Manzini, 2016). And so in design culture we can find some clear water between research and practice: it is deliberately not in service mode to the design professions (Julier & Munch, 2019, p. 7).

By nature, a design culture inquiry must scavenge ideas and theories from other places. It has been noted that the entire field is comparatively 'outward looking and permeable in its disciplinary borders' (Julier & Munch, 2019, p. 1). Studying design cultures in their multiple dimensions means being necessarily multidisciplinary (Highmore, 2009, p. 2), becoming a 'neo-expert in psychology, management, technologies, politics, cultural studies, economics, sociology, ethnography and human geography, notwithstanding design studies, design history and design management' (Julier, 2006, pp. 238-9). Such a heterogeneous approach can be challenging to identify and articulate. In a paper exploring the question of 'design knowledge', Michael Erlhoff (2015, p. 81) highlights the risk of finding oneself 'searching through a supermarket of ideas'. But if we are after provocation, speculation and possibility rather than bagging up a quantum of (instrumentally-useful) 'design knowledge' then this sort of roaming in other fields is the only option. As discussed in chapter 1, it was this kind of reading beyond and outside of design research that helped contextualise and make sense of the 'design for government' literature itself.

## **Anthropologies of design**

One might hope that an anthropological gaze would put design firmly in its place as a contingent socio-cultural construct. It does seem to be a site of growing interest. As anthropologist Keith Murphy notes in a paper summarising the intersections between design and anthropology: ‘design seems to be almost everywhere, so it is not so surprising that it is receiving renewed anthropological interest’ (Murphy, 2016, p. 444). Pauline Garvey and Adam Drazin (also anthropologists) argue that critical attention to design is one of the most interesting frontiers of the anthropological discipline (Garvey & Drazin, 2016). In fact design and anthropology come in various different combinations, so let’s clarify which we are interested in here. Murphy does a version of Christopher Frayling’s formula<sup>21</sup>: ‘anthropology of design, anthropology for design, and design for anthropology’ – or one could call this last one ‘anthropology by design’/ ‘design anthropology’ (Murphy, 2016).

The tradition of ‘applied’ anthropology, or ethnography, ‘conducted in pursuit of explicit design goals’ (Ball & Ormerod, 2000), has its roots in the Computer Supported Cooperative Work movement (Schmidt & Bannon, 1992). Ethnography developed in the field of design and technology as a result of designers’ (and corporations’) interest in having a window onto how consumers interact with their products (Wasson, 2000; Blomberg & Karasti, 2013). Anthropological techniques and understandings are somewhat in service to the design process (not to mention the production-consumption logic) here.

The field of ‘design anthropology’ is more of a coming together of equals, which aims to integrate the strengths of design thinking and anthropological research (Gunn, et al., 2013; Miller, 2018). Its advocates are interested in a more flexible and open-ended (and collaborative) approach to designing, that is less problem-oriented: ‘a process of design ... is not to impose closure but to allow for everyday life to carry on’ (Gunn & Donovan, 2012, p. 22). For designers, design anthropology represents a distinct way of knowing that incorporates both analysing and doing in

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<sup>21</sup> Research for, by, or into design (Frayling, 1993)

the process of constructing knowledge (Otto & Smith, 2013). Anthropologists see in design a set of methods and practices which could advance the capacity of ethnography to deal with the contemporary world (Rabinow & Marcus, 2008).

‘Anthropology of design’ has perhaps received the least attention to date, but it is also the strand we are building on here. One could locate the beginnings of this in design history scholarship, in a shift away from the canon of objects, style and artistic authorship, towards a more anthropological locating of designed things in everyday life and socio-political contexts e.g. (Sparke, 1986; Forty, 1986; Attfield & Kirkham, 1989). (One also finds ethnographic accounts of design within Design Culture studies, e.g. (Rosselin, 2009; Seremetakis, 2009).) The field has evolved somewhat since these early studies, but remains bifurcated into studies of material culture and studies of the practice (Murphy, 2016, p. 435).

Anthropological studies of design as material culture explore the life of objects after the moment of consumption, their changing meanings and the connection to identity (Attfield, 2000; Garvey, 2017), as well as their exploitation, misuse and capacity to control (Jain, 2006; Dow Schüll, 2012). Susan Leigh Star’s paper on ‘the ethnography of infrastructures’ advocates the study of ‘boring things’ to excavate the norms and power relations that are inscribed within them (Star, 1999). Keith Murphy meditates on the relationship between national socio-political context (‘Swedishness’) and material culture (Murphy, 2013; Murphy, 2015 ). For our purposes these studies are useful to the extent that they highlight the connections between power and material technologies, which we will expand upon in chapter 5.

Within studies of design-as-practice (Kimbell, 2013), anthropological or ethnographic explorations still seem, often, to be circumscribed within an instrumental logic, with ‘design’ as a conceptual frame that sets the terms of the study – what one might call a ‘gaze-narrowing device’ (Agha, 2011). It is quite common for the ethnographic method to be deployed in order, ultimately, to find ways of better understanding and improving design processes and practices. The purpose of peering inside the black box of designing (Vinck, 2003) is to furnish instrumentally useful insights about design, for designers or others who would like to understand it better. For example, Albena Yaneva’s book on architecture studio

OMA concludes that design innovation is not about brilliant moments of creativity but mundane, routine practices of making and re-making (Yaneva, 2009).

Ethnographic observations of engineering design have re-presented it as a social process, not simply a technical activity (Lloyd, 2000; Bucciarelli, 1988). Stigliani and Ravasi's paper adds to our understanding of what is going on in a design process by exploring how designers draw on aesthetic knowledge (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2018). These ethnographic studies<sup>22</sup> are still oddly in the mode of 'knowledge-bagging' (Erlhoff, 2015), and in service to practice. Authors here have less turned themselves into anthropologists, than deployed the ethnographic method to tell ever more detailed stories about how design processes lead to designed outcomes. Not that there is anything necessarily wrong with this in the cases cited: but it does demonstrate how well disciplined we are by the assumption that the point of researching design is to establish its effectivity as a technical capability. This can come to operate as a set of blinkers.

Keith Murphy and Lucy Suchman have both highlighted the need for a 'critical' anthropology of design (Suchman, 2011, p. 3) as a 'corrective to a widespread, credulous acceptance of design's most sanguine promises across a range of social, economic, and political domains' (Murphy, 2016, p. 434). While the disinterested light of an anthropological gaze undoubtedly has critical potential, there still seem to be brackets around what criticality means, or how far it goes. Suchman writes about the limits of design although ultimately her interest is in 'contributing to the emergence of a critical technical practice' (p.16). The telos of critical anthropology here is *still* design practice. And more than one anthropologist, having roundly excoriated or exposed another domain, seems to have turned towards design, or a reconfigured version of it, in the hope that it might play some kind of redeeming role (Escobar, 2018; Latour, 2009). The instrumental logic (and optimism) that pervades design and design research seems to be quite catching.

More curious, ethnographic studies of design often set out with a *prima facie* acceptance of their object, whether that means design as material goods or designing as creative practice. For example, none of the articles in the special issue

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<sup>22</sup> Others in this mode include (Baird, et al., 2000), (Lefebvre, 2018), (Vyas, et al., 2013)

of the Journal of Design History on design and anthropology<sup>23</sup> problematise the ontological certainty of design. The design label is assumed to refer to some stable thing, some ongoing presence. Murphy, otherwise so lucid, argues in a very backwards moment that design once had a conceptual coherence that has today become splintered. If it indeed appears to be the case that ‘design itself isn’t really a single term, but a collection of homonyms’ (Murphy, 2016), one wonders if the appropriate anthropological response is to rush out and determine what it means in all those disparate locations, or to question the pre-existing category? Perhaps design should not be taken as a stable ‘locus on the basis of which other questions may be posed’ (Townley, 1994, p. 4). We may have to suspend judgment about our categories. Once again, ‘the tranquillity with which they are accepted must be disturbed’ (Foucault, 1989, p. 28).

So, when it comes to design as a disciplinary constellation, or apparatus, anthropology has not yet been wielded with the same critical force as it has in relation to some of the other objects of study we looked at in the previous section – with a few exceptions. Sociologist Tim Seitz’s book rummages around in ethnographic vignettes of design thinking workshops to find clues as to the nature of contemporary capitalism (Seitz, 2019). Anthropological explorations of fashion and dress practices – and the labour that sits behind the fashion economy – problematise the very concept of a global fashion industry and the kinds of human objects and subjects it produces (Moon, 2020; Moon, 2016; Luvaas, 2016; Jenss, 2016; Sadre-Orafi, 2016). Juris Milestone’s paper, ‘Design as Power’, takes a field-level approach, treating design as a contemporary idea, and exploring its manifestation and effects in the popular press and a student project (Milestone, 2007). Jakob Krause-Jensen’s ethnographic book on the organisational culture at Bang & Olufsen meditates on how employees inhabit and express organisational values, finding that they are not dupes of some corporate ideology but (applying governmentality as a theoretical device), engineered to be self-managing (Krause-Jensen, 2010). These anthropological studies – deconstructing design thinking, the

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<sup>23</sup> Volume 29, Issue 1, February 2016

fashion industry, design as a structuring idea and design workplaces – begin to get close to what we are attempting here with ‘design for government’.

## **Conclusion**

The objective of this chapter has been to establish some basic theoretical foundations for the thesis. ‘Design for government’ has been characterised as a disciplinary apparatus, and we have looked at a range of other studies for guidance on how to go about dissecting such an object of inquiry. We have established the need to step outside of that apparatus in order to reflect critically on it, which means treating much of design research as part of the object of study rather than a foundation of knowledge to be built upon. We are interested in ‘design culture’ and ‘anthropologies of design’ as fields which objectify design, although we identified the need to push further in a critical direction. Building on the outline of the method provided in the introduction, the chapter looked in more depth at some contemporary debates in ethnography, and established this thesis in the traditions of multi-sited ethnography, and opportunistic auto-ethnography.



## Chapter 3

### The discursive metamorphosis of design

#### Introduction

With this chapter we begin the dissection of our object, starting with the discourse. The purpose of this chapter and the next are to demonstrate how ‘design’ has been discursively – and strategically – remodelled to become relevant to the public sector, and how ‘design for government’ as a field of knowledge and practice has been established and legitimised through discourse. My contention is that it has, quite literally, been talked into existence. In chapter 4, we examine the specific dynamics of the ‘design for government’ discourse to see how it aligns harmoniously with the strains of a dominant and longstanding ‘public sector reform’ discourse. However, lest we be tempted to cast this particular case as an anomaly or an aberration – as not *really* being design proper – in this chapter we look at a longer history of design’s discursive transformations. Periodic strategic remodelling, and often in line with prevailing political priorities, is a consistent characteristic of design: the idea of what design is has transformed dramatically over the years. The patterns that emerge from this longer view get us underway with our analysis of ‘design for government’ as a discursive phenomenon. Before we embark on any of this, though, we first need to establish the idea of discourse that we are working with.

#### Making sense of discourse

Let’s start with some examples of the ‘design for government’ discourse. We already heard a little bit of it in the Lab Connections example: ‘we know we need some new ways of cooking’. But there is plenty captured in print too. The following are taken from the Design Commission 2013 report, a tweet from someone I follow on twitter attending a ‘design for government’ conference in 2017, and an academic paper published in 2020.

The pace of change, in the economy and across society, is quickening. Every day we see a freshly designed product or service that has the potential to improve our lives, our businesses, our communities. And yet we know that public services and government institutions have not kept up with this pace of change. Why should our lives as private sector consumers be so improved, while our lives as citizens accessing public services often seem stuck in the 20th century?... Design may sound an improbable suggestion. The design sector has an undeniable reputation for fuelling the whims of fashion, and for pursuing creativity at someone else's expense. However there are many kinds of design, and many kinds of designers. We are not advocating the frivolous use of public money for vanity projects. Rather, we are concerned with the application of certain methodologies pioneered over the last twenty to thirty years in the fields of social, service and strategic design. (Design Commission, 2013, p. 1)

My highlight in SDGC17 morning keynotes... A service designer is a change agent is an activist. (Anonymous twitter user, 2017)

Public sector organisations face many intractable issues, such as climate change, migration and integration, chronic diseases, aging and inequality. ... Furthermore, governments also face financial pressures, urging them to come up with cost-efficient solutions. Citizens, simultaneously, expect governments to develop policies and services that fit their needs without causing excessive bureaucracy or unwanted inequalities (Bason, 2017; Kimbell, 2016). As a result, the problems governments are dealing with have become increasingly complex, and so have the solutions – policies and services – they develop: they have become increasingly integrated, spanning across levels of public administration and involving different actors (Chindarkar et al, 2017). As a result, governments are confronted with a significant design challenge: how to deal with 'wicked problems' (Rittel and Webber, 1973) in such a way that effective and efficient policies and services result, which are perceived as legitimate. Design is advocated as a promising development in public administration for various reasons. (Hermus, et al., 2020, p. 22)

What does it mean to regard texts such as these as 'discourse'? The term 'discourse' has a range of meanings in different disciplinary contexts, and different

strategies for ‘discourse analysis’ follow<sup>24</sup>. A common premise of all varieties, however, is that language does not merely reflect or describe the world; it constructs it. The quotes above are not merely observing and commentating: they are doing far more work than that, they are creating something.

In this thesis we are taking up a definition of discourse derived from the post-structural view of knowledge and power we have already discussed, also referred to as Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) (Gill, 2011; Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2011). In this domain, discourse is defined as ‘groups of statements which structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking’ (Rose, 2001, p. 136). Discourse provides the ‘language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic’ (Hall, 1992, p. 290). It is concerned with the ‘things said’ (Foucault, 1991, p. 63) in ‘the dimension of their exteriority’ (60); in the ways they construct systems of knowledge, meaning, and truth.

This is a matter of rules and conventions, but rules that go beyond grammar:

Discourse is constituted by the difference between what one could correctly say at one period (under the rules of grammar and logic) and what is actually said. (Foucault, 1991, p. 63)

In other words, between what is grammatically correct, and what is deemed to make sense. These rules are ‘historically contingent’ (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2011, p. 12): what can be said to be true in one period does not necessarily hold at other times in history, or in other places. Knowledge has currency only within the context of a wider discursive regime: ‘discursive formations... are knowledge formations’ (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014, p. 188). In fact discourse is a useful concept precisely for this ability to account for the way in which systems of thought change over time: new objects of knowledge emerge, new areas of expertise arise, things that were once thought natural become strange. It was Foucault’s explorations of the genesis and evolution of conceptualisations of madness (Foucault, 1988), sexuality (Foucault, 1998), discipline and imprisonment (Foucault, 1977) – things

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<sup>24</sup> See (Gill, 2011) for a discussion of the ‘57 varieties of discourse analysis’

which take very different forms and are understood in very different ways over time – that the necessity of such a concept of discourse arose. Knowledge is not a stable constant, and neither are its objects. Consider the fact that there is no readily available translation for the English word ‘design’ in many other languages: conceptually, it does not exist in the same way. One can see that such a premise instantly throws a sceptical light on the ‘knowledge’ that has been accumulated about ‘design’ through ‘research’.

In this formulation discourse is not only about language, texts or speech. First, discourse has a material quality. Foucault in fact describes it as like a historical monument: ‘alongside everything a society can produce... there is the formation and transformation of ‘things said’’ (Foucault, 1991, p. 63). Second, the generation of discourse is a material practice (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014). People do not speak or write in a vacuum; these are in themselves situated practices. Third, discursive practices do not only produce discourse, they are ‘entangled in technical processes, institutions, patterns of behaviour’ (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014, p. 190). Discourse is performative, it produces things, it has a function (which may be overt or unintentional) (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). This is so because things and actions exist within webs of meaning, or ‘systems of representation’, which are provided (or not) by the discursive context. So while not denying the existence of physical things and actions apart from the labels and descriptions they are given, in this account ‘they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse’ (Hall, 1997, p. 73). Therefore discursive formations – ‘regimes of truth’ – have very real effects (76). As well as producing knowledge and ‘truth effects’ (Hepworth, 2018), they shape practices, and produce subjects (Foucault, 1991, p. 58) (Rose, 2001, p. 136):

In our relations with the world these forms of knowledge ... focus, enhance, empower, enliven and ultimately normalize particular ‘selves’. They also, in the process, narrow, constrain or pattern our forms of conduct. (Prichard, 2002, p. 268)

This is why it is said that knowledge and power are so closely intertwined: what comes to be understood as knowledge is really a question of which (and whose) accounts come to be authoritative, to govern the field – to govern individuals in fact.

In our case, this provides some plausible justification for saying that a field of (design) practice might very well be talked into existence.

The discourse analyst is therefore not interested in establishing the validity or truthfulness of knowledge – because to launch an interpretation that sees knowledge as discursively constituted, is to accept that there is no ‘truth’ outside of discourse – but in studying its genealogy, shape, dynamics and effects (Prichard, 2002, p. 266). FDA studies are interested in the statements that give us a certain knowledge, the rules that govern what is sayable or thinkable in a given moment, how knowledge acquires authority and constitutes truth, what sorts of subjects are made up, and the practices within institutions for regulating those subjects (Hall, 1997). The intention is to investigate

not the laws of construction of discourse..., but its conditions of existence. To relate the discourse not to a thought, mind or subject which engendered it, but to the practical field in which it is deployed. (Foucault, 1991, p. 61)

This provides some sense of the framing with which we are approaching the analysis of design, and the practices of speaking and writing about it: as a discursive formation, governed by a discernible set of rules that render certain ways of speaking and thinking about design sensible (or non-sensical), that changes over time, and that has material consequences.

## **Studies of design discourse**

The discourse we are studying in this thesis did not, of course, emerge from nowhere. There is a much longer history of conceptualising, talking and thinking about design, a rich discursive field from which these ways of speaking about ‘design for government’ have evolved. So before launching into the particulars of the discursive formation around ‘design for government’, in this section we will look at some FDA studies of design. What can we learn from how design has been constructed, discursively, in other times and places?

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was witness to a massive expansion of talking about, writing about, pronouncing upon, and researching into design. Whereas in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century design-interested general readers might have been limited to Vogue and Harpers Bazaar (neither of which were exclusively design publications in any case), today one is spoilt for choice. Glossy design publications bombard the reader with delectable images. Published books on design – theoretical treatises, manifestos, coffee table tomes, management texts, handbooks, histories and monographs – roughly quadrupled over the period 1900 - 1990<sup>25</sup>. Academic journals addressing the subject of design started to appear in the 1970s and continue to proliferate as the profile of design as a research discipline grows.<sup>26</sup>

There are two ways of taking this. One is to follow the position adopted by design author and educator Victor Margolin in the introduction to his book, 'Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism' (Margolin, 1989), which is to assume that what this accumulation of text is doing is filling in the gaps, remedying an unaccountable silence on this 'central human activity' (p. 8). Design discourse for Margolin means 'a body of serious and useful research' (p. 5) that places design 'within larger debates about social theory' and produces a 'persuasive argument for its centrality to social life' (p. 8). On this view, design has been there all along, it has simply been overlooked and under-explained: 'these lacunae do not reflect an inherent marginality of design, rather they are an indication of its weak conceptualisation' (p. 8). The logic of his argument is: design exists out there; to those in the know it is unquestionably important; and yet sufficient numbers have not grasped this point; therefore we must talk about it until they do. In fact some of his statements read as an overt attempt to deliberately make things happen through discourse, for example:

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<sup>25</sup> According to Google Books Ngrams analysis

<sup>26</sup> Design Studies (1979), Design Issues (1984), Journal of Design History (1988), The Design Journal (1997), Design Philosophy Papers (2003 – 2017), PDC: participatory design (2004), Co-Design (2005), The International Journal of Design (2007), Design and Culture (2009), She Ji (2015), Modes of Criticism (2015)

Public agencies... might well create more projects for designers if they had a better understanding of what designers could do for them, or if designers had a stronger sense of what they themselves might propose (p. 5-6)

In this oddly prophetic sentence Margolin lays out a kind of roadmap for what the discursive formation we are examining was subsequently to do. Nevertheless his account is underpinned by the assumption that design is a pre-existing reality, and the discourse is merely pointing to it. Ezio Manzini does the same thing in his book, 'Design, When Everybody Designs', identifying, rather anachronistically, origin points for architecture, furniture design and graphic design 10,000 years ago in Mesopotamia and Sumeria (Manzini, 2015).

A Foucauldian interpretation would say that what Margolin and Manzini are doing here is constructing the object of which they wish to speak, projecting design onto the world (and backwards onto history). And it would say that the profusion of design discourse has been producing something, not simply commenting on it. A small number of studies some at design from this alternative direction. Architectural historian Arindam Dutta (Dutta, 2007; Dutta, 2009) places the emergence of 'design' – or rather its transformation from a pre- to post-industrial meaning – in the machinations of the British Department of Science and Art (DSA), a bureaucratic 'juggernaut' set up in the aftermath of the Great Exhibition of 1851 'to introduce superior design and artisanal sensibilities in industrial workers' (Dutta, 2007, p. 2).

Design was the new key word that emerged... to transform the very basis of industrial capitalism, and to confer on its mercurial behaviour a predicative systematicity (p. 5).

As a concept, design emerged already-entangled with Empire, with reforming educational initiatives (schools, museums, galleries), with the battle for 'the continued preponderance of British global trade', and the development of intellectual property law.<sup>27</sup> In his book, 'The Bureaucracy of Beauty', Dutta argues

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<sup>27</sup> Used, Dutta argues, as a means of de-legitimising the practices of colonised artisans as vernacular craft, rather than copyrightable design, thus denying them the economic rewards associated with authorship.

that the DSA should be seen not only as an administrative structure, but as a political response to the 'perceived depredations of industrial capitalism', 'a full-blooded enterprise of economic restratification through aesthetic means', and 'aesthetic education for the masses' (p. 3-4). The word design – and the related practices of, for example, producing pattern books of ornamental motifs, establishing hundreds of schools of design – carried all these associations.

Design historians Stephen Hayward and Christopher Thompson, in a journal paper and PhD thesis respectively, dissect the discursive construction of design in the periods following the first and second world war as part of national reconstruction efforts, Hayward focusing on the dynamics of the 'good design' discourse and its paternalistic deployment to pillory 'vulgar' mass culture taste (Hayward, 1998), and Thompson re-tracing the meandering path that eventually led to the establishment of the Council of Industrial Design (latterly the Design Council) (Thompson, 2008). These histories of invention – of design itself, the industry, and the Design Council as an institution – are enlightening as a kind of prequel to the discursive formation we have in mind, where the Design Council continues to play a leading role. In both Hayward and Thompson's accounts there features a sort of 'design lobby': a mixed group of art and design commentators, civil servants, interested politicians, professional associations and designers themselves, collectively agitating for design. The precise rationale of their arguments evolved over time, as did the characteristics of what was considered 'good design' (although the definitions put forward for distinguishing between good and bad design were typically expressed in universal terms: function, beauty, sound construction, 'common sense', etc (Hayward, 1998)). This design lobby has not gone away: it has shifted target though, as we will see.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century arguments one can hear 19<sup>th</sup> century refrains, given a post-war twist. One rationale put forth for 'good design' was the good of the people, founded on the belief in environmental determinism, that 'rational furnishing' bore some relationship to efficiency, 'cleanliness, simplicity and a respect for property, and an idea of good citizenship' (Hayward, 1998, p. 225). 'Efficiency' in this period came to signify a host of virtues: performance, hygiene, durability, ease of maintenance, value for money (p. 226) – all laudable qualities in post-war Britain.



Good design and efficiency became interchangeable. The second rationale was the good of industry: good design equals more sales, an especially important consideration in trying to drive exports after the second world war (p. 228), and, correspondingly, reduce the entry of foreign (especially German) industrial goods into British homes (Thompson, 2008, p. 113). The taste of the public was implicated in both agendas, as 'an educated consumer might compel the manufacturer to raise standards' (Hayward, 1998, p. 225). In this way design was configured within wider discourses of patriotism, international competition, and economic reconstruction.

Preventing the spread of 'good design' and its associated benefits, however, was the 'lamentable state' of public taste, which required 'educational reform' (p. 224); and the reluctance, apathy and suspicion of manufacturers, who felt their 'goods sold on quality not on design, and that they needed no fresh designs' (Thompson, 2008, p. 118). These aims are rather circular, and not particularly logical: the taste of the public must be improved, to drive the quality of manufacturing. And the quality of manufacturing must be raised, to improve the taste of the public. The important thing to note is the deficit logic baked into the discourse.

The 'good design lobby' was therefore fighting both these fronts simultaneously through promotional and communications activities, but also through scheming to establish a council of design, and organising associations of professional designers. There were overt attempts in this period to draw practitioners together under one banner. A Society of Industrial Artists formed in 1930, with the aim of establishing design as a profession, and began to make claims for what the 'Creative Industrial Artist and Designer', as a professional would do, and which roles would be subsumed into his (it almost always was 'his') – 'Works Manager, Sales Manager, Engineer, etc' (Thompson, 2008, p. 109). Thompson notes the design lobby emulated tactics previously deployed by other proto-professions such as advertising and management, in order to establish authority and legitimacy. There was some disagreement over what was in and what was out – whether commercial arts (packaging and advertising) were design in the same way as industrial, three-dimensional design, or whether they were simply a matter of distribution. Alan Young, another design historian (Young, 2009) describes the emergence of graphic design in a similar way in his paper, 'Design as Discourse', with 'the drawing

together of certain practices from the areas of commercial arts, printing, and the like, and with the leaving aside of others' (p. 126). An idea was mooted for a central bureau of information with a register of industrial designers (Thompson, 2008, p. 113), and there was some squabbling over who should 'own' this governing body (the Board of Trade or the professions). This was a moment of rupture, or transition, when the design professional was formulated and framed within a promotional discourse, and the battleground for 'design' was contested. The arguments *for* design went hand in hand with the invention *of* the design industry, and the shaping of particular kinds of consumer-subject. The industry did not precede the discourse: like the version we are studying, these promotional efforts argued it into existence.

As Alan Young notes, discourse works by making things visible, implying that all that is happening is 'a 'revealing' of something that was there all the time yet obscured' whilst at the same time 'reorganising what is there to create something new' (Young, 2009, p. 125). The design lobby implied that they were simply pointing to something that was there yet underappreciated, rather than actively constructing it. And yet the confusion and resistance of manufacturers to the idea of design implies that it was something new being forced upon them. Thompson describes the adverse reaction of some British industrialists at this time to the imposition of design – particularly in the incarnation of the 'design consultant' – understood as the invasion of American business practices. The British perceived the US, design-led, industrial model to be

built on the principle of wide sales and replacement at frequent intervals, and this policy is fostered by the frequent introduction of new models and changing fashions. British industry, on the other hand has jealously maintained its reputation for building goods to last (Thompson, 2008, pp. 107-8).

Clearly at this moment in time, 'design' did not signify, to everyone, a kind of universal or essential attribute of things, nor was it synonymous with quality, but rather it represented something else entirely, perhaps more akin to fashion or planned obsolescence.

Coming closer to the present day, a paper by anthropologist Juris Milestone (Milestone, 2007) continues the account of design as a discursive strategy for accelerating consumption. He explores the way the 'idea of design' was presented and promoted through the American media in the early 2000s. Although the paternalistic tone of earlier admonishments of public taste had disappeared, in this 'corpus of statements' can still be read efforts to educate the consumer, or – rather – to manufacture a certain type of consumer subjectivity, creating 'productive supporting agents of a globalising consumer-capitalism, through the 'synchronization' of consumer desire for something well designed' (Milestone, 2007, p. 178). A key feature of the contemporary idea of 'good design' is an inherent contradiction between 'ubiquity and a rarefied design genius': that design is (and should be) everywhere, that good design should be 'invisible', and yet that it is also the result of 'brilliant innovation', achievable only by design talent.

Having read these articles, one walks away with the decided sense that design is not only 'hot', but is everywhere and in everything, and that designers are the gurus of our time, and that we can partake only if we pay attention to them, and shop (p. 187).

This is a discursive strategy that constructs design as an intrinsic good, and inserts it everywhere. In another paper, Guy Julier tracks a similar dispersion in the account of design that emerged in the UK in tandem with New Labour's politics and the global valorisation of creative economies (Julier, 2009). Looking specifically at the Design Council's programmes, strategies and pronouncements, he describes a shift, a relocation of design from a link in a chain of production, to distribution across networked economies (p. 219). Design becomes understood as having a more complex relation to – or rather is discursively reformulated to fit – the new 'knowledge' economy. No longer simply about giving form to products, it is framed more abstractly, in terms of 'value', generally. And rather than simply putting value into things, it becomes a signifier of the value of whatever it appears hitched to (people, cities, countries), as an indicator of 'potential transformations that can take place' (p. 221). This is an important precursor, as a discursive move, to 'design for government'. It provides the platform from which design can be reoriented in many

different directions, reconfigured to fit the needs of different markets, including the public sector.

In these accounts, the discourse of design is entangled with that of 'creativity'. We have already talked about the possibility of detecting some shared logics and mechanisms across these two ideas. Two FDA studies of creativity are particularly interesting in this regard. Design researcher Amanda Bill (Bill, 2008) examines in her PhD thesis the 'creativity explosion' in higher education in New Zealand, in the early 2000s, which she articulates as 'neoliberal rhetorics representing creativity as flexible human capital and a generic, transferable skill needed by workers in the new economy' (p. 1). Focusing on the connection between creativity discourse and creative subjects in the form of fashion students, she identifies that 'creativity' as defined here is not synonymous with the having of aesthetic, craft, and design skills – or identities: one might acquire the knowledge, practice and techniques of garment design and construction, and think of oneself as a maker of clothes (through, for example, a vocational apprenticeship) without ever having to confront the question of oneself as a 'creative'. She likens the functioning of 'creativity' in the knowledge economy revolution to the role played by the concept of 'horsepower' in the industrial one:

One might imagine that horsepower simply describes an essential quality of the horse and that the concept has existed for as long as the animal. However the term was not invented until the 1780s, when engines were built that could replace the work of the horse. At this stage, a proxy was devised for the amount of work that a horse could conceivably perform, in order to calculate the royalties that should be paid for the operation of the new engines. Thus the concept of horsepower was brought into discourse through a calculative technique invented to sell steam engines, and this produced a whole new set of statements about horses. ... Horsepower does not tell a truth about horses, any more than creativity tells a truth about human being (p. 109-10).

We might wonder whether 'design' – both in its original formulation, and still today – performs a similar discursive function: rather than deriving from the essential qualities of architecture, graphic arts, fashion, product engineering, or website

construction, etc, the idea of design might in fact be a tool with which to highlight the deficiencies of that-which-is-not-design. Just as horsepower is not about horses, and creativity is not about human beings, design may not really be about designers, but about critiquing and evaluating something else. As a concept it serves to continually identify a deficit.

Critical management researcher Craig Prichard applies an FDA approach in a paper on critically reading ‘creativity’ in management discourse (Prichard, 2002), noting that – again – it has been configured in a particular way to achieve certain aims. Comparing it to other versions of creativity (such as that articulated by D. H. Lawrence), he shows how the managerial account of creativity ‘is particularly concerned to configure its object as useful and task-focused – not rebellious or chaotic’ (p. 269). It is defined in ways that subordinate it to the demands of business and management because (to borrow a nice phrase from art historian Molly Nesbit) ‘industry [does] not want authors in its ranks’ (Nesbit, 1987, p. 234). Management gurus can then freely prescribe ‘mechanisms and practices that re-route creativity toward manageability and economic objectives’ (Prichard, 2002, p. 270). Creativity is re-made to make good business sense.

This might feel like a somewhat tangential detour into a very partial history of design (and creativity). However appreciating these sorts of accounts and histories is fundamental to the construction of the argument in this thesis. Reviewing the shifts in an epistemic regime over time is one very concrete way of achieving de-naturalisation. We can see that things we take as being essential or natural today have not always been thus. It also shows us the discursive field and material that was the petri dish (as it were) for the formation we are studying, providing a set of clues as to what we might look for in analysing the ‘design for government’ discourse.

## **Historic patterns in the discursive construction of design**

Drawing together these FDA analyses of design at different times (which, to my knowledge, has not been done before) provides a novel collection of insights. First, design has been discursively assembled differently at different moments. The very

fact of its fabrication is perhaps most evident in the shift Dutta (Dutta, 2009, p. 167) describes through the industrial revolution as ‘the displacement of design from the a priori imprint of purposiveness’ to ‘a form-finding sensibility of control, directed toward the entire plethora of commodity-objects: chairs, chintzes, china, alike’ (p. 170). Subsequent shifts have moved it away from the exclusive matter of giving form to commodities, dispersing it across sites of application and processes of value-generation. With each shift the design discourse absorbs – or strategically re-aligns with – elements of other ‘interpretative repertoires’: German idealist philosophy (Dutta, 2007, p. 5), post-war rhetorics of ‘efficiency’ and patriotism (Hayward, 1998) (Thompson, 2008), third way politics and new public management (Julier, 2009), creative cities/ economies/ jobs and the new knowledge economy (Bill, 2008; Prichard, 2002), or the economic fundamentalism of neoliberalism (Milestone, 2007). Design is a fickle creature, re-inventing itself to suit the times, and the long view highlights this contingency. This is why I argued, in chapter 2, that we might very well regard it in the same way as those ‘dubious’ sciences at which Foucault takes aim (Foucault, 2002, p. 111): it is not the same category of thing as mathematics, say. It is a strategic invention, constituted as part of political and economic power games.

The second notable thing is that there is always a moralising or reformatory agenda in these examples of talking about design. The discursive usefulness of design has been in its potential for berating industry, consumers, and the state for some perceived failing. Manufacturers are exhorted to improve the quality of their outputs, consumers are – in a tone that shifts from patronising to seductive to amicable – encouraged to be more sophisticated in their tastes, government institutions are admonished for the pitiful service experiences they offer up to citizens. The content of the moral agenda has shifted ground: at one time design grandees felt comfortable making universalist pronouncements of good design – and dictating to the public the appropriate taste – in a way that eventually became untenable (Hayward, 1998, pp. 229-230). But design has never been spoken about without also subtly (or not so subtly) lobbying for something. It was a term coined specifically to push an agenda. The agendas that inhere within design discourse may have changed but there is always something lurking somewhere. It’s never just

about design. In the case of ‘design for government’, that moralising and reformatory impulse has been turned on the public sector, finding fault in its processes and products.

Related to the moralising undertone, is the inseparability of articulations of design from the need to promote itself. There is a deficit logic baked into the way Design Council (and others) talk about design. There is always and inevitably found to be a lack of design in whatever the target context happens to be. Part of the agenda, therefore, whatever it is, always involves promoting design. And constructing a sense of the profession, of design itself, in relation to the context. Note that the professional body initially named itself as the Society of Industrial Artists, calling together and recategorizing groups of people who previously would have understood themselves quite differently. It was only in 1963 that the name was updated to Society of Industrial Artists *and Designers* (Thompson, 2008, p. 108), suggesting that – even though the Government School of Design, for example, had existed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century – the identity was an unstable one that took some time to become codified. The idea of design as a discipline, with its attendant knowledge, expertise, skills, methods etc, emerged as part of efforts to promote it. Previous to these arguments, that idea did not exist. To speak of ‘designers’ would not have made sense, or at least not in the way it is understood now. Similarly, then, we might expect contemporary promotional efforts around ‘design for government’ to be inventing rather than revealing a professional community.

Finally, in this handful of accounts design is very often interwoven with the interests and schemes of the state: as a strategy for driving and maintaining global trade, for reconstructing a battered post-war nation, and for reforming its own self. As we will see, in the formation we are studying, design is articulated as a kind of binary opposite to the state and bureaucracy, a position which can only be made possible by the deliberate omission of a central feature of design’s genealogy – that it has long been a creature of the state.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to set up some definitions and context that will help us tease out how the idea of design has become relevant to the public sector in a new way, and how the field of 'design for government' has arisen and become established. We have identified the definition of discourse that we are working with: as a certain way of thinking, speaking, and knowing about an object, governed by a discernible set of rules and conventions. Further, we have established the idea of 'design' as something with a long discursive heritage, constructed in different ways at different moments, and that carries forward a set of associations, a lineage. We are governed by design in the sense that we are schooled in certain ways of speaking and thinking about it. We established that discourse is performative – it constructs our world – as things and actions take on meaning only as a function of being enmeshed in a system of representation. And in the case of design this has meant discourse determines the interpretation of design practices in advance, by re-labelling and re-assembling, while at the same time maintaining the existence of some essential thing that is simply being revealed. Finally, we have encountered the idea that design has always served a strategic purpose for someone, often constructed in response to prevailing political priorities. Its strategic reorientation towards government recently is made possible on the back of earlier discursive shifts. Having now established some of these premises, we can carry on with our analysis of 'design for government' discourse in the next chapter.



## Chapter 4

### The strategic re-alignment of ‘design for government’

#### Introduction

If you wanted to find out about design for government, you wouldn't have to be reliant on finding a practitioner and shadowing them as they went about their work. A quick internet search would reveal that a great deal of ink has been spilled on the topic: sometimes by designers, but predominantly by another cadre of professionals whose job seems to have become to speak and write about design (academic researchers who study design, and people who work for think tanks, design promotion organisations, design industry associations, and the state itself). The words take a variety of forms. They are written down in academic papers and books, pamphlets, reports, white papers, policy documents, and blogs. They are also, more ephemerally, spoken: informally in conversation, formally in speeches and presentations at events, conferences, training sessions, pitches and interviews.

It is this blossoming of verbosity about ‘design for government’ that we are interested in, its dynamics and operations. The purpose of the chapter is to unpack the ‘design for government’ discourse in order to see how it works. In teasing out the rules and ‘interpretative repertoires’ that allow these statements about ‘design for government’ to make sense, we will start to see how the ideological apparatus of ‘design’ is established and operates. So, here we are partly arriving at an answer to our first research question – how has ‘design for government’ been constructed? How has design been made relevant to the public sector, and how has the field become established and legitimized? The argument is that design sustains its relevance through continual readjustment in alignment with other discourses, bolting on interpretative repertoires in order to make sense to new markets. This is why I use the term ‘strategic realignment’: it is not random, but indelibly linked to the commercial interests of its disciplinary members. And new fields of design are quickly established and legitimised through a range of pseudo-scholarly tactics: counting, labelling, and mapping, for example.

The chapter is structured as follows: after a short discussion of how we will go about our analysis, we will then mark out some boundaries around the discursive formation. Then, we get into the analysis proper, identifying the rules, the tactics, and the effects of the discourse. As we will see some of its central assumptions and motifs lead us into another discursive formation entirely, that around public sector reform. We will see how a process of discursive re-alignment and re-construction of design has been achieved in line with this dominant political dogma.

## **Conducting a discourse analysis of ‘design for government’**

How does one go about analysing discourse? Although it is acknowledged that there is no one codified methodology (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2011), there are a number of consistent features. Several methodological texts advise a process which begins with determining a corpus of statements (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2011; Gill, 2011; Tonkiss, 2012) or ‘plotting the discursive formation’ as it arises in a particular field:

A discursive formation can be regarded as a group of statements linked together by a whole range of discursive practices (speaking, writing, interviewing, publishing, lecturing etc.). (Prichard, 2002, p. 269)

Many types of discursive material can be brought under the microscope here (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2011, p. 13), including ‘expert discourse’. Expert language is of particular interest because of its specific effects: ‘it marks out a field of knowledge or expertise, it confers membership, and it bestows authority’ (Tonkiss, 2012, p. 408). In our case we are particularly interested in such ‘expert discourse’ as that is predominantly what comprises the ‘design for government’ discourse, but note that this does not only mean academic texts. All three extracts at the start of chapter 3 might be regarded as a kind of expert discourse.

The next step recommended is a close, ‘sceptical’ reading, ‘attending to the detail of what is actually said’ (Gill, 2011), and a more or less formal process of coding and analysis, looking for a collection of things including key themes and arguments, problematisations, variabilities and consistencies, emphases and silences,

technologies, subject positions, characterisation and agency (Tonkiss, 2012; Gill, 2011; Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2011). In a book chapter teaching discourse analysis, Wetherell and Potter introduce the idea of the 'interpretative repertoire' as a unit of analysis (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p. 172), which they define as the 'building blocks' or 'explanatory resources to which speakers have access'. These might be one way of conceptualising the rules that make things thinkable and sayable, the heuristics that we resort to, the implicit assumptions that underpin what we think are intelligible sentences. And finally there is the process of checking reliability and validity, forming hypotheses and testing them across numerous instances of discourse, and revising them accordingly.

So, from Foucauldian discourse analysis we have the idea of establishing a corpus of statements or discursive formation, working with expert language, ferreting out rules and tactics, and interpretative repertoires or heuristics. In addition, on the basis of the discussion in chapter 3, we know we might also be looking for practices of strategic re-alignment, a contingent relation with the context, a deficit-promotion logic, and a moralising or reforming agenda.

## **Plotting the discursive formation**

How might we circumscribe the discursive formation? Putting to one side natural conversation and speech for now (although that is clearly important), there are two kinds of written text which we can look at, both of which might be regarded as 'expert discourse'. First, there are the blogs, magazine articles, think tank reports, industry publications, puff pieces by thought leaders, evaluations, and so on, emanating from a cluster of organisations (and their people) that hover round the fringes of the state.<sup>28</sup> As noted by Geoff Mulgan (2014), then chief executive of Nesta, in a briefing summing up the strengths and weaknesses of design for public

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<sup>28</sup> Think tanks and foundations (the RSA, Demos, Nesta), NDPBs/ quangos (the Design Council, the Danish Design Centre), design industry associations and representative bodies (the APDIG, the Design Commission, BEDA, the EDLB), public sector innovation teams themselves (MindLab, UK Policy Lab, EU Policy Lab, 27th Region, Helsinki Design Lab), policy teams (the European Commission), HEIs, and consultancies (Futuregov, Innovation Unit, livework, and others).

sector innovation, this represents something of an onslaught<sup>29</sup> of design advocacy by interest groups – repeated calls for design to be taken seriously in government. There is no subterfuge here. These organisations and publications are generally quite honest about their intentions, and their purposeful promotion of design.<sup>30</sup>

Although it is hard to name an exact origin point for all of this, a number of institutional shifts in the UK and Europe (which came with associated publications) seem to be significant. From 2004-2006, the UK Design Council ran something called the ‘RED Unit’, which represented a reorientation in the Design Council’s articulation of the value of design, and organisational focus (Julier, 2009, p. 221).

RED challenges accepted thinking. We design new public services, systems, and products that address social and economic problems. These problems are increasingly complex and traditional public services are ill-equipped to address them. Innovation is required to re-connect public services to people and the everyday problems that they face.  
(Burns, et al., 2006, p. 2)

The RED Unit published a paper called ‘Transformation Design’, which put forth a case for the transformative potential of design in different settings, including the public sector, to deal effectively with ‘complex’ problems. The argument is illustrated with examples taken from the Design Council’s own work, and design agencies Ideo and live|work. The paper heralds what the authors refer to as a new design discipline (‘transformation design’), which they argue can tackle many kinds of problem, and whose strengths lie in ‘looking from the point of view of the end user’, ‘making things visible’, and ‘prototyping’ (Burns, et al., 2006, pp. 18-19). At around the same time, the UK think tank Demos published two reports on design in relation to the public sector, ‘The Journey to the Interface: How public service design can connect users to reform’ (Parker & Heapy, 2006), and ‘Making the most

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<sup>29</sup> For example, the website ‘Design for Europe’ (now mothballed it seems), one of the outputs of a three year publicly-funded programme to ‘support design-driven innovation across Europe’ had an archive of 94 resources relating to the use of design in the public sector, in the form of reports, blogs, toolkits, guides, ‘top tips’, action plans etc.

<sup>30</sup> See for example Christian Bason quoted in (Camacho, 2016)

of Collaboration: An International Survey of Public Service Co-Design' (Bradwell & Marr, 2008), written in partnership with PwC.

Across the water, in 2006 the Danish government's MindLab, an outfit that had been established in 2002 'as an internal incubator for creativity and innovation' (Carstensen & Bason, 2012, p. 7), was evaluated and set on a new course.

Previously the focus had been on creative facilitation and supporting collaborative working in the policy process. Its new ambition was to become 'a Danish "centre of excellence" in user-driven innovation' (p. 9), running longer-term projects 'developing new ideas based on user needs; analysing, qualifying, and possibly testing ideas; and ... evaluating and measuring the impact of new action' (p. 14). Although 'design' had been a prominent part of MindLab's reputation from the start – the design of their innovative work space had been much publicised – in the second iteration of MindLab, 'design thinking' became firmly established as part of the methodological mix (p. 16). And in 2008, Sitra, the Finnish government's innovation fund, resurrected the Helsinki Design Lab, with a mission to help 'government leaders' deploy 'strategic design' (Helsinki Design Lab, 2013). Both MindLab and the Helsinki Design Lab produced texts (MindLab, 2011) (Boyer, et al., 2011) promoting their methods that were well-received by the UK design for government community. I know, because in my role as secretariat to the Parliamentary Group I organised two events for Parliamentarians, civil servants and designers bringing the leads of each of these labs to speak about their work. At the time, the general feeling was that the Scandinavian countries were 'ahead' in this new wave of public sector practice and the UK needed to catch up:

*"We're not first on [this], Denmark was there about 12 years ago, but [we want] to be seen as leading innovative policy practice. Domestically and internationally."*

*- interview with senior civil servant, Cabinet Office, May 2015*

It wasn't long before academic literature began to appear – and this is the second type of text we will look at here. In fact initial attention from researchers was quite critical, inclined to view these developments, and certainly the claims being made for them, as a discursive strategy that had more to do with political mood and trends in public administration than as evidence of a new design discipline (Julier,

2009; Moor, 2009; Weber, 2010). However there is now a much larger body of work outweighing these first sceptical contributions, which – operating in a more instrumental mode – takes the practice at face value as representing a distinct discipline, skills, and knowledge, and seeks to (instrumentally) theorise it.

One can detect a rough pattern to the development of this collective body of literature: a first wave of promotional, industry-led texts was followed by a second wave of design research, backing up the former (mostly), and more recently academics working in the (pre-existing) field of policy studies have begun to pay attention to this new development in a third wave that has started to blend the two domains.

There are a number of reasons for regarding this – or at least the first two waves – as a discursive formation. First of all, the same narratives and arguments circulate freely between both sets of literatures. With the exception of the small number of critical accounts, a suite of familiar refrains are repeated, cited, adapted, riffed upon, and elaborated; there is a clear sense of a united front. Second, there are the entanglements of institutions and people in the production of discourse – the shared material context of these discursive practices. The Design Commission report from 2013 (which I co-authored) cited at the start of chapter 3 was co-funded by the Design Council, Capita (a private sector firm that has many contracts with the state for outsourced business processes), and the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and drew on a number of other texts including those published by MindLab, Helsinki Design Lab and the Design Council. The AHRC has also funded other efforts to ‘map’ the field of research and practice, which documented the activities of not only design researchers, but design consultancies, the Design Council, third sector organisations using design, the NHS, and government teams (Armstrong, et al., 2014; Malpass & Salinas, 2020; Yee, et al., 2015). Authors often wear multiple hats, operating as practitioners, researchers, and promoters at different times (and sometimes at the same time), and publishing similar things for different audiences. For instance: the former CEO of MindLab, now heading up the Danish Design Centre, who has a PhD looking at how public managers make use of design (Bason, 2017), has written extensively about MindLab’s practice, edited a collection of essays from an international list of contributors on ‘design for policy’

(Bason, 2014), and worked toward design being included in Europe-wide policies as part of the European Design Leadership Board (Thomson & Koskinen, 2012). The European Design Leadership Board also included the President of the Design Research Society, Professor Rachel Cooper, who is the series editor of the collection that included 'Design for Policy' (Bason, 2014) mentioned above, and Dr. Andrea Cooper, the former head of the UK Policy Lab in the Cabinet Office, who herself used to work for the Design Council, has a PhD in design, and often communicates and theorises publicly about the practice (Siodmok, 2014). Several of my former colleagues in design practice have PhDs, teach design in HEIs, and contribute to academic publications, as well as practitioner publications. This is a community of practice where people move between being design consultants, academics, government employees, lab practitioners and teachers, and all the while carry on participating in the same discursive milieu. For these reasons, the analysis that follows takes examples from across the full spectrum of this discursive formation.

## **Selecting a corpus of statements**

Having reviewed the literature previously for earlier versions of the thesis, I had established some key themes and problematics already (although these observations did not all fit neatly into a straightforward literature review). In fact, for a Foucauldian discourse analysis, taking a fine-tooth comb to every single text is not necessary. A small handful can suffice. However, given that I have read much of this literature – and some things more than once – the analysis here is based on a larger bibliography, and on some of the themes I had identified previously. For the greater depth of focus required in this iteration (and for ease of referencing) I have selected six focal texts, and I predominantly quote from these. The texts have been chosen to cover a range of variables: moments in time, academic and non-academic accounts, UK and non-UK-based,<sup>31</sup> design research and policy research,

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<sup>31</sup> The discourse itself does not pay much heed to national borders. Design is assumed to be the same everywhere in a globally circulating conversation that downplays the situated nature of practices within cultures, politics, institutions and local discourses.

local government and central government, policy design and service design. They are, in chronological order: 'RED PAPER 02 Transformation Design' (Burns, et al., 2006), 'Design for Public Good' (McNabola, et al., 2013), 'Design for Policy' (Bason, 2014), 'Valuing Design in Public and Third Sector Organisations' (Yee, et al., 2015), 'Design Research and Practice for the Public Good: A Reflection' (Junginger, 2017), and 'Applying design in public administration: a literature review to explore the state of the art' (Hermus, et al., 2020).

Looking forensically at a small number of texts is undoubtedly essential for paying close attention to the detail of what actually gets said. However, the value of having looked at a much larger body of texts is that it is possible to discern not only 'the rules' for speaking about an object within any given example of discourse, but a set of tactics operant across the discursive formation, discernible over multiple texts. For this reason the analysis that follows tackles these two things: rules and tactics.

## **Rules for speaking about 'design for government'**

What rules govern what one can say and think about 'design for government'? What truths are produced? What are the implicit assumptions that underpin statements? What resources or heuristics do speakers (and writers) draw upon? In any discursive formation there may be a great many themes, and interpretative repertoires called upon, of varying significance (Potter & Wetherell, 1987): major plot lines, sub-plots, cameos, dead-ends, etc. In the case of 'design for government', there are two fundamental 'truths' which underpin nearly all statements:

1. design is good/ desirable; and
2. the state/ public sector/ bureaucracy needs reforming.

Bringing these two premises together obviously has some strategic value in terms of establishing a market for design. However, our interest here is in the knowledge that is being produced about design, and the juxtaposing of these two themes lays the groundwork for the discursive regime, disciplining what can be said, what sorts of research inquiries are deemed valid, and also what design as a practice can legitimately claim to do. The combination results in a number of sub-themes: design



is (must be) not only good but useful in some way, even the complementary opposite of government; it is both a response to change (out there) and a route to organisational change (in here); it delivers innovation and de-risks it at the same time. Let's explore each of these themes in more detail.

## **Design is...**

A preliminary thing to note is the agency lent to design, linguistically. Manifest in its use in sentences or slogans like 'What design can do' and 'Design for good', and phrases such as 'design produces', 'design constructs', 'design has', and so on, this linguistic habit implies there is some independent thing called design, which has its own internal force and ability to achieve things. It is a powerful move because once one has learned to speak of design in this way it is difficult to unlearn it, partly because it allows one to say things that would otherwise be complicated to formulate. It is a useful shorthand, and a cover: it allows for the possibility that anyone (civil servants, for example) can 'harness' design. It allows 'design' to turn 'its' hand to any kind of challenge. But it also leads to an unresolved contradiction in the discourse, which is what, exactly, is the nature of the relationship between 'design' and 'designers', or perhaps more accurately 'people who do design'? Are designers essential to design – can it exist without them? Does design somehow have its own momentum and logics that carry it along? Can it only be performed by those with hard won skills, or is it a mode of thinking and acting that pretty much anyone can adopt?<sup>32</sup>

## **Design is good**

The notion that design (independent of designers) is an inherently desirable thing is a central 'truth' of this discursive formation. In a very basic way, these statements about design only make sense if one accepts that we are talking about a force for

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<sup>32</sup> Paradoxically, this attribution of agency is similar, although done for completely different reasons, to the position I am adopting here: that the apparatus makes things happen – produces designers, even.

good in the world. One is only ever understood as a speaker as inhabiting this position. The intuition of this particular ‘truth’ preceded, I have to say, the moment when I sat down with the texts to scrutinise them: I first encountered it in conversation, in the ways I found myself to be routinely misunderstood as being in favour of design when I meant to be critical. In speech people say quite explicit things like ‘I believe in design’. Such outspoken statements of design’s goodness are less common in written form, but the assumption is there nonetheless.

Design always appears paired with other ‘goods’. In (Hermus, et al., 2020) design is linked with a series of positive terms: promising, feasible, reliable, creativity, innovation, capabilities, imagine, solutions, integrate insights, successful implementation, and responsive. Its assumed desirability is revealed in the sorts of research questions that get asked. It’s never ‘is design useful?’, but rather ‘*how and why* is design useful?’, and ‘how can we prove it?’, as these extracts demonstrate:

As the role of design expands from its traditional role of idea generation, visualisation and prototyping to also becoming a catalyst for change, the importance of articulating the value of a ‘design-led’ approach to innovation is crucial. (Yee, et al., 2015, p. 1)

How and why can a design focus aid public managers in their quest to conceive of, plan, develop and deliver the kinds of products and services that support their mission and allow them to fulfil their mandates?  
(Junginger, 2017, p. 292)

It must be a good thing, that is not in question; the task for research is to describe *how* it is useful, and find out how to make it happen more and better. The findings of research also imply this sort of question: ‘barriers and enablers’ are discussed a great deal (Pirinen, 2016; Whicher & Crick, 2019); there is found to be a ‘lack of awareness of design’, therefore public sector clients must be made aware (Malmberg, 2017; Kim & Nam, 2017)<sup>33</sup>; design does not sufficiently evidence its worth, so studies always end with a call for further research into the value and impact of design (Mager, et al., 2016).

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<sup>33</sup> This was the entire rationale for the SEE Project (European Commission, 2011)

Design's innate goodness is what underpins the expressions of commitment to promoting it as far as possible, for example:

We are increasingly concerned with design in government, because of the fact that our design practices and our design methods are nowhere near as consequential in policy-making and in policy implementation as they could be. (Junginger, 2018, p. 23)

The intent of this book is to point to new avenues for applying design-led processes of policy development and innovation at all levels of the public sector. (Bason, 2014, p. 3)

This typology is a useful starting point for further developing and refining design approaches in public administration. This can help deliver the promise of design to combine scientific rigour and societal relevance. (Hermus, et al., 2020, p. 23)

Recommendation 1: Use the Public Sector Design Ladder as a diagnostic tool and roadmap for progression... Recommendation 2: Build design thinking into government and public policy practice. (McNabola, et al., 2013, p. 10)

It is notable that nowhere in any of this literature does anyone entertain the possibility that we shouldn't use design or take it any further. It is no great surprise to find a promotional logic in the utterances of the Design Council, but it is odd to hear it repeated in research: in any other discipline, researching a real-world practice would not necessarily require one to be an arch proponent of it.

The 'design is good' motif lures speakers into certain idiosyncrasies: into arguing for design for the sake of design – promoting design ladders (McNabola, et al., 2013), design maturity and design capability assessments (Malmberg, 2017) – even while making the case for its instrumental value. As a colleague once pondered, 'yes, but what is the *point* of an organisation being design mature? Is it just to be design mature?' (notebook 06.17).

This particular interpretative repertoire has various roots. The notion that design is a good thing inheres in all the previous discursive constructions of design that we studied above; with the exception perhaps of the different connotations it held for

those British manufacturers of the post-war period. Generally it is hard to think of occasions where design might be used as a pejorative term. One could make fun of someone's predilection for 'designer' clothes, but the term 'designer' is still an indicator of some kind of positive value. As Milestone argues, the idea of design is used to discipline consumers to desire things (Milestone, 2007): it is itself a construct shot through with desirability. In this discourse it is described as having done great things in the private sector – and by a simple logic of extrapolation (which rests on another naturalised 'truth' that the state should be more business-like) it should now be allowed to do the same great things in the public sector.

The process involved in designing the world's most successful products, services and innovations is a highly transferable one. (Burns, et al., 2006, p. 9)

This capability grew from the private sector, but it provides vital cues for the public sector. (McNabola, et al., 2013, p. 4)

This also draws on a 'design is social' interpretative repertoire. This holds that all design can be said to be social, in as much as the designed world is made for people. Additionally, it is argued that there has been an explicitly 'social turn' in design (Miller, 2018), where designers have taken a growing interest in doing socially beneficial work (Armstrong, et al., 2014), which draws on the discourse of an alternative, (ostensibly) non-commercial strain of design that claims a radical heritage (Clarke, 2016; Huybrechts, et al., 2017a).

Design is increasingly embracing the social... a wider change in design culture which has arguably been underway since the late 1960s. (Bason, 2014, p. 4)

Discourse does not have to be logical to be persuasive, and so although this may sound like two trajectories coming together, the simplicity of this narrative effaces a number of incoherencies. Designers may purport to be 'embracing the social' but working for the public sector is a commercial activity. The idea that this kind of work somehow satisfies the need to do public good also rests on a lazy equation between the state and 'public good', and on overlooking the fact that what counts as 'good' might itself be highly contested. Finally design is not, in this account,

advocated for its keener social conscience, but rather because of its association with the virtues of enterprise, and its track record enhancing business success.

### **The public sector is broken**

A second ‘truth’ which underpins the discourse is the belief that the public sector is no longer (and possibly never has been) up to the job. There are a number of interwoven strands to this theme, which sometimes appear on their own, sometimes all bundled together.

First, there are lots of problems that the public sector has to deal with, and those problems are getting worse. This is a kind of ‘perpetual crisis’ narrative. A checklist of problems (typically including things like climate change, globalisation, social inequality, ageing populations, diminishing budgets and rising demand for services – and now, of course, global pandemics) sets up the argument for design. The task of governing is qualitatively harder than it was in the past: problems are more difficult to manage, and the demands on government are ever greater.

Arguably, policymaking in the twenty-first century has become increasingly difficult, as the contexts in which policies are formed and must work have become more complex... Governments around the world are under unprecedented pressure to identify new, better and more cost-effective ways of producing public services and better societal outcomes.  
(Bason, 2014, p. 2)

The second spin on this theme is that governments are ill-equipped to deal with this new landscape of problems. Complexity, complex problems, wicked problems, complex worlds, interconnected systems: these are noted as contemporary conditions that the public sector struggles to handle, and that design – like a more youthful and up to date protégé - may be able to help with (Bason, 2014; Bentley, 2014; Bannerjee, 2014; Christiansen & Bunt, 2014; Buchanan, et al., 2017; Coupe & Cruickshank, 2017). Because while the world has become harder to govern, the machinery of government hasn’t changed appropriately; we’re trying to solve new problems with old tools. A key theme here is the inability of ‘traditional’ modes of public administration to cope with new, complex problems.

Hierarchical and silo structures... are not, however, so effective handling high levels of complexity (Burns, et al., 2006, p. 8)

Traditional policymaking is based on assumptions of a linear, rational process, delivery in discrete silos, and by different tiers of government – and this administratively atomised approach doesn't work any more (Bentley, 2014). Or it may be that the public sector is just inherently flawed, as these statements imply:

Design thinking is the way to overcome common structural flaws in service provision and policymaking. (McNabola, et al., 2013, p. 6)

Traditional public sector service provision and policymaking commonly encounter a number of stumbling blocks (McNabola, et al., 2013, p. 18)

Policymakers lament the fact that perhaps they do not make the difference to people and society they could. (Bason, 2014, p. 1)

Policies do not work because they are too often based on inaccurate assumptions (Blomkamp, 2018). The traditional approach is 'overly rationalist' (Christiansen & Bunt, 2014; McGann, et al., 2018), privileging technological and scientific knowledge and a positivist world view (O'Rafferty, et al., 2016). As a result we repeatedly see poor outcomes: 'a lot of expensive things are not working very well', politicians and citizens are becoming intolerant of 'the cost of incompetence' (Miller & Rudnick, 2011). Public servants are characterised as equally frustrated at the dysfunction of the system they are working in (Christiansen, 2013).

Thinking back to the Lab Connections example with which we opened chapter 2, the whole event was framed, up front, by a description of the problems facing state bureaucracies. Those problems were characterised as unprecedentedly complex, and the unquestioned assumption underpinning the speeches that kicked off day 1 was that the state must be modernised, reformed, fundamentally reinvented in order to meet those problems. Complex political problems require technical innovation. This means new policies, new ways of *making* policies and by implication new kinds of civil servant (and not, notably, new politics or politicians).

A third strand is the self-evident ‘truth’ mentioned previously that the state ought to be more business-like, that businesses know better and the public sector must catch up.

For governments to remain credible to their citizens, they must treat the design quality of their services as seriously as the best businesses. (Ideo chief executive Tim Brown, quoted in Kershaw, et al., n.d., p. 3)

The assumptions underpinning these critiques of bureaucracy – and praise of design – are easily challenged. For example, the theories usually cited to back up the argument for a contemporary state of heightened complexity come from John Dewey, writing in 1927 (Dewey, 1927), and Rittel and Webber (Rittel & Webber, 1973), writing in 1973, respectively. In other words, complexity is not a new phenomenon. And it seems a little crude to dismiss everything that bureaucracies have been doing up until now as not fundamentally complex. The complexity theme is also interesting because it is not actually that easy for speakers to turn design into a response to complex problems, to reformulate it as better at dealing with complexity than the state. The RED Unit paper essentially redefines complexity in order to fit design as it was thought at that moment in time, equating it with poor customer experience, and mis-characterising a series of case studies of service and process redesign as solutions to complex problems.

Many of today’s more complex problems arise because the latent needs and aspirations of ‘end users’ – those individuals who will receive the benefit of a given service or system – are not being met by the current offer. (Burns, et al., 2006, p. 19)

This argument disappears from later formulations, but it continues to be a challenge to marry design with complexity – or rather to find out how design is a good answer to complexity (Blomkamp 2018; McGann et al 2018; Bason 2014). Some authors note circumspectly that it is not yet clear whether design is capable of dealing with complex policy problems (McGann et al 2018; Bason 2014), and wonder if perhaps design works best at the level of services than with ‘abstract, cross-cutting and complex problems’ (Bason & Schneider, 2014; Clarke & Craft, 2019). Nevertheless, complexity continues to be deployed as a general premise and context for design

(Hermus, et al., 2020). This demonstrates a discursive tactic which we will explore more in the following section: of rhetorical alignment with fashionable ideas to demonstrate design's relevance. It also works to the advantage of multiple different interests. Invoking the need to 'manage' in the face of complexity shifts the locus of problem-solving away from political leadership and onto the technical capacities of public administration. And for experts of many kinds, it provides an opportunity to sell competencies in to the state.

Bureaucracy-bashing is not a sport invented by design, but it is one that this discursive formation has taken up to its advantage. Opposition to the idea of 'the state' is not new of course, but over the last 40 years or so this kind of critique has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity (Du Gay, 2007, p. 110), fuelled by populism on the one hand, and managerialism on the other (Clarke & Newman, 1997). The design discourse picks up on both of these critiques. Aligning with the populism argument, authors have design addressing democratic deficits by involving people in decision-making processes, enabling negotiations between different perspectives (Vaajakallio, et al., 2013), and helping government better engage with the publics to whom it is accountable (Docherty, 2017; Kimbell, 2016; Bridge, 2012). This supports goals such as social sustainability and cohesion (Cook, 2011), empowering citizens by 'enhancing their skills and by having them represented' (Piemalm 2018), and increasing trust between government and citizens (Blomkamp, 2018; Baek & Kim, 2018; Vaajakallio, et al., 2013).

Aligning with the enterprise argument, authors have design supporting transformation, innovation and organisational change (more on this later). The roots of this particular repertoire can be traced to the work of the Conservative think tank, the Centre for Policy Studies, which, building on Friedrich Hayek's theories of neoliberalism, was a strong influence on the philosophy of the Thatcher administration (Morris, 1991). A key idea here was not only that the management of public goods should be transferred into the hands of private enterprise, but that the 'commercial enterprise' is the paradigmatic model of a good institutional form – a Platonic ideal to which the state ought to conform (Keat, 1991, pp. 2-3). This involves some 'strategic de-differentiation' – the denial of difference between organisations, people, and professions. (Keat, 1991, p. 3). And so the 'enterprise



culture' of the 1980s was expressed in politics in a problematisation of bureaucracy and an associated set of directives about what ought to be done.

Enterprise-based calls for public sector reform dispersed into all sorts of texts and discourses: academic observations of governments (Eggers & O'Leary, 2009), (King & Crewe, 2013) and celebrations of enterprise and managerialism (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992), the memoirs of politicians (Clarke, 2014), other think tank publications (e.g. (Reform, 2021)), and also crucially texts produced by the state itself. Publications like 'Improving Management in Government: the Next Steps' (Efficiency Unit, 1988), 'Modernising Government' (Cabinet Office, 1999), 'Innovation Nation' (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2008), and the 'Open Public Services White Paper' (Cabinet Office, 2011) and their associated programmes of reform all take aim at the machinery of government – the civil service – for different reasons: efficiency and effectiveness, quality and responsiveness, fairness, transparency and accountability. A similar set of refrains to those we hear in the design discourse appear here – or rather, they appeared here first:

The world is changing rapidly and the demands placed on public servants are changing too. (Cabinet Office, 1999, p. 55)

People are exercising choice and demanding higher quality... not just from the private sector, but from the public sector too. (Cabinet Office, 1999, p. 10)

The defining social challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – climate change, an ageing population and globalisation – will not be solved by 'off the shelf' answers. (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2008, p. 70)

The cause of poor standards in the public sector is ... an outdated approach to organising public services that is out of step with the way we live now. (Cabinet Office, 2011, p. 7)

An assumption they all share – derived from the argument for enterprise – is the managerial nature of governing: the task of the public sector is one of management (Clarke & Newman, 1997). And when seen through the lens of management, as opposed to public office (for example) public administration is found wanting (Du

Gay, 2007). These white papers are reflective of the discursive formations swirling around successive political administrations and their mantras on public service reform, in which there is a high degree of continuity in spite of the ostensible political swings from right to left, and this discourse set the tone for others to follow. One could easily dispute the analysis contained therein (all of these political texts are in places quite incoherent), but for whatever reason – actively seeking business, to curry political favour, or simply picking up on the mood and language of the moment? – the design discourse continually aligns itself with the prevailing political discourse. In 2013 the ‘Design for Public Good’ report bundles a cluster of public sector reform axioms into a single sentence:

Government design projects consistently deliver lower costs, greater efficiency, fulfilled public sector staff and, most importantly, citizens who are both more secure in the present and more empowered and self-reliant long-term. (McNabola, et al., 2013, p. 16)

The design for government discourse is in fact a blend of interpretative repertoires – bringing together some pre-existing ways of thinking and talking about design, with the fashion in political discourse for problematising the way the public sector does things. These two major themes then produce, as a consequence, a number of others. If design is good, and the public sector, by contrast, has problems, then design must be of some relevance and use in application.

### **Design is useful**

Design is not only good; it is useful. It does something. And that something is of value to the public sector because it is different; it is an improvement. It is not particularly difficult to make a case for improvement because, as has been made clear by successive political administrations, the public sector must be improved. In making the case for design being the answer to the question of public sector reform, texts have to specify why: what is it about design that makes it useful? And what does it do? These twin concerns dominate both academic and non-academic texts. Establishing new answers to these questions is what counts as new

knowledge about design in this context, and the answers must abide by some general rules.

One thing that falls away in the shift from 'good' to 'useful', in the context of the public sector, is the aesthetic connotation design has in other discursive formations. For example, in the post-war period 'good design' meant an object or furnishing that, in shape and style, met the approval of elite tastemakers (Hayward, 1998). However, in 2013 the Design Commission defined design purely as 'the application of certain methodologies', and there is some distaste for anything beyond the purely essential, distinguishing their version of design from 'fuelling the whims of fashion' and 'frivolous... vanity projects' (Design Commission, 2013). Earlier formulations of design in the public sector experimented with pairing function and form, usefulness ('solving a problem') with desirable aesthetic qualities:

Good design creates products, services, spaces, interactions and experiences that not only satisfy a function or solve a problem, but that are also desirable, aspirational, compelling and delightful. These are the qualities desperately needed by organisations in both the public and private sector which are seeking to transform the way in which they connect to individuals. (Burns, et al., 2006, p. 9)

But by 2020, desirability, delightfulness, and even the idea of design as form, have dropped off the radar:

Design processes are supposed to result in feasible and reliable policies, services and interventions, while addressing complex or even wicked social problems. They are said to foster creativity and develop innovation capabilities, by helping participants to imagine alternative solutions and features. In addition, design is supposed to help integrate insights from different fields, sources or actors, thus increasing the chances of a successful implementation of a policy that meets the needs of users. Designed policies and services are potentially more responsive to the needs of those who work with them. (Hermus, et al., 2020, p. 22)

Perhaps it was the intervening years of austerity that made such things seem 'frivolous', although why aesthetic matters are deemed inessential to the functioning of public services is an interesting question. User needs are repositioned not as

what the consumer wants, but ‘as a quick route to efficiency’ (McNabola, et al., 2013, p. 7), tailoring solutions to the needs of the end user, ‘trimming off whatever is extraneous’ (p.16). One might question, of course, whether or not extreme personalisation of services is necessarily a more efficient delivery model. One would have thought not.

Later on design becomes purely instrumentally a route to ‘smarter’ problem-solving. There are some common building blocks to the rationale for design’s usefulness in this regard, which appear in different combinations, but generally fall into one of two categories: ways in which design is better at understanding problems, or better at coming up with solutions. Design is participatory, it has methods for co-creation and enables collaboration. It is user-centred, it pays attention to people and what they do, how they live, what they think and feel – and how they interact with services. It is visual and tangible – in its methods and its results. It has a suite of methods, processes, and tools. It is creative and generative, therefore better at innovating; it enables collaborative creativity. It is holistic and synthetic; it looks at problems in the round, it understands systems, its research methods uncover the ‘architecture’ of problems.

Taken together these qualities imply that design somehow has greater proximity to, or a grasp on, ‘the real’ – to real people, to the architecture of problems, to the messy complexity of the world, to tangible solutions.

Designers... go beyond the focus group or survey to observe real user behaviour (McNabola, et al., 2013, p. 7)

Walking hand in hand to discover real issues (Yee, et al., 2015, p. 12)

Policy makers in Whitehall and policy thinkers in think tanks are similarly too distant from the creative power of real people with real problems. It is hard to gain insight into the real lives of users of public services by reading about them in research reports or talking about them in seminars. Moreover, the pressure to please a particular minister, deliver a vote-winning idea, or grab the day’s headlines can be a distraction from the task of generating ideas that might actually work in practice. (Burns, et al., 2006, p. 9)

The implication is of a problematic distance or disconnect between the public sector and the rest of the world: messages that don't resonate, incomplete information or a misunderstanding of users, services that don't work with people's realities, policies that don't 'land'. This conception creates a role for a mediating agent to patch up the relationship: 'design sits at the interface between government and citizens' (Julier, 2017, p. 163). Inside government too, there is a problematic gap between policy and delivery (Christiansen & Bunt, 2014), which collaborative design practices can bridge (Ansell, et al., 2017). This might be a hangover from earlier formulations of design, as operative at a certain moment in 'the cycle of production, distribution, exchange and consumption of commodities' (Thompson, 2008, p. 27). Design has to be inserted in the middle of something.

It is interesting that with all of these accounts of usefulness it is very hard for texts to separate characteristics of design from the outcomes it delivers: collaboration delivers collaboration, creativity delivers creativity. It is never described without reference to the context in which it is working or the thing it produces. This is perhaps because usefulness is a highly contingent property; it relies on a context in which something can become useful. If design is these things, it is because these qualities are particularly relevant to the context. Authors have design leading to organisational change (Junginger, 2017; Deserti & Rizzo, 2015); improving 'performance, quality and safety' (Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016); improving the public sector's ability to deliver health and wellbeing (Blomkamp, 2018); 'helping to make government services more accessible, efficient and streamlined' (McGann, et al., 2018); improving the quality of services but *not* their efficiency (Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016); improving responsiveness and adaptability (Clarke & Craft, 2019); supporting a new 'human-centred governance' model – 'relational, networked, interactive, and reflective' (Bason, 2017); and so on.

Design's properties and uses are mutable, and in the context of the public sector, its usefulness shifts in relation to changes in the external environment. For example, following the introduction of austerity policies, design is re-described as a route to money-saving. There is no mention of this particular form of usefulness in the original RED Unit paper. However by 2013, the Design Council can claim:

design has shown its ability to square the circle between two first-order objectives often seen as mutually exclusive: cutting state spending and improving the experience of citizens (McNabola, et al., 2013, p. 16)

Similar claims are made by Lord Michael Bichard in a short article for Public Money and Management (Bichard, 2011), and by the Design Commission report (2013). So: was this valuable quality overlooked in 2006, in pushing design to the public sector? Did the design sector rapidly develop these abilities in the short intervening period, in a reflex response to public sector budget cuts? Or was it in fact re-described to fit the needs of the moment?

To really drive home the point of design's complementarity, of its suitability to ameliorating the problems of the public sector, some texts adopt the strategy of explicitly setting design and the public sector up as a binary pair, with opposing qualities. Sometimes these are characterised in design's favour: for example, disjointed incrementalism vs. designing for the fundamental need, high-risk piloting vs. low-risk prototyping, lack of joined up thinking vs. a complete innovation process, silo structures vs. multi-disciplinary teamwork (McNabola, et al., 2013, p. 18). Sometimes there is less of a design good/ public sector bad dynamic: for example, analysis vs. synthesis, rational vs emotional, logical vs intuitive, deductive vs inductive (Bason, 2014, p. 6). Whether or not these claims for design stand up to scrutiny is perhaps beside the point (although, they don't). This is a rhetorical strategy, intended to make design attractive by being everything that bureaucracy is not.

The challenge of making design indispensable to the public sector leads texts into a number of contradictions (often to be found within a single text). Sometimes design is aligned with management: management is a kind of designing, design is indispensable to managers (Bason, 2017). And sometimes it is set up as the qualitative opposite to 'management thinking and practices' (Junginger, 2017, p. 294). It is both holistic and precise. It delivers innovation and change, and mitigates risk. It is something that anyone can do, and it is the expertise and skillset of trained designers ('hopefully you are already aware that design is not just for designers - everybody has the capacity to design!' (Kershaw, et al., n.d., p. 4)). It is tools and methods, and it is a 'mindset' or attitude. And, similar to the contradiction noted

above by Milestone (the ubiquity/ rarefied genius pairing), it is at the same time already 'in' public services, and lacking from the public sector. It is everywhere, civil servants are already effectively designing, design is in everything; but yet at the same time it is not sufficiently understood, used, valued, taken advantage of, or skilfully deployed.

### **Change, innovation, and risk**

So: design is an unquestionable good, the public sector is broken and needs fixing, and design is useful because it brings exactly those qualities the public sector lacks. There are a couple of other significant 'rules' or interpretative repertoires, adapted from the public sector reform discourse, that structure how design is articulated here. One is around change and innovation, and the other is around risk.

The pace of change, in the economy and across society, is quickening.  
(Design Commission, 2013, p. 1)

In the design discourse, and public sector reform discourse alike, we are characterised as being in a contemporary state of change. Change is an external reality that must be faced. No-one is responsible for or driving the change: the change just happens. The discursive construction of change is a good example of both nominalisation – the act of turning a process into a noun and thereby obfuscating agency (globalisation is another example) (Fairclough, 2000, p. 162) – and epochalist theorising (Du Gay, 2007), accounts which seek to 'encapsulate the zeitgeist in some kind of overarching societal designation' (Osborne, 1998, p. 17). Both are very effective strategies for limiting the terms of discussion in advance.

If change is the one constant, the job of government is therefore to 'manage' in the face of change, and the appropriate response to an uncontrollably changing external environment is continual innovation.

Governments at all levels are embracing ever growing levels of complexity and in increasingly uncertain times... Many governments require more fundamental change so are adopting approaches more associated with innovation. (Kershaw, et al., n.d., p. 7)

Innovation is essential to the UK's future economic prosperity and quality of life... Innovation in public services will be essential to the UK's ability to meet the economic and social challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2008, pp. 9-12)

However, change also appears in another guise, as an 'unalloyed good' (Du Gay, 2007, p. 137) in the context of organisations and management – and the modus operandi of the public sector. As we know, reform of the public sector has been discursively constructed by successive political administrations as non-negotiable. And reform means change. Change in the context of the public sector is therefore also a desirable thing. In fact, the public sector must change, to be able to innovate, in order to meet the demands of change. And in a complicated twist, innovation itself is changing, and governments must keep up:

Government policy needs to recognise these new sources of innovation and, in particular, develop new instruments that drive demand for innovation as well as its supply. (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2008, p. 5)

The DIUS Innovation Nation white paper reconfigures innovation to incorporate, among other things, design (and also names Nesta and the Design Council in that regard). In a parallel move, the Design Council and Nesta re-describe design as indelibly linked to innovation generally, and as essential to public sector innovation.

'Design' is what links creativity and innovation. It shapes ideas to become practical and attractive propositions for users or customers. Design may be described as creativity deployed to a specific end. (Cox, 2005, p. 2)

Design thinking is an innovation approach and its tools and techniques can lead to significant changes in both policy design and service delivery. (Kershaw, et al., n.d., p. 5)

These processes are key to growth and competitiveness.... Design thinking... is a way of... meeting both the challenges that are pressing in the present, and the new ones that will continually appear in the future (McNabola, et al., 2013, p. 16)



Design methods ... quicken the pulse of innovation and help governments get to better solutions more quickly. (Kershaw, et al., n.d., p. 9)

In this muddle around change, design becomes a way of (en)countering the external challenge of change, of catalysing positive change (innovation), and of the public sector changing itself.

Design research and design methods can contribute to public sector innovation in significant ways... by reframing concepts... by opening up new avenues for management thinking and practice (Junginger, 2017, p. 301)

Design research and design studies offer a new path to organisational change (Junginger, 2017, p. 291)

A design-led approach has clearly been valued as a catalyst for change (Yee, et al., 2015, p. 2)

In order to make this plausible, design in this account has to demonstrate its capacity for change and innovation. This entails some discursive work, because design, in previous formulations – and in commonplace understanding – has not been synonymous with the delivery of something. Typically, design (as a verb) has meant an activity of planning or intent. It means the bit before the change. Not the change itself. So, the question of how design leads to change and innovation leads to much theorising (answers include fresh insights, collaboration between different stakeholders, new perspectives, methods for generating new ideas, re-framing, etc). However, underpinning all of that is a basic conceptual move that allows design to be equated with change.

This is achieved firstly by referring back to that infamous Herbert Simon quote – ‘everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones’ (Simon, 1996, p. 111) – as a kind of origin point. It is not only in this discursive formation, but becoming increasingly popular across design research, to take up Simon’s position on design as a problem-solving

process as opposed to a form-giving one (Huppatz, 2015).<sup>34</sup> In fact, Simon's ambition was to subsume design into a broader field of artificial sciences (Hermus, et al., 2020, p. 22), not to say that all artificial sciences, all change processes, are design. However, the reverse is effectively happening here: all change processes are rendered design processes.

Design can be defined as the human endeavour of converting actual into preferred situations (Bason, 2014, p. 3)

And there is another subtle shift. Bason's 2014 version leaves out two crucial little words: 'aimed at'. Whereas for Simon design was still a question of intent to change, for Bason it does the change itself. It then follows: if design is change, and the public sector needs to change, then, logically, the public sector needs design.

The Herbert Simon definition is hard to disagree with, and thereby provides almost watertight grounds for design to enter into public sector reform. What is designing if not the attempt to improve something? But on the other hand, what is not covered by this phrase? The genius of that quote, extracted from its context, is that although it sounds quite specific, a great many things could potentially be grouped under that description – making a sandwich, meditating, going for a walk, sleeping. What is life but one long process of converting existing situations into preferred ones? The expansiveness of this definition means it can be used to create a sense of equivalence between both designing and governing, and at the same time between designing and change.

Another strategy for cementing the idea that design leads to 'real' change, is the construction of prototyping, in this discourse, as equivalent with implementation:

Research user needs, visualise solutions, prototype and improve... design thinking offers a complete end-to-end problem-solving method... a

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<sup>34</sup> Never mind that the kind of design process Simon had in mind, 'objective, value-neutral, quantifiable and mathematical', 'a logical search for satisfactory criteria that fulfill a specific goal' (Huppatz, 2015, p. 34), is not the sort of approach likely to be able to respond to complexity. Nor the fact that he had no interest in implicating 'creativity' in problem-solving: 'solving a problem simply means representing it so as to make the solution transparent' (Simon, 1996, p. 132).

joined-up process that moves seamlessly from analysis to solutions to implementation... a complete innovation process, one that approaches problems from the ground up and carries through solutions to implementation. (McNabola, et al., 2013, pp. 18-21)

Sometimes it is stated more tentatively: the promise of design is in its 'devices... that can help give form and shape to policy in practice' (Bason, 2014, p. 5). We are still though building on the assumption that having something visual or tangible is one step closer to making it 'real' than – for example – writing about it in words.

Making this claim, for design as implementation, involves two omissions. First, as might be ascertained by even a cursory glance at research on prototyping, it is not normally understood as being the same as implementation. It is never conceived as the end point of the process; something always comes after (Kimbell & Bailey, 2017, p. 217). Prototypes are 'holistic precursors of the final product' (Sanders & Stappers, 2014), 'things that are not quite objects yet' (Corsin Jimenez, 2014, p. 383), just as likely to be abandoned or modified as carried through to delivery. The second, more empirical, issue is there is relatively little solid evidence, even within the instrumentally focused design literature, of design in the public sector leading to implementation (Hermus, et al., 2020, p. 34).

The contingency of the linkage between design and problems/ change/ innovation, in this discursive context, is highlighted by its absence in other discursive formations. Take, for instance, this extract from 'Designing Costume for Stage and Screen' (Clancy, 2014, p. 47), from the start of chapter 2, 'the design process':

When the text, script or libretto arrives, read it as carefully as possible.  
Get the director to take you to lunch, and discuss your initial response...  
Find out what the director thinks – better still, find out how the director thinks – as your ability to anticipate changes of mind will save much heartache and bad temper later on... Then read the script again, this time making notes. There are as many methods of approaching the design of a set of costumes for the stage as there are productions. It is useful to explore several contrasting design concepts in your discussions with the director – if only to clarify the director's mind by agreeing how you don't want the production to look.

Here design is primarily a matter of planning, of form-giving, of shaping an aesthetic vision, of choosing between possibilities. If change occurs it is only in as much as at some point one needs to produce some costume designs, where before there were none. Tellingly, the book includes very little information on how one goes about making (i.e. implementing) costumes. Designing ends with some drawings, after which point ‘the designer needs the support of skilled craftspeople and technicians, who will translate his or her ideas into wearable garments’ (p. 84). But design is no herald of guaranteed change in the world here, and innovation is certainly not routinely called for. Why, then, must design be made to encompass implementation in the public sector? Because if it doesn’t lead to change, if it merely leads to prescriptions for change, then it is no more effective at delivering innovation than ‘traditional public sector approaches’.

Another way design is constructed as a solution to the public sector’s change and innovation problem, is through appeal to a ‘risk’ narrative. Innovation is seen as inherently risky, associated with disruption, entrepreneurialism, novelty. The public sector routinely fails to be creative, and to deliver change and innovation, because it is more motivated by a fear of risk:

The cultures of Parliament, Ministers and the civil service create a situation in which the rewards for success are limited and penalties for failure can be severe. The system is too often risk averse. As a result, Ministers and public servants can be slow to take advantage of new opportunities. (Cabinet Office, 1999, p. 11)

We are committed to simplifying the raft of health and safety regulations that hold back public servants from doing their job creatively, and tackling the pervasive culture of risk-aversion (Cabinet Office, 2011, p. 42)

The reality is that working in these areas in full public scrutiny, with the possibility of frequent policy changes, has resulted in organisations being risk-averse and employees fearful of attempting anything new. (Yee, et al., 2015, p. 10)

Design supports the public sector in its ambition to be innovative through ameliorating this risk, ‘reduc[ing] the risk of policy failure when it is scaled by testing

out ideas early and getting feedback from users' (Siodmok, 2014, p. 191).

Prototyping carries a lot of weight here too.

Designers like to 'suck it and see' by building little mock-ups or prototypes before they commit resources to building the real thing. In business terms, this is a good risk management technique. (Burns, et al., 2006, p. 19)

By the time one arrives at a final prototype or pilot, unintended consequences and risk of failure will have been designed out (McNabola, et al., 2013, p. 7)

For a culture allegedly obsessed with risk, design is reformulated as a kind of risk management – a reassuring capacity for controlling the future, for predicting the unpredictable – even though elsewhere in the same discursive formation we find the occasional recognition that design itself might actually be risky:

No matter how much risk we remove through prototyping and customer testing, our work remains at root a creative activity. We are seeking new ways to tackle existing problems, some of which will work and some that won't. It's been important to be honest about this. (Design Commission, 2013, p. 42)

This is a rare admission however. Cox's definition of design ('creativity deployed to a specific end') essentially disciplines it, tames it, as design itself channels directionless 'creativity'. As we saw in the management discourse on creativity (Prichard, 2002) design is here being made useful and task-focused, subordinated to the needs of the public sector, it 'fits solutions to problems with precision' (McNabola, et al., 2013, p. 16). Hence the emphasis on accessible methods and tools. Design for Europe's mission statement, for example, included a promise to public sector managers and policymakers of providing 'the tools they need to innovate'. While being innovative sounds like a tall order, design is constructed as an 'enjoyable experience', a 'safe space', 'non-threatening' (Yee, et al., 2015), and a safe pair of hands. The design process model (typically the Design Council's double diamond) 'reassuringly suggests the project is heading towards an actionable change' (p. 11). The principles and skills of design are 'simple, empathic, teachable

and transferable' (Burns, et al., 2006, p. 26). It is 'an expandable set of little methods': like shadowing, personas, visualisation techniques, user journeys, prototyping, scenarios, and the Double Diamond (McNabola, et al., 2013, pp. 24-27). Toolkits detailing these – even offering up readymade templates – abound. Texts make it as easy as possible for novices to take their first steps: providing descriptions of methods, lists of resources, names of agencies and experts, and suggesting practical, small-scale, low-risk starting points for trialling design. Design is a robust, rational, ordered process, and a foolproof set of tools, that delivers public sector innovation (actual change in the world) without the risk.

## **Tactics for constructing the field**

In the above exploration of 'the rules', we have established some of the structuring ideas that govern what it is possible to say and think about design in this discursive formation. However in a discourse analysis we are also interested in how knowledge acquires authority – how does it make itself persuasive? In this expert discourse there are a number of observable tactics geared towards assembling a new field of expertise, and establishing its legitimacy and authority. These are particularly noticeable because we are looking at a field in a moment of transition and emergence: a different idea of design is being constructed, along with a new type of expertise, and a new profession. Speakers are both establishing the rules and arguing for their validity, simultaneously.

## **Assembling the field**

Many studies begin by noting the proliferation of 'design for government' activity (Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016; Clarke & Craft, 2019; Bason, 2017; Kimbell & Bailey, 2017) or the fact that design is beginning to appear in the official utterances of governments, for example in Australia and New Zealand (Blomkamp, 2018) and Europe (European Commission, 2013), indicating that this is a real-world development to be taken seriously. The RED Unit did the same thing in 2006, identifying 'a nascent but growing community of practice' (Burns, et al., 2006, p. 7).

This is the first step: identifying something and pointing to it; that tricky little move of implying it has been there all along while actively constructing it.

A second step involves claiming examples: grouping things together and classifying them as of the same kind, re-labelling things that might previously have been known under another name. (Burns, et al., 2006) give four cases. (McNabola, et al., 2013) give twelve. (Yee, et al., 2015) give six. (Design Commission, 2013) gives nineteen. In these, such disparate things as digital products for local government, the Behavioural Insights Team, big data, process re-design projects, and government innovation teams all appear as examples of design in the public sector. This is a key mechanism in the link between practices and discourse. As Young (2009) notes about the emergence of graphic design, the discourse does not produce practices where previously there were none: it draws together pre-existing things and makes them intelligible as something else.

The assembling is not only of practices but also of other knowledges (or discourses). Design in the public sector incorporates methods and ideas from systems, futures, ethnography, and behaviour change, and samples and remixes elements of discourses around creativity, enterprise, participation/ empowerment, public sector reform (as we have seen), labs/ experimentation, and complexity. But there is a kind of semantic indeterminacy here. The use of words should not be taken as a sign of engagement with any theory behind them, they are used to signal affiliation.

A third step involves ‘mapping’. Having identified there is a field of expertise and practice, and appropriated some examples, the next logical thing to do is to quantify and represent it, somehow. Versions of this appear in (Bradwell & Marr, 2008), (Fuller & Lochard, 2016), (Bason & Schneider, 2014), (Armstrong, et al., 2014) and (Malpass & Salinas, 2020). Occasionally these include actual cartographic representations, but often the term ‘mapping’ is used metaphorically, to describe attempts to count and classify. At Lab Connections there was a map – an actual map, not a metaphorical one. A kind of territory of practices was overlaid onto Europe’s geography: defined, made knowable, and claimed. The exhibition served

the function, too, of creating the field through representing examples and classifying them together.

The use of the term ‘map’ is itself indicative: maps are tools to enable and assert control, central to the project of colonising, empire-building and nation-forming (Kitchin, et al., 2011, p. 440). They make things calculable and thereby governable. In the Lab Connections introduction, the Vice President urged the more advanced to share their expertise and bring the laggards on. In their review of the state of play of design in the public sector, Christian Bason and Andrea Schneider note that although it is a rapidly spreading global phenomenon, it appears to be clustered in industrialised countries, prompting a suggestion of further colonisation:

One question arising from this pattern is how to link these trends to other regions, such as Latin America, Asia and Africa. Could they not benefit from being integrated with the growing community of public sector design? (Bason & Schneider, 2014, p. 38)

These maps also have the effect of unifying a disparate set of things: consultancies, think tanks, experiments in smart city technology, policy innovation teams, and innovation ‘spaces’ in government departments are de-differentiated in their representation. Labelling things, categorising them, and counting them is always a strategic business (Stone, 1988). And power is constituted in the making of maps themselves: they embody a perspective (even if their effectiveness relies on an assumption of the ‘naturalness’ of the representation); certain things are shown and others omitted; they are ‘vested with the interests of their creators’ (Kitchin, et al., 2011, p. 441). The very act of counting things together renders them part of the same phenomenon. The act of ‘mapping’ design in the public sector implies its naturalness as an object.

### **Establishing legitimacy and authority**

As we have already seen, a key discursive mechanism is alignment with politically favoured ideas. We have looked specifically at the discourse around public sector reform, and the related problematisations of change, innovation, and risk. There is neither time nor space here to look in detail at other strategic alignments, but we



can highlight a few. Design has been discursively linked with a range of ideas that have come in and out of fashion, including the Big Society (Blyth & Kimbell, 2011), the relational state (Tassinari, 2013), social sustainability (Cook, 2011), resilience (Thorpe & Rhodes, 2018), systems (Boyer, et al., 2011; Conway, et al., 2017; Barbero, 2017), transformation (Burns, et al., 2006), excellence (Allio, 2014), openness (O'Rafferty, et al., 2016; Gryszkiewicz, et al., 2016), behaviour change (Maschi & Winhall, 2014), and co-production (Radnor, et al., 2014; Seravalli, et al., 2017). In these pairings, design is (re)formulated to chime with a political trend, in terms of the intellectual climate surrounding the public sector at any given moment. The case is made for design through the appeal to other 'truths', agreeing with the rules of another discourse and inserting design as a necessary accomplice.

Another rather bald strategy is eliciting respected and authoritative figures to speak approvingly about design. Typically, unless they are of extreme notoriety (Steve Jobs for example), this means figures not from within design, but rather from fields the public sector audience is likely to have heard of and respect. Reports feature forewords from Ministers, quotes from local authority chief executives, and influential business figures.

The doing of academic research itself is also a key pillar in establishing a disciplinary apparatus. Studies of practice make connections into other scholarly literatures – such as design management (Terrey, 2012), service design (Buchanan, et al., 2017), participatory design/ co-design (Blomkamp, 2018), design for social innovation (Manzini & Staszowski, 2013), policy design (Junginger, 2013), public management (Bason, 2017), organisational change (Sangiorgi, 2011; Junginger, 2018) – and deploy a range of theoretical ideas – such as design thinking, managing as designing, complexity and wicked problems, emergence, actor network theory, agonism, infrastructuring, commoning, logics of interdisciplinarity, and theories of public sector change such as new public management and new public governance. These more established disciplinary ideas are used like a scaffold to erect the 'design for government' edifice.

There is also a reverse process of legitimisation that goes on through the practice of citing and the authority conferred therein. Grey literature is consistently cited in

academic work. In fact it is often treated as The Literature that scholars are building their own work upon. The original Design Council RED paper on transformation design, and Demos's 'The Journey to the Interface' are referenced in a great many studies as foundational touchstones (Sangiorgi, 2015, pp. 29-30; Cho, 2017). The Annual Review of Policy Design has published within its journal pieces by the All Party Parliamentary Design Group and Design Commission<sup>35</sup>. Sometimes academic researchers acknowledge that the emergent nature of the field means that academic work is thin on the ground, leaving only the grey literature to fall back on (Blomkamp 2018, McGann et al 2018). However even these accounts still rely heavily on those non-academic sources. Blomkamp (2018) notes the predominance of grey literature but goes on to draw extensively on Demos/ PwC's 'Making the Most of Collaboration' (Bradwell & Marr, 2008). Publications by think tanks, quangos, consultancies, labs, and bloggers – by virtue of repeated citing – come to be treated as canonical texts.

Finally there is the technique of holding design up as a benchmark and rating organisations against it. The 'Design for Public Good' report has its Public Sector Design Ladder, a close adaptation of the Danish Design Centre's original business-focused design ladder (Danish Design Centre, 2015), which maps degrees of sophistication of design use, 'for discrete problems', 'as capability', and 'for policy' (McNabola, et al., 2013), thereby colonising policy as a legitimate site for design practice, and conferring a degree of sophistication on those policymakers who have realised the advantages of using design.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, at the design agency I worked for, we developed a tool for clients to assess their own 'design maturity'. And in the academic literature theorisations of the development of 'design capability' in public sector organisations are starting to appear (Malmberg, 2017). The savviness of the design ladder is in turning this theory into a self-assessment tool, a 'roadmap for progression', and a communicative visual artefact. It becomes a means by which organisations can be subjectified in their relation to design. By creating tools of

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<sup>35</sup> See Annual Review of Policy Design Vol 2, No1 2014

<sup>36</sup> See also Scottish Approach to Service Design Maturity Assessment Matrix (Scottish Government, 2019)

measurement and differentiation, organisations are faced with the prospect of being better or worse, and encouraged to pay more attention to this capability within themselves that (up until now) they may not have even known they needed.

### **Discursive indeterminacy**

A little like David Mosse's observation about development policy (Mosse, 2004) there is an expansiveness to design, a lack of definition, that functions to its advantage. We can see this by returning to the Lab Connections example. What design meant throughout that conference was vague and shifting. In my notes taken during the event I had jotted down what it felt as though design meant when different people spoke about it, which included: 'experimentation; working with evidence that's more contextual, provisional and experience-driven; the predisposition to 'action'; the desire to find a solution that 'works'; focus on and awareness of the user, possibly translating into participation, or at least into the representation of the user in the policy process; the use of different kinds of qualitative research (such as ethnography) to generate a deeper understanding of people; and methods for negotiating digital transformation across the public sector' (notes 19.10.16)

In other words, a mixed bag, which could equally be read as a list of public sector shortcomings. The vagueness here might actually be a tactic. Linguistic indeterminacy allows many things to be appropriated under the same heading. This was a multilingual group of people, and I had the sense that the word design (and indeed lots of other words) signified slightly different things to all of us, and yet at the same time we were coalescing around it. The layer of discourse served to obscure difference. Being vague about design means it can be moulded and redeployed for new purposes.

### **Effects**

Discursive formations – or 'regimes of truth' – do not only produce rules that govern the thinkability of something, and tactics for making their truths authoritative. They

have generative effects including the invention of subject positions (locations within the discourse from which the world makes sense), practices that are enacted, and institutions that regulate discourse, practice and subjects.

## **Subjects**

Within the expert discourse on ‘design for government’, there are three main subject positions available to be taken up: speakers about design, agents of design practice and knowledge, and an audience of public managers.

In his analysis of the discursive formation around creativity in management texts, Prichard notes that

the formation includes and provides a position for agents of knowledge who define and elaborate legitimate knowledge and perspectives. The formation provides a position which can be taken up which speaks for the object (Prichard, 2002, p. 269)

In other words it creates the possibility of being an expert on creativity, and we might say the same about design. This ‘authoritative speaking position’ is different to the subject position of the ‘creative self’: it is an authority on how and why to be a creative self. We can see the same distinction in the design discourse (even though there is some overlap between speakers and doers): the formation produces the possibility of speaking about the object, a subject position we might trace back to the ‘good design lobby’ of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. To be a speaker is to be an expert: learning the language, the ways of talking about design, confers the mantle of expertise on the speaker. At the same time the discourse also constructs the design professional as another kind of expert, as the carrier of practices and a certain ‘mindset’, but their status is somewhat complicated. On one hand, speakers are wholly dependent on doers in order to have anything to talk about at all. Designers provide the empirical world of material that the discourse labels. But on the other hand, a key tactic in establishing the field has been to make it accessible to non-experts, which has involved sidelining the expertise of the professional designer. So we see again that contradiction between expertise and universal capacity:

Designers are uniquely placed to help solve complex social and economic problems, and the beginnings of a new design discipline are emerging from groups around the world. (Burns, et al., 2006, p. 11)

And then later in the same text:

It takes the romance out of it to think that anyone could think and act like a designer... but we believe anyone can. (Burns, et al., 2006, p. 26)

The relation between these two subject positions is interesting too. Speakers may be constructed as ‘agents of knowledge’ but it is not clear that they are producing that knowledge for the benefit of designers who are, by definition, already ‘expert’. However practitioners aren’t immune to articulations of practice. Formulations do get adopted. One could say that the discourse is in fact providing some plausible ways of describing the practice, a language with which to speak to clients, but the research and grey literature is not fundamentally constructed to provide new insights to the expert practitioner.

The third subject position is the real intended beneficiary of this knowledge: people at work in the public sector, engaged in ‘management’, commissioning and deploying design as a management tool. Reports such as ‘The Journey to the Interface’ and ‘Design for Public Good’ are not intended for designers, for the man or woman on the street, or even really for the ‘front line worker’. They are formulated to appeal to the managers and decisionmakers in government or, in other words, a certain kind of client. This is often stated quite openly:

So for innovation-minded public authorities looking to deliver a robust, rational public sector, design-led innovation is a set of tools tailored to your needs, waiting to be tried. There is nothing to lose and a great deal to gain. (McNabola, et al., 2013, p. 16)

Design for Policy is intended as a resource for government departments, public service organizations and institutions, universities, think tanks and consultancies that are increasingly engaging with design as a tool for public sector reform and innovation. (Bason, 2014, p. 3)

This subject is positively constructed (in the terms of public sector reform discourse) as progressive by dint of taking an interest in innovation. It therefore appeals to an existing self-schema: the innovation-minded public manager:

*“I’m probably quite self-selecting because I’m interested in this stuff anyway”*

- interview with policymaker, Cabinet Office, May 2015

In spite of the ambiguity about the status of the professional designer, there is nevertheless a kind of ‘economy of identity’ at work (Prichard, 2002, p. 273), because if the audience of public managers are being exhorted to be anything, is to be ‘like a designer’, even if – non-sensically – the pre-existing cohort of expert designers have been deemed unnecessary, or more-expert-than-necessary.

Whether or not the discourse alone successfully recruits people into this subject position is another matter. The RED Paper notes that ‘it’s difficult to get a handle on this stuff’, hard to communicate through writing and photographs, and that the best mode of communication is experiential: ‘stakeholders who have participated in transformation design projects are enthusiastic champions of the work’. In other words, practices more reliably recruit subjects, as we will go on to see. Still, they carry on constructing the necessity of the speaker subject position: ‘in order to inspire those at a company board or ministerial level, we need to build up an appropriate shared language and evidence base’ (Burns, et al., 2006, p. 27). Presumably, because what is the Design Council if not a speaker for design?

## **Discourse**

Texts often close with a finding or call to action that efforts must be made to communicate or ‘prove’ the value of design.<sup>37</sup> Policymakers need to be helped to

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<sup>37</sup> This is in fact a very old discursive habit. Thompson notes the difficulty the design lobby had presenting a convincing argument, because it was always quite difficult to prove the case that ‘good design’ made the difference. And, coming from designers, it was perceived as ‘far from disinterested’. He suggests this may explain why ‘the good design lobby has had to continually re-present its case to successive governments’ (p. 225), a dynamic that continues to be evident today.

‘understand the potential of design’, and the ‘lack of evidence for effectiveness’ is acknowledged, with exhortations or recommendations to undertake further research in that regard. That this argument is repeated, even in the face of substantial expansion of design across the public sector, is intriguing. Two contradictory claims are made: that design is an essential tool, public sector managers/ policymakers are realising this and deploying it/ policies that support it; and yet that there is somehow not enough evidence for public sector managers and policymakers to be convinced, and they need to see more. It is as well to remember that there is now an entire design promotion industry (a chorus of speaking subjects) whose livelihood depends on speaking about design. And indeed public money has been earmarked for such efforts, both in terms of policy advice<sup>38</sup> and research.

Another effect, therefore, is the production of yet more discourse, an accumulation of words – production that is bound up in research practices, in institutions ranging from universities to think tanks to evaluation consultancies, and employment therein. Given that this continues to be governed by the same set of rules as those outlined above, in the case of research it has resulted in the growth of a specific kind of research about design: instrumentally-focused, and preoccupied with theorising and demonstrating how and why design is useful. Branching out in other directions becomes a logical impossibility: the rules governing the discourse make it hard to even conceive of the questions that are not being asked.

## **Practices**

Finally, the discursive formation assembles, makes intelligible, communicates and encourages the development of practices. Practices are particularly prominent here because design is in fact understood primarily as something one does. The entire discursive formation is a commentary on practice, and texts are quite explicit about describing practices:

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<sup>38</sup> See the list of design promotion activities supported by the European Commission (European Commission, 2017)

ethnographic, qualitative, user-centred research,... probing and experimentation via rapid prototyping, and visualising vast quantities of data... Graphic facilitation and the use of tangibles and visuals for service and use scenarios... (Bason, 2014, pp. 4-5)

Although in some places practices are reduced to 'tools' to emphasise their accessibility (McNabola, et al., 2013, pp. 24-27). One couldn't say that the discourse on its own is producing practices, since one of the key tactics noted above is the act of pointing to already existing practices. What is happening, instead, is a drawing together and re-labelling – codifying and categorising – of some extant practices. In doing so, it provides a language with which to talk about what one might be doing at work in the public sector, when using design.

Clearly, one of the things that has emerged over the last two decades is a market for design practices within and around the public sector: this is 'a worldwide trend that means new business opportunities for design firms' (Kim & Nam, 2017, p. 15). Whether this has been influenced by the expert discourse, or is the result of business development efforts by design agencies is not within the scope of this analysis to deduce. However, it would be difficult to buy something without the concepts to know what it was you were trying to buy – and in this way the discourse provides both the rationale for spending, and the purchasable objects. Texts also, for those who have no money to spend (remembering that years of austerity formed the backdrop to much of this discourse in the UK), provide a DIY version: toolkits and toolboxes.<sup>39</sup> In multiple ways then, discourse provides the context for the spreading of practices. And increasing incidence of practices drives the discourse: new examples enter the canon, this time self-consciously describing themselves from the outset in the terms of the discursive formation (self-representing as design), and the truths become more deeply embedded. Exactly what these practices are – and what they do – will be the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>39</sup> See Nesta's ultimate toolkit of toolkits for the public sector (Sellick, 2019)



## Conclusion

In identifying and exploring some of the themes within this discourse, and the rules that govern what is sayable and thinkable, we can see how design has continued to be re-modelled and re-positioned through language, in alignment with other interpretative repertoires (in this case around public sector reform). Done right, design is configured as being able to deliver better policies and services, more effective implementation, successful innovation. It is rendered useful and task-oriented; sanitised and directed towards approved ends. It is re-made to be useful to the public sector (or a certain account of it). The meaning of design here has shifted quite radically from the industrial art of Henry Cole and the pattern books of Owen Jones – to the extent that the connecting threads become harder and harder to find. Reconstructed as ‘useful’, moving away from ideas of form and aesthetic value, the arguments for its value to the public sector are moulded around strains in the public sector reform discourse. These shift as that discourse itself shifts, which is frequently. Political tastes evolve; one cannot afford to be selling ‘old’ ideas into government; the frontier of what counts as new thinking is constantly on the move.

One constant though – a linguistic hangover – is the promotional tone. There is a clear agenda around constructing a sense of design as a discipline like any other – with its own knowledge, skills, practices, experts, research community – and a discipline essential to governing. But that this kind of remodelling is even possible suggests something quite intriguing about design: that it is not a discipline like any other. It would be quite hard to imagine chemistry or physics undergoing such a conceptual metamorphosis. There is something in the idea and practices of design that allows for this kind of transformation.

In this chapter we also saw how ‘design for government’ has become established and legitimized as a field of knowledge and practice through a battery of pseudo-scholarly tactics that insist on the existence of it, like ‘mapping’ – or pointing to things and asserting their sameness – and measuring organisations up against design with a ‘design ladder’; through the production of academic texts and the practice of citing, through (superficial) alignment with a range of other ‘in vogue’

ideas; and through some good old-fashioned lobbying techniques (getting important people to speak for design).

The moralising agenda, the deficit logic inherent in the advocacy of design, is also a kind of tactic. The good design lobby has not gone away, it has simply found another target: in this case, the public sector and its less-than-optimum processes. The Design Council (and other speakers-for-design) may no longer be able to claim authority over taste, but still reign supreme over the domain of design process and practices. The good design lobby has retreated from form and aesthetic, and taken up a defensive position around methodology. 'User-centred' (or any of the other contemporary tenets of design) might be seen in the same light as 'efficient' in the post-war discourse. In fact it is no more precise a term. It undoubtedly does a lot of work, it carries a lot of meaning: but what it doesn't mean is that every single service is actually oriented around every single user. It is an expression of values, and an implied criticism, rather than a technical descriptor, although to contemporary ears it may sound like the latter. Design therefore functions, discursively, as a critique of the public sector – one that 'helpfully' proposes an alternative, hence its appeal perhaps.

Building on these insights, there are a few further comments to make, about what this discursive remodelling functions to achieve. Clearly, strategically, this serves the interests of the design community, by opening up a new market for design practices and professionals. But in chiming in with the chorus of the managerialists, the design discourse serves the same political ends (probably without realising), and may well in fact be denigrating rather than protecting that which it seeks to serve. Because what is occluded in this critique – by insisting the public sector ought to be business-shaped and finding it is not – is any recognition that the public sector might have valid reasons for *not* being like a business. The characteristics of bureaucracy – negatively framed here – can be seen in a positive light with a different lens, and as the result of other kinds of needs: democracy, stability, and political impartiality, for example. This might look like a Machiavellian move on the part of the design community, perceiving an opportunity and strategically realigning itself to take commercial advantage, however things are undoubtedly more complex than that. We have all been made subject to the argument that change is inevitable

and the public sector must be reformed; the logic is insidious; one hears the refrain everywhere. So in spite of its branding as a creature of the private sector, and a carrier of some essential qualities that the state sorely lacks, design here continues to be buffeted about by political schemes. It is still powerfully shaped by that which is outside itself: its identity contingent upon another discourse, disrupted and re-assembled to fit a managerial critique of the state.

## Chapter 5

### **‘Little machines for producing conviction in others...’: the material technologies of ‘design for government’**

*“The task was to create a persona and draw a policy or something – we had to agree a challenge from someone’s day to day job, and draw a system. I bet no one on that table had done anything like it before. And what was remarkable was they all immediately engaged with it, instead of refusing to engage. Which made me wonder, ‘how is this working?’ I couldn’t work it out. You could see people were doing things that they were given permission for, that were new, but that somehow made sense. And these people who didn’t know each other were all working together. Then we had to feed back what we had done and it didn’t really make any sense but that wasn’t really the point of it. The point was, these people had all tried a new thing out, it hadn’t been stupid, and a number of people said ‘I just hadn’t thought of it that way’.”*

- interview with a Cabinet Office senior civil servant, May 2015

#### **Introduction**

This reflection, shared with me by a senior civil servant in 2015, points us towards the physical, material dimensions of the apparatus and their effects on people. After all, it is people that ‘do’ design, and experience it, as well as writing and talking about it. How do these practical engagements construct the field and govern people? What do they function to achieve? Of course, we have already heard in chapter 4 what ‘design for government’ is supposed to do: deliver innovation, change, improved services and so on. Is this what is happening? Or is there more (or less) to it than this narrative would have us believe? Answering this means setting aside the ‘design’ framing and looking with an anthropological eye at what is empirically evident. What is the material culture of practice made up of? Where do these things come from? What do people do with them? What are they made to

do? And how does what we see, when we look in this way, relate to the discourse we have already studied?

We are approaching this investigation with a particular framing in mind, derived from Foucault's concept of 'technologies of power', which is the notion that discourse and power relations shape, are concretised in, and operate through practices, material objects, spaces and environments, and social and institutional forms. And that those things in turn shape us. Design scholar Katherine Hepworth, whose work uses governmentality to interpret communication design, argues that design artefacts are central to power relations, 'enmeshed in discursive entanglements, continually being imbued with regulatory meaning, and in turn, regulating their viewers and users' (Hepworth, 2018, p. 497). Discourse finds its way into artefacts and those things in turn exert control. 'Ideas are embedded within arrangements, which in turn produce effects' (Lobenstine, et al., 2020, p. 19). Power is 'inscribed in a field of sparse available possibilities underpinned by permanent structures' (Foucault, 2002, p. 340). We are not free to think, do, or be just anything – our options are heavily framed and constrained by the world around us:

power is not a violence that sometimes hides, or an implicitly renewed consent. It operates on the field of possibilities in which the behaviour of active subjects is able to inscribe itself. It is a set of actions on possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives, makes more probable or less; in the extreme, it constrains or forbids absolutely, but it is always a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action.' (Foucault, 2002, p. 341)

So, whereas typically we might imagine that the objects we use in daily life are simply tools that we pick up and put down, inanimate things that do our bidding – or we might equally feel that we are generally the authors of our own actions, that we choose to do certain things (or not) and in a certain way – this analysis begins from almost the opposite premise: that we are directed, manipulated, and persuaded by the things that surround us, and the practices we find ourselves enrolled in. The material world is complicit in – even has agency in – power relations. Material things and social practices do the work of governing.

Methodologically, what we are doing in this chapter is a kind of discourse analysis but of visual and material artefacts (Rose, 2001, pp. 135-186) and practices. This might also be called an ‘aesthetic governmentality’ approach. Although governmentality studies have often focused on statistics and calculable things, there is an increasing appreciation of the possibility of *aesthetic* governmentality (Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2014; Ghertner, 2010): the idea that governing technologies can work by affect, imagery, and aesthetic normalisation as much as clinical calculation. Organisation theorist Pasquale Gagliardi (Gagliardi, 1999) makes the case for an aesthetic reading of organisational culture, which means for him looking at the architecture, the branding, communications materials, and other physical, sensible things. In his essay he argues that these ‘influence corporate life’ in two ways:

- (a) artifacts make materially possible, help, hinder, or even prescribe organisational action;
  - (b) more generally, artifacts influence our perception of reality, to the point of subtly shaping beliefs, norms and cultural values.
- (p. 706)

We will investigate both of these mechanisms – the disciplining of bodies and the shaping of perception – as well as the mechanisms by which discourse finds its way into material form in the first place. A fourth strand of inquiry will look at how users are depicted and proposed to be governed through these technologies. The analysis is illustrated with extracts from my field notes and interviews, appropriately selected and anonymised as discussed in chapter 1, so as not to put in harm’s way any of the people who appear here obliquely through these texts. These appear in italics, with quotation marks (“”) to indicate direct quotes, to distinguish them from extracts/ quotes taken from academic texts. Theories and insights from other scholarly studies that have explored the connection between material things and governing are woven into the discussion as we proceed.

What technologies are we interested in? Losing the ‘design’ framing means gathering up an odd assortment of things that constitute the material culture of practice: the Post-It notes and workshops, the personas and user journey maps, the idea generation activities, the prototypes and design ‘solutions’, ethnography, and the Double Diamond process model. As we go through this chapter we will examine each of these technologies more closely. However we are not only seeking to

enumerate and describe them: we are interested in these things not simply as artefacts and practices but as ‘technologies’ that do work, and through which power flows.

The argument, in brief, is that the technologies of design for government rapidly materialise discourse – they convert abstract ideas into tangible form, acting as devices for visualising things-to-be-governed. Design methods are protocols that both produce and constrain simultaneously, channelling thought and action while remaining indifferent to the content. They represent and invisibilise: as some things are brought into view, others are strategically suppressed. Design briefs both frame the problem and silence alternative accounts. The practices perform a very managed, tamed and democratised version of creativity, that invites and normalises participation. And they push a particular ontology which has the quality of rendering everything as a design process – or amenable to being designed. Taken together, the technologies of ‘design for government’ serve to assemble the field as a coherent professional and disciplinary domain, produce new governable subjects and objects, perform change (without delivering it) and creativity, and present a critique of bureaucracy in embodied form.

## **The Post-It Note**

Let’s start with an example of what might be regarded as a ‘technology’ of ‘design for government’: the Post-It note. A small coloured square of paper with an adhesive strip on the back, it is a ubiquitous feature of design for government practice: jumping off the page in those photos from Lab Connections. Indeed, no image of a public sector design workshop, or project, would be recognisable without it. It has become *the* visual signifier of a certain type of creative work, a commonplace in marketing imagery (see figures below). However, while it is highly visible, it is rarely mentioned as the essential tool that it apparently is. Few studies of ‘design for government’, or reports promoting design, discuss it at all. As a practitioner though I can reel off any number of uses to which the Post-It note was put in our design consultancy work. We used them in workshops, as part of brainstorming: encouraging people to contribute their thoughts and reflections,

capturing critical responses, generating ideas for solutions. We used their physical properties to structure activities: colour coding types of response. We used them for prototyping, building or assembling representations of things as though they were little pixels of colour. We sorted, coded and analysed research insights by clustering Post-Its. We planned workshops or activities using them. We used them in project management: allocating tasks and sequencing project phases. We permanently had a stack available during team meetings for any impromptu brainstorming. We all began to use them as a replacement for paper, jotting down thoughts and carrying around little piles of them, pasted into the flyleaf of a notepad.

It is interesting to note that this is not at all the purpose the inventors of the Post-It note had in mind. An adhesive with some unusual properties was discovered almost by accident by 3M's laboratory. The company experimented with a range of applications that never took off. The one that finally did was what they thought of as a sticky bookmark (Christensen, 2020), something that lawyers and secretaries might use to organise their papers. Speaking about it in 2020, its inventor describes how it has today become 'a very simple thing you can invent with' (p. xviii), a tool for creativity. It has infiltrated a certain kind of design practice (as well as other disciplinary domains) and become visually synonymous with it.



Figure 6 Image from the front cover of 'Design in the Public Sector' (Design Commission 2018)





Figure 7 Image from Radio 4 series, 'The Fix' (BBC, 2021)

What is happening here? How can Post-It notes possibly be relevant to questions of governing? In fact, this little square of paper is a dense site of power relations at work: embedded in regimes of discourse and practice, structuring the field of possibility, telling us things about ourselves, deployed as a tool for governing. These are four inter-related dynamics which we will go on to unpack through this chapter.

First, material things and practices have affordances and limitations that structure what is possible. For example, there is only a certain amount of handwriting one can fit on a Post-It. It's just the right size to capture a short phrase – a thought, perhaps. Its stickiness means you can move that thought around. So it affords some action and prohibits others. Its moveability affords provisionality: you can keep changing its position and relationship to other thoughts. Beyond this, we might even say that it shapes capabilities and cognition. After several years of design consultancy practice, I had become somewhat dependent on Post-It notes in order to think and plan anything. I had become a techno-human hybrid, part sticky note.

Second, technologies have ways of persuading and governing. They come with their own implied view of the world, an ontology or field of visibility. Their existence normalises certain things and renders others invisible. Ideologies are embodied in material form, submerged and carried along by the presence and meanings of objects. This is not only about how the world 'out there' is, but the subjects they suggest we might become. We can all be productively creative little workers, if only

we have Post-It notes. This ideology is not inherent to the Post-It note, but rather a product of the techno-social relations within which it is enmeshed.

So, third, physical artefacts and social practices might thus be seen as material dimensions of discourse. The Post-It note, as an object, emerged within a particular discursive context that shaped its material form and properties. It has, however, undergone a transformation in its meaning and usage; it is deployed in a certain way now because it is embedded in a different discursive formation, and regime of practice. Its enrolment in – and perhaps its role in the production of – ‘design for government’ practices highlights how meaning is generated through use, and how fields are discursively assembled by re-labelling and appropriating existing artefacts and practices. Finally, in ‘design for government’, the Post-It note is a material participant in methods and processes concerned with the governing of people. Information about ‘users’ is produced and managed in ways that Post-It notes afford.

## **Technologies and practices in theory**

Let’s pause here, before we launch into our material analysis, to unpack some of the key ideas we need to bring through this discussion; namely, ‘technologies’ and ‘practices’. These things have quite specific meanings in different discursive formations so let’s clarify what we mean here.

### **Technologies**

Our usage is based on a meaning established by Foucault. In fact, his deployment of the term ‘technology’ evolved somewhat (Behrent, 2013), but in his later works it became central to his theorisation of power as a productive force, as something that creates and produces as well as represses and controls. Technology in this definition does not mean tools, machines, applied science or industrial products, but rather the methods and mechanisms for governing human beings. If people are rendered subjects, it is not solely as a result of ideology or ideas on one hand, or violence on the other (Behrent, 2013, p. 84). There are very concrete, tangible

expressions of governing intent, directed primarily at human bodies, which take a variety of forms (institutions, practices, environments, objects, experts, and so on), that shape who we become, what we are able to do – and what we are persuaded to willingly do. ‘Technologies’ is his term for power distilled into an ‘assemblage of knowledge, instruments, persons, buildings and spaces which act on human conduct from a distance’ (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2011, p. 14).<sup>40</sup>

Initially he took aim at some discrete and institutionally-specific ‘technologies’, such as the hospital and the medical establishment (Foucault, 1996), psychiatry and the asylum (Foucault, 1988), and the penal system (Foucault, 1977). Later on he used the term in the context of more socially diffuse things such as sexuality (Foucault, 1998). While the contemporary practice of design, with all its paraphernalia and accoutrements, might not be so directly and physically controlling of people as madhouses and prisons, or so widespread as ideas about sexuality, there are reasonable grounds for considering it – or its constituent elements – as a technology of power. We can identify not only a cluster of discourse, experts, institutions, and subjects associated with ‘design for government’, but also certain kinds of practice, space, equipment, and even modes of dress and costume.

## The workshop

*“It stood out as different... the style of workshops. I liked the way problems are broken down and addressed using dialogue. It was interactive. Lots of stuff, and sketches, and getting people to do stuff, which is probably uncomfortable for the average policymaker.”*

- interview with senior civil servant in the Ministry of Justice, May 2015

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<sup>40</sup> This sounds rather like the definition of apparatus we have already established. In fact, it is often hard to find stable terminological definitions in Foucault’s writing so it is probably more important to define what we mean by these things for the purposes of this study. In this case, I am using apparatus and technology to indicate a difference in scale. If the apparatus is design for government as a whole, the technologies are things like workshops, activity templates, Post-It notes and so on, which nevertheless each represent an assemblage of ‘knowledge, instruments, persons, buildings and spaces’.

The workshop is a prominent feature of our site: whenever one is actively ‘doing’ ‘design for government’, more often than not one is in ‘a workshop’. And, as the interviewee above expresses, these workshops are somehow ‘different’ to what civil servants might otherwise be doing. ‘The workshop’ might be considered as a kind of technology, then. But what exactly is a workshop? In the older definition of the word, it refers to a room or building, smaller-scale than a factory, where manufacturing, manual work, or craft activity is carried out, and it is typically kitted out with the appropriate conditions, tools and devices to support making. It is this sense of practical, creative, productive work that is carried over into the more modern meaning of the term: a group of people engaged in doing something together, typically perceived as a creative endeavour. ‘To workshop’ something means to improve and revise it collaboratively. It is a term and indeed a physical form that has gone through several transformations across different discursive regimes. In this discursive context (i.e. design for government), it refers to a way of bringing people together in order to do something practical or creative: typically explore a problem or situation, or come up with ideas for a solution. Really, one could say it is a particular way of running a meeting. The room and the people are physically arranged to allow for group working, and to discourage the activity of sitting and passively listening. People stand up and move around freely, rather than staying in their seat. There is a certain social protocol: no obvious hierarchy, no speaker vs audience, no chair vs attendees, just participants and facilitators. The facilitator’s role is not to dictate an answer and make decisions, but to support participants to do so. Participants are encouraged to join in, be active, spontaneous, contribute their ideas, and so on. There are probably some materials to support ‘creative’ working: pens and paper, activity templates, craft materials. The agenda will revolve around a series of activities, rather than discussion points. One does not capture minutes, people are allowed to speak freely and simultaneously (when working in small groups). When workshops go well they exude an ambience of messy, productive creativity – and fun, in fact.



*Figure 8 A workshop in action (photo courtesy of Uscreates)*

Just like with the Post-It note, the workshop as a socio-material practice, with its particular aesthetic, encourages and structures certain kinds of action and rules out others, gives people the opportunity to be a certain version of themselves, shapes the ideas and beliefs of participants, produces certain kinds of artefact and knowledge, and is a recognisable form only because of its place within a wider discursive or epistemic regime. The workshop is an important backdrop to hold in mind as we go through this chapter: it is the stage on which many of the other technologies we will discuss play out.

## **Practices**

The workshop might also be regarded as a kind of practice – or a cluster of them – another term we need to define. Social practices are a specific way of conceptualising human action, and indeed the social world. As Theodore Schatzki noted, where once thinkers spoke of ‘structures, systems, meanings, life worlds, events and actions when naming the primary generic social thing, today many theorists would accord ‘practices’ a comparable honor’ (Schatzki, 2005, p. 1). Sociologist Andreas Reckwitz notes, in a paper reflecting on the emergence of practice theories, that although the term refers to a cluster of ideas from different theorists, the family resemblance is that they find that human activity is primarily the performance of social practices, and practices are therefore the appropriate focus of social analysis (Reckwitz, 2002). Practices, or what he called ‘regimes of practices’, were a central target of analysis in Foucault’s work, a nexus where ‘what

is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken-for-granted, meet and interconnect' (Foucault, 1991, p. 75). Practices are not reducible to other things, but possess 'their own specific regularities, logic, strategy, self-evidence and 'reason'' (Foucault, 1991, p. 75).

'Social practices' might be defined as routinised actions that are habitually performed, and meaningful, across any given social group. Or, in Mitchell Dean's words, 'regimes of practices are simply fairly coherent sets of ways of going about doing things' (Dean, 2010, p. 30). Examples might be cooking, showering, driving, writing an essay – or in our case, running workshops, brainstorming, prototyping, user testing, and so on. Practices depend upon the coming together of several interrelated things: 'forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, things and their use, background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how and notions of competence, states of emotion and motivational knowledge' (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249). Shove et al (2012) propose the simpler and memorable trio of 'meanings, materials and competences', emphasising the essential role that physical objects and environments play in practices. This interdependency of practices and material things/ artefacts is worth noting: 'objects are necessary components of many practices – just as indispensable as bodily and mental activities. Carrying out a practice very often means using particular things in a certain way' (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 252). The governing effects of Post-It notes depend on people knowing how to interact with them in a particular way: their effects are animated through practices.

Design itself, of course, might be considered and analysed as a kind of social practice (or set of practices), that is particularly 'inventive' (Kimbell, 2013) – an argument made by design researcher Lucy Kimbell as a corrective to the emphasis on 'design thinking'.

Design-as-practice mobilizes a way of thinking about the work of designing that acknowledges that design practices are habitual, possibly rule-governed, often shared, routinized, conscious or unconscious, and that they are embodied and situated. (Kimbell, 2009, p. 10)

And indeed this is a very helpful framing for our analysis of ‘design for government’, not as a singular kind of process or expertise or definitive set of methods, but a shifting assemblage of socio-material practices.

We are, of course, not interested in forensically dissecting practices for the sake of it, but for what they can tell us about governing. Practices are central to Foucault’s account of discipline as a prime location where one might observe power relations, with institutions literally shaping the body and its capacities – through training, drilling, and surveillance, for example (Foucault, 1977). And they are central to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977): the learned dispositions or bodily ways of being that are specific to groups and social contexts. Practices – like discourse – are neither random nor universal but are historically and geographically contingent. Human interaction is not strictly governed by rules and regulations but by ‘communities of dispositions’. ‘Habitus’ as a term was in fact introduced in a 1934 essay by Marcel Mauss, ‘Techniques of the Body’ (Mauss, 1973). Mauss observed that, across societies, there are very different bodily ways of being – even in the case of things one might suppose to be ‘natural’ (e.g. swimming, walking, sleeping etc). He concluded that one’s bodily ‘techniques’ are not one’s own creation, but the result of ‘prestigious imitation’, produced at the confluence of physiology, psychology and social influences. Bourdieu revives this idea of *habitus* as the link between ‘structures’ and ‘practices’, between the shaping forces of society and the acting individual. One can be enrolled in a certain *habitus*, or community of dispositions, without necessarily being aware of it. Indeed, sometimes one only becomes aware of it when two ‘communities of dispositions’ collide, in, for example, trying to run a co-design workshop with people who don’t know the form and appropriate behaviours (notebook 07.19). (As so often in ethnographic work, one discovers the rules by breaking them – or seeing them broken (Fox, 2004, p. 10).)

In summary, practices shape what it is normal to do (prescriptive effects), and what it is possible to know (codifying effects) (Foucault, 1991, p. 75). Reliant for their existence on a combination of meaning, competencies and materials, through their reproduction, we perpetuate the know-how, their meaningfulness, and the necessity

of the material infrastructure that supports their performance (Shove, et al., 2012). We internalise their rules and replicate them.

## **Disciplining bodies**

Let's continue our material analysis by thinking about perhaps the most straightforward power dynamic: how these technologies structure the field of possible action.

## **Templates and tools**

*“...you could pick your policy area, and then you just had to I think draw a picture, or draw some sort of visual representation of your idea. And they gave you an A5 sheet of paper which had some sort of standard information on it, in a cartoon-y sort of format. And they said, I think partly as an icebreaker, and also as a way of... genuinely encouraging people to think a bit differently potentially – they said just draw an image of it, and people did.”*

- interview with senior policy advisor in the Cabinet Office, May 2015

Design for government practice, and particularly the co-design element of practice, is often supported by the use of templates and tools: worksheets that guide participants through a design activity. Typically these are large format pieces of paper, with different permutations of boxes, frameworks and questions, with spaces to write and draw. These both communicate instructions to participants, channel their activity in specific ways, and become a record of the workshop. At Lab Connections we were given some of these to fill in during the workshop, and I made some hand-drawn ones too. They often follow a number of frequently used structures – experience maps and journeys, the persona, the storyboard, the service blueprint, the business model canvas (see figures below for some examples). At the agency, some of these had become ingrained in our practice and could be wheeled out and adapted as the project or situation required. We never treated them as set in stone, but as devices to be shaped in order to perform the function required in that particular moment and context. We also operationalised




ideas from elsewhere by turning theories into design tools: using the behaviour change theory of ‘capability, opportunity, motivation’ (Michie, et al., 2011) to make a ‘design for behaviour change’ tool, for example.

## Journey map

<b>Phase</b>					
<b>Touchpoints</b>					
<b>Goals/ needs</b>					
<b>Actions</b>					
<b>Experience</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• thoughts,</li> <li>• feelings,</li> <li>• reactions,</li> <li>• expectations,</li> <li>• hopes and fears</li> </ul>					
<b>Pain points</b>					
<b>Opportunities</b>					

## Persona

Name:		<b>People and organisations around me</b> 
<i>Draw my picture...</i>	<b>Key information:</b> age, gender, etc  <b>Career/ employment:</b> Role, ambitions, motivations and challenges at work	
<b>Brief biography/ backstory</b> Family, friends, living situation, education, skills, resources etc		<b>Interests and hobbies</b> What do I do in my spare time?
<b>Hopes ...</b> What do I most want to achieve this year?	<b>...and fears</b> What am I most concerned about right now?	<b>Beliefs and values</b> What is important to me?
<b>A typical day or week in my life...</b>		

## Storyboard

Draw your concept as a series of steps ("scenes") and interactions, and describe what is happening in each scene. The story can focus on one key moment or interaction, or a longer experience/ timeframe.

SHOW: draw the 'who, what, where' of the concept story – what are people saying, doing, thinking, etc?

1.	2.	3.

TELL: describe what is happening, who is involved, where is it happening, etc?

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Concept development		
Your challenge:		
<b>What is your idea?</b> Describe it in a sentence. Give it a name.	<b>Who does it help?</b> Who are the beneficiaries and what is the value to them?	<b>How does it work?</b> What happens? Who does what? How do people find out about it? Get involved?
<b>How will you know it is working?</b> What are the signs of success and how would you spot them?	<b>Why is this a good idea?</b> Why are you confident this will make a difference? How is it based on the evidence?	<b>Next steps?</b> How would you move this idea forward?

Figure 9 Examples of design templates and tools (created by the author)

Sometimes these sorts of devices are referred to as ‘tools’. Strictly speaking – if a tool is a device used to perform work – the main tools of ‘design for government’ practice would be pens, paper, computers, Post-It notes, and the craft materials used for ‘prototyping’. However when one reads about ‘toolkits’ or ‘toolboxes’ in this context e.g. (McNabola, et al., 2013) it doesn’t mean a pack of felt-tip pens: it means a collection of design activities, described in more or less detail, sometimes with step-by-step instructions, or templates to download or copy. In some ways tool and template are interchangeable terms: the template is a process concretised into a fixed kind of tool. Again, it is interesting to think about the genealogies of these things. A template in the original meaning of the term refers to a physical pattern or guide used for making something repeatedly in an identical manner. In the world of document-making, the template is the pre-set format of a file or document, so that the thing does not have to be created from scratch every time. A tool, on the other hand, might be used to make a wide variety of things. As we will see, this conflation of terms is telling.

## How things shape action and cognition

Templates such as this are a good starting point to discuss how ‘design for government’ might ‘structure the possible field of action of others’ (Foucault, 2002, p. 341). Arguably, all material things possess this property, in as much as certain actions are or are not made possible by physical artefacts and environments, and their ‘affordances’ (Gibson, 2014; Norman, 1990; Gaver, 1991): one cannot sit at a table in the absence of a chair, one cannot ‘push’ a door open when one is on the ‘pull’ side (Norman, 1990). Such affordances are not normally accidents: the material things of the manmade world represent the delegation of some intention, some function, to an object: beliefs about the value of keeping doors closed are ‘delegated’ to mechanical door-closers (Latour, 1992), for example. These devices in turn ‘prescribe’ particular forms of behaviour back to humans (Akrich, 1992). Templates such as these are strongly prescriptive: not only does the physical form permit some things and disallow others, we literally write what we want to happen in the boxes: ‘draw your idea here!’.

Humans can have more or less power to resist such prescriptions. Persuasive design and technologies (Redström, 2006; Dorrestijn & Verbeek, 2013), such as speed bumps and flashing warning lights, strongly imply one *ought* to do something, leaving the choice up to the driver. Alternatively in some cases the option to choose is designed out altogether, as in Latour’s car that won’t start until the seatbelt is fastened (Latour, 1992). But users may still find ways of disrupting prescriptive designs – as in the home care nurses who invent fake patients in order to outwit a route optimising system (Andersson, et al., 2019). Or, in our case, workshop participants who write in the margins of the template, re-write the questions, or turn the sheet into a paper aeroplane.

What do these devices do to the people who are deploying them (i.e. me), who might regard them as part of their professional toolbox? Such devices are not simply tools we pick up or put down, they extend the ‘routine, bodily capacity’ of human agents (Otter, 2007, p. 581). Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche noted with interest how his prose style changed when he began working on a typewriter (Kittler, 1999, p. 203). Post-It notes create certain ‘cognitive’ styles (Christensen, et

al., 2020) – as I can attest. More recently, developments in the study of cognition and perception have revealed it to be embodied rather than representational (Shapiro, 2011; Clark, 2011), and so objects become an extension of ourselves in grappling with the world (Crawford, 2015). One interviewee noted that the materiality of the design process made her ‘think differently’:

*“I really found the visual ways of doing things allowed me to think on a different level than I normally would do. Instead of just reacting quickly to what we need to do, we were contemplating and thinking”*

- extract from interview with policymaker, April 2017

As Dorrestijn (2012) shows, this understanding of ‘technical mediation’ is present in Foucault’s work, in his analysis of the training of routines: ‘practically all gestures of the body depend on some sort of association with technologies’ (p. 230). We are always a kind of human-technology hybrid. These hybridisations structure our mode of existence, and are fundamental to the idea of ‘discipline’. Guy Julier argues that certain design artefacts and processes ‘habituate people to particular ways of being and acting that align with and, indeed, produce neoliberal behaviours and dispositions’ (Julier, 2017, p. 20). Neoliberal objects produce neoliberal brains (Julier, 2017, p. 29; Väliäho, 2014). In his book, ‘The Whale and the Reactor’, Langdon Winner (2020) argues similarly that in our engagements with designed objects we are not simply ‘using’ them. If we are always-already-hybrids, then the material world is necessarily ‘part of our very humanity’:

we become the beings who work on assembly lines, who talk on telephones, who do our figuring on pocket calculators, who eat processed foods, who clean our homes with powerful chemicals. (Winner, 2020, p. 12)

A ‘design for government’ professional is someone who sees the world as made up of users, experiences, journeys and services, and responds to it through the application of a particular set of frameworks. In my case, I began to internalise their uses and functions as a set of predetermined responses to different kinds of situation, readymade tools for producing the material of the design process.

Devices do not, of course, always and inevitably imply submission to another's control or agenda: these hybridisations are also what facilitates skilled practice (Crawford, 2015). But the question of how such hybridisations happen, the nature of them, and what they do to the subject, is therefore an ethical one (Dorrestijn, 2012) requiring care and attention. Matthew Crawford's book, 'The World Beyond Your Head', is motivated by a concern for the (as he sees it) infantilising effects of a material environment that does too much for us:

Design conditions the kind of involvement we have in our own activity...  
(it) can facilitate embodied agency, or diminish it in ways that lead us  
further into passivity and independence. (Crawford, 2015, p. 78)

We will return to the question of what degree of agency and skill is afforded through these templates and tools.

### **(Paper) protocols**

We can think of paper templates and workshops as 'protocols'. As Alexander Galloway defines it in his book, 'Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization', the term refers to the 'conventional rules that govern the set of possible behavior patterns within a heterogeneous system':

Protocols are highly formal; that is, they encapsulate information inside a technically defined wrapper, while remaining relatively indifferent to the content of information contained within (Galloway, 2004, p. 7)

We might see many of the practices and methods of 'design for government' as kinds of 'technically-defined wrapper', that de-limit and direct thought in a certain direction, constraining without specifying the outcome, 'indifferent' to the content. Although, of course, the definition of the wrapper itself is discursively-informed. Such protocols might include a workshop agenda; templates; the depiction of the design process itself (discover, define, develop, deliver); matrices and morphological boxes (or close relatives thereof) for producing ideas; idea generation sheets; lateral thinking prompt cards; 'evidence safaris' (Policy Lab, 2016); journey mapping; service blueprinting. Post-It notes are the information-carrying building

blocks, little pixels representing thoughts. These protocols carry the process along, empty vessels waiting to be filled by workshop participants and policy discourse, as we can see in this example.

*The third activity puts a more explicit focus on ‘users’. Everyone is up on their feet, and trying to gather around an A1 size sheet of paper on which a 2x2 matrix has been drawn – showing ‘time in the labour market’ (short-long) against ‘personal resilience’ (low-high). Participants are asked to think of examples of people who would fall into each quadrant, spending 5 minutes jotting down as many suggestions on Post-It notes as possible, based on their existing knowledge and understanding of the labour market. There isn’t much room in between the tables and the wall, making it hard for more than 2 or 3 people to view the sheet at once. In general, they are able to think of many more examples for the low resilience quadrants, however there are at least a couple of types in each box. For example, short time/ low resilience – young parent with child care responsibilities, low qualifications and experience, short time/ high resilience – tech entrepreneur, late 20s, low debt; long time/ low resilience – late career retail/ supermarket worker with low qualifications; long time/ high resilience – senior civil servant... The group then split into four, and each picked an example from one of the quadrants, and developed into a pen portrait of a real person.*

- extract from my notes following a workshop with civil servants from several different central government departments, July 2016

These protocols are compelling<sup>41</sup> because they are both productive and controlling. By creating a blank box for something you invent the possibility of it, the thinkability of it. A 2x2 matrix forces you to think of at least four things. Confronted with a space on a piece of paper that was both bounded but empty, everyone obligingly invented characters to fill the four quadrants of the matrix. Users were conjured up. Paper protocols thus ‘prescribe’ what one should think about and how to think

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<sup>41</sup> It is not uncommon for these protocols to take on a life of their own and migrate across organisations. The ‘evidence safari’ is a good example: a quick google will surface its adoption beyond Policy Lab where it originated.

about it, channelling thought in certain approved directions. They both produce and constrain simultaneously, perhaps comfortingly. One is not faced with a blank slate; one doesn't have to think of everything; or to come up with an idea out of nowhere. They provide a helpful little step-ladder for thought. They structure things in a way that simplifies and clarifies. They give you something to do, a logic to moving forward, an illusion of order and rationality. People feel held, within a controlled process. Rigid and granular, when they work they constrain and direct participation through micro-managing thought processes. In this example the physicality of the protocol also made people move their bodies around the room in specific ways. So they serve a useful purpose to the designer-facilitator too, as a technique for managing a workshop, shepherding everybody – bodily and mentally – towards a goal.

*“As a technique it was really successful in getting a group of ... people into thinking about the future. It structured the responses they gave, so it made what they said more structured and more usable.”*

- interview with civil servant, Government Office for Science, May 2015

However they also frame the conversation, discursively, in a particular way. In the example above the matrix defines the objects of which it wishes to speak, constructing people's work lives and personal resilience as objects of knowledge, naturalising these things as a basis for policymaking, enshrining the assumptions of the participants, and at the same time silencing other possible objects.

## **Idea generation**

Although professional experienced designers (in any field) may have their own distinct ways of generating ideas, there are some specific practices in 'design for government' that are more often used to support non-designers to come up with ideas, which might also be regarded as a kind of protocol: but in this case for producing 'creative' outcomes. 'Idea generation' is one of the discursive justifications for arguing that 'design for government' is creative and innovative. At Lab Connections I tried to get my workshop participants to do generative work. The practice starts with a design brief, a question that would typically be phrased, 'how



might we...?' For example: 'how might we ensure citizens have more responsibility for their data, and are informed about the use of their data?' With this question in mind, one can then embark on some idea generation activities. These are essentially varieties of brainstorming, usually carried out within a compressed time frame (referred to as 'sprints'). Prompts are designed to encourage 'lateral thinking': for example asking 'what would x do?', where x is someone or something (an organisation or brand perhaps) with a wildly different worldview to one's own.

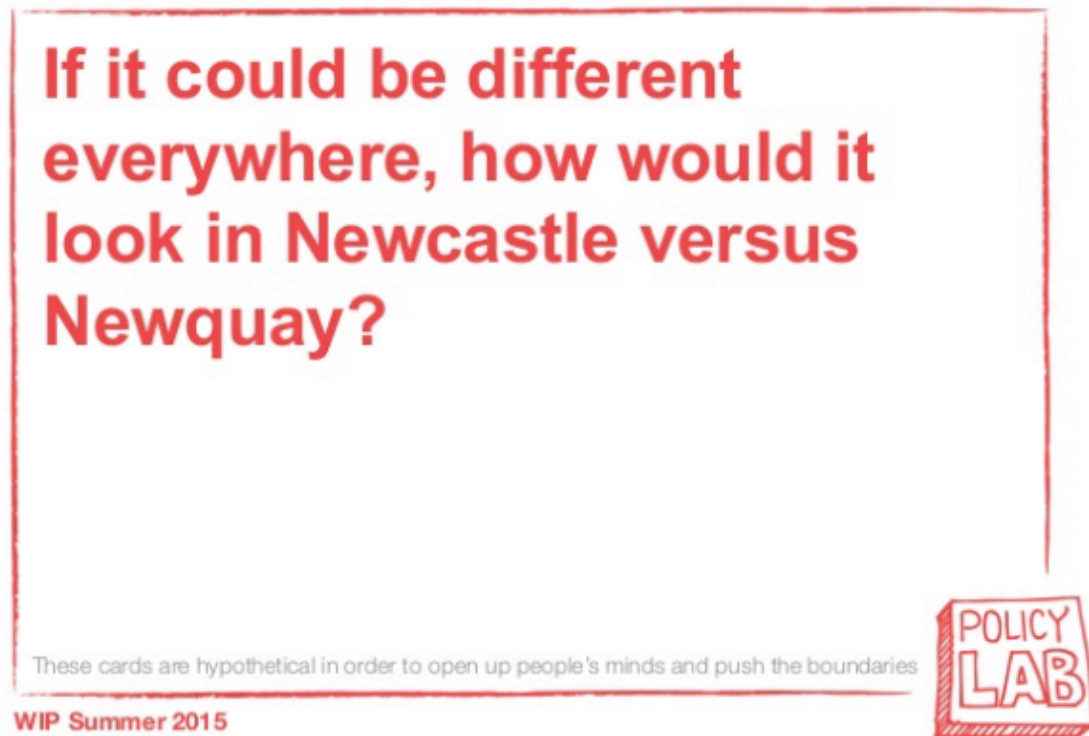
*They seemed to be getting more engaged, working in small groups and apparently writing things down. First I asked them to just write down any initial ideas they had, on their 'brainstorming sheet'. Some of them weren't sure what this meant and just started writing more problems down. Then we did some lateral thinking exercises – exaggerate, reverse, combine etc. I warned them beforehand what I was about to do, and explained the theory behind doing things quickly: compressing time forces creative thinking.*

- extract from my notes following a workshop with local government employees, July 2017

The activity is framed with some golden rules for how one ought to behave when generating ideas: come up with as many ideas as you can (don't fixate on one), don't judge other people's ideas, don't self-censor (no idea is a bad idea), capture everything, etc. The practices are materialised in paper templates and tools – artefacts which become mobile and travel across organisations.

Where does this practice come from? It was not something I had encountered in my years studying and practicing architecture; presumably not, therefore, an essential ingredient for 'creativity' in all design fields. 'How might we...?' was a technique invented by Ideo to support brainstorming sessions and business innovation (Kelley, 2002). Going further back, these idea generation – or brainstorming – techniques, practices, and associated behaviours have been found to have their roots in American efforts to turn creativity towards productivity, fuelled by the drive for military and technological advantage in the Second World War, and subsequently the Cold War (Mareis, 2015; Mareis, 2020; Cohen-Cole, 2009). Brainstorming itself is a term whose meaning has shifted from referring to a pathological dysfunction of

the individual to a mode of group creativity (Mareis, 2020, p. 55). Its migration and marriage with design practice is a clear example of discursive re-assemblage at work.



*Figure 10 One of Policy Lab's 'change cards' (Slideshare, 2015)*

What do these methods observably produce, in the case of 'design for government'? Most obviously, a profusion of ideas. The hope is that within the profusion, there might be something good. But the thoughts that emerge can only come from the people in the room, and they can only emerge because they are (discursively) available possibilities. The 'creativity' is in fact located in the production and materialisation of ideas, not in the quality or nature thereof. As we will go on to discuss later in the chapter, the solutions that emerge through these protocols are rarely radically original, which is perhaps not all that surprising.

## Managed creativity

*“They do need to be kind of forced out of their comfort zone a little bit. I don’t know whether it will ultimately be effective, but it’s at least worth having a go at getting people to think more creatively and openly... traditional civil servants struggle with it, they’re sceptical about, like being asked to draw pictures or whatever it might be, rather than just sitting there in the boring meetings that everybody has all the time... anything that, ah, encourages people to think more strategically, be more creative, I think should be encouraged.”*

- interview with a policy advisor in the Cabinet Office, May 2015

As this quote demonstrates, design methods are strongly discursively linked with the idea of ‘being creative’, which in itself (or for this interviewee at least) is understood as a positive attribute. So let’s return now to the question of what sort of engagement with the world these technologies facilitate. The language of design is seductive. Workshop, template, tool, blueprint, canvas, storyboard, all imply that one is engaged in the act of creatively making something. The discourse promises tools for innovation. And yet: what is one actually making? As sociologist Tim Seitz has identified, design thinking ‘tools’ are not the same as other kinds of tools for making (a hammer or a needle and thread, let’s say), in that they have the curious property of reproducing themselves – but cannot be used to make anything else. A persona produces a persona. An empathy map produces an empathy map (Seitz, 2019). Idea generation activities materialise thoughts in large quantities. These are, in other words, tools that afford relatively little agency, or opportunity for skilled practice on the part of the user. One cannot fail to make user journey map. And perhaps one cannot be trusted to go away and be creative in one’s own way. If there is any skill here it is on the part of the designer-facilitator, planning and scripting the performance, choosing and adapting the tool.

As Prichard put it (Prichard, 2002), such protocols might therefore be best understood as tactics for *managing* rather than unleashing creativity. For workshop participants, the challenge of ‘being creative’ is broken down into manageable steps. For facilitators, the risk of a flare-up of unbridled creativity is diminished. For the institution, the risk of surfacing a problematically radical idea can be minimised.

The protocols direct creativity towards approved ends. The performances of creativity are made accessible to all, but they are also fundamentally brought under control.

## **Shaping perception**

*“I had some skepticism about the policy challenge – but realized in the workshop people weren’t having those reactions, because the space was structured to make people think ‘what if?’”*

- interview with senior policy maker, Ministry of Justice, May 2015

Beyond human action and capacities, the material environment and the artefacts around us (our human-techno-hybrid forms) also influence perception, understanding, thought, belief and the appreciation of ‘norms’. Not only do they discipline through affordances and prescriptions, they also govern through persuasion and a quiet ontological argument.

## **Visibilities and ontologies**

In his prescription for analysing regimes of governmental practices, Mitchell Dean (2010) recommends investigating ‘fields of visibility’. Just as ‘clinical medicine presupposes a field of visibility of the body and its depths... [or] risk management strategies present social and urban space as a variegated field of risk of crime’ (p. 41), the material artefacts and devices of ‘design for government’ assume the existence of certain things, render particular objects visible and knowable, and encourage people to ‘see’ in a specific way. There is a worldview embedded in these technologies, an ontological hinterland to artefacts and practices.

## **The Double Diamond**

The Design Council’s model and illustration of the design process (see figure below), is a particularly potent ontological device. Formulated in 2003-4, since then it has had 660 million google searches (Drew, 2020) and is widely known and used.

It is a simple kite-shaped process model, representing the four phases of a generic design process: discover, define, develop, deliver. The diverging and converging lines of each half of the kite represent divergent and convergent thinking. The hinge point between the two diamonds represents the moment of problem definition and the articulation of a design brief. The Design Council undertook the challenge of developing a process model that described a generic design process to give greater clarity and visibility to what they meant when they said 'design process'. It was a deliberate strategy to clarify design for the purposes of promoting it. The team that came up with it did so on the basis of reviewing a range of design projects and practices in different contexts (Ball, n.d.). Kite-shaped process models already existed – in product development and business innovation. And design researchers for years had been working on models of the design process 'containing elements of divergence and convergence, cycles and iterative structures' (Ball, n.d.). The Double Diamond represents a synthesis and distillation of these earlier discursive artefacts.

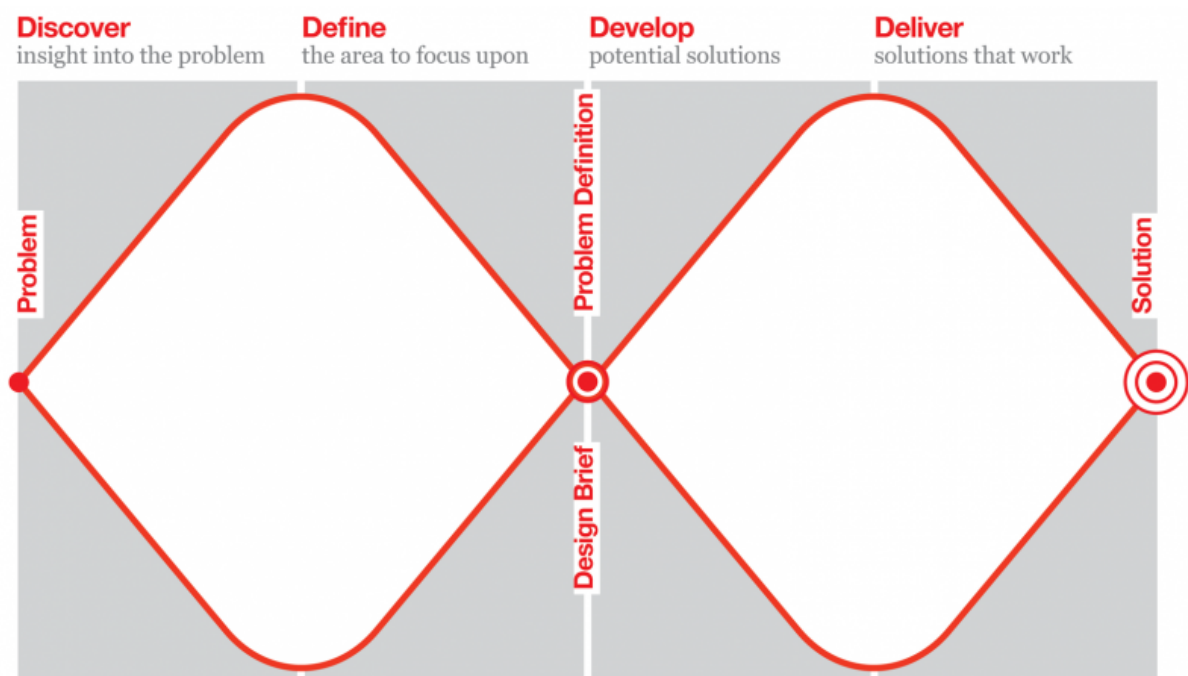


Figure 11 The Design Council's Double Diamond design process model (Design Council, 2021)

At the design agency, we used the Double Diamond in many different ways. We drew on the underlying 'theory' – sequencing alternating phases of divergent and

convergent activities (undertaking research vs defining a series of design opportunities, for example), and adopting it as an overarching project structure. We made frequent use of the image itself, overlaying the diamonds with project proposals or workshop plans, or as a visual key on a deck of methods cards, for example. We found it to be a very helpful tool for explaining our plans quickly and efficiently to clients and project participants – whether for a two hour workshop or a six month project – and also for explaining ‘what design is’ to the uninitiated. We used it as an orientation device, for reminding ourselves and clients ‘where we were’ in the process. We used it to explain to clients that by jumping straight from problem to solution they were missing some critical phases of research and development. Its logic and structure became deeply embedded in our practice, and no doubt in all of our heads. On the point of how one becomes shaped by one’s tools, I began to find it very difficult to think about how to approach a problem in any other way. Its usefulness – and presumably its popularity – is in the universal applicability of its logic, which can be wrapped around anything from abstract strategic policy problems to the design of very concrete, tangible things. It is also somewhat ‘indifferent’ to the uses it might be put to.

### **The process-solution pair**

What ontologies are implied by this artefact and the practices it is wrapped up in? The Double Diamond has the effect of rendering everything as a kind of process (and thereby silencing other ways of interpreting social phenomena). Process here has two pertinent meanings: a coherent series of actions directed to a specific end, and the treatment of something (e.g. the ‘processing’ of information). All problem-situations are potentially amenable to design processing, to disciplining through design’s practices and tools. And all situations – which might otherwise be seen as a disparate set of people, problems, events, conceptualisations, perspectives, actions etc – are potentially convertible into a rational design process. All other things then become accessories to the process. The framing produces a typology of design-process-objects: challenges, opportunities (a juncture that sits between problems and solutions), constraints, insights, material for design, new (often

ephemeral or virtual) objects, ‘prototypes’, and project management techniques. This leads to ‘translations’ (Palmås & von Busch, 2015) in the intent of things – the purpose and meaning of ethnographic research, for example, gets translated into something else that is subordinate to the design process (notes 17/08/15).

Process is also a teleological concept: it necessarily leads somewhere. In this case, the practices, framings and artefacts of design all strongly imply the existence of solutions. Every problem has a solution, somewhere; one finds it, or constructs it, through a design process. This is how design can be proposed as a response to ‘intractable’, ‘complex’, or ‘wicked’ problems: not because it has some special capacities for dealing with really difficult things, but because of the productive value of simply believing that the solution exists or is design-able. By applying design one is positing the existence of a solution, by asking ‘how might we...?’ one is entertaining the possibility that ‘we’ might be able to do something. In fact we assumed – we told our clients – that there are many possible solutions, and the purpose of these design tools is to generate options and choose between them. It is possible of course that the flurry of ideas that are generated are not solutions at all, but only labelled as such. However the conviction that there is a solution to be found or invented is quite different to political conceptions of inevitable and ongoing conflict or agonism, and therefore no doubt quite attractive to a group of people who conceptualise their work as struggling with some typically very difficult, opaque, or controversial problems.

*“policy is a big word that covers a lot of things, the centre ground is in making difficult – sometimes impossible – trade offs between multiple competing aims, with limited resources, in a political context.”*

- extract from interview with senior civil servant, Cabinet Office, May 2015

*John quiets the room and talks about the work that the chief exec’s team is doing and our involvement in it. He talks about people with multiple disadvantages and what they cost the council. He talks about shifting to an outcomes-based budget.*

- extract from my notes following a workshop with local councillors, March 2017

In this context, design practices and devices are presented and received as inherently (perhaps naively) optimistic. They suggest that ‘intractable’ social and public problems are not so. There are always solutions. (And perhaps this is not such a bad thing: believing that something exists does make it much more likely that one will find it.) The process-solution ontology is also quite canny: each half of the pair implies the other. If you want solutions you need a (design) process, and if you conduct a design process you can’t fail to find solutions.

### **How things shape beliefs and the perception of norms**

These technologies do not simply exist in our lives with a hidden ontology. The Double Diamond is not mute, or inert. The work that is done is to persuade people of its immanent worldview. The banal details of everyday life, the inhabited landscapes of manmade things, add up to a form of persuasive power in the way that their quiet, unobtrusive presence comes to be taken as a natural and normal condition. Ideologies become concretised in material form and continue to exert influence (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991). They imply that this is how the world both is and should be. Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga (Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2014) finds this acutely at work in architecture, which has the quality of appearing as though it had always been there:

As seemingly enduring, even timeless components of urban landscapes, they validate relations of power because they become the naturalized background for everyday life, lending themselves to hegemonic purposes. (p. 825)

Katherine Hepworth argues that communication design artefacts operate in a similar fashion, piling up around us, amplifying certain ‘truths’ and silencing others, furthering the perception that ‘the prevailing attitudes in our societies are natural, or common sense.’

Like countless mirrors reflecting and collectively exaggerating the dominant attitudes of our time, communication design artifacts extend governmental power into even the most mundane and seemingly innocuous situations and interactions. (Hepworth, 2018, p. 517)



This quiet, accumulating argument articulated by the material structure of our lives clarifies what is 'normal'. Damon Taylor (2015) explores how the mundane features of national infrastructure form the 'substrate of the physical landscape of subjectivity' (p. 63), creating a sense of identity and belonging in a place – a 'national habitus', a way of being in our home environment, that makes us feel we are at home. The material backdrop of our lives does the work of naturalisation. Material things render people, tastes, and behaviours within the norm or outside it, or perhaps even 'pathological'. The distinctions between 'clean' and 'dirty', or 'on time' and 'late', for example, are in part a function of technological affordances (Otter, 2007). In Los Angeles, the city of the automobile, walking is regarded as suspicious enough that people have been arrested for it (Winner, 2020, p. 9). The world over, certain tastes – such as for white, fitted kitchens – have been promoted through a process of 'disciplinary normalisation' (Connellan, 2010), which consists in:

positing a model, an optimal model that is constructed in terms of a certain result, and the operation of disciplinary normalization consists in trying to get people, movements, and actions to conform to this model, the normal being precisely that which can conform to this norm.  
(Foucault, 2007, p. 56)

The material culture of 'design for government' practice implies and normalises certain things, through presenting a new kind of naturalised landscape that tells us, for example, that the social world is made up of personas, problems can be designed out, that 'we' can all be 'creative'.

### **Persuasive modalities**

At Lab Connections, splashed all over the European Commission's sophisticated conference spaces – all glass and marble and indoor palms – were the (rather incongruous) materials of creative play. Let's turn now to considering the aesthetic mode of these technologies. The way these materialisations, visualisations, and protocols are presented carries meaning, communicates certain ideas, and shapes behaviours. The distinctive ambience they set up is part of how design practices

enrol and persuade. The environments they create rescript possibilities for how one ought to behave when in a public sector organisation. A preliminary thing to note is their ‘difference’: they operate partly through a technique of aesthetic disruption – ‘a sensory experience that challenges actors’ existing assumptions’ – which momentarily destabilises habitual ways of being and thinking, and opens up the space for something different to happen (Wetter-Edman, et al., 2018). There are three quite prominent aspects to this difference, to the styling of these practices and artefacts: play, pace, and provisionality.<sup>42</sup>

Playfulness is in the light-hearted ‘warm-ups’, in the idea generation activities that are deliberately far-fetched, asking people to imagine ‘what would happen if ...?’, in the materials of the craft that are reminiscent of childhood (pipe cleaners, coloured card, balloons, Play-Do). These materials suggest neutrality and universality — Post-It notes, felt-tip pens, newsprint — and downplay the need for draughtsmanship or skill; and they suggest disposability and impermanence. Mistakes don’t matter. The connotations of play perform multiple functions: they invite participation and lower the barriers to involvement, they suggest a break from business as usual, they permit ‘creative’ thinking and outlandish ideas, they engender collaboration, and elicit goodwill from participants. They put a sheen of fun over the work to be done. And this is regardless of how much the materials actually get used to make or represent something.

*As usual we had brought lots of ‘prototyping materials’ with us – a box containing coloured paper, card, play-do, stickers, pipe cleaners, straws and other basic craft materials – which I tipped out onto the table and encouraged them to make something that represented their idea. A couple of people picked up some play do and started messing around with it, but no actual models got made. That box is really heavy and a pain to carry around, and it often gets tipped out and tidied up again without anyone having done anything with any of the materials.*

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<sup>42</sup> This characterisation of aesthetic modalities was co-developed with Chad Story (Bailey & Story, 2018).

- extract from my notes following a workshop with local government employees, July 2017

Their presence and role is symbolic as much as functional, indicating a kind of universal, accessible, non-expert creativity.

Speed seems to be essential to the delivery of this kind of design.<sup>43</sup> It is reflected in the nomenclature — ‘rapid’ prototyping, lateral thinking ‘sprints’, hackdays and ‘jams’ — and infused into practice — starting, stopping and developing ideas quickly in workshops; producing design objects and project outputs within short spaces of time; doing rather than debating. This appeals to the sense of urgency in the public sector about delivering innovation and ultimately savings.

*“If we’d been left on our own it wouldn’t have happened as quickly.”*

- interview with policymaker, Department for Work and Pensions, May 2015

In contrast to the supposed inertia of the bureaucratic machine, design proposes itself as a light-footed and entrepreneurial catalyst of change. The aesthetic communicates the value of trying things out and ‘failing fast’, and demonstrates that ‘moving at pace’ is possible.

Provisionality is communicated explicitly as part of the method: building iteration into the project plan, or holding a ‘prototyping’ phase. It is infused into micro-practices: the ‘draft’ nature and quality of materials; constant representation and re-representation, making ideas sensible for dialogic purposes; leaving things on the walls and building up layers of work; moving Post-Its around; working interactively, visibly taking and incorporating feedback; and, of course, prototyping. It is also produced and communicated through the performance of workshops: symbolically breaking away from traditional meeting formats, literally changing the layout of tables and chairs, sticking things to the walls, and creating a sense of creative clutter. Provisionality serves multiple ends. It is dialogic: it allows ideas to emerge

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<sup>43</sup> Which may be as much to do with how much consultancy time clients can buy, and how much workshop time they are prepared to spare their employees for, as anything else.

and evolve. It invites further contribution. And it is persuasive: the suggestiveness of even unfinished design objects – the sketch – can hold great rhetorical power.

*“...lots of roughly sketched things, which is a good idea, because if you show people things that are quite precise then it narrows peoples’ thinking. That must be a deliberate ploy. It makes people think ‘that’s a fait accompli so I’ll just go through the steps’. But the sketches made it feel more flexible and playful.”*

- interview with senior policymaker, Ministry of Justice, May 2015

These technologies represent a new aesthetic landscape within the world of bureaucracy; an elaborate material performance that communicates the possibility of being ‘different’ at work, that invites and normalises participation, and constructs a democratised idea of creativity.

## **Governing souls**

Thus far we have looked at what the material technologies of design for government do to the people who come into direct contact with them. However there is another group of people who feature equally prominently but in a different way: the ‘users’ of services, the beneficiaries of policies, the people one is ostensibly designing around or for. Various of design’s technologies bring this group into view. People are ‘governed’ through design in another sense then: by being made knowable and manipulable through its artefacts and devices.

### **‘Ethnography’, personas and journeys**

‘Ethnography’ is one such technology – here in quotation marks because it is not quite the same kind of practice as the ethnography that this thesis represents. As mentioned in chapter 2, there is a history of design utilising ethnography to understand the life worlds of users, and to study people in their interactions with things. In ‘design for government’, ethnography is something that takes a few days (rather than months), it consists in shadowing and interviewing users and documenting their lives (although it rarely involves much interpretive writing), and it

produces ‘insights’ that can be mobilised as ‘opportunities’ for intervention. In other words it is a light touch form of user research, subordinated to the design process.

*“The kind of ethnography \_\_\_\_\_ is doing is concerned with uses, not meanings and practices and cultural practices. But then I guess uses are essential to public service questions.”*

- interview with ethnographer working on a government design project,  
June 2015

‘Ethnographic’ data is made use of here not to deepen one’s understanding of a culture, but as ‘personal stories’ to spark ideas and illustrate arguments, to add emotional content to dry policy discussions.

*“Definitely the principle of getting some real life stories to embellish the other forms of research that you do is helpful. And thinking about different types of evidence content. We often do a lot of presentations where we have to present the evidence, so having the videos as a tool, or the user journeys is really powerful, and it does make a difference when you’re trying to convince people, you’re trying to bring the subject to life.”*

- interview with policymaker/ client, Department for Work and Pensions,  
May 2017

Ethnographic data is often translated and communicated through visuals such as personas and user journey/ experience maps (see figures above). The persona – a representation of an archetypal user – is an invention of software design, created and promoted by Alan Cooper as a device for both holding a sense of real interactions in mind while designing, but also for communicating the rationale for a design (Cooper, 2020). In the context of ‘design for government’, personas are used to bring the user into the room. Although they may be based on research, sometimes – in a workshop, if one is short on time, or if one cannot easily get access to users – personas are constructed on the basis of whatever one happens to already know, ‘just use your imagination’. The argument here is that having an imperfect user in mind is better than not thinking about them at all (which is of course a mechanism by which the technologies amplify discursive norms). Another device used to bring the person into the room, is a user journey map. This is a tool that comes from service design, and is typically used to think through how

someone interacts with a service now, and how a future improved interaction might go (Ivey-Williams, 2016). However this narrative structure is also used to depict other things which might not be as discrete as a service experience: a relationship journey, or a journey towards homelessness for example. People's lives are represented in narrative form. Material from 'ethnography' is most likely to be used once it has been visualised in these devices. A single page persona or a map is easier to interact with than lengthy 'thick descriptions'. The design process requires that some 'key insights' be identified, those 'jumping off points' that provide a platform for designing.

Personas and journey maps are two examples of the 'protocols' we have already discussed. Empty wrappers, yes, but in this case ones that have been designed on the assumption that what matters – what needs to be rendered visible and present – is the psychology, behaviour and narrative life history of individuals. Ethnography gets turned on its head: no longer about the writing of culture, in 'design for government' it is a tool for probing the psychology of representative (problematic) individuals. That this should come to be at the centre of both policy and design represents in itself a deeply naturalised 'truth' about what the social world is made up of (atomised individuals and their behaviours), which can be called into question, as we will see in chapter 6.

### **Aesthetic governmentality**

As mentioned earlier, we might think of design's technologies as operating through a kind of aesthetic or affective governmentality (Ghertner, 2010; Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2014; Ashworth, 2017; Kantola, et al., 2019). It has long been recognised that some kinds of visual artefacts play an active role in governing, in the way that they make things knowable and therefore manageable. The intelligibility of things as a necessary condition for governing sits at the heart of Foucault's original genealogy of governmental power (Foucault, 2007): he argues that the gathering and representation of statistics made it possible to conceive of the 'population' as an object to be managed. Within governmentality studies there is therefore a keen

awareness that depictions and representations (maps, graphs, charts, tables of statistics etc) are important, as

little machine[s] for producing conviction in others... material techniques of thought that make possible the extension of authority over that which they seem to depict (Rose, 2008, pp. 36-37).

However, 'little machines' that operate through aesthetic and affective means have been under-appreciated and under-discussed. Asher Ghertner (2010) argues that Foucault's citation of statistics, as the 'main technical factor' underpinning the development of 'political economy' as an object of government, has led to an overemphasis on counting, numbers and other 'scientific' types of information in subsequent governmentality studies. By contrast, he suggests – on the basis of an analysis of strategies for slum clearance in Delhi – that aesthetic modes of governing might be just as, if not more, powerful, and certainly worthy of investigation. He shows how switching from calculative techniques based on statistics, numbers, and the accurate 'mapping' of terrain, to aesthetic ones based on photography and judgments about the outward appearance of slums, proved to be a much more effective strategy in the support of slum clearance, effectively neutralising resistance by presenting a set of 'truths' about slums that were much harder to challenge. Professor of Architecture and sociocultural anthropologist Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga (2014) investigates a 'design review' process in California to similarly show how policy can be built very easily on the basis of the aesthetic judgments of elite (powerful) groups. Katherine Hepworth (2018) notes that communication design artifacts, whilst appreciated, are not deeply analysed in the governmentality literature (p. 506), a gap she seeks to fill in a series of studies (Hepworth, 2017; Hepworth, 2018; Hepworth, 2016), theorising communication design as 'embodied discourse'. Ben and Marthalee Barton (Barton & Barton, 1993) address 'professional and technical visuals', likening them to the seeing-without-being-seen power of the panopticon. They argue (as did Foucault) that the panoptic idea went way beyond its instantiation in built form, as a political 'technology': a practice of rendering things enumerable and controllable, of seeking both a globalising and an individualising viewpoint. They find these two modes – the synoptic, or globalising, and the analytic, or individualising – at work in professional

and technical visuals. Maps, graphs, charts, in bringing everything into view at once, and providing access to the granular detail, are another expression of panopticism. Personas and journey maps might equally well be regarded in the same light: as panoptic devices that present the archetype and the detail, that render visible for the purposes of control.

The notion of aesthetic governmentality is a useful descriptor of ‘design for government’ then: the effects of the forms, practices and artefacts of design rely much more on aesthetics and affect than hard numbers. A concern commonly voiced about ‘ethnography’ is about its ‘reliability’, its ‘standards of evidence’ when compared with other information-gathering techniques typically used by the state.

*“When we got the ethnographic data back I found it fascinating and I thought it did help – to the extent that it told you about these case studies. The difficulty is that in order to inform policy development, and decisions that have to be taken by ministers, there are a number of steps that you need to go through in order to reassure people that the evidence that you’re basing decisions on is robust. Therefore a key criterion is ‘is it representative?’”*

- interview with government social researcher, June 2015

However this is perhaps to miss the other thing it is doing: which is making entirely new kinds of ‘knowledge’ available, and influencing the people who come into contact with it in new and different ways.

### **New governable objects: people and time**

Design’s technologies literally bring new things into view, appearing to render those objects less mysterious, and more amenable to management. The rhetoric about the value of design revolves around ‘people’ and design’s better understanding of them and their importance, and around its ability to get much closer to the messy reality of problem-situations (as we saw in chapter 4). In fact what design’s methods for research and representation do is construct new kinds of knowledge, and render it visible, creating new governable objects.



Design practices purport to be able to grasp things about people that might not previously have been visible to government, in the sense that they do not appear in data or statistics (e.g. ‘resilience’), or they do not appear conceptually.

*“...given that these issues are so inherently personal, I really wanted to get a much closer perspective, from real people, who are going through these things, and not just our interpretation or our projection of what we thought were the issues. Or a political projection of what we thought were the issues. Or a very kind of academic perspective. We wanted to kind of get underneath some of that and get to the real stories of what people were experiencing.”*

- interview with policymaker/ client, Department for Work and Pensions,  
May 2017

Design can, allegedly, tell you ‘what makes people tick’, which is not data that is routinely collected by government agencies, but is particularly tempting in a context where public problems are understood to have, at their root, the problematic *behaviours* of the public. A key epistemological claim of ‘design for government’ is that it is possible to find out about these things, either by going out into the ‘real world’ – leaving the department and talking to ‘real people’ – or by imagining as a good-enough substitute. Then, having gathered together all of this tantalising information about the user, the templates and tools of design – the persona, the user experience map, the ethnographic film – present it all in an obligingly accessible format. Simplified, visual, legible, affective.

These devices then come to stand in for reality within the rest of the design process. The real user falls away, the persona remains. Ideas about the subject (that are floating around discursively) are materialised through the protocols of ‘design for government’, and the resulting artefacts, objects and ontologies are so persuasive that they come to have a life of their own. In one workshop, even though the participants knew they had all just invented their characters, the personas quickly assumed a sense of realness, and participants began to ‘know’ things about them, saying things like, ‘We picked up that in order for this to work for John...’, ‘Carol is clearly not a JCP customer’, implying that they had learned something objectively true from studying John and Carol (notes 18.07.16). The materialising

protocols of 'design for government' turn Carol – a figment of discourse – into a real governable object. Because a second ontological assumption inherent in design's forms is that people are open to being shaped and changed: the dimensions of the subject become both data about the problem, and the object to be worked on. The point of knowing about and depicting this is as a substance to be governed.

Another ontological object implicit in these design practices and tools is time itself, ordered into coherent narratives, as in the map-making activity described here:

*...I draw out on a piece of flip chart a little x and y axis and a wiggly line going from left to right, starting above and then dipping below zero. I ask them to pause their conversations ... and explain that I'd like them to take a story and map the person's experience over time, going up and down depending on whether they were happy or sad, healthy or unhealthy, better or worse etc, and add to the diagram any events, touchpoints or interactions with the council, or other things they were doing to cope. I say they might have to make up some of the past or previous events, where the council only came into contact with them at a crisis point. I acknowledge that this might seem a bit flippant, but that if we can stick with what from our experience seems a plausible story it will help us think about where in their story the council might have intervened earlier. A's table immediately draw out their axis, copying mine. I go to R's table again and draw one for them...*

- extract from workshop with local councillors, March 2017

These technologies are suffused with 'narrativity', the belief and the pattern-making tendency that connects events over time in some logical manner (Strawson, 2004). They construct the world not as a random chaotic mess but as narrative arcs: processes, journeys, experiences, transitions, sequences, flows, causes and effects. This is true about the design process and how it is articulated: design process models such as the double diamond are a way of telling a story about what we are all doing, about the transition from problem to solution, a story of change. Proposed solutions often have a narrative form: a new service, a different behaviour, an intervention are conceptualised as sequences that unfold over time. Someone watches a TV show, clicks on a link, signs up, changes their behaviour,

tells a friend. People themselves have pasts, presents and futures that are logically related. Lives are given a narrative arc.

These narrative techniques bring not only the user, but time itself, into range as a governable object. Pasts, presents and futures are manipulated through visual and material devices and practices. Stories about people are detached from reality for the purposes of a design process – what would have happened, what could happen, what imaginary things might befall them that would lead to some other version of the story. Speculation thus presents as a form of information gathering – by telling stories about how things might go we know something more about the future. Through prototyping one is jumping forward in time, or rather bringing the future into the present, materialising (even if imperfectly) a new situation or solution. And in proposing to make the future sense-able, knowable — and therefore manageable – design practices take on the guise of a kind of prediction and risk-management capability. These are the ‘anticipatory practices that attempt to rationalise and pre-empt future events’ that Julier (2017, p. 29) describes as a feature of neoliberal design objects. Instead, though, of indicating sources of future value, they promise a kind of risk-neutralising prediction and prevention capacity. Time is disciplined and made legible in these materials, which imply the possibility to shape or manage uncertain futures.

‘Design for government’ therefore has a particularly compelling ontological hinterland, which is pushed not only through words and verbal arguments, but through material, aesthetic and practical ones. Compelling because it tells the institution of the public sector, with its particular logics, some things it would like to hear: the world that seems complex and chaotic can be ordered into discernible patterns, there are solutions to problems, mysterious and intractable subjects can be made knowable and governable, and uncertain futures can be brought into view. These technologies of ‘design for government’ have been cobbled together precisely to tell the public sector what it wants to know but doesn’t seem to be able to find out on its own, to purport to be able to govern that which it wants to manage but doesn’t know how. They are calibrated to act as a mechanism that generates the right answers:

*“the products that have come out have been very much what we wanted, bringing out the issues that we’re really interested in. Designing the personas, again, went well, and the fact that the ethnographers were able to find those people was a good sign that we were kind of on the right track.”*

- interview with policymaker/ client, Department for Work and Pensions, April 2017

## **Materialising discourse**

This brings us to the fourth and final mechanism by which these technologies discipline and govern, and which underpins the other three: the process by which discourse and ideology finds its way into material form. This is observable in the characterisations of ‘problems’ and the nature of ‘solutions’ that emerge through these protocols and practices.

## **How discourse shapes things**

Applying the lens of governmentality to the world of design reveals some interesting readings of how things come to be the way they are. Rather than being the work of a single author or designer, things, in this reading, can be seen more as a product of their discursive context, enmeshed in power relations and unavoidably shaped by them. ‘Designing’ might not actually be a very useful or accurate concept here. Studies that reflect on the genesis of a range of different designed objects<sup>44</sup> highlight their discursive contingency, contextual specificity, and the role of history and chance. They emerge (and don’t emerge), sometimes by accident, through

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<sup>44</sup> For example, architecture (Balke, et al., 2018), (Abramson, et al., 2012), government logos (Hepworth, 2017), passports (Keshavarz, 2015) (Keshavarz, 2016), digital healthcare (Andersson, et al., 2019), office environments and supplies (Jeacle & Parker, 2013), plugs and plug sockets (Taylor, 2015), white fitted kitchens (Connellan, 2010) and Victorian machines, devices and networks (Otter, 2007)

messy processes of deliberation and negotiation, involving multiple actors (Abramson, et al., 2012, p. ix).

‘Designed’ things are highly inflected by their discursive environments. For example, window envelopes – and various other features of office life and technologies – came out of the ‘efficiency mania’ of the 1920s that touched many aspects of American life (Jeacle & Parker, 2013). The British plug and socket was not a solely a product of electrical engineering, but of ‘22 meetings’ of the Electrical Installation Committee through which the electrical standards for post-war building in Britain were set out via a bureaucratic and political process (Taylor, 2015) concerned with rebuilding the nation, and public safety. The passport can be read as a ‘material articulation’ produced at the confluence of a centuries-long history of the need to identify travellers (but also to label and control less desirable persons), the invention of the ‘nation-state’ following the First World War, and the League of Nation’s concern for the welfare of the resultant ‘nationless’ refugees (Keshavarz, 2015; Keshavarz, 2016). These material things are the by-products of discursive practices, the material tip of an epistemic iceberg. What might be labelled ‘design’ processes, methods, or activities are better understood as conduits for the flow and material articulation of the discourses in which a design project and all of its participants are immersed. Designed outcomes are ‘embodied discourse’ (Hepworth, 2018). By implication, then, designed things can also be material evidence of governing rationalities. This is precisely the value of communication design artefacts to the historian, because they are always ‘imbued with the governance ideologies of the time and place in which they were created’ (Hepworth, 2016, p. 280). And indeed, none of this would be any great surprise to the design historian: architecture, fashion, advertising, consumer products and so on are easily recognised as being specific to a time and place. But it does raise some questions about how we might understand what ‘design for government’ is doing: generating new ideas and solutions? Or simply materialising the ideologies coursing through its environment?

## Prototypes and maps

Prototyping, as we discussed in chapter 4, is the practice of rendering a design proposal visual and material, creating a precursor of the final product, in order to learn about the design and improve it (or abandon it). Prototypes can take many different forms: paper versions of a document or website, cardboard mock-ups of a product, a storyboard imagining a future service experience, a role play imagining an interaction – and each mode enables different kinds of learning. In our projects at the design agency we created prototypes ourselves to test ideas with ‘users’, however the term ‘prototype’ was used rather expansively to refer to any kind of visible or tangible representation of an idea that was used to elicit any kind of feedback. In the first project I worked on I was daunted by the prospect of prototyping a policy until I realised that what we meant by that was essentially creating a visual representation and showing it to someone (notes 17.08.15). We encouraged prototyping in workshops – even short ones – and provided materials for that purpose.

*One table ... got up and grabbed some materials and came up with something about how services should be coordinated around the person... Another table was focused on ‘not spending all the time in meetings’... and they made a paper and play-doh scene of people having a meeting in a roof garden. Another team I walked step-by-step through creating a future ‘day in the life’, making a timetable for them with the hours of the day on, which they then wrote on - but around the margins, tentatively, rather than in the middle where I’d left space. ...We wrapped up the workshop with each team presenting their object, and everyone clapped.*

- extract from my notes following a workshop with local government employees, April 2017

The value of prototyping as a workshop activity seemed to us to be the way in which it fast-tracked conversations, and helped people converge on an idea as well as critique and collectively improve it. As one participant in a workshop commented ‘we got further in half an hour than we have in weeks of meetings’ (notes 03.08.16). The word ‘further’ is interesting here: clearly, the materialisation of an idea felt like

more significant progress than mere discussion. A picture is closer to the 'real' than some words on a page.

As we saw in chapter 4, 'maps' have played an important role in the discursive assemblage of the field, and in practice the language of making 'maps' is pervasive too: mapping the area, mapping stakeholders, mapping the issues, user experience map, context mapping, systems mapping. These are rarely geographic maps. Rather they are depictions of a certain element of the context or problem under investigation. They turn abstract ideas ('stakeholders', for example) into a visual landscape, a picture one can do something with. The choice of the word map, rather than picture, is telling, implying something more functional than a 'picture'. A map helps you work out where you are, or where you want to go. It supports decisions about direction. It also tames a territory (Kitchin, et al., 2011).

## **Making tangible**

Prototyping and map-making are two instances of a more general mechanism of visualisation and materialisation. The technologies of 'design for government' render intangible, virtual, conceptual things – a network, a lab, a journey, a solution idea, relationships between things, a field of stakeholders – physically present. Unlike Mitchell Dean's metaphorical 'visibilities', design practices quite literally visualise things, and render them 'tangible'. The frequent use of this word (see e.g. (Yee, et al., 2015)) – 'tangible solutions', 'tangible outcomes' – indicates that what we are dealing with is in fact usually *intangible*. If something is clearly tangible one does not need to specify it – you do not need to say 'a tangible chair'. The use of the word tangible is well-calculated, meaning capable of being touched, but also real rather than imaginary, definite rather than vague, and (in the sense of 'tangible assets') possessing some kind of real value. Design research methods, templates and tools, and prototypes, are mechanisms for constructing the material one is working with – creating the object of which you wish to speak – manifesting the problem in order to do something with it. Working with data in a design process is more likely to involve sitting on the floor surrounded by paper, than running an analysis through a computer programme. Design's protocols materialise concepts

and models ('the business model canvas'), experiences ('the journey map'), the subject ('personas'), thoughts (Post-It notes), future possibilities ('scenarios', 'storyboard'), opportunities, and so on. Even the design process itself is materialised in the Double Diamond, and in our attribution of different embodied experiences to each phase: 'don't worry if things feel confusing and overwhelming right now, we're diverging, soon it will all feel clear again'. 'Design for government' makes intangible things both present and manipulable.

In these various practices and devices that facilitate the performance of problem-solving processes, what we are looking at are mechanisms for materialising discourse. Discourse makes certain framings available, which are manifested as paper protocols, which in turn get filled with assumptions, values and norms. In that 2x2 matrix we discussed earlier, the parameters are pre-defined, and the empty space of the framework is waiting to be filled with the beliefs, assumptions, worldview, and so on of the participants – things which are, as we know, discursively constructed. The segmentation activity then led into a set of imagined personas around whom the solutions were supposed to be designed:

*Steve, an 18 year old from Manchester. 3Cs at A Level, in computer science, maths and physics. Low confidence and sense of initiative. Doesn't fancy going to university. Lacking direction... John, a 55 year old investment banker made redundant. Has financial security. Likes the status his work gives him. Has a good network and now thinking about making a career change... Carol, a 37 year old mum who has taken several years out of work to look after her children. Now thinking about working again. An engineering graduate, she was previously at an IT consultancy. She is of an entrepreneurial mindset and wants to start up her own business but not sure how...*

- extract from my notes following a workshop with civil servants, July 2016

These characters are called forth to serve the process. 'Design for government's' protocols are little machines for putting discourse into material form.





Figure 12 Turning interview data into a design specification (author's photo)

And these materialisations have powerful regulating and governing effects. Pictures are persuasive: something is made closer to the real and begins to be naturalised.

*...we did some further development of visuals ourselves, to show the client what the first stages of prototyping looked like. Out of the dozens that had been generated, the four ideas that we drew pictures of ... quickly became the favourite ideas to be progressed...*

- extract from field notes, August 2017

The tangibility of such visuals seemed to give confidence and certainty to the client. The 'prototype' lent its own momentum to things. This is how things are both expressed and silenced: as one option is made sensible, as it comes into discourse, other potentialities fade from view.

### **Selective representation**

So, the material agency of these practices and artefacts is in what they do to information – the kind they collect and the way they represent it. Maps, journeys, stories, matrices all exhibit the same virtue of marshalling messy and potentially overwhelming data into more structured and digestible forms. The protocols cannot

handle, indefinitely, a lot of thick unsorted data about people. Ethnographies have to be categorised and winnowed down to the relevant points to be acted upon – risk factors, moments or junctures, communication styles, key strengths. ‘Maps’ render the complexity of reality digestible and navigable, but they do so by filtering. They ostensibly present only the things one needs to know. Prototypes focus attention, naturalise ideas and invisibilise that which is not depicted. In claiming to be able to deal with complexity, then, what these practices and devices actually do is select (and by implication ignore). This leads to a fundamental confusion about what ‘dealing with complexity’ means, ‘that complexity can be made simple if only designers can look at it...’<sup>45</sup> Things are necessarily tidied up, which is, no doubt, an attractive feature. The protocological process is acting to define the nature of the subjects and objects in play. And these simplifications are then performative, in as much as they create representations on the basis of which other decisions are made, and other artefacts emerge.

‘Design for government’ methods, practices and protocols also tend to edit out the politics and the history of ‘issues’, as this comment implies.

*“Some of the feedback I got from people afterwards was... ah... was a bit more sceptical than I would have been about it. Saying, you know, ‘it’s all very well doing that, but that’s not going to overcome the reluctance of... ah... most politicians in the country not to build on the green belt for example. We know what the solution to the housing crisis is – to build more houses. To do that we need to build houses in areas of high demand, and that means some selective building on the green belt. And this sort of thing isn’t going to help us overcome that problem.”*

- interview with senior policy advisor, Cabinet Office, May 2015

Design methods can appear to simply ignore – or be oblivious to – certain issues. This is partly a question of context: when the policy direction has been set, some things are just not up for discussion, and therefore defined as ‘outside the brief’. And there is often an institutional desire that policies definitely do not become ‘issues’ with ‘publics’ (Marres, 2005). ‘Design for government’ obliges by creating

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<sup>45</sup> Private communication with a colleague

templates that don't allow for certain ideas to be expressed, and by rendering 'issues' invisible, or depoliticising them, through practices of nominalisation and reification. Problems are taken at face value, characterised as a 'lack', a 'challenge', or an 'opportunity', a platform for designing the future without looking back to where they might have come from. Design briefs can be worded to tactically ignore controversial histories, foreclosing any discussion of causes or blame. 'How might we support people at risk of homelessness to be more resilient?' is also a way of pointing the lens away from state responsibility for, and welfare-based solutions to, homelessness. 'How might we...?' tells you not to worry about whose fault it is, let's just work together to come up with a solution. Briefs can equally well be framed to direct attention away from less politically desirable 'solutions'. In this way these technologies obscure causes as much as they reveal them, strategically avoid the question of responsibility and accountability, and set parameters around solutions. Once again, the wrappers remain tactically indifferent to their contents, and to the nature of the changes that might be brought about through their deployment. But they also pull off the trick of selectively representing certain kinds of information whilst appearing to be a neutral mirror to the world. The language and the aesthetic provides a veil of objectivity.

### **(Non-) solutions**

*They came up with a few ideas by the end of the workshop, but not many of them were about long term prevention. Some of them were things the council was already doing, or an extension of something that already existed. Some were common bugbears... They mostly stuck with what they knew. None of them dealt with the problem they all complain about given half a chance – which is the general expectation of the resident population that they are entitled to a council house. And there were quite a few gaps in relation to the opportunities we had identified.*

- extract from my notes following a workshop with local government employees, August 2017

As we saw in chapter 4, there is a heavy emphasis in the discourse on design producing 'solutions'. What does this mean and what do they look like? Looking

across my data, and mentally working through the long list of projects undertaken, produced four observations about design for government's 'solutions'. First, the term 'solution' usually refers to an *idea for* a solution, not something that has been implemented, and which is communicated through a visual or material representation of the idea (a prototype), and a written description. There is also little solid evidence within my dataset of these ideas ever actually getting to the execution stage, a curious absence of implementation also noted by Hermus, et al (2020). Second, although each project had its own portfolio of solutions answering to the specific brief, there were some recurring themes in the ideas generated; for example proposals around 'life skills' and education,<sup>46</sup> communication and awareness-raising,<sup>47</sup> persuasion and 'nudging'<sup>48</sup>, informed choices approaches,<sup>49</sup> and more openly coercive techniques.<sup>50</sup> Another 'design for government' practitioner once expressed frustration in conversation with me about the limited range of 'go to' ideas that projects always seemed to converge on:

*"Ban it. Put it on the curriculum. Or get front line workers to think about whatever the thing is policymakers are worrying about."*

- field notes 20.09.17

Third, the aim with many of these ideas is ultimately to change the way that people behave. The same sorts of ideas came out when thinking about how to make civil

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<sup>46</sup> Sending people to 'life skills' classes; inserting things into education, putting things on the curriculum; compensating for the lack of social capital (e.g. leaflets on how to find a flat to rent, encouraging kids to talk to their grandparents and vice versa, teaching council tenants how to cook, how to do DIY); improving digital literacy/ skills

<sup>47</sup> Providing information or making it more accessible or understandable: creating websites, putting everything in one place (the 'one stop shop'), peer to peer communications strategies, apps

<sup>48</sup> advertising and communications campaigns (either overt or covert); coupling the desired behaviour with another thing the individual is going to do anyway

<sup>49</sup> Self-assessment and decision making tools: 'is CBT right for you?', 'are you ready to take on social finance?'

<sup>50</sup> Such as making the receipt of benefits/ universal credit conditional on a certain behaviour

servants behave differently too.<sup>51</sup> This is perhaps an inevitable consequence of the ontologies of those templates and tools we have already looked at, which objectify people and their behaviours and motivations. Finally, in many cases these ‘solutions’ already existed; there was nothing radically original about them. On more than one occasion we (at the design agency) bolstered a suite of underwhelming ideas from a co-design workshop with some more provocative ones of our own. This lack of originality was also mentioned by several interviewees:

*“...although I probably could have predicted the outcomes we arrived at, the process was vital for getting buy in from a larger group of stakeholders.”*

*“Nothing was completely unknown. We’ve got lots of policy experts who spend a long time thinking about these things. It would have been weird if we had been surprised by anything. I think the value is in reordering things.”*

*- policymaker interviews, both Department for Work and Pensions, May 2015*

### **Tuning in to the discourse**

But by now we perhaps shouldn’t be too surprised if the technologies produce a flurry of unoriginal (and mostly unrealised) ‘solutions’. Implicit in Hepworth’s arguments about the governmental effects of communication design is the idea that designers might be more than usually attuned to the nuances of discourse (even if they would not describe their sensibilities in such terms), because working within and manipulating discourse is essential to the success of a designed outcome. The skill of design lies in using ‘aesthetic and functional techniques to produce work that resonates within the discursive contexts of its intended users’ (Hepworth, 2018,

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<sup>51</sup> For example: education and awareness techniques, making GPs aware of the alternatives to medication for a certain issue, or encouraging ‘knowledge-sharing’ around improvements and ‘best practice’; requiring the front line worker to look out for a particular problem and/ or deliver a broader range of information/ advice; improving collaboration and communication between departments; developing predictive strategies: making better use of data, or other people (like front line workers) to spot problems; using sanctions and incentives, for example writing things into contracts; setting up system-based nudges, like putting something in IT systems that reminds an individual to do a certain behaviour.

p. 507). The protocols and practices of 'design for government' are seen to 'work' not because they produce radically innovative and original ideas, but because they produce ideas that fit. And the reason they fit is because they are of the same discursive field. They are technologies for the 'material articulation' of power (Keshavarz, 2015) and the 'embodiment' of discourse (Hepworth, 2016). The technical wrappers are empty vessels, remember (Galloway, 2004): waiting to be filled by whatever the dominant ideology happens to be. An interesting and notable difference between 'design for government' and other design domains is that the expert or professional designer is demoted to playing relatively little role in the development of solutions. They are simply there to provide the frameworks and facilitate their use. There is no expectation that they will mediate which ideas make it into material form. They are there to construct the process, ensure its smooth functioning, and otherwise remain as indifferent to its contents as the protocols themselves.

So one might be able, then, to look at the list of solutions, at their material articulation in prototype form, and discern the discursive environment from which they emerged. Although it is not my ambition here to produce a conclusion or accusation of 'neoliberalism' (which I see as being in the same vein as the 'epochal' sorts of statements that the design discourse relies upon), it has to be said that these behavioural solutions could be made to fit fairly well within a neoliberal schema, as examples of its tactics of responsabilisation, downloading and marketisation (Julier, 2017; Julier & Kimbell, 2019; Whitfield, 2006; Brady, 2014; Clarke, 2005). They certainly fit with the values and concerns of non-interventionist, austerity-driven political administration. Whatever rationality one wants to tether them to, what seems clear is that 'design for government' is acting as a conduit for the assumptions, beliefs and intentions coursing through its environment. These technologies are not a 'neutral' tool for generating innovative and user-friendly solutions, they are a vehicle by which political intent finds its way into form.

## Effects

In this final section, we reflect on what these various mechanisms – the structuring of action and capability, the shaping of perception and belief, the objectifying of people, and the materialisation of discourse – all add up to. Here we are again into the realm of strategy as opposed to tactics: the cumulative strategic effects of the apparatus that may be more than the sum of its parts, and indeed more than the intent or desires of any individual actor.

## Assembling the practice

We can now see that the practice of ‘design for government’ itself, is an assemblage of devices and social practices with a diverse range of origins, drawn together discursively and given new meaning through practice. Even the cursory look that we have taken here at the genealogies of these technologies reveal lives that stretch back into a range of discursive contexts: manufacturing (the workshop), business process modelling (the Double Diamond), office supplies (the Post-It), word processing (templates), anthropology (ethnographic interviewing), Cold War creativity research (idea generation), and industrial product design and manufacture (prototyping). Much like the discursive re-assembling of ideas we saw in the previous chapter, what is drawn together here is an odd assortment of pre-existing artefacts and practices, packaged up and re-labelled as ‘design for government’, iterated and performed and rendered meaningful in new ways through discourse.

This is a great demonstration of the inter-relation between technologies and rationalities. Things are not meaningful all on their own. If the Post-It note has become the symbol and enabler of a kind of managed, de-clawed creativity, this is not, ultimately, the sole achievement of its physical properties. Historian Chris Otter, in a paper on the technologies (in the common meaning of the word) – the steam engine, the rail network, the egg beater – that made possible ‘the kinds of liberties which appealed to many Victorians’ (Otter, 2007, p. 572), points out that there is nothing inherently ‘liberal’ about any of these artefacts.

Their political significance is only revealed when they are considered relationally, alongside ideas and practices. Their liberalism lies in the techno-social relations they could establish: the particular way they meshed with, facilitated, and patterned the kinds of practices promoted by liberals like Mill and Smiles. (p. 579)

The effects of technologies are a result of the simultaneous social and political currency of certain values: mobility, productivity, cleanliness, and independence, in the case of the Victorians. Similarly, the Post-It note has come to be deployed in a certain way because of the values, norms and politics of its discursive environment. This is a cyclical rather than a uni-directional process. Meaning is not inserted from above by some higher power, but generated through use, consumption and practices (Baudrillard, 1981; de Grazia & Furlough, 1996; Campbell, 2004; Lane Benson, 2000; Miller, 1987; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Hebdige, 1979). The field itself and its technologies are a product of their environment.

It's almost too obvious a point to make, but one effect, then, is the emergence of a new regime of practice. The materiality of these technologies brings the field into existence in very perceptible, tangible ways. Their physicality is persuasive, an argument for design's particular way of doing things and seeing the world, and also for its legitimacy as a discipline and expertise. Material performances of design construct and validate the field as they go. They persuade people of the ontology and effectiveness of 'design for government'. In this regard the technology works hand-in-hand with the discourse as a motor driving the creation of the field. An assemblage of random stuff has coalesced into something with claims to disciplinary status. Of course, as a field grows, more and more people become involved in constructing and maintaining it: institutions, careers, livelihoods, organisational aims become reorganised around and depend upon it. Research money is earmarked for theorising it. The apparatus solidifies.

Pushing design's ontology has some obvious strategic advantages. The methodology – and especially the Double Diamond's capacity for absorbing all sorts of problems – can be applied quite independently of the topic, which opens up new territories (markets) for colonisation: 'everything can be designed,' tweeted a senior government designer (notes 16.01.19); 'What are the limits of design?',



asked a speaker at a panel discussion of new fields of design practice. Design is formulated as a detached methodology that can be applied to anything, sold to anyone.

### **New subjects and objects**

A thread underpinning everything here is the effects on people. There are two slightly different processes at work however. We have the people ('users') who are made objects of knowledge in new ways through design's methods. The persona, the experience map, the ethnographic film, all construct information about, and representations of, citizens (or customers, or users of public services, or whatever the favoured term might be), in order that something can be done to them by someone else. In this case, usually, in order that they can be made to do something that the state would like them to do (eat less, for instance). 'Design for government' renders people knowable and governable in new ways.

And then we have the people who are made subjects of the apparatus of 'design for government' (the workshop participant, the civil servant, but also the designer), enrolled into those subject positions through the practices and devices we have discussed. The staging of workshops, the protocols of templates, the ontology of the double diamond, the asking of 'how might we...?', all propose a particular way of being, and an attendant worldview, to the people caught up in them.

### **Performances of change and creativity**

If all actions are 'actions under a description' (Hacking, 1985), here the description often precedes the action. People are primed to interpret what has happened in a certain way. All of these technologies when they come together constitute an elaborate material performance of a process, and of creativity, as a proxy for change and innovation. The material performances of 'design for government' are about fetishising a methodology, making it tangible, performing the process. The process has come to take centre stage over the designed outcome.

We discussed in chapter 4 the emphasis on change and innovation in the expert discourse. This narrative, as well as the material experiences of these technologies, lead to the (mis)perception of change occurring. The things that are produced in workshops – prototypes, ephemeral and virtual – come to stand in for change, made real but not actual (Julier, 2017, p. 157; Miller & Carrier, 1998). The act of materialisation – of producing *something* – can make one feel as though one really has made a breakthrough, or done something. At the start of the workshop we just have a persona and their problems, disconnected from the client's attempts to reform her. At the end of the workshop we have a bridge between the two. And in fact a change has indeed happened in the space of the workshop: a new ontological thing has arisen, a mechanism – a 'solution' – for changing the user. People feel a sense of achievement. The workshops, the prototypes, the language, the sensation of 'doing' that imbues the practices, all conspire to create a sense of change, of actions in the spirit of making change and innovation happen. This aesthetic, affective experience – it feels like change, it looks like change, it is spoken about as change – comes to eclipse the question of what constitutes change and whether it is, in fact, occurring. The spectacle and sensations come to stand in for the real thing.

We can see this at work in the Lab Connections example. On the one hand, the methods weren't totally unproductive: we did come up with a reasonably sensible-sounding diagnosis of the likely challenges to implementing the Once Only Principle, and some plausible ideas for moving forward. But then what happened? I don't believe anything came of the working group formed. I joined a follow-up call a month or so later but after that heard nothing more. Far from being an end-to-end innovation methodology, the process here fell off a cliff. No real solutions were delivered. No end-user-citizens felt the effects of our designing. However, the language, the pace, the methods, the material performances all lent a sense that something creative was happening. We used words like action, solution, kickstarter. We visualised our proposals, making them tangible. Splashed across tables and flip charts was that particular aesthetic that communicates universally accessible creativity. And the whole event was underpinned by the assumption that getting to actions was the point. This was evident in the post-event debrief, where the

discussion was focused around what went well in this regard, what could have gone better, and what to do differently next time. I left feeling very unclear as to whether what I had been a part of was a ‘real’ policy design activity, or a hypothetical rehearsal of one. The virtualism that suffuses everything makes it hard to tell the difference. A similar blurring is evident in the BBC Radio 4 programme, ‘The Fix’ (BBC, 2021), one episode of which I had a role in delivering, through the design agency I was working for. Badged as ‘12 of the country’s brightest young minds gather to solve difficult social problems’, the design process was performed and ‘solutions’ were identified – and then... nothing. It might be objected that both of these examples are very obviously performances, and standalone events, perhaps destined not to go anywhere. I can only say that when it was time to try and analyse the outcomes of all my various projects, I was somewhat surprised to discover that in very few cases could I point to evidence of implementation, leading me to look for ‘outcomes’ somewhere else entirely.

These are also experiences and performances of ‘creativity’: a universally applicable, detached from any specific craft, accessible, lowest-common-denominator kind of creativity. The protocols of design have a levelling effect. There is very little difference between the novice and the experienced practitioner. Minimal skill or ingenuity is required. Rather than unleashing the inner creative potential in us all, this is a highly managed, subordinated version of creativity. But one that nevertheless produces enjoyable experiences of work, because it appeals to yet another pervasive contemporary notion that everyone wants to be creative (Reckwitz, 2017), and everyone always feels better for having ‘produced something’. All this performance, and the tenuous connection to functional outcomes, sounds rather like labour as ‘dressage’ (Jackson & Carter, 1998): performance for performance’s sake. Although, as we will see in chapters 6 and 7, other things are being produced.

### **An embodied critique**

Finally, these ‘technologies’ are the embodiment of the critique of bureaucracy – its ‘fields of visibility’, beliefs, forms of knowledge and practices – that motivates the

design discourse. Collectively these material forms and practices manage and prescribe the ways one ought to think about what one is doing as a person at work in the public sector: namely, one ought to regard it as a question of designing (and not as whatever else one might regard it). The very idea of design as a flexible methodology renders all matters of governing, all of the state's business, as problems of design. This results in the de-differentiating of diverse matters into problems to be solved by designing, which of course expands the market for design. The critique of bureaucracy, indeed the formulation of a positive response to it, makes great business sense for design.

The problem with de-differentiating, however, is that other things of importance are rendered invisible and easily lost. And the problem with replacing everything the public sector does with design is that design (or this version of it) is evacuated of any capacity to resist. Its concept of a process, and its 'technical wrappers' are, as we have discussed, a kind of empty vessel, waiting to be filled by whichever discourse happens to harness them. There is no mediating role for a 'designer' as a professional who makes evaluative judgments: we simply facilitate the functioning of the tools. And the tools expediently reproduce – amplify in fact – the 'truths' circulating through the public sector environment. There is no critical filtering, no practice of deliberation over what matters – but rather a fetishization of what works. The design lobby may claim to be concerned for the 'public good' but in reality 'design' as it has been constructed and practiced here doesn't have the mechanisms or forms to care about anything.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the apparatus of 'design for government' from the point of view of its material culture and practices, to try and understand how those things do the work of governing. We looked at four different dynamics: the structuring of action and capability by the affordances of artefacts and practices; the shaping of perception and belief through ontologies; the governing of souls through new aesthetic and affective devices; and the materialisation of discourse.

So, returning to our research questions, we can say now that the field of ‘design for government’ has become established and legitimised by literally constructing itself through performances of practice. If one finds oneself in a design workshop, filling in a persona, making a prototype, one is inclined to believe that design for government is a thing – and, depending on one’s experience of that workshop, quite possibly a useful and valuable thing. Design has been made relevant to the public sector by responding to some of its articulated challenges (innovation, change, creativity, and so on) with a suite of methods, tools, practices and artefacts that are tailored to appeal to those needs. These both offer a methodology for proceeding, and purport to offer tantalising insights into the world of hitherto unknowable publics and futures.

The apparatus as a whole functions to produce performances of change, and an embodied critique of bureaucracy. ‘Design for government’ is an attractive proposition because it responds to some of the problematics set up by the public sector reform discourse in very concrete ways. Its technologies prescribe easy-to-follow formulae for proceeding, and doing so ‘creatively’. It provides a way of materially performing the work of innovation and change.

It also produces a whole new cadre of subjects. People are disciplined by its protocols, and persuaded by the very materiality and aesthetic of its arguments: one hears the rationale but also experiences it in action. The descriptions give meaning to the action, the experience of practice validates the description (even, sometimes, when these things might be quite divergent). Enrolled in design’s practices, one can momentarily become someone else – a more creative version of oneself at work, for example. Clearly, a lot hinges on processes of subjectification and objectification. It is to this which we turn in the final pair of analytical chapters.

# Chapter 6

## Remixing subjects

### Introduction

Imagine you are looking at a picture: there are people in work attire – but relaxed, jackets off, sleeves rolled up – sitting in small groups around tables that have been pushed together. On each table is a mess of printed sheets of paper with colourful drawings, blank boxes, and scribbled writing. There are Post-It notes, pens, glasses of water and cups of coffee. On the walls behind them are blu-tacked more bits of paper with words, diagrams, tables, photos. And a poster that says in big letters: ‘How might we support tenants to care for their homes?’

We are looking at a snapshot of a design workshop in progress. Today it’s about coming up with some methods for raising awareness of, and attendance at, ‘tenancy skills classes’. The council has a problem with some of its tenants not taking care of their properties, and has decided that instead of continuing to only deal with problems once they become overwhelming or very expensive to fix, to take preventative action and train up tenants in how not to get into difficult situations in the first place by becoming more skilled and confident in looking after their own homes. They’ve engaged a design agency to help them work this through – or maybe they’ve turned to an in-house lab for support.

At the moment the snapshot is taken, the people in the photograph are poring over sheets of paper with a stick man drawing surrounded by clusters of writing in neat little boxes. This is a persona of a user: Fred. They have been talking about Fred for a while, what his life is like, what keeps him up at night, his difficult relationship with his neighbours, his hopes and fears, why he has gotten into trouble and what could have gone differently for him. Now they have been asked to think about – given everything they know about Fred – what opportunities there might be to raise his awareness of these new tenancy skills classes, and encourage him to attend...

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As we have seen, a primary effect of the discourse, practices and artefacts we have been studying are the effects on people, who are made the objects of knowledge or subjects of practice. In this chapter and the following we are going to delve further into this question of how people are governed by design, by studying its mechanisms of subjectification and objectification.

The snapshot above provides a good starting point for thinking about who might be being governed through design. In our imaginary scenario there will be some designers facilitating, there will be the client and their colleagues (public sector staff); and there may be some users, but there will definitely be some material which represents the users so they are symbolically present even if physically absent. There may be others who fall into a different category – ‘experts’ on the topic for example – but these are the three most substantial groups and the ones we are concerned with. We want to know what happens to these groups: what are the effects of the discourse and the technologies we have discussed so far? If a necessary constituent of governing and disciplining is the production of subjects, how are they produced in this context?

There are some preliminary theoretical ideas to establish first, that will help us answer these questions. First, what is subjectivity, and how is it conferred? And second, what other kinds of subjectivity are in the mix? After all, design discourse, practices and artefacts do not land in a vacuum. They are made sense of in a world already full of other discourses, practices, artefacts – and subjectivities. So, thinking about the three groups identified, we look at some other discourses and processes of subjectification that shape how these groups are made up: as participants, designers, creatives, civil servants, people at work, ‘users’, and entrepreneurial, active, skilled citizens. The argument of the chapter is that the subject positions we are investigating have not been invented by design, but result from re-mixing others; a discursive re-assembling and labelling (under the banner of design) of a set of qualities that might previously have been known under different labels.

This chapter draws together ideas and discussions from the literature, from a heterogeneous range of sources that have not been pulled together to analyse design in this way before. In the following chapter we take these ingredients forward

into an analysis of 'design for government''s subjects, which brings in new auto-ethnographic material, to tease out the mechanisms by which people are subjectified by the disciplinary apparatus of design.

## **What is a subject?**

So, first: what is subjectivity, and how are human beings made subjects? A subject position, in the Foucauldian meaning, refers to the standpoint from which a particular discourse makes sense, and the worldview proposed therein falls into a coherent pattern. 'The subject' therefore refers to the individual in their relation to something else (structural or social forces for example). Its popularity in social and cultural theory as a general term for human beings is due to this embedded implication, that one is never not 'subject to' power. 'Subjectivity', a related term, is the state or quality of being a (specific kind of) subject. It refers to a code of conduct that has been invented elsewhere and dropped on us from above. We are made 'subject to' 'someone else's control and dependence, and tied to [our] own identity by a conscience and self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to' (Foucault, 2002, p. 331). Subjectivity in this account is not something with an interior structure (as psychoanalysis has it), but 'a position in a field of possible behaviours constituted by power/ knowledge' (Mansfield, 2000, p. 76). This is what it means to say that subjectivities are 'discursively constituted', they are generated not by us but course through our environments.

We can see how this works, for example, in relation to consumerism. A popular claim is that we are all discursively constructed, under (neo)liberal consumer capitalism, as 'consumers'. We live in a 'consumer civilisation' (Campbell, 2004), within which we are encouraged to believe that freedom equals choice, and to 'optimise the worth of our existence ... by assembling a lifestyle or lifestyles through personalised acts of choice in the market place' (Du Gay, 1996, p. 77). People inhabit this subjectivity the moment they 'participate in consumption practices regulated by markets' (Shankar, et al., 2006). Further, in such a society, our identities are indelibly linked to acts of consumption; we discover our tastes and



who we are in this way (Campbell, 2004). This is a good example to demonstrate the 'productive' nature of power: inhabiting a consumer subject position serves multiple interests. Those of retailers, for instance. And more broadly of political administrations who run economies on the basis of consumption. But for individuals there are also clearly positive experiences, enjoyment, desire, a sense of identity, and so on, to be had as a consumer-subject. So, governmental power produces subjects even as they are constrained. In their paper on the Tavistock Programme, sociologists Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose (1988) note exactly this characteristic:

regulatory practices and techniques have come to operate, not through a crushing of wills or a subjugation of desires, but through the promotion of subjectivity, through investments in individuals lives, and the forging of alignments between the personal projects of citizens and images of the social order (p. 172).

We are back again at the paradox of governmental power, in taking 'freedom itself and the soul of the citizen, the life and life-conduct of the ethically free subject', as its target and object (Gordon, 1991, p. 5).

### **'Acts are constitutive of subjectivity'**

How do we come to inhabit subject positions? In his 1970 essay, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', Louis Althusser proposes 'interpellation' as a description of the process by which ideology recruits individuals and transforms them into subjects. The act of hailing the subject,

can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing, 'hey, you there!' Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. (Althusser, 1985, pp. 81-82)

This is a nice image (and a useful bit of terminology), but it doesn't get us all that far in determining how subjectification works. The metaphor of call and response implies a self that is hearing, and then self-consciously recognising that the call is for them. It's almost as if this process requires that the subject is already a subject

(Hirst, 1979). But it may be entirely possible for one to be a subject without actively identifying as such, or even being very aware of it. In fact most of the time it's necessary that we don't fully recognise the subjectivities we are embodying. As Foucault noted: 'power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to an ability to hide its own mechanisms' (Foucault, 1998, p. 86). Althusser also says however that 'apparatuses' – the embodiments of ideology – are material as much as social. It is not only recognition that makes us subjects, but being 'subject' to particular forces that act on bodies as well as minds. Barnett et al (2008) note that 'there is no need to suppose that efforts at shaping conduct aim to bring off strong subject-effects on individuals who identify themselves' as such. They make a distinction between acts – performances of subjectivity – and identity, suggesting it is not that discourse creates self-knowing subjects who perform the appropriate conduct, but that discourse encourages certain forms of conduct, and through this we appear as subjects. 'Acts are constitutive of subjectivity' (p. 636). Subjectification begins with bodies (Farnell, 2018) and practices (Reckwitz, 2002). These processes are not hidden: they are about people, in space, surrounded by material objects, doing and saying things. So we don't need to look for evidence of people self-consciously considering themselves as 'subjects' of design: subjectivity is conferred through engagement with the material technologies we discussed in chapter 5 (the workshops and Post-Its, the personas and idea generation activities, and so on).

This idea that acts are constitutive, rather than a consequence, of subjectivity, is rather like the notion of 'performativity' that Judith Butler advances in her book, 'Gender Trouble' (Butler, 2007). In her case she was exploring how gendered subjectivities might be constituted. Rather than coming from within, performances of gender are perceived, learned, rehearsed, and iterated, with the effect of creating a sense of gendered identity. In Butler's view, we are in the mistaken habit of assuming a gendered sense of identity is the cause rather than the effect of such performances. We are back in the territory of Mauss's 'prestigious imitation' and Bourdieu's 'habitus': we learn these things by copying others. Butler uses the literary metaphor of 'citations' to suggest that performances are always quotations from elsewhere, and as such can be modified, exaggerated, inexpertly copied,

parodic, and so on (Butler, 2011). In doing so she carves out the space for human agency – or rather an explanation for the fact that we do not simply repeat robotically that which we have been socially conditioned to do. Carrie Noland (2009), in a book on ‘Agency and Embodiment’, extends this understanding into an exploration of ‘gesture’, ‘learned techniques of the body’ which both embody cultural conditioning and provide the kinesthetic vocabulary to challenge it. This allows her to go beyond the binary of subjection or resistance, and speak instead of ‘variations in performance’ (p. 3). The accumulation of ‘reiterated learned behaviours’,

the embodied history of the subject, a history stored in gestural “I can’s,” determines in large part how that embodiment will continue to unfold. (p.

4)

This specific gestural history and learned capacities may also then provide a clue as to the variable constitution of subjectivities – and the development of a sense of self, and skill.

In our case, this account of subjectivity – as a product of participation in practices – is illuminating when it comes to thinking about how ‘design for government’ might be enrolling new subjects. The co-design workshop begins to look like a strategically very effective technology. One becomes a subject the moment one participates – picks up a pen and post-it note – and this is deepened as one engages more and more with what is going on. One might, without being very conscious of the fact, start to learn the gestures and cite the practices, absorbing what the experts do (the methods they use, the way they present) through the natural human inclination to imitate.

### **The self-conscious subject**

But, there is a further interesting element here, which is the question of how people think, quite self-consciously, about what they are doing: the civil servant new to design, who says to themselves (and sometimes to me), ‘I never thought of myself as a designer but perhaps I am!’ Although subjectivity can work without the involvement of a conscious self, this does not mean this is always the case. Ian

Hacking takes up this question in his essay on ‘making up people’ (1985), a phrase which indicates how particular ways of being a person can literally be invented:

all intentional acts are acts under a description. Hence if new modes of description come into being, new possibilities for action come into being in consequence (p. 166)

This is a useful encapsulation of how discourse, practices and subjectivity work in concert: the design lobby establishes a new way of talking about design, a range of practices and technologies become re-categorised, and people find themselves in a ‘design for government’ workshop being asked to think of themselves as a ‘designer’. These ‘descriptions’ can be invented ‘from above’ in the labels created by experts, but they also ‘press from below’ in the autonomous behaviour of the labelled (p. 168). And sometimes the two ‘conspire to emerge hand in hand, each egging the other on’ (p. 165). Here he is talking specifically about the human sciences’ penchant for labelling people (autistic, split personality, hysterical) and the new possibilities for human action that classification brings forth. It may be that the classification actually inspires new sorts of practices and self-identifications, or that the people with their attributes and practices are already out there waiting to be (re)classified. The designerly civil servant – or the government designer – are just such kinds of label or description. For some, these may be entirely new concepts that provoke a new set of behaviours. For other people, these labels may simply be providing a language and forms to articulate what they already do, or to express some things they already feel about themselves.

Clearly, the ‘self’ – the individual’s idea of an inner consciousness that grounds who they are – is playing a role here; which is complicated given that we have already said that subjectivity can bypass the self by operating through technologies and practices. It is worth spending a moment unpicking this idea of ‘the self’ and how we are to understand it. The existence of ‘the self’ has been problematised by a great many theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all of whom – in spite of divergences between them – as a starting point take issue with the characterisation of the subject, proposed by Descartes, Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers, ‘as a completely self-contained being that develops in the world as an expression of its

own unique essence' (Mansfield, 2000, p. 13). In fact, it has been shown that 'the self' is an historically and culturally specific concept that does not pertain to all human societies everywhere through all time (Carrithers, et al., 1985). In a 1938 lecture which romps through several thousand years of human history, Marcel Mauss demonstrates that this distinctively Western idea manifestly did not, and does not, exist in other societies (Mauss, 1985). By his analysis it appears to be a modern and culturally-specific invention. Other writers have shown that 'the self' is a construct that does a lot of work in contemporary Western societies. Nikolas Rose demonstrates how we are given 'selves' discursively (Rose, 1999). Erving Goffman wrote about how we perform our selves (Goffman, 1990 (1959)). Alain Ehrenberg (Ehrenberg, 2010) diagnoses depression as the 'weariness' of individuals in a social and cultural milieu that puts the self at the centre of experience and requires too much of it, 'the pathology of a society whose norm is no longer based on guilt and discipline but on responsibility and initiative' (p. 9).

This contemporary emphasis on the self, the 'common sense' idea that our inner psychology is an origin point, that there is some essence to who we are independently of any external forces or conditions, is central to how a number of different processes of objectification, subjectification and identification work with 'design for government'. It is what underpins, for example, the concern with understanding 'people' through technologies such as ethnography, personas, user journey maps, and so on. The self is seen as a legitimate object of government, and the implicit argument is the state needs to use design to get a better handle on 'selves' if it wants to govern them effectively. It underpins the targeting of civil servants and their skills as the site of reform. And the self is an ingredient in the process by which people come to identify as 'designers'.

Foucault was beginning to explore the role of the self in his later works on sexuality (Foucault, 2020; Foucault, 1990). He proposed what he called an *ethics* or a *technology of the self*, practices conceived of as working on the self – regulating one's conduct – in relation to a 'moral code'. In his study of Greek morals around sex he highlights that the developing (masculine) code was not the same as prohibition: it was concerned in fact predominantly with areas of life which were all perfectly permissible. The work done to the self by the self was therefore a kind of

‘art of existence’ (Foucault, 2020, p. 11). However what any ‘ethics of the self’ relies on, or presupposes, is an awareness of the self as a thing to be worked on (in other words a problematisation of the self), and a consequential accumulation of practices that are ways of doing work on the self, which he identifies in Greek, Roman, and Christian cultural contexts. But this is also an idea we might apply to how people govern themselves at work in the contemporary context, as we will go on to see.

## **Identity**

‘Identity’ is another important word to clarify before proceeding further. It refers to the sense of self that arises through conscious acts of ‘narrativization of the self’ (Hall, 1996, p. 4). In cultural analysis identity has been theorised as something that is contingent, unstable, and constructed on the basis of difference. As the times change, new identities become possible and others disappear: modes of public administration evolve and new professional identities emerge. Contingency also means that identity ‘constitutes itself in relation to that which it is not’ (Du Gay, 1996, p. 2). This will be useful to bear in mind when thinking about how design sets itself up in opposition to bureaucracy. Rather than being permanent attributes, identities are best understood as ‘points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us’ (Hall, 1996, p. 6). Identity is therefore not the same as subjectivity. People may identify themselves in one way, while at the same time being discursively constructed as subjects in quite another way. For example, while I may believe my career as a ‘designer’ is a unique pathway built upon my personal qualities and interests, and a series of freely-taken and self-determining decisions – and build a coherent narrative about my professional identity on that basis – from another point of view I may look like one of a very large number of university graduates of a certain generation with a raft of ‘transferable’ skills, seeking ‘creativity’ in work, that makes us both a flexible and dispensable resource for contemporary capitalism and (neo-)liberal government. In fact, in this particular example, again, it would seem that the practice of identification is masking a quite different process of subjectification. If I see myself

in one way, the alternative reading becomes harder to contemplate. So, with ‘design for government’, the processes of identification, by which people self-consciously and willingly subscribe to an idea of who they are, may help mask the functioning of power.

### **The raw ingredients of ‘design for government’ subjectivities**

We began by noting that design’s technologies operate in a social world already full of discourses and subjectivities. And we learned from Ian Hacking that whilst some kinds of subject might be entirely invented from above, very often there are ideas and practices already circulating that coalesce in new forms of subjectivity. In this section, then, we take a look at what some of those circulating forms of subjectivity might be.

In our scenario – the imaginary photo of a ‘design for government’ workshop in progress – there are three (perhaps four) different processes of subjectification going on simultaneously. First, everyone in the room is being asked to conduct themselves in an appropriate manner as workshop participants. Second, there are the people labelled as ‘designers’, performing a particular role. Third, there are the others (the non-designers, often civil servants) who are being subjected to the material technologies of ‘design for government’, perhaps for the first time. Finally, there are also – and this is more complicated – ‘users’. Complicated, because users shift between being ‘objects’ of knowledge (the problematic group of people being designed around, or for) and subjects of design (the people the users will be required to become as a result of the designed output). In our example, the current Fred is objectified for the purposes of turning him into a future/ alternative Fred, who is a more skilled and self-reliant inhabitant of a council house – a desirable subject – as a result of tenancy skills classes. Let’s take each of these groups in turn.

## Participants

What do we know about the nature of the participating subject? In fact there is little discussion of this, even in participatory design (PD) literature, perhaps because the concept of power that underpins PD discourse is of the powerful vs powerless variety. The rationale for PD is traditionally that ‘the powerless’ are ‘empowered’ through involvement in the processes of design: a conception which doesn’t leave much room for the possibility that power might be at work in other ways.

Occasionally the automaticity of empowerment-through-involvement is problematised, through recognition that even when the marginalised are present there are still politics and power differentials at work (Vink, et al., 2017; Farr, 2018). One thought-provoking paper, however, explores the ways in which individuals are produced as subjects through participatory modes. In a discussion of ‘hackathons’, Lily Irani argues that although such events ‘ostensibly produce “demos” (software prototypes)’, what they produce, far more powerfully, is ‘entrepreneurial subjects.’ (Irani, 2015, p. 2) It is this conceptualisation – of participation actively constructing subjectivity – that we are interested in here.

Other accounts of participation, outside of design scholarship, delve further into its subject-producing mechanisms. Because participation is a mode deployed not only in design (Robertson & Simonsen, 2013) of course, but in many other contexts, such as development – in Participatory Rural Appraisal for example (Chambers, 1994), or at work – in employee engagement/ management (Taylor, 2001). Design did not invent participation, it appropriated the technology from elsewhere. It is a mechanism that has travelled across domains. Writing in Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari’s collection of essays critiquing participation in development (Cooke & Kothari, 2001), Heiko Henkel and Roderick Stirrat sketch a quick genealogy of participation, highlighting two roots: one political, the other religious. The political roots (of 18th century campaigns for enfranchisement) are where the notion of empowerment-through-involvement come from. In its religious usage, participation denoted direct communication between the soul and God in Protestant practices (Henkel & Stirrat, 2001). The Protestant Reformation made participation not only possible but a duty: ‘to be a good Christian required participation’ (p. 174). They argue that this heritage has left participation with a ‘spiritual aroma’, which for them



explains the ‘missionary habitus’ of exponents of participatory development. (And note - ‘habitus’. There is a particular disposition adopted by those who run participatory activities, which has become a constituent part of the designer-facilitator persona here.) In spite of the fact that participation is now a thoroughly secularised concept, there is a lingering moral imperative attached to it, and an ‘implicit notion of deviancy for those who choose not to participate’ (Kothari, 2001, p. 148). Participation is therefore distinctly coercive in that it leaves one with no other positive alternative: there is no congenial way of not joining in (Nelson & Wright, 1995). Appearing to be inclusive, democratic, and creative, participatory modes in fact can be particularly ‘tyrannical’ (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

In these accounts participation is seen as an effective strategy in the shift from force to governmental power. ‘In the contemporary world, participation as an administrative or political principle eases authoritative force, in turn placing responsibility on the participants’ (Henkel & Stirrat, 2001, p. 179). What is commonly referred to as ‘empowerment’ might better be thought of as ‘subjection’ (p. 178). Which is perhaps why the question of ‘empowerment’ in participation continues to be such a vexed one. The structures one is participating in, the methods and forms used, the questions under consideration, are very often determined not by the participants but by the development practitioner – or in our case the designer.

## **Designers**

Although in the literature on design and governmentality there is a predominant focus on the consumption (rather than the production) side of design, a small number of studies have investigated the construction of the designer-subject. In these accounts designers are shaped by their training and education (Bill, 2008), the tools and technologies they use and their experiences in a particular disciplinary space (Hepworth, 2018), the methods and practices they adopt and reproduce (Avle, et al., 2017), their contexts of work and types of clients (Julier, 2014; Julier, 2017), and by the structures and norms of the creative economy (McRobbie, 2002; Neff, et al., 2005; McRobbie, 2016).

Guy Julier's book, 'Economies of Design' (2017), notes the discursive nature of professional identity in design, describing how design professions constitute themselves socially as a group and 'format themselves in relation to other domains, rather than through the solidification of some internal professional definition' (p. 45) – in other words in a 'contingent' manner, reliant on something outside of itself.

Amanda Bill's thesis (2008) explores how a certain kind of subject emerges from contemporary forms of design education. She finds that design education as it has evolved might be peculiarly good at producing 'creative subjects', understood as 'a particular type of self-reflective and self-responsible person' (p. 169), because the main technologies of creative pedagogy involve an 'intense hermeneutical processing of the self' through continual representation and reflection on the student's own thought processes:

Work-in-progress is required to be discussed, oral presentations required to be made, workbooks with original drawings required to be presented for critique. Creativity is thus performed by attending to oneself, by analysing and diagnosing one's stories of inspiration, all of which are technologies of the self that produce a specific configuration of creative subjectivity. (170)

These self-forming practices linger on, in the professional environment, in all sorts of ways. The widespread practice of sharing work in progress – that took the form of lunchtime talks within the design agency I worked for, for example – is a continuation of this pedagogic technique that produces a type of professional who is peculiarly self-aware, and skilled at narrativizing their self, practices, ideas and professional expertise. As we will see in chapter 7, continually talking about and accounting for practice is a key feature of the designerly subjectivity.

Katherine Hepworth (2018) sees designers as existing within specific discursive communities that are shaped by whatever ideas of knowledge, skill and practice pertain to that specialism. These ideas are absorbed through 'design courses, professional organizations, the studio environment, computer hardware and software, and informal professional news and communication networks' (p. 510-11): different specialisms have their own material cultures and technologies. Designers'

perceptions of the world – and the appropriate ways of operating within it – are therefore directed along certain lines by their experiences: the tools they are familiar with dictate their responses to problems (p. 513). Technologies of production – from felt tip pens to coding language – also have disciplining effects on designers, prescribing the limits of what is possible (Hepworth, 2018, p. 511). Avle et al. (2017) explore how ‘methods make designers’, in a paper looking at the global dispersion and adoption of Silicon Valley-esque ‘toolkits, how-to guides, events, spaces, organizational approaches... design thinking, startup weekends, the lean startup, hackathons, pitch contests, incubators and accelerators, (and) co-working spaces’. They find that – in contrast to the discipline-specific communities Hepworth describes – this particular set of methods is generating a cadre of professionals ‘who converse with ease in a globalised culture of designerly innovation’ (n.p.). The broad appeal of these methods is in their promise to ‘upgrade’ individuals, whatever their disciplinary background. Silicon Valley enrolls its global community of subjects through a *promise* of transformation and empowerment, although what it actually delivers is a homogenised set of subjects made up in the entrepreneurial image of Silicon Valley. We might think of the appeal of ‘design for government’, in similar terms, as the opportunity for civil servants and others to ‘upgrade’ themselves along creative lines.

## **Creatives**

This brings us to the contemporary ideal of creativity – and the pressure it places on individuals to ‘be creative’ (McRobbie, 2016). Andreas Reckwitz, in his book ‘The Invention of Creativity’, regards creativity itself as a powerful kind of ‘dispositif’ (or apparatus) that has come to be regarded as one of the highest forms of human virtue (Reckwitz, 2017). Others position it as a moral imperative (Osborne, 2003) and a highly prized as an attribute of cities (Florida, 2004), work, and people (Amabile, 1997). The creative industries are an important constituent in discourses of ‘the new economy’, and creative workers serve as the paradigmatic example that others should follow, in being autonomous, reflexive, innovative, resourceful (Lash & Urry, 1994), and expressive of the self (Nixon & Crewe, 2004). Creativity has come to play

a prominent role in the quest to find meaning and joy in work, and the expectation that one ought to find one's work enjoyable – 'love what you do/ do what you love' – is increasingly commonplace (Tokumitsu, 2015). The idea that creative work is some kind of human right is supported by theories from humanist psychology that configure creativity as a normal part of the life of the psychologically healthy individual (Prichard, 2002, p. 270). The appeal of creativity, constructed thus, is its potential for universality: we all have creativity within us, repressed by the system, waiting to be unleashed (this is the argument put forth by Ken Robinson, at one point the most watched TED Talk). Creativity as an ambition for one's 'self' has therefore infused many kinds of professional identity. 'Design for government' workshops play on this narrative: that we can all be creative, that we all – deep down – want to be creative. However creativity is also a fundamentally unstable and dislocated (Laclau, 1990, p. 39) sort of quality. Bill (2008) notes the difficulty of defining what creativity means when applied to professions, or to human beings and their sense of self. It is most readily defined in contrast to what it is not: a good example of identity as contingent (Du Gay, 1996, pp. 1-2). However this is (she finds) precisely its power when it comes to enrolling subjects. The notion of 'creativity' works through a sense of difference, identified not by what it is but what it is not, and interpellating subjects by proposing itself as something that one lacks and seeks to gain (Bill, 2008). In other words it works as a kind of technology of the self, as:

a 'reflexive ethical instrument', a means by which individuals invest in new existential relations to themselves (Bill, 2008, p. 174)

## **Civil servants**

Let's now consider the civil servants in our scenario: the non-designers, the 'others' to design's self. There is something being done to them, beyond the simple requirement to go along with things in a workshop. By dint of being subjected to this 'different' way of working, they are by implication required to become somehow 'different' at work. In my own projects this non-design group included: NHS staff, community midwives, 'expert patients', Quality Improvement professionals, people

working for health charities, policymakers and managers in central government departments, social care workers, academic researchers, community organisers, local government officers, university staff, think tank researchers, employees of non-departmental public sector organisations, clinicians from clinical commissioning groups, ward staff at a private psychiatric hospital, and housing association staff. This is by no means a homogenous group, but many of them would be united by the public service ethos that underpins their professional role. In other words these are not just any people at work, they are individuals occupying roles that are constructed in particular ways to serve the state, and the public.

There is a long history of the construction of the bureaucratic subject. Max Weber wrote in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century about the necessity of bureaucracy for democracy, and the separation of politics and administration embodied in the person of the bureaucrat (Weber, 1978). This is a much larger topic than there is time or space to cover here, but we can at least note the likelihood of this particular subjectivity being constructed a certain way, to serve some particular ends. The essential characteristic of political impartiality, for example, has been described as fundamental to the functioning of the British Civil Service, which has to serve, equally, successive governments of very different persuasions (Bogdanor, 2001). The ethics of the state rests on the behaviour, judgment and discretion of its officials (Chapman, 2019). This requires a degree of separation of personal and professional: one's morality at work is informed by the ethical code of one's 'office', separate from whatever one may think or do in one's personal life (or indeed in other 'life orders') (Du Gay, 2007). The figure of the civil servant, their 'personhood', is 'made up' in specific ways for particular (democratic) reasons (Du Gay, 1994).

As we saw in chapter 4, there have been general and longstanding critiques of bureaucracy – and initiatives to reform the civil service – that require it to be more business-like (Bogdanor, 2001) and entrepreneurial. And an entrepreneurial government requires entrepreneurial employees. The problems of the state, and its solutions, are re-located in the personal attributes of the civil servant – who must be re-moulded accordingly. This does not mean that civil servants must go around starting up businesses. Rather it stands symbolically to indicate a set of values and ideals of conduct associated with the entrepreneur – such as creativity, innovation,

and risk-taking (Du Gay, 2007, p. 121). The term ‘entrepreneurial’ cropped up often in and around my projects as a design consultant, as a positive statement of value. Entrepreneurial citizens were idealised, but the term was also applied to policymakers (‘policypreneurs’ – notes 14.11.16). This, then, is one of the discourses, or interpretative repertoires, that design must strategically align itself with: the discourse must account for, and the technologies must perform design so it becomes seen as a route to ‘entrepreneurialism’.

‘Experimentation’ as a value works in a similar manner. There has been a distinct discourse around experimental government in recent years (Jones & Whitehead, 2018), that has found its expression in the popularisation of Randomised Controlled Trials, for example (John, 2014). Civil servants must embrace experimentation. Those that do are literally – as in the Lab Connections story that opened chapter 2 – put on a pedestal. Design – and particularly prototyping – can be read as a mode of experimentation; or rather, design argues for its legitimacy through an appeal to the value of experimentation, putting itself in the same class of idealised practices.

Both of these demands of civil servants – that they be entrepreneurial and experimental – rely on a third discourse of epochal statements (Osborne, 1998) about the escalating complexity of the contemporary world, the wicked problems the state faces, and therefore the leadership qualities required for such times. Design is discursively connected with these qualities. Coupe and Cruikshank’s paper (2017) references Richard Wilson’s list of leadership qualities required for the successful management of wicked problems: ‘empathy, humility, self-awareness, flexibility and the ability to acknowledge uncertainty’ (Wilson, 2013), which they find are also found in good design managers. This could equally be operating the other way around, though: the problems of the state have been reconfigured to require entrepreneurial and experimental (and designerly) qualities in its people. The characterisation of the problem is defined to fit the preferred solution.

## **People at work**

We must also bear in mind a central feature of at least two of these subjectivities – designers and civil servants – which is that they are people at work. The Marxist

framing of power and labour has cast a long shadow over analyses of power at work, making it difficult to carve out a place for the working subject beyond that of simply 'alienated labour' (Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979). In fact a Foucauldian conception of power – the capillary, subject-producing, productive as well as repressive kind – lends itself well to understanding what might be going on for people at work. Professional life seems a rich site for exploring questions of subjectivity and identity, and especially now, precisely because people are so evidently subject to other power structures, and at the same time actively making themselves up. Working life – one's career – has become a key site 'where you discover identity' (Du Gay, 1996), central to the 'reflexive identity' project (Taylor & Littleton, 2008, p. 278). This attitude towards work has been seen as an extension of the values of the consumer identity, where we construct a sense of ourselves through choosing and bricolaging (Hebdige, 1979) from the panoply of options made available to us (Rose, 1999, p. 103). Work is therefore not purely a question of financial maximisation or social solidarity, but a 'search for meaning, responsibility, a sense of personal achievement, a maximised quality of life' (p. 103-4). Work has become 'a site and an activity which forms an integral aspect of an individual's 'style of life' (Du Gay, 1996, p. 80). 'Design for government' presents an opportunity for both designers and civil servants to redefine who they are through work. As a professional culture it offers a particular 'art of existence', and a set of beliefs one can entertain about one's self as a result of this professional identity.

Paul Du Gay however, in his book, 'Organising Identity', develops an alternate conception of the individual at work – 'personhood' – that is less tethered to a personal sense of self, that he uses to support his defence of bureaucracy (Du Gay, 2007). With personhood he means to move beyond subjectivity and identity, and think about how certain sorts of persons might be materially and culturally constructed, distinct to a particular milieu, and the ethical codes of different 'life orders' (Hennis, 1988). Personhood is not something essential to the individual, but rather an 'attribute that individuals acquire as a result of their immersion in, or subjection to, particular normative and technical regimes of conduct' (Du Gay, 2007, p. 11). This allows him to explore how 'individuals in particular organisational settings have acquired definite capacities and attributes for existence as particular

sorts of person' (p. 13). We can therefore draw a distinction between styles of identity and culturally-acquired personhood, which is perhaps a useful way of conceiving the difference between the subjects of design for government and bureaucracy. The personhood of the civil servant, as noted, is the result of a long history of tradition, norms and practices that are functionally tied to the purpose of the organisation, and in the case of any one individual may be acquired as a result of long years of service (which is typical for the civil servant career). It would be difficult to argue the same is true of 'design for government': it simply hasn't been around as long. And it is not at all clear that the figure of the designer<sup>52</sup> has been thoughtfully and deliberately constructed to serve institutional purposes. Rather, as we have seen, 'design for government' has been made up in a kind of knee-jerk response to populist criticisms of bureaucracy, which in themselves change over time. The 'design for government' professional might be therefore seen more as a manifestation of some shifting contemporary discourses. How individuals come to find meaning and a positive sense of professional identity in spite of that is an interesting question.

## **'Users'**

As we saw in chapter 4, the user plays a key role in the rationale for design: their existence or nature or circumstances are invoked and problematised to give a reason for designing; they may be called upon for democratic reasons, or to de-risk the design process and improve the viability of the end-product; but ultimately the rationale for design here is to change something for the end-user. But, as we discussed in chapter 5, it is not clear how often such a change is actually realised. Nevertheless, the figure of the 'user' is an undeniable presence in both the discourse and the practice. In Foucauldian terms, the user might be considered *both* as an object of knowledge (we define and research users) and as a subject to be governed (we design for them).

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<sup>52</sup> In this context. With other, more established forms of design – graphic, fashion, architecture, for example – one could more plausibly make the case for kinds of personhood, in Du Gay's sense.



In fact, the category of ‘user’ is already a kind of subjectivity: it is a relational term. Users do not exist ‘out there’, they are configured during and for design (Grint & Woolgar, 1997). The user and the design come into existence together – one does not make sense in the absence of the other, ‘designs are not designs unless there is a receiver’ (Kazmierczak, 2003, p. 47) – and vice versa. Users are ‘configured’, in Keith Grint and Steve Woolgar’s formulation, in the sense that they are conjured up as part of a design process, but also in the sense that they are predetermined: ‘the user’s character, capacity and possible future actions are structured and defined in relation to the machine’ (Grint & Woolgar, 1997, p. 92): affordances structure acts which produce subjects. The user is already a heavily circumscribed subject.

A Foucauldian interpretation of the ‘user’ also highlights that what gets characterised as design’s capacity for ‘understanding the user’ cannot possibly be an objective process of data-gathering or unfiltered representation, but will rather be a process of ‘making up’ some subjects. Grint and Woolgar show how users are configured according to the demands of the organisation designing, and the needs of the design in question: ‘users are configured to respond to the technology in sanctionably appropriate ways’ (Grint & Woolgar, 1997, p. 93). In policy discourse, Alex Wilkie and Mike Michael find that ‘users’ are configured in such a way as to justify particular policy narratives, and to make certain decisions seem rational and logical. The user is ‘a future modelling device that is key to the enactment of policy discourse and the associated micro-practices of policy persuasion’ (Wilkie & Michael, 2009, p. 519). In other words, the user is a subject whose characteristics are determined discursively, which calls into question some of the claims of the design lobby around design’s practice of ‘empathising’ with users.

### **Entrepreneurial, skilled citizens**

So if users are discursively determined, what do we know about some of the discourses informing their construction? The users in ‘design for government’ projects are typically people in their relationship to the state (and sometimes public sector employees). These might be known as citizens, although in line with the ‘government must be more like a business’ agenda, often one comes across them

being referred to as 'clients' or 'consumers' – implying a different kind of relation to the state, and subjectivity. And so we meet once again the long tail of 1980s enterprise culture (Keat & Abercrombie, 1990). Although most definitively articulated as a Thatcherite political project aimed at economic revival, it was not by any means restricted to political initiatives, but rather more like a cultural wave, a form of 'governmental rationality' that suffused many spheres of life (Du Gay, 1996, p. 58). The exhortation to become more enterprising applied of course to businesses, and therefore to people at work, but it also seeped into the personal. One's life becomes an enterprise (Gordon, 1991, p. 44). Enterprising qualities take on the status of aspirational human virtues – a kind of moral code of self-reliance, boldness, imagination and self-improvement (Du Gay, 1996, pp. 56-59). Rose writes about the personal striving for freedom itself – and the commitment to maximizing one's life as a kind of enterprise – as an internalisation of the ideals demanded of citizens by advanced liberal states (Rose, et al., 2006, p. 91). The logic of personal endeavour and competition has also of course been attributed to a neoliberal governing rationality (Davies, 2014). In this, the border between state and personal responsibility shifts, the locus of social risk is relocated: people are obliged to take greater care to not become an undue 'burden' on society (Donzelot, 1991).

This conceptualisation of the subjects of government as (ideally) active, responsible individuals seeking to fulfil themselves in family life, at work, in leisure etc (Rose, 1996, p. 57) entails a conceptualisation of governing as assuring the possibility for that to happen: for subjects to be free, independent and flourishing. In the case where individuals appear to be struggling, the appropriate response is programmes that target their 'ethical reconstruction as active citizens':

training to equip them with the skills of self-promotion, counselling to restore their sense of self-worth and self-esteem, programmes of empowerment to enable them to assume their rightful place as the self-actualizing and demanding subjects of an "advanced" liberal democracy (60)

Although written twenty-five years ago, this description by Nikolas Rose is uncannily close to the 'solutions' generated through 'design for government' projects, which we discussed in chapter 5. Such conceptualisations would have

become especially attractive in the period of austerity that followed the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Without recourse to the public funds to create new services or welfare offers, changing citizens becomes the only viable option. In a project on reducing homelessness, for example, the eventual ‘solution’ took the form of ‘a different conversation’ between housing staff and applicants, which, one could argue, did look like the council doing something differently. But this was really the best they could do in the absence of any material, financial or practical help with finding a home. The result of the conversation was nearly always going to be a ‘no’ to the applicant, but the way that the conversation was had could potentially increase their resilience – could put them back on the path to ‘active citizenship’ (notes 17.08.07).

Relatedly, there is an increasingly dominant ‘skills’ discourse (Urcuioli, 2008) in which the self – at work, but also more generally – is ‘reimagined as an internalised skillset’ (p. 223). Detached from the traditional meaning of mastery of a craft, ‘skills’ has become a floating term that might denote ‘attitudes, methods, techniques, approaches, and tools’, but significantly the attributes that make workers useful to organisations. Or in this case, less burdensome to the state. The development of ‘life skills’ can be seen as a ‘technology of the self’, where one is required to problematise one’s own management of life-as-enterprise, and acquire the necessary skills to do better. People are bundles of skills (Urcuioli, 2008), and skills account for the difference between success and failure in a competitive world (Davies, 2014). Survival in contemporary society depends on the continual acquisition and updating of knowledge and skill (Barry, 2001). Thus, the continual reappearance of ‘skills’ as a feature of the user to be worked upon in ‘design for government’ projects.

### **Psychological, behavioural selves**

All of these discourses valorising the active, entrepreneurial, skilled subject rely heavily on the notion of the self that we discussed earlier. And the management of the conduct of selves has become an increasingly significant feature of the toolbox of the state. Administrations of all persuasions take into consideration the personal

propensities and mental capacities of citizens in making their plans and policies (Rose, 1999, pp. 1-2). This represents just one aspect of the general psychologisation of life, by which the management of the psychological self – the language, the practices, the idea that it can be done – has seeped into many areas, including design. This account of human beings, and the associated technical expertise, has resulted in the growth of psychologically and behaviourally informed public sector policies and tactics (Jones & Whitehead, 2018) – where government is increasingly sensitive to the emotional and non-rational human subject, and deploys techniques, like ‘nudge’, that overtly seek to manipulate behaviours (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Such approaches draw on evidence from behavioural psychology and neuroscience about how ‘to shape human behaviour through the subtle targeting of the human conscious and subconscious’ (Jones, et al., 2010, p. 484), and rest on the premise that ‘policy is much more likely to work and be cost-effective if it exploits psychological techniques’ (p. 489). In response a whole new milieu of behaviour change expertise has grown up around the state: a cluster of ideas, people, organisations, events and happenings (Jones, et al., 2013). Behaviour change tactics typically involve ‘starting from where people are’, and mapping the current and potential behaviours of the subject, and the ways these might be influenced (p. 38). The psychological and behavioural subject is very present in the technologies of design for government. At the agency we advocated ‘deep human understanding’ as a precondition for designing. Persona sheets regularly include questions about ‘hopes and fears’, motivations, behaviours and interests. And behaviour change was often either an implicit or explicit aim of the briefs we received: ‘how might we encourage (a certain type of user) to seek counselling/ become more resilient/ attend antenatal classes/ manage their condition/ quit smoking/ eat more healthily?’, and so on.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter has been to establish the concept of subjectivity that we are working with, and associated theories of subjectification (which comes about through enrolment in practices), technologies of the self, identity and

personhood. We have also established what is known on the basis of the literature about how the figure of the designer, the civil servant and the user are 'made up'. And we have discussed some contemporary discourses and practices – of participation, creativity, entrepreneurialism and skills, psychological government and behaviour change – which each come with their own embedded subjectivities. Through reviewing this odd assemblage of ideas and subjects, we can see again, as in our discussion of discourse and technologies, how 'design for government' as a field works by remixing discourses and their associated subject positions. In the next chapter we will look at how these come together in practice.

# Chapter 7

## Changing the subject(s)

### Introduction

In this final analytical chapter, we come back to the question of what, exactly, is ‘changing’ as a result of ‘design for government’. As we saw in chapter 4, design’s capacity for creating change, and the civil service’s need to change, are central motifs in the discourse. And yet, as we learned in chapter 5, the material technologies of design conspire to perform change without necessarily delivering it. In this chapter we will explore how this dissonance is maintained through the construction of objects and subjects: how users are configured, how designers are enrolled, and how civil servants are reformed. The central proposition of the chapter is that ‘design for government’s’ most notable effects are on people: if anything is changing it is the human beings who come into contact with the apparatus. And we will see how the entire field hangs on a number of contradictions in the make-up of the designer subject, around the question of change: one must care passionately about change, without caring at all about what kind of change; and one must believe in the ability of design’s methods to deliver change, even though we rarely see it happening.

Methodologically, what we are doing here is taking the ideas and theories we have discussed in chapter 6 and applying them as interpretive tools to our site. We will continue with the typology of participants, designers, civil servants, and users, and answer three questions in relation to each. First, what does the ideal subject look like? What are the attributes and qualities of the agreeable participant, the emblematic designer, the reforming civil servant and the re-designed user? And where might these values come from, discursively? Second, how are these subjects interpellated and enrolled as such? What processes of subjectification and identification are at work? And third, what does the fulfilment of each subject position achieve? We can find the answers to these questions in various ways: through a visual analysis of ‘design for government’ imagery, by referring back to

the discourse and technologies we have already discussed, through analysing interview texts and ethnographic fieldnotes, and through auto-ethnographic introspection and reflection. In many cases, this draws on specific events recorded in my field notes. However in this chapter I am also acting more directly as an informant. In answering questions about the designerly subjectivity, in particular, I am drawing on my cumulative and situated experience of practice – on recollection as well as data. Throughout this chapter, as in chapter 5, the argument is illustrated by selected (and anonymised) quotes and short extracts from interviews and field notes. Again, these appear italicised, with verbatim quotes in quotation marks (“”) to distinguish them from citations from academic texts. Some of my colleagues may hear conversations we have had echoed in this chapter, and I hope that, if they do, they will forgive me for borrowing our shared reflections.

## **The agreeable participant**

We begin by returning to the practice (or ‘technology’) of participation, as a central mechanism in the enrolment of new subjects. If subjectivities are conferred through acts (Barnett, et al., 2008), imitation (Mauss, 1973), citation (Butler, 2011) and gesture (Noland, 2009), then the collective performance of participatory activities in design for government workshops must presumably be powerful tools for interpellation. This is a temporary enrolment: one is only required to be a participant within the space (physical and temporal) of the workshop. But while there is in theory a limit to this subjectivity, it has some significance because these practices, with their logics and code of self-conduct, tend to spill over into ways of working more generally. The participatory workshop ethos exceeds its borders. People take the gestures and practices and cite them elsewhere.

So, first, what does being a good participant mean? Well, as we saw in the literature on participation in development (and indeed almost by definition) it means to join in, to do so willingly, and perhaps even to understand that it is one’s right, duty and social responsibility (Henkel & Stirrat, 2001).

*“We were in groups and each had to do a persona as an exercise, a person who was a primary carer. People were quite enthusiastic about it,*

*once they realised what the point of it was (which they struggled with at the start) but actually people liked it and were enthusiastic. The feedback on the session as a whole got really good feedback”*

- interview with civil servant, Department of Health, June 2015

If we revisit in our minds that imaginary workshop – or if we look at the imagery in reports promoting design for government<sup>53</sup> – we see people leaning in, smiling, listening to each other, poring over something together. They look jolly, pleasant and relaxed – like they are having fun, comfortable with creative chaos, and with working in a team. Hence the label of ‘agreeable participant’. Looking at the auto-ethnographic data we can get even more precise about the desired qualities and behaviours. In various places in my field notes I talk about workshop agendas being derailed due to the behaviour of participants: people who question the premise of the activity, won’t stop talking and move on to the next task, who sit silently, looking grumpy, who talk but won’t write or draw, who hold court and don’t listen, who go off topic, are overly critical, raise awkward political issues deemed officially ‘outside the brief’. For example:

*On one table I went to talk to and chivvy along, the chap on the end seemed actually angry about being there. He said he’d been made to attend. I suggest he leave, that there was no reason for him to stay if he didn’t want to be there. But he said he couldn’t leave because he’d be in trouble. Then he changed his mind and stomped out.*

...

*After the end of the workshop, [another man] started complaining about how users of the centre will cancel at the last minute, or just not turn up, not realising what a waste of resource this is from the team’s point of view. Interesting that he brought this up one-to-one with me at the end - as a problem he was clearly bothered by in his work and trying to find a way of dealing with - rather than as part of the workshop where we were explicitly trying to come up with ideas. He had spent the entire workshop eating - first a giant packet of crisps, then a sandwich, then chocolate.*

- field notes, April 2017

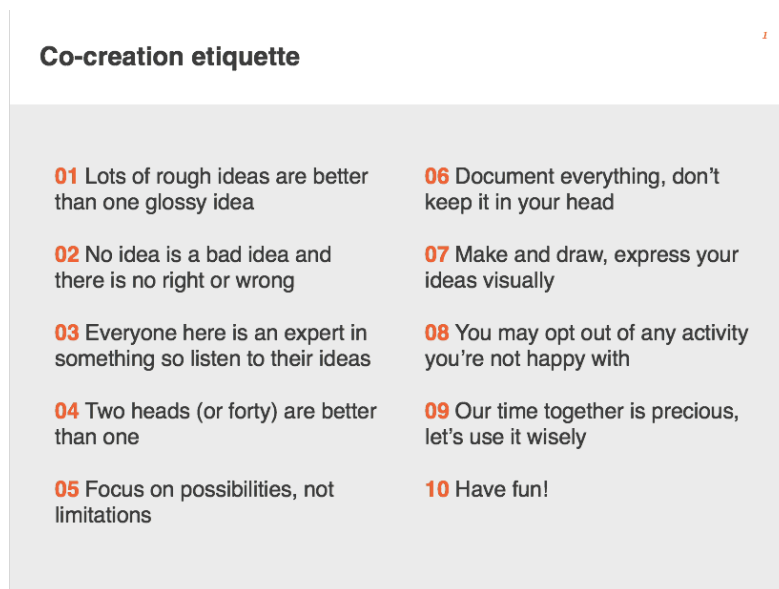
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<sup>53</sup> See, for example, page 7 of (Design Council, 2018); or page 24 (McNabola, et al., 2013)



Both of these participants in different ways were actively resisting the subjectivity being foisted upon them.

Rather usefully, there are also examples of design workshop etiquette made explicit as instructions to participants. Much like Ideo's 'rules for brainstorming' (Ideo U, 2021), at the design agency we had a slide (see figure below) we showed at the start of a workshop outlining our 'co-creation etiquette'. (Even in the choice of the word 'etiquette' we can see governmentality at work: an appeal to govern one's own behaviour and manners, rather than an uncompromising statement of 'rules'). Implicit in these guidelines is the ideal of democratised creativity. The participants of design for government are not just joining in, they are mobilising their inner creative.



*Figure 13 Co-creation etiquette slide (author's materials)*

This example leads us to the next question: how is subjectivity conferred? Telling workshop participants quite explicitly what the approved behaviours are, is a direct attempt to enrol them as a certain kind of compliant subject. The marketing imagery also establishes norms. As a form of visual discourse (Rose, 2001) it literally shows us what the practice is supposed to look like. And as we discussed at length in chapter 5, the material technologies of 'design for government' play a significant role here: embodying that sense of democratised creativity through a particular aesthetic, structuring certain kinds of action and constraining others. The requirement to behave a certain way – and to behave differently to how one

normally behaves at work – is implied through ‘aesthetic disruption’, through the physical space and layout of the room, the style and format of printed materials (a rough agenda hand written on a flip chart and stuck on a wall), the craft materials on offer (Post-its, sharpies, blu tac, coloured paper and card), and in the role modelling of appropriate behaviours by the facilitators. The ‘how might we...?’ question is a particularly potent subject-producing device, which puts the speaker in a position of ownership over the design problem and process, implicates them in the solution, and linguistically forces them to entertain an open question, which, once posed, becomes all the more compelling to answer, because it is one’s own. The scripts are written not only in language but spatially, behaviourally, bodily, gesturally, materially, and aesthetically.

Of course this doesn’t mean everyone complies. My field notes reveal all manner of resistance, counter-conducts (Foucault, 1998, p. 95), and ‘variations in performance’ (Noland, 2009). However the ‘design for government’ workshop provides quite an interesting snapshot of effective interpellation. The majority of the time, people go along with things (after all, there is no congenial opposite to joining in), and consequently temporarily become a certain kind of subject. This does help explain an observation made very early on in the discourse on ‘design for government’, the comment by the RED team (Burns, et al., 2006) that one has to experience it to ‘get it’. Telling people about design, what it does and why it’s valuable, doesn’t communicate what is special about it nearly so well as the experience of being subjectified by it.

But what is the point in all this? What is achieved by the enrolment of agreeable participants? On a pragmatic level, agreeable participants mean the smooth delivery of a process, and contracted deliverables on the part of the designer. By so closely scripting the roles of others, the facilitator is more easily able to shepherd everyone through the performance. On a discursive level, the enrolment of agreeable participants achieves the suppression of dissent – and the production of consent. In contrast to more agonistic or dialectical formats for collective inquiry – such as debating for instance – in participatory creative workshops one is left with a stark choice between agreeing and conforming (accepting the terms of the brief and getting on with the business of generating ideas), or becoming a social pariah. This

sort of subjectivity serves to silence critique, controversy, or discussion of difficult matters: one must say ‘yes, and’, not ‘no, but’. In absorbing the approved subject-position, one also intuitively knows what is taboo, and raising those things means breaking rules, which, for many of us, is uncomfortable. The technologies also conspire to filter out certain ideas and objections: anything deemed outside the brief can be conveniently ‘parked’ (sometimes literally on a piece of flip chart paper called ‘the car park’), thereby ostensibly ‘hearing’ but actually sidelining voices that threaten to derail proceedings. Co-design generates buy-in, by simply making it harder, socially, for anyone to pursue the non-approved questions. This is undoubtedly an expedient way of proceeding. But by bracketing out certain issues, by setting the terms of the engagement in advance and preventing anyone from deviating, it allows commentators to look at the results of ‘design for government’ projects and falsely claim positive outcomes, as we will see in the final ethnographic example in the conclusion.

And, as we discussed in chapter 5, the enrolment of participating subjects creates a cadre of people who believe they are engaged in creativity and the work of change. The technologies – the Post-its and craft materials – tell them they are being creative. Co-design workshops and hackathons ‘manufacture urgency and an optimism that bursts of doing and making can change the world’ (Irani, 2015, p. 2). They generate subjects who by participating in performances of change come to have the perception that change has occurred. People leave workshops feeling better about things, like something has been achieved, even if all they come away with is a bad drawing and some scribbled notes on a piece of paper that will be forgotten on a shelf somewhere, making little sense outside of the context of the workshop. Things are only virtually achieved (Julier, 2017, pp. 157-8); but still that makes people feel good about themselves, and pleasantly surprised that something so enjoyable can count as work. In fact we might regard design for government workshops – as collective performances of creativity at work – as a sort of ‘Trojan Horse’ approach (Szűcs Johansson, et al., 2017) to changing employees: transforming ways of working under the cover of designing something else. Whilst busy believing that the object of change is the world out there, we are apt to miss our own enrolment and conversion.

## The emblematic designer

It would be easy to regard the designer, in this disciplinary apparatus, as the person exerting power over others. But this would be to miss the fact that the designer is a product of the apparatus too, configured through performances of designing. The mechanism by which new recruits are enrolled into this subject position is a central motor driving the growth of the field, and the dissonance between what the discourse claims, and what the apparatus functions to achieve hinges upon the features of the designerly subjectivity.

Let's start by looking at what being a good designer means, in this context. When asking this question of myself as a practitioner, I reflected that what was required seemed to shift from client to client: to be inventive and creative, or rigorously logical and analytical, an authority on a technical process, a teacher of methods, a conveyer of a certain attitude or mindset, a facilitator of conversations, a synthesiser of research, or a visualiser of ideas. One colleague said he felt as though his job was 'a form of organisational therapy', giving the client a safe space to work through their issues (note book 07.17). A local government client asked us to 'hold a mirror up to the organisation' in our project with them (notes 17.03.16). This might be confusing if we were trying to find some essential core of designerly expertise. But in fact this contingency is an answer in itself. Designers must be differentiated internally, from other disciplines, and also from the client. Every so often, the go-to performances of design lose their footing: when a client knows how to run a creative workshop, has used personas and experience maps before, already manages projects with an agile methodology. On one occasion, in a coaching session with some health service managers, it transpired that they already knew all the methods I was proposing – although they wouldn't have termed them 'design' – and I suddenly felt quite useless. Such episodes highlight the fact that having a specific set of methods is not as important as having a *different* set of methods than the client.

*"...obviously you're much more slick, much more professional, and you know, actually proper tools for the workshop and that kind of thing. We've*

*always done brainstorming sessions, trying to get peoples' ideas, collaborative sessions, but – yeah a similar type of thing, but a lot more formalised. I think stuff like the videos, and seeing the user journeys... the visual representations and the tools, we haven't usually had access to things of that quality, but essentially the conversations are pretty similar."*

- interview with policy lead/ client, Department for Work and Pensions,  
April 2017

What is required is difference, and if design is not different, it is redundant. So one must be contingently different, 'other' to the client's self, whatever that is: chameleonic. Difference is actively performed in the processes we use, the things we bring to meetings, our software and hardware, our clothes, our language, our spaces and furniture, our slides and presentations, the way we run workshops... and so on. Sometimes the difference is projected by clients, as in this conversation:

*"IQ We were just saying we liked coming over to your offices – it made us feel a lot more creative!*

*JB That's funny why do you think that is?*

*IQ Have a look – this is as creative as it gets – and have you seen our offices?! I really do feel that helps – to get out of the office anyway, but being in that environment, yeah it just really helped us to think of things in different ways."*

- interview with policymaker, May 2017

In fact, we had conducted most of the workshops in the rather corporate-looking shared meeting rooms in our office building, although we did bring our box of craft materials.

This requirement to be different leads to continual introspection and rearticulation: a constant re-processing of the self. And a race to be at the frontier, to maintain difference. New methods are bolted on as old ones become passé. And this need to have one's finger on the pulse of design, to be across the next development, to hitch oneself to the latest discursive meme, keeps the field mobile. 'What's next for design?' is the question that is always asked at the end of panel discussions and

reports (Mager, et al., 2016); design cannot possibly sit still. The designer has to keep moving to stay one step ahead.

Creativity is also part of the designerly subjectivity, but as we have seen, creativity itself is not a stable quality. It is also fundamentally dis-located and contingent. In this case the context requires not a lone-artist-in-the-garret kind of creativity, but a social, collaborative, collective kind. As we discussed in chapter 5, creativity must be safely managed, so the designer is a very controlled kind of creative, who works towards institutionally sanctioned ends, and shepherds people safely through a process. Creativity is not, therefore, in the results one produces. It has been almost completely detached from an object (and thereby made strategically deployable anywhere). Instead it is manifest in one's attitude, approach, methods, personality: one must have an air of the unexpected, evince 'lateral thinking', be a bit (but not too) quirky.<sup>54</sup> One must adopt a creative *habitus*, then, and present in such a way – fresh, energetic, optimistic, fun – that it inspires others to 'be creative' too.

Creativity is what the client is buying, so it 'is performed for client benefit and reassurance' (Julier, 2017, p. 47). And it is partly performed through the virtue of simply being 'different'. In performing these things we come to feel different, to believe we are indeed different. The performances are performative (Butler, 2007).

Second, to be a designer one must internalise and reproduce the ontologies of design that we discussed in chapter 5: process, solutions, narratives, malleable subjects, and so on. One must be a process constructor, a protocol inventor, shepherding the flock toward 'solutions'. We see the world in terms of a design process and show others how it can be interpreted in that way. Most of the time, one is not called upon to actually come up with ideas: the designer constructs the framework within which the client (and workshop participants) can experience making 'change' happen themselves. In the face of a huge question one doesn't know how to even begin to approach ('how do we get tenants to stop costing us so much money?'), we build achievable stepping stones, breaking it down, finding a

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<sup>54</sup> Being different also comes with the risk of being rejected, of course. Clients want the magic difference that design can make but take issue with its professional language, referring to it as 'jargon': inviting the expertise and denying it simultaneously.

pathway, and representing it as diverging and converging. There is in fact some ingenuity called for in the design of the process, behind the scenes, out of sight of the client (although ironically we described our methods as ‘tried and tested’ in order to reassure people). One must plan a collective performance that will leave participants enough space to enact their own creativity, but be prescriptive enough to (hopefully) lead to the right results. Like designing a game, one has to think several steps ahead of the players to work out if the structure and rules will lead in the right direction, and make it fun for them at the same time. We shape the technologies that structure the action; we script the protocols – although, as we have seen, these things are always imports from elsewhere, shaped not by the designer but by the discourses they are enmeshed in.

Perhaps the most naturalised ontology underpinning the designerly subjectivity is that of change. Change is what clients are buying: an innovative idea, a solution to a problem, a different organisational culture, behaviour change. In performing this change process, the figure of the designer must represent that general principle and possibility of change. To be a designer therefore means being pro-change. We love change. We want to make things ‘better’. But at the same time we have to remain indifferent to *what kind of change* is desirable. Like the technologies, one is oneself a kind of empty wrapper, an enthusiast about whatever it is the client cares about. This was epitomised by the slogan on the design agency’s website, ‘we believe in better’ (notes 28.09.17). Walking the tightrope between appearing to personally care (‘we believe’) while remaining tactically neutral (‘in better’) is essential to the subjectivity. Having a political or personal view about what should happen is not. One must remain a-political (another lesson I learned by breaking it – notes 08.08.17). The message to the client is: we care about what you care about, we will make better whatever you think needs changing, and we won’t ask difficult questions. In contrast to the oft-repeated assertion that designers ‘challenge the brief’, being a designer in this context (and no doubt others) means doing so only in institutionally sanctioned ways. Interestingly, the language of political change –

‘agents of change’, activists, manifestos, power<sup>55</sup> – is often used to describe the person of the designer in their technical capacity. ‘I think of myself as an activist in the system’, said a government website designer to a room full of aspiring design students (notebook 02.18). ‘A designer is a change agent is an activist’, tweeted another. As we learned in chapter 4, change, in many contemporary discourses, is an unalloyed good. So by performing change, by embodying the virtue of change, as a designer one can claim to be doing good.

But how do we make sense of the reality that we don’t very often see change happening? Somehow we continue to believe that it will, that our working methods will logically lead to change. I don’t believe there is wilful deception going on here. The field is not filled with people knowingly selling a dud product; quite the opposite in fact. But maintaining these dissonances takes work. It requires a kind of ‘making sense’ by the individual, as described by Keat and Abercrombie in their discussion of ‘radical divergence between rhetoric and reality’:

Rather than seeing this as a matter of disguise ..., it might instead be seen as attempting to provide a particular (and politically motivated) interpretation of these phenomena. Any such interpretation has to ‘make sense’: it has not only to give them a particular meaning, but also to give one that seems ‘reasonable’ to those involved, partly in relation to the prior meanings available to or accepted by them. For just as projects of radical reform work best when they are carried along by independently generated forces, so, too, are ideologies most effective when they provide people with a not-altogether implausible interpretation of their lives’ (Keat & Abercrombie, 1990, p. 10)

The lack of change is made reasonable through all sorts of strategies: claiming circumstantial reasons or client inertia, or in the nature of complexity itself. As (Irani, 2015, p. 18) notes of hackathons, ‘failure to achieve desired effects was no cause to critique one’s own process in wider systems understood as capricious and difficult to predict’. To a certain extent failure is to be expected, or at least forgiven.

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<sup>55</sup> For example the ‘One Team Gov Manifesto’, which was essentially a number of suggestions for how civil servants could work better together (Medium, 2017)



In the Lab Connections example, we can see that I am doing the work of ‘making reasonable’. At the time of that conference, I thought that ‘design’ was a real and useful thing, if slightly nebulous. I narrated and justified the methods to my workshop participants. I saw people questioning the method as them ‘not getting it’ rather than the possibility that their scepticism might have been valid. I was preoccupied with design ‘working’, with the effectiveness of what I had done, with the concern about whether the solutions were the right ones. I am doing some discursive labour here, worrying about and making the case for design as something that ought to be useful. And also, constructing a narrative that makes design itself reasonable, identifying the distinguishing features that connect the conference with Victor Horta’s house. I was busy persuading myself, and in doing so constructed a narrative that could persuade other people too.

It will be evident from all of the above that performance is a significant part of the role. Performance, communication, narration, evangelism: these are all features of the subjectivity. As we have discussed, a workshop is always a kind of performance, and most acutely so for the person leading it. In a very literal sense, one must stand up in front of a room full of people, tell them the story of what is going to happen to them, give them clear directions, keep the show on the road. Outside of workshops, one must continually perform one’s professional expertise and skills, partly because it’s a performance (of creative difference) that the client is buying. There was often an explicit client expectation of receiving a performance; one began our work together by saying ‘we had a disappointing experience of design’ last time they hired a designer, like a magician at a child’s party whose illusions fooled no-one (notebook 06.15). The same client subsequently critiqued me for not being confident enough in my articulation of design when presenting to large groups. If one does not exhibit the appropriate habitus, one’s expertise is called into question. The performance *is* the work.

In order to successfully pull off the performance, one must communicate continuously. Workshops are filled with directions, explanations and justifications. Because the designer-subject is ‘different’, but at the same time wants to be hired, they must engage in continual acts of bridging between the designerly self and the client. The designer must gain the other’s trust (Warwick, 2017), and not the other

way around. One must constantly narrate one's methods, one's expertise, one's ontological view of the world, one's value. This is actually something more than communication: it is promotion. Or perhaps even evangelism. After all it is not uncommon to hear people say 'I believe in design'. Being a good designer means being a passionate defender of the faith, a convincing spokesperson for the practice. One has to be able to answer the question (and how many times have I been asked this), what is design and why is it valuable? One must not only speak, but also persuade. Other people cannot remain ambivalent, they must be converted. The designer shares the pseudo- missionary habitus of the development professional (Henkel & Stirrat, 2001). Exactly why is this? Why do we have to proselytise? Perhaps because, as we learned in chapter 3, the deficit-promotion logic has been baked into the design discourse from the start. Or perhaps it's because it is contingently defined. Constantly being improvised and discursively reconfigured and realigned, we have to constantly re-describe it. Presumably it's also because we need to continually be drumming up business, finding the next project, selling ourselves. And note – selling our *selves*. Not our products (we have none), or our methods (they aren't really ours).

All of this articulating of one's design expertise requires a degree of self-consciousness – and in fact identification as a designer. So in this case it goes beyond submerged subjectivity and becomes a question of identity. Whether because of the self-processing technologies of creative pedagogy, or perhaps simply the requirement to constantly be 'on' (Julier, 2017, pp. 50-51; McRobbie, 2002), the designer subjectivity does not only apply at work. Eventually it is not a face one adopts only in professional life, but an identity which reaches further into the self, and a lens through which one sees the world – at work and beyond. The ontology applies to everything. It becomes wrapped up in one's personality, in one's performance of the self. In contrast to the traditionally faceless bureaucrat, the influx of designers into the civil service has resulted in some very public performances of committed designerly selves: blogging, tweeting, speaking at conferences, evangelising. (So whereas traditional civil servants remain politically neutral, expedite government policy and keep quiet about it, government designers feel the need to proselytise about the good they are doing.)

Where do these attributes come from? One could argue that some of these ideals – strategic difference, change, performances of creativity – have been in the designer DNA for a long time, an embodiment of modernist values of progress, growth, order and so on. However we can see blended here a number of the other discourses we have already looked at: the creative; the entrepreneur of the self, transforming the personal into a brand (Gerson, 2014); the flexible worker, adapting their transferable skills to any new context or problem. These are brought together with some specific designerly tropes: the socially committed designer, personified by icons like Victor Papanek, William Morris, even the Bauhaus, turning their skills to ‘good’ rather than profit. However this figure has been updated for the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a kind of mash-up with the Silicon Valley image of the youthful, iconoclastic, techno-utopian, ‘design will save us’, innovator. But all of that is inflected by the specific context: the performance is moderated by the tastes of the audience. One can’t be too politically committed, nor too Silicon Valley, in central government and local authority meeting rooms.

*“They have got a lovely tone, and a lovely way of being different, but not wacky or stupid. I live at the ‘wackier’ end of government, and have done for many years in different roles, and it’s so easy to get that tone thing wrong with civil servants.”*

- interview with senior civil servant, Cabinet Office, May 2015

It is also shaped by the context in that the designer-subject (here) has been moulded in response to some specific narratives about the state: the state must be more innovative, the machinery of government must be reformed, the person of the bureaucrat must be reconstructed. The designer is an embodiment of the critique of the state’s inability to change.

How are designer subjects enrolled? Unlike participants, who are only temporarily made subjects in the space of a workshop, one is schooled in the designerly subjectivity everywhere in the professional milieu. Design education has not hitherto played a huge role: courses in design for government have only recently started appearing. But as Hepworth notes, it is the professional culture of design communities that produces designers (Hepworth, 2018). Design for government professionals are produced through project work, but also in the interstitial spaces

around it: in proposal writing, which provides recurring opportunities to narrate the practice; in marketing and promotional work (blogs, newsletters, freebie workshops, talks); in behind-the-scenes project management; in studio life; at industry events; on social media. The identity is acquired through practice and performance across multiple sites and over time. Designers do not pre-exist the practices, they are ‘made up’ in the moment of designing. At the Lab Connections conference I was configured as the person who knew what they were doing, there to initiate other people into these new ways of ‘cooking’. Throughout I was performing methods, practices, forms, ways of asking questions, gestures, and so on, that I had learned from others’ performances of design. I was constructing the narrative in order to be able to explain it to others. And in doing so I was solidifying my own sense of being a person with expertise. In constantly narrating, one begins to persuade oneself. You practice the arguments until you believe them.

This is a mechanism by which non-designers can relatively easily become designers, given the opportunity to perform the role. The narratives about design serve the purpose of allowing the non-expert to become expert. For example, the detachment of process from object: if it’s all about process and methodology that is all you need to absorb, it doesn’t matter if you haven’t ‘studied’ design, it’s all about the mindset. You just need to *think* like a designer. The set of virtues that form the person of the designer are articulated loosely enough that a range of people can find identification with them, and simply enough that they are easy to pick up, emulate, and perform expertise in. The discourse and the practices conspire to make it relatively easy to upgrade one’s self in this direction.

Various ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault, 1982) are at work in the process of coming to successfully inhabit the subject position: from imitation to identification. It begins with contemplation (‘could I do this sort of work?’), and then reconciling the idea with one’s existing sense of self, typically on the basis of skills (‘I suppose I am quite good at x’). Imitation follows, of one’s colleagues, of other professionals, of the field leaders as role models for what it looks like. One copies gestures, verbal formulations, and tricks of performance, practices as well as style of delivery. One rehearses and gradually improves one’s own performance, until others begin to imitate you, to ask you what it means to be a designer, to invite you to write and

speaking about it publicly. This is an odd reflection of some quite mainstream advice about how to be creative: simply, copy creative people (Albrecht, 1987, pp. 66-7).

In all of this there is of course a degree of self-monitoring and improvement that goes on, but also self-persuasion. In a new field, we are all learning on the job, and yet we manage to convince even ourselves that we are experts. We have confidence that we have something special which is different to what our clients have. None of us think it is *entirely* smoke and mirrors, even when we recognise some of it might be. How do we go about convincing ourselves of this? As we mentioned above, the performance itself does half the work. But one also has to believe certain things about oneself in order to 'make sense' of the identity. In my case I wondered if there was indeed something about the way I thought and worked that made me particularly well-suited. My first degree was in architecture, so I had some kind of design training. I would draw parallels between the 'skills' I had learnt during my degree and the ways I managed things at work, constructing a narrative about why it made sense that I would be good at the job. I have seen other colleagues do the same thing: trying to find some innate quality in common with the supposed skills and traits of this designer subjectivity (notes 28.09.17). Even researchers have resorted to personality tests in trying to define the essence of the designer (Durling, et al., 1996). This is perhaps how it becomes about the self; one has to locate something within one's idea of the self to latch it onto. It then becomes a part of one's identity ('perhaps I have always been a designer without realising it'). Which leads to some of the exploitative effects noted in the critical literature on creativity: 'the prized workplace subject ascribed and performed as 'flexible', 'entrepreneurial' and 'creative' has few boundaries' (Prichard, 2002). The workplace has exceeded its old boundaries. Other things get squeezed out (Hochschild, 2003).

So what does the fulfilment of this subject position achieve? As the embodiment of a confluence of discourses, and a demonstration of what it looks like to be an idealised kind of subject, the designer is doing everyone a great service by making innovation, change, and creativity tangible. The figure of the design for government professional provides a paradigmatic example of the creative subject at work (in the public sector). I am calling this 'the designer' but actually it might just be a new type

of creative, entrepreneurial, flexible, transferably skilled labour – wielding Post-it notes and running workshops – that could appear in various fields under different names depending on the context. So we could argue it serves the same agendas of neoliberalism, advanced liberal government, disorganised capitalism, and so on, that those subject types support. However in this context it also serves the purpose of joining in with the endemic critique of bureaucracy, and does so by formulating a clear alternative. The person of the designer embodies what it means to be creative, entrepreneurial, and skilled in pursuing the change and innovation objectives of the state, and thus functions as a carefully calibrated opposite to the bureaucrat.

Second, the subject position attracts a steady stream of new recruits (from both design and the public sector). The designer identity is appealing – seductive even – because of its resonance with these dominant virtues and discourses around how one should style oneself at work.

Third, the practices of performance, self-persuasion, new recruits, the production of technologies, and so on work in a circular manner to consolidate and reproduce the field. By repeatedly performing and enacting the discipline, it comes into existence. So another effect is the ongoing expansion and legitimisation of the field, and the creation and growth of a commercial market. This is also achieved through the location of designerly identity in the self, beyond the boundaries of ‘work’. One turns one’s designerly gaze on new objects, and sees virgin territory for colonisation.

And finally, the subjectivity produces ‘collaborateurs’, in Palmås and von Busch’s definition (2015): agents willingly colluding. Because what is suppressed, or jettisoned, in this reformulation of the social designer, is the kind of ethical, political and social commitment – the specific positions on actual issues – that characterised some of the original figures of social design. Such individuals were in fact resisting rather than inhabiting the subject positions made available to them. In the contemporary figure of the design for government professional they have been tidily brought back under control. The figure of the designer is a catalyst expediting political aims. It is no surprise then that this breed of designer – while appearing to carry forward a social design lineage – necessarily fails to be at all critical, politically

aware or socially committed (and anyway we wouldn't get hired if we were). Suffused as it is with such discourses, one cannot inhabit the subject position and resist the values framework within which it has been constructed. The unease individuals feel at this form of submerged control may well be behind attempts to critique the practice or challenge its 'ethics' (e.g. (Buchanan, et al., 2017); perhaps this is how resistance emerges. Such reflections typically end however in technical recommendations for improved practice, rather than concluding, for example, that it might be better to stop designing, or to un-become a designer. So the production of uncritical 'designers', who are mostly quite vocal advocates of the practice, is a key mechanism by which the field grows, gains legitimacy, and becomes established.

## **The reforming civil servant**

At the Lab Connections conference, perhaps the biggest subject-effect, overshadowed by the heavy emphasis on action, and on policy as the object of change, but nevertheless stated quite clearly at the outset, was the work being done to the civil servant. This primary agenda was hiding in plain sight: 'we know we need some new ways of cooking' is another way of saying people (in this context policymakers) need to change how they do things. The inhabitants of bureaucratic offices are being collectively disciplined in a new way of thinking about their work, treated as designers-in-information, the yet-to-be-converted. As one of my interviewees also commented:

*"...the impact there wasn't the impact of the project itself and its hopeful consequences into direct action in the way that childcare is organized, but that sense of, there's a senior policymaker who's had a proper eureka moment... Part of the purpose of these things is changing the quite difficult to define culture of these institutions..."*

- interview with senior civil servant, Cabinet Office, May 2015

Not only should they absorb new methods, adopt design's 'tools' and apply them elsewhere in the institution; but they should also become a different sort of self, more creative, innovative, empathic, user-centred, problem-solving, flexible, pro-

change, entrepreneurial; they should develop a ‘bias to action’ (Irani, 2015), be less risk-averse. This goes beyond practices, to attitudes and ‘mindsets’ (Sellick, 2019; Miller, n.d.). One interviewee said of a co-design workshop they ran that ‘It broke the existing mindset’ (interview with policymaker, Department of Health, May 2015). Changing one’s mind means also changing the ontological and epistemological assumptions embedded in different ways of working – and in this case coming to accept those of design. In another workshop the participants objected that ‘they did not have users’, which was deemed to be an incorrect view of things, unenlightened about the true nature of their own role and work – ‘they’re just not getting it’ commented one of my co-facilitators (notes 14.11.16). Fundamentally, the civil servant subject as constructed through design is up for change, and changing themselves, as well as the ‘tools’ they use.

This agenda was often explicitly stated as one of our objectives in design work:

*Part of the undercover remit for this workshop was to try and understand ‘where staff are in their heads’. We had talked about this within the project team, noting that there were those among the staff who took a strategic view about the goal/ aim of the service, and differentiated between that and the activity they do on a daily basis. In other words, some people were ‘natural improvers’, whereas others thought that the point of their work was filling in the forms correctly... [The client is] keen to understand how much work it’s going to be to get staff to where she wants them to be... She wants to know who those natural improvers are, and who might never be able to change.*

- extract from field notes, July 2017

Where does this subjectivity come from? Again, these ideas are derived from the public sector reform narrative we have looked at, from the generalised contemporary discourses of creativity, entrepreneurialism, skill, and so on, and from design’s own arguments about what it takes to solve public problems, its tailored reformulation of the critique of the public sector. In other words: the reforming civil servant subject is produced by the same set of discourses and arguments as the designer subject, just on the other side of the divide. They are the target rather than



the agent of change. Through the performances and technologies of design for government they are invited to cross the floor.

There is, as we have seen, a healthy body of literature promoting design to the public manager. But the interpellation of this particular subject happens most obviously in activities badged as ‘capability-building’ or training workshops, and is quietly there in the background of all projects, especially any participatory activities. A degree of transference seemed to be expected, as though through the experience of the work, the client would inevitably pick up some of the skills and methods of the designer; which, we now know, is not too far from the mark. However in the context of design more broadly this is an anomaly (‘normally clients want to get away’, commented the owner of one design agency recruited to work with policymakers; notes 06.15). The fact that clients might become more designerly on contact rests on the construction of the designer subjectivity here, which the discourse is at pains to make generally accessible. Anyone might transform themselves in this direction, and so the processes by which civil servants adopt this subjectivity, and come to identify with it, are the same as for designers (imitation, rehearsal, personal identification, self-persuasion). Of my own clients, some picked up the methods enthusiastically and claimed to have used them on other projects; others found that the design approach ‘suited their way of thinking’; some self-consciously adopted a more ‘creative’ demeanour in workshops – for example one staff member who was clearly a skilled illustrator realised that this was an opportunity to be that version of himself at work. More than one client subsequently approached the agency to ask how to get into our line of work (notes 15.08.17). Interestingly, enthusiasm for the approach bore little relation to results. Often the experience of participation in a capacity-building workshop (which might be based around an entirely hypothetical problem) was compelling enough evidence of the ‘effectiveness’ of design – one participant was impressed with ‘how quickly we had produced something’ (notes 21.04.17) – that we were commissioned to do further work. Clearly there is some ‘making sense’ going on for clients too, to interpret their experiences in accordance with the narrative.

Again, it would be misleading to imply that everyone was won over. People questioned the validity of the methods and the standards of evidence they are

capable of producing; expressed concern about the applicability of the approach to specific kinds of problem, or politically sensitive issues; actively subverted the methods we had designed; remained ambivalent about design – commissioning us but then challenging our methods and validity; and sometimes rejected the terms in which the problem had been stated or refused to recognise its ‘solvability’, maintaining the view that conflicts are inevitable and ongoing in the management of public problems and cannot be effaced with some nice design methods. But, a healthy number of sceptics notwithstanding, there is nevertheless a revolving door between the design community serving the public sector, and the civil service, and a growing army of hybrid public innovator/ problem-solver types, who – to paraphrase (Avle, et al., 2017) – converse with ease in a global discourse of designerly public sector innovation. A shared discursive community with a particular habitus, that crosses the borders of design and the state, is emerging.

What does this achieve? Presumably some fulfilling experiences of work and gratifying sense of professional identity, for some people. In the semblance of action and change, and the sense of optimism design engenders, no doubt some are having more enjoyable experiences of work, at least some of the time. For civil servants feeling the weight of demands to change themselves by becoming more innovative – by being the change – the figure of the designer provides a ready-to-wear professional identity, complete with language, methods, and mannerisms.

But Paul Du Gay (2007) offers a warning about the consequences of eroding the ‘office’ of public service, which may be what we are looking at here. In the advocacy of creative, innovative, entrepreneurial ‘mindsets’, in harnessing these other discourses, the articulation of this new subject-type pulls away from the traditional ‘personhood’ of public office – with who knows what consequences. Because it’s not as though – in this version of design – there is any kind of alternative ethos, beyond the commercial, and the preoccupation with ‘what works’, to fall back on. There may be less, rather than more, than meets the eye; style over substance. In place of any depth of expertise, or commitment to a professional ethos, we have frameworks and Post-its.

## The re-designed user

*“[We’re] now more open to doing things differently, and trying to learn from end users and business users to deliver a product that meets all requirements”*

- interview with manager from \_\_\_\_\_ Police, May 2015

Finally, we turn to the group who are the ostensible reason for all this designing: the end-users, the beneficiaries, the recipients of public services, the citizens of the state. Who are we talking about here? This is potentially a very heterogeneous group. In my projects, users included: couples struggling with their relationships, NHS patients, pregnant women from ethnic minorities, council residents, employees of a university, people with psychosis, small businesses seeking funding, people who drink too much, GPs who overprescribe opiates, GPs with diabetic patients, cancer specialists, people with Type II diabetes, nurses at a private psychiatric hospital, homeless people, people at risk of becoming homeless, Quality Improvement professionals in the health system, tenants of a housing association, and policymakers. A mixed bag of problematised people, rendered as beneficiaries or objects of a design process. It is worth mentioning here that ‘users’ often primarily appear as rhetorical figures in the form of personas – rarely in person. And even if real users have been consulted in a research phase, or indeed are present in the workshop, the process will still be focused around their fictionalised persona counterparts. Human beings may have a variety of different relations to, and statuses in the eyes of, the public sector, but for the purposes of designing their status is re-assigned to that of ‘user’, another de-differentiating characterisation of the relationship between the state and citizens that renders it a technical or service-oriented one. Having been conceptualised as ‘users’, there are then two different ways they might be enrolled as subjects: as people to be designed for, or as people to be designed.

We will only touch briefly on the former, as there is simply less evidence of this in my fieldwork. Nevertheless with the tools now at our disposal we can hypothesise that what is actually being produced, in, let’s say, a digital service design project (paying your car tax online for example), is acquiescent subjects (Weber, 2010).

While design appears to be creating public service experiences that are smoother and less frustrating for individuals, and there is a great deal of talk about making digital services ‘so good people prefer to use them’ (Beaven, 2013), this is somewhat misleading. The frictionless service experience is not motivated by care for the citizen; making it easier simply makes compliance more likely (and in fact compliance has been identified in the mainstream literature on design for government as an indicator of ‘good design’ (Langham & Paulsen, 2016)). In the car tax example, it would appear that the object of knowledge (the potential-car-tax-payer) has been successfully understood, designed for, and enrolled as a subject the moment they complete their online form. In Hacking’s schema (Hacking, 1985), both vectors are in operation; the call from above and the response from below. However the car-tax-paying subject already existed. Design is simply making the performance of that subjectivity more expedient: it’s helpfully greasing the wheels of an existing subject-position, expediting government.

Let’s now turn to the latter mechanism: that of objectifying the user for the purposes of re-designing them.

*“[It’s] about having a much better understanding of the people you’re ultimately dealing with – people with a health condition that you’re trying to get into work.” (added emphasis)*

- interview with policymaker, Department for Work and Pensions, May 2015

What demands are projected onto these user subjects? Here I can call on plenty of empirical material from my own projects. In one, parents were required to not have destructive relationships that might affect their children; to be knowledgeable about the best way of conducting a relationship and skilful in their management of relationships; to be brave and resilient in the face of particular life changes and challenges; to be open to receiving the correct help, and capable of engaging successfully with the appropriate government service. In another, council residents were required to be ‘resilient’, skilled and independent; to not use public services inappropriately (for example because they are lonely); to be active community members and responsible for building a sense of community; and to be leading a ‘flourishing, meaningful and chosen life’. In a third, people at risk of homelessness

were required to be self-reliant and resilient, ‘alert to impending risk and able to actively navigate the system’; to not automatically come to the council for help with housing; to acquire ‘life skills’ at a young age; to understand how the housing system works and how to find their own way through it; and to be digitally literate in order to interact with council services in the most efficient manner. In all of these projects, the configuration of the problem (at least partly) included the behaviours and attributes of the user: there was nearly always someone who needed to be reformed in some way. In our fictional workshop we are not designing a service to suit Fred, but moulding Fred in the image of the state. Yes the state is providing a service, but Fred is also expected to become a changed man.

Where do these ideals and expectations of users come from? Not from design, of course. Instead, we can see a broad intersection of contemporary discourses in these articulations of model citizens: resilience, skill, entrepreneurialism, self-reliance, activeness and so on.

*...On another table, a woman who works in the call centre, was talking at length about the ridiculous things people call up about, and why they can't take some responsibility for themselves and sort themselves out. For example – one resident repeatedly called up about a branch tapping against their window. She said for lots of residents they don't recognise that, ultimately, 'it's up to you to look after yourself'.*

- extract from field notes April 2017

*Through a group discussion, it became clear that many of them [council employees] simply did not believe it was within their gift to do much about the problem, seeing it as either a problem with residents' expectations and attitudes: 'there is a real expectation that we are the safety net', 'there are some lazy people about who can't even make a phone call'...*

- extract from field notes July 2017

While the design discourse might characterise what's going on here as ‘empathising’ with the user, and taking their life and perspectives as the starting point for designing, what is in fact happening is users are being made up according to some specific ideas about the appropriate relationship between selves and the state. In the Lab Connections conference, the language of ‘users’ was laid on thick.

But we can see from the peculiar framing of ‘refugees’ in that example – ‘How do we safeguard the entrepreneurial mindset of refugees before they get beaten down by the system?’ – that people were not so much ‘understood’, as turned into objects of policy knowledge (Foucault, 2002), ‘configured’ as users (Grint & Woolgar, 1997) or ‘made up’ as subjects (Hacking, 1985) – entrepreneurial ones, with assets and resources. Their capacities were being invented and enrolled from afar in the formulation of policy.

It should be noted that similar kinds of change expectations, quite apart from becoming more ‘designerly’ in their skills and mindsets – are loaded onto public servants as a result of design processes, in much the same way that they are loaded onto users. The reconstruction of a government employee (often the ‘front line worker’) is usually identified as part of the solution. In my projects, for example, public sector employees of various kinds were required to ‘spot problems before they arise’, even if outside of their remit; to better understand their clients and read the person in front of them; to be empathic and caring and able to coach people through their issues in order to ‘activate’ citizens; to be a human ‘one-stop-shop’, navigating the complex maze of public service offerings on behalf of citizens, pointing them towards the ‘right’ bit of the institution, or other resources that can help; to be general purpose problem solvers, compensating for the citizen’s lack of ‘skill’ in whatever arena with their own (patching up a deteriorating relationship with a landlord, showing them where to get training or education, helping fill in forms etc); to be continually learning improvers and innovators; and to be autonomous and take initiative (be ‘empowered’) to do things differently at work where they can see possible improvements. In these ‘solutions’ the civil servant becomes a changed subject in much the same way as the user. Personas are created, lifeworlds explored, their experience represented in some kind of map, and then means devised, prototypes created and tested for persuading them to do whatever it is the design process has in mind.

The demand for entrepreneurial, active subjects and the equation of public problems with wrong behaviours have found their way into design relatively unimpeded (Julier, 2017, p. 158). People are conceptualised through its technologies as a bundle of behaviours, beliefs, knowledge, skills, habits, likes and

dislikes, hopes and fears, and (an import from ethnography) to exist in a social and cultural context, with a personal background and an everyday routine: these are the sorts of categories one might find on a persona template. This becomes the material for thinking about what we might design. There is no evidence of critical thinking about the nature of the object/ subject, the implications of inventing them, or even about the naturalness of putting the 'user' at the centre. The normalisation of the behavioural subject, and any other assumptions about the subject inherent in the brief – or the client's worldview – are rarely challenged. The technologies of 'design for government' are a product, in fact, of such assumptions.

In a Foucauldian schema, the value of knowing objects and enrolling subjects is that it makes them governable at a distance (Rose, 1996). In theory we could now turn to a discussion of exactly how these subjects come to understand themselves as such, how they resist or improvise in the face of such subjectivities, to see how governing works. However I have little evidence to go on here. What emerges from my data are a lot of half-made-up subjects, who appear bound up in 'designs', but would not crystallise in real life unless such a design were implemented. The users are rhetorically very present, but mostly absent as participants, recipients of enacted solutions, or changed subjects. The design process helps the state clarify an idea of who it wants people to be, and provides insights about those selves that can (theoretically) help enrol them as the ideal subject. But the next step – of successful interpellation – would appear to be far less common. From the point of view of determining how governing rationalities construct subject positions, this absence doesn't hamper the analysis. After all, the determination of subjects in discourse is never total. There is always a gap between call and response. The claims around what governmental power does are always stated in qualified terms – as endeavours and aspirations rather than achievements (Barnett, et al., 2008, p. 630). Government is an inherently incomplete task (Dean, 2010). And we could plausibly argue that by articulating these subject-positions so prettily design might ultimately hasten their arrival on the scene; the overarching picture might show some statistically valid evidence of interpellation where a single design project (or twenty) does not.

However this might be to miss the strategic achievement of ‘design for government’, in conjuring up all these idealised users. In fact what the technologies of ‘design for government’ do is construct some compellingly clear representations of the object/ subject: the resident at risk of homelessness, the young father, the immigrant mother-to-be who won’t attend her antenatal scans. Design promises, and in fact delivers, techniques for ‘knowing’ the individual self in ways hitherto not imagined possible through the expertises of the public sector, with ethnographic and creative techniques that fill in the gaps. In one project, the policy team perceived there were some important kinds of information about their target audience that they did not have – not because it had not been collected or had been lost, but because it was of a fundamentally different type that they did not have the wherewithal to get – and thought that we designers might be able to get it for them. Design’s technologies flesh out the detail of these problematised objects of governmental knowledge. This data is then visualised and materialised (as discussed in chapter 5) as a device supporting the process.

*“the user maps were probably the most powerful tools. ... and the fact that the user journeys had all the different layers of information. So you had how they were feeling, what they were thinking, what they did at that point, what other things are going on. I think that really brought home some key things. There were just some powerful snippets...”*

- interview with policymaker/ client, April 2017

So if, previously, policymakers or council officers might have had some implicit idea of who is problematic, and why, and who they would rather they become, design invites them to really spell that out, and draw a nice picture of them (literally). Where once such people might have been known only as a statistical mass, or by a limited set of coordinates, these practices individualise and identify a problematic population and bring it to life.

And then, having invented and represented the existing (problematic) user-object, workshop participants are invited to scour the details of that user to find the lever that can flip them into becoming the ideal subject; to use aspects of their selves against them, as it were. The ontology of ‘design for government’ imputes a self that can be appealed to and worked on, a specific psychological and behavioural object



that the state can (in theory) do something with. Further, not only is it possible to know about these previously hidden aspects of the subject, and use that information to subjectify them, but a key claim of the design discourse is that it is both ludicrous and irresponsible to make policies and services in the absence of this kind of knowledge. From the public sector's point of view, this extra information about the problematic object/ subject – and how to change them – fulfils a desire for minimising risk. User-centred design becomes a kind of risk management.

In 'design for government' we can therefore see a new step in the evolution of how the user appears and what they are there to do. In design, the user as a figure of interest – or a unit of analysis – emerged as a result of changing ideas of what it means to design. Johan Redstrom traces the historical transition of design from being a matter of form to a question of use, from use to communication ('design as a matter of shaping the perception of objects'), and then from communication to experience (the experience the user undergoes as a result of interaction with the object). He argues that a continuous preoccupation with 'optimisation' has led to this expansion in the purview of design: from the form of an object to the experience of the user (Redstrom, 2006). What we are seeing in 'design for government' is the next link in the chain: from designing the experience of the user, to designing the user. Whereas elsewhere designers may have been interested in understanding the user (and deploying ethnography) in order to design more suitable objects for people, in 'design for government' the object very often *is* the user. The design brief has been relocated away from the state and into the person of the citizen. Changing the subject has become the object of design. The slippage happens so easily: I have seen it countless times, and it took me a long time to spot the sleight of hand. One researches behaviours in order to get insight into a problem, and then those behaviours suddenly *become* the problem, the thing to be designed out. Ontologically, the problem, the user, and behaviour change become one and the same thing. Separating them out again takes another ontological feat: of insisting there is something other than behaviours to be designed.

So we can see how the figure of the user-subject serves a clear purpose. But from the point of view of the design discourse's claims, the absence of changed user-subjects is provoking. If these subjects rarely materialise, where does that leave

design's claims of innovation, transformation, change, and so on? This is an intriguing and slightly bizarre possibility: that the persuasiveness of 'design for government' doesn't actually depend on it producing the kinds of results it claims. 'Users' might be quite forcefully present in design practices and materialised through design artefacts, but then they disappear, configured only momentarily for some other purpose, and otherwise remaining as ungovernable as ever. The apparatus of 'design for government' therefore would not depend on the realisation of these subjectivities for its legitimacy.

What is clear, is that 'users' are conjured through the technologies of 'design for government' in order that they may be designed for (made knowable and governable) and that – in theory – policies and services will more often hit their targets. While this ambition may be variably realised, unless one looks closely it does appear that design is offering all sorts of useful new knowledge about – and tools for changing – the user. There is thus a sort of triple bluff going on.

Performances of 'designing with users in mind' are masking practices of actively seeking to change the subject according to a specific set of values, which are discursively dressed up as universal, natural ones. And there is misdirection going on. While looking at what design is doing to help the state better connect with people, we are apt to overlook a much more substantial group of changed and changing subjects: the people doing the designing.

## **Conclusion**

What does this discussion of people – the human beings caught up in the apparatus of design for government – add to our understanding of the research questions? We can now see that, alongside the discursive work of design promoters, researchers, and other authoritative 'speakers for design', practitioners are actively involved in the process of transforming design to be relevant to the public sector. The carriers of the practices find themselves having to do the work of 'making sense', of bridging between discourses, of adapting the practice and the words to fit the context. The metamorphosis from one thing to another is actively produced by people shifting what they do and how they describe it.

And we can see that it has become established and legitimate as a field of knowledge and practice by continually finding new subjects, as they are invited to participate in design practices. Participation is a key mechanism of persuasion and enrolment. In fact, the creation of objects of knowledge – problematic and idealised users – and the enrolling of new subjects, is a central mechanism and effect of the apparatus: the production of design acolytes.

How does it do this, though? Why are people persuaded? Why don't they more often turn around and walk away? What is it about design that hooks them in? Partly, it would appear, it is because 'design for government' offers a living breathing idealised version of what it looks like to fulfil the demands of some contemporary discourses. The subjectivity on offer is a seductive one. Be creative. Be active and resilient. Be entrepreneurial. Be socially responsible. Up-skill yourself. Love what you do. Bring your whole self to work. And for civil servants intuiting the demands of the public sector reform discourse, it offers a template for what it looks like to be an entrepreneurial, creative, innovative, systems-thinking change agent, instead of the much-maligned grey bureaucrat.

## Chapter 8: Conclusions

### Recap of thesis

This thesis has investigated how ‘design’, as a practice, has come to be something one might logically do while at work in the public sector. It has looked at how this transformation of design has been effected, how the rapidly emerging ‘apparatus’ of ‘design for government’ works, and what it functions to achieve. Methodologically, it has done this through a combination of ethnography, auto-ethnography, discourse analysis and a theoretical framework derived from studies of governmentality and disciplinarity.

Chapter 1 outlined the field and site of study, the research questions, and introduced the concepts of apparatus and governmentality as a theoretical frame for understanding design. Chapter 2 reviewed the foundational ideas and literature that informed the research questions and the methodology. It looked at critical studies of disciplines, regimes of practice, and other ‘apparatuses’ that have similar governing and disciplining effects, including creativity, development, management and policy. From this were derived a number of analytical strategies (de-naturalisation, anti-instrumentalism, reflexivity and vivisection) and concepts (discourse, technologies, practices and subjects). We then discussed approaches within ethnography and introduced the methodology of ‘opportunistic’ auto-ethnography. Chapters 3 and 4 began the analytical investigation by treating design, and ‘design for government’, as a discourse to be dissected, with rules to be uncovered and tactics to be exposed. Chapter 3 presented a brief history of design’s discursive transformations. Chapter 4 then applied a discourse analysis approach to the ‘design for government’ literature, looking specifically at ‘expert’ discourse (both academic and non-academic publications). Chapter 5 continued the analytical investigation from a different angle, focusing attention on the socio-material technologies (a combination of practices and artefacts) of ‘design for government’, and the various ways in which these mediate power. And if governing, ultimately, is of people, chapters 7 and 8 concluded the analytical investigation, with a study of what happens to the people who find themselves caught up in ‘design for

government’ – either invoked, problematised and redesigned as users, or enrolled as participants, designers-in-information. Chapter 7 explored some ways of thinking about what power does to human beings, and looked at how other discourses and regimes of practice (including creativity, participation, bureaucracy) construct subjects. Chapter 8 then unpacked processes of subjectification as they unfold for four different types of subject: participants, designers, civil servants and users.

## **Answering the research questions**

### **How has the field of ‘design for government’ been constructed?**

We approached this question by looking at how design has been constructed in discourse historically, by analysing the expert discourse on ‘design for government’, and by looking at the material technologies of practice – at how they have been assembled and how they are performed.

We found that ‘design for government’ is being constructed and invented, both discursively and practically, to chime with some common preoccupations in the discourse of public sector reform. ‘Design’ has been re-modelled to respond to, and align with, a dominant political dogma about the necessity of reforming the machinery of state to become more innovative. Design here becomes a device with which to critique bureaucracy along those lines. This latest metamorphosis builds on a long history of design being reinvented to fit changing political demands and contexts, where some characteristics are dropped or quietly retired, and other new ones are bolted on. The transformation is achieved in no small part by the efforts of expert ‘speakers for design’: it is no exaggeration to say ‘design for government’ has been talked into existence. But it is also achieved through the work of practitioners, tweaking and adapting practice to fit the needs of public sector audiences and problems, ‘making reasonable’, narrating it and constructing the rationale – ultimately in order to sell it. We can therefore say that ‘design for government’ is a product of the deeply naturalised assumption that the public sector is broken and must be fixed, combined with the design industry’s own interests in establishing a new market for design.

All sorts of discursive tactics and means have been used to rapidly establish the sense of a coherent field of practice and knowledge, including mobilising the forms of and legitimacy conferred by academic research, and mapping and re-categorising existing practices. This is how it has gone from non-existent to design specialism in such a short space of time. Alongside pseudo-scholarly tactics, the performances of practice themselves consolidate a sense of the field: it is realised through performance, but performance combined with discursive re-assemblage. One may have participated in creative workshops with Post-it notes before, but once such practices are re-labelled as design, the description prejudices the interpretation of events. In the Lab Connections example, there was a narrative woven around the methods, which are represented as established, distinct to design, and delivering something useful. The participants were told what to make of their experience in advance.

### **How are people governed by design?**

We approached this question by looking at how the discourse sets up certain subject positions, at how the technologies work, their affordances and persuasive effects, and at the cumulative effects of these things in producing four different types of subject (agreeable participants, emblematic designers, reforming civil servants and re-designed users).

By looking at the apparatus in this way, we identified that its success does not depend on its being 'useful' (or at least not in the way claimed by the discourse) but rather on its ability to govern subjects. In this way it is not so much effective, as seductive. The apparatus grows not on the basis of evidence of results, but through continual recruitment of new enthusiasts. And individuals subject themselves because the apparatus offers an opportunity to upgrade oneself. The idealised designer subject is constructed at the confluence of a number of contemporary discourses, as creative, experimental, resilient, innovative, and entrepreneurial. Who doesn't want to be 'creative' these days? The identity allows civil servants to regard themselves as innovative activists, and designers to regard themselves as public do-gooders.

The fact that the subjectivity is communicated via a highly accessible material and experiential set of technologies makes it particularly persuasive. One is not only enrolled as a subject from afar by words: it grabs hold of you and initiates you through its practices. The tactic of participation is especially powerful in this regard: one is not only performed to, one is made to take part in the performance; a stake is conferred. One finds oneself asking ‘how might we...?’ Seen in this light, the entire Lab Connections conference was one colossal act of persuasion and subjectification: a staging of something in order to convince a large number of people in one shot. If acts are constitutive of subjectivity, the sociomaterial technologies of design are particularly potent subject-producing devices, because people find themselves acting without having to think about it too much.

It is remarkable, though, how readily people are prepared to go along with the narrative that creativity and change is afoot. The field depends on the effacing of a fundamental contradiction in the ideal designer-subject: passionate about change whilst remaining tactically neutral, believing in change without seeing it. Did those dozens of ‘bright young minds’ participating in The Fix, and the hundred or so civil servants at Lab Connections, willingly participate in a charade? Or did they think they were ‘fixing’ problems for real? There is work being done here, some efforts at ‘making reasonable’, explaining things to oneself and governing one’s self accordingly. The discourse and the technologies work together to school people in certain ways of thinking and speaking about – and believing in – design.

However it is not only subjects that are governed through design practice, users are invented, configured, problematised and redesigned through affective and aesthetic techniques that turn individuals into objects of knowledge and subjects to be changed. ‘Design for government’ and its technologies can also be read as a product of psychological and behavioural discourses, and the assumptions of austerity politics. In this, again, we can see persuasion by seduction rather than results. Users are brought into range as the object of government, made knowable and ostensibly more governable: but again this is a performance of something that is rarely realised.

### **What – tactically and strategically – does the apparatus function to achieve?**

We approached this question by looking at the ‘effects’ of the discourse, the technologies, and the construction of subjects, at what these things conspire to produce or achieve.

We found that the material technologies of ‘design for government’ practice work well as a vehicle for rapidly materialising (political) discourse. They construct specific possibilities for action and thought – and rule out others. They take abstract concepts and make them tangible for the state to do things with. They produce aesthetic and affective artefacts of ‘embodied discourse’. They manage creativity in approved directions. The solutions that emerge from projects are therefore necessarily rarely innovative, but entirely predictable – they are *of* the discourse. Design appeals through its ability to produce solutions that fit.

We found that the set piece performances of design for government serve multiple functions. Workshops deliver invigorating and reassuring performances of change and creativity, that fulfil demands for the public sector to be more innovative. The discourse, technologies and subjectivities are an embodiment, a performance, of the critique of bureaucracy. They allow all sorts of people to temporarily rescript themselves toward a more creative ideal. They produce virtual, ephemeral things that nevertheless feel like ‘tangible solutions’. Like a form of ‘dressage’ they perform the work of change, and divert attention away from the question of whether any real appreciable change is actually occurring, and all the while produce designers and recruit enthusiastic new acolytes.

Returning to the idea of design as a myth that does something for us, we can see that the apparatus achieves some advantageous things for quite a range of subjects. It allows us all to be creative. It makes us feel like we are doing something useful. It creates business for the design sector, activity that looks very much like innovation for the public sector, and material for the academic sector. It gives the state some tantalising new material about troublesome citizens to work with. And it can be deployed for anything by anyone. This is perhaps why we see the ongoing discrepancy between discourse and reality: it is in everyone’s interest to find that it ‘works’. Whose interest would it serve to find otherwise?



So we also found that the apparatus – the discourse, the material performances, and the subject positions – functions to achieve its own exponential reproduction and expansion: yet more discourse, practice, projects, research, roles and so on. What emerges is a new disciplinary and professional domain, driving forward not only commercial interests, but a particular worldview. The battle is for an ontology, disciplinary dominance, for the pre-eminence of one worldview over another. It's not just about the money: we (designers) do actually think we have better ways of doing things.

Strategically, the apparatus is complicit in the ongoing larger project of remodelling of the civil service, in the transformation of the relationship between the state and citizens from a political to a technical one, swelling the chorus of voices seeking (and asserting the existence of) technocratic solutions to political problems. At the Lab Connections conference, the Vice President of the Commission opened proceedings by laying down the gauntlet: 'the political world is ready for more innovative policy approaches'. With this framing, the solutions to complex public problems are cast as technical rather than political matters. The change that is required is of the machinery of government, and its people. Design is constructed as a tool for tinkering with the machine. One can't help but feel, though, that teaching civil servants to run creative workshops with Post-it notes is not a solution to political problems. But perhaps it simply seems much easier to retrain civil servants, to reprogramme the machinery of the state, than go about reforming politics itself.

One of the consequences of this set of findings, then, is the refutation of some of the claims made for the value and effectiveness of 'design for government' – both in the academic literature and in more populist accounts. Rather than being a methodology for innovation and change, 'design for government' performs these things without reliably delivering them. In fact, far from generating novelty, the technologies of 'design for government' are vehicles for the reproduction of whatever logic and beliefs are coursing through their environment, empty protocols whose contents are only ever as radical as the person using them (or used by them). Relatedly, users are not understood and designed for, but invented and configured (in line with prevailing views on who those users are and ought to be) for

the purposes of designing things that will govern them better. If the tools and methods of design are producing anything, it is primarily experiences of ‘doing design’, and a steady supply of designerly public problem-solvers. What is most obviously ‘changing’ is not the experience of life for the ‘end user’ but the experience of work for the civil servant.

## **So what?**

Why does any of this matter? If civil servants are having a nicer time at work, and designers are employed, who cares if it’s not delivering the change it claims to? Maybe it’s harmless? We can reflect on this question – of what is at stake – by returning to a real-life example of the apparatus at work.

In December 2020, the Design Council published a report on the social and environmental value of design, which included a case study of a public sector design project around preventing homelessness. The authors characterised this project as ‘bringing local stakeholders together to understand issues around homelessness and to design solutions to address them.’ The case study explains that design was employed as a ‘problem-solving tool’ to reduce homelessness, ‘finding new ways of solving old problems’. Design was used to ‘gain a deep human understanding to uncover the root causes of homelessness’, ‘reframe challenges’, co-create and prototype solutions to ascertain ‘what would work’. The design process revealed the importance of ‘resilience factors’ and how these might be increased for homeless people. The study claims a number of impacts for design: ‘a 44% increase in prevented homelessness cases’, more adaptable council staff, a shift to prevention at the policy level with the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act,<sup>56</sup> designers who were ‘empowered to do more’, and two new designers hired by the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MOIN & Design Council, 2020, p. 26).

This account from the Design Council is as telling for what it says, as for what it leaves out. Let’s ‘write in what has been written out’ (Fournier & Grey, 2000, p. 18),

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<sup>56</sup> This is perhaps the most disingenuous claim, given that the Act preceded the project.

starting with what is easily discoverable in the public domain. In 2017, at the time the project took place, homelessness in England had been steadily increasing since 2010. The number of households living in temporary accommodation had risen by 60%, and the number of rough sleepers by 134% (and doubled in London). The coinciding of a change of government with this steep incline in numbers is rather telling. And indeed, in September 2017 the National Audit Office published a report on the homelessness situation, concluding that the government had not effectively ‘evaluated the impact of its welfare reforms’ (Morse, 2017, p. 10). This echoed what many commentators had been arguing for some time, that the government’s welfare policies, combined with rising house prices, were to blame (Bennett & Ottewell, 2015). The Design Council’s opening statement that ‘there had been an increase in homelessness’ is already an act of wilful blindness. Let’s be clear: the government’s own policies led to a rise in homelessness. Homelessness is not ‘an old problem’, it’s one that is continually re-produced. There is a whole responsible apparatus that actively creates homelessness. Why does this get left out? Perhaps getting bogged down in a discussion about the real ‘root causes’ of homelessness (as opposed to the personal, psychological and behavioural ones that appear later) would distract attention from the real point of the case study, which is to tee things up for design-the-problem-solver.

Let’s carry on. Within government, the response to the crisis was to introduce the Homelessness Reduction Act (April 2017). The Act requires councils to provide help, advice, ‘prevention’ and ‘relief’ to everyone that comes to them at risk of homelessness - not only, as previously, those deemed to be in ‘priority need’ (meaning with children, or ‘vulnerable’ in some way). The Act also redefined ‘at risk of homelessness’ in more generous terms: the period of time in which councils have to help people before they are evicted, and afterwards, has extended from 28 days to 56. This represented something of a challenge for local authorities, many of whom were already struggling to deal with homelessness in their area. The statutory obligation to house families and vulnerable people, in the face of a chronic shortage of social and affordable housing, means that some councils spend way beyond their allocated budgets to put people up in temporary accommodation for long periods of time, sometimes years. Charities like Shelter pointed out the limitations to the

government's strategy, of increasing the demands on local authorities without giving them extra resource or growing the housing stock: 'rationing is solved by increasing supply, not redesigning the system that dishes out limited resources' (Webb, 2016). But instead, the Department for Communities and Local Government (as it then was) announced a £20 million 'trailblazer' fund for local authorities to help them respond to the requirements of the Act by developing their own innovative new approaches. Alongside this, while the Bill was making its way through the house, the Cabinet Office Policy Lab undertook some work that went forward to inform the 'trailblazers', starting with ethnographic research that highlighted the 'personal factors' contributing to homelessness:

The ethnography confirmed many of the risk factors that we know are associated with homelessness: childhood abuse, financial instability, truanting, mental health, offending etc. But it also revealed the importance of other factors such as resilience, resourcefulness and support networks, something we've termed personal protective and risk factors. When trying to predict or prevent homelessness it is important to understand these factors, but at present we don't collect any information about them.  
(Drew, 2016)

Their project then 'prototyped' a number of solutions, including a 'universal prevention commitment' across multiple services, a self-referral service, a typology of people at risk to help councils predict using data, a wellbeing assessment, and a resilience programme delivered through schools to build 'life skills' (Policy Lab, 2016). Risk, resilience, skills, active self-referring citizens: we can see here some familiar discursive refrains about the nature of the ideal subjects of government.

And now here is some information that is not in the public domain. The project described in the Design Council case study was in fact one of the last things I worked on before I left the design agency. Beginning in May 2017 I spent a day a week at the local authority's offices for a period of months. I ran a design process that involved interviewing local government housing officers, getting them to create some personas of people at risk of homelessness, and to plot their journeys towards homelessness, identifying opportunities to divert them on a path to greater resilience. We mapped how the service worked at present. Actually, we never spoke

directly to any homeless people (so much for ‘deep human understanding’). We did a co-design workshop with council staff, which involved quite a lot of ‘parking’ of the multiple objections and concerns they raised which were deemed ‘outside the brief’. Quite reasonably, most of them thought they couldn’t do much about it, seeing it as something that needed to be addressed by central government – in the form of, for example, building more social or affordable housing, finding some way to curb the growth of the housing market, bringing in rent controls and tackling irresponsible landlords, and reversing the damage done by the introduction of Universal Credit (Stephenson, 2017). Nevertheless, they were more or less willingly enrolled into a participatory process of idea generation, through which they were cajoled (by me) into proposing their own ‘solutions’ for ‘preventing’ homelessness – none of which, it has to be said, were very original. Finally, we prototyped a solution, which primarily involved the council staff changing their behaviour in their interactions with applicants (notes 07.08.17).

We should by now be able to recognise some classic ‘design for government’ tropes in all of this: the configuration of users through ethnography and design, dressed up as ‘deep human understanding’. The bracketing out of politics and issues in the articulation of the challenge. The material performance, and the requirement on civil servants to participate and ‘be creative’, to solve the state’s problems by changing themselves. Design’s technologies acting as a vehicle for austerity policy. The expediting of politically palatable solutions dressed up as ‘innovation’ and problem-solving. And both the production and the constraining of individuals within subject positions. As the designer in charge, I was quite aware of the obvious flaws with the project – indeed the whole thing went directly against many of my own beliefs and political views – and at the same time I was unable to do much about it, apart from absenting myself from the scene. I was not ‘empowered to do more’. Designers are as bound by their technologies – and the political and commercial context of their work – as users and participants.

One could characterise this entire policy scenario as some pretty audacious ‘downloading’ (Julier & Kimbell, 2019): where central government loads the problem onto local government, who in turn have no choice but to ‘responsibilise’ individuals. Homelessness is cast as a result of ‘personal factors’ not macro-

economic ones, precisely in order that the solutions can be found in changing the individual rather than what would presumably be a more expensive or politically difficult set of interventions. As far as I can see, what design is doing here is helping the process along. Our job was to make the policy workable. Apparently we did that quite well, if the Design Council's impact statistics are to be believed. Although a 44% reduction in homelessness sounds nicer than it is. Really, all this means is that the council found a way to not take 44% of homelessness applicants onto its books. Who knows what that meant for the individuals concerned.

And yet, this project has been established in the 'design for government' discourse as an example of design solving problems, framed within a discussion of how design delivers social value. The narrative has been set, and no doubt this case study will be wheeled out again as evidence in design's favour. I don't imagine anyone has objected to it, apart from me, right now. The discourse determines the interpretation of events, shaping what it is possible to say, and silencing everything else. The deeply naturalised truth of design's virtue smothers the possibility that it might not be virtuous at all. And so design for government will no doubt carry on, unchecked, unaccountable, unregulated, consuming finite public resources, infantilising and responsabilising overworked civil servants, denigrating the ethos of public office, trapping users in its reductive ideas of what it means to be a human being and a citizen, causing who knows what damage – and all the while being constructed as good, desirable and a seductive and virtuous career option for well-paid university-educated middle class people seeking creativity in their work.

## **Meeting the aims of the thesis**

I said at the start that one of my aims with this thesis was to produce an account that more truthfully reflects my own experience of practice. I feel I have achieved this for myself – and in the process found answers to some things that I was once confounded by. I will be very interested to see whether the analysis I have unfolded here, and the conclusions I have come to, resonate (or not) with others working in the same field. To some extent, the proof of its soundness will be in the reading.

In terms of the wider project, to find ways of breaking out of the strictures of design discourse in researching design, and to begin to unpack why design has been such a successful idea, I have a few comments and observations to make.

With regard to the former, this is just one experiment and no doubt there will be others. There is much to be learned, clearly, from other deconstructive efforts directed at other disciplinary 'apparatuses'. In some ways, this is not such a hard task as there are plenty of examples to follow. Critical management studies provides a particularly relevant parallel: there some family resemblances between management and design; they could probably both be put in the same class as 'dubious human sciences' – those fields of knowledge that are particularly amenable to be transformed and deployed in the machinations of power; and the mainstream ways of doing and thinking/ researching both are highly instrumentalised. And yet CMS has developed all sorts of strategies for critiquing, unpacking, dis-assembling, destabilising and resisting. There is much more to be explored here. The one thing this project does entail though is letting go of design. The open-mindedness necessary for a thoroughgoing critique of anything requires the 'sincere acceptance of the possibility that it should not be saved' (Cooke & Kothari, 2001, p. 15). No doubt this will be hard for lots of design researchers, given that most of the people who research design are also caught up in practicing it. Building with one hand while destabilising with the other produces a high degree of cognitive dissonance. Perhaps this is ultimately an endeavour for the design historians, anthropologists of design, and design culture theorists.

With regard to the latter question of why design been such a successful idea, the findings here hint at some possible answers. First, there is clearly something in the idea of design that allows it to be reformulated, which means it can adapt and move with the times. One might think of this as a remarkable regenerative resource, a virus-like capacity for mutation, or a zombie that just won't die – depending on your point of view. The fact that it is impossible to define, once and for all – a frustration for some – is not a weakness but a kind of secret special power. Second is its fundamentally positive connotations. Juris Milestone describes this as the mobilisation of desire, although I think it is somehow broader than that. As I have mentioned, design is imbued with optimism and a sense of possibility and promise.

These are all nice things. It is not mean, negative, difficult, or devoid of hope. With these positive associations, why wouldn't we want design in our lives? Third, is the tactic of participation. I suspect in years to come we might see the moment that design became participatory, when it detached from a traditional kind of professional expertise and flung open the doors, welcoming everyone in to enjoy its riches, as the moment it took off.

## **Limitations**

I have never had a problem with data: getting to the right set of research questions, and finding the analytical tools with which to answer them, has been the struggle of this thesis. Had I started with a clear research question in mind, and a proper grasp on an appropriate methodology, a much more targeted and usable body of empirical material would have been produced, and no doubt in a much more effective and efficient manner.

There are other limitations around the site of research and the data: it is really a singular and personal perspective, and it is grounded in a particular time and place. This is why I said at the outset this should probably more realistically be regarded as a work of history rather than a diagnosis of the present. Things have already moved on. And things are undoubtedly different elsewhere. There are some specificities to the reach of these conclusions, then. Given what I have argued about the conceptual flexibility of design, and its production by discursive contexts, this really is a study of what 'design for government' has meant and been in the UK since 2008, with a particular focus on the period 2015-2017. I would venture that the micro-effects of the material technologies – for example what does a template do to a workshop participant in the moment of use – may be generalisable beyond these specific examples. But I am not making claims about what the apparatus strategically produces in Denmark or the EU, for example, as the practices are embroiled within a different discursive milieu, political regime, and so on. It is hard – and perhaps even artificial – to hive off only the elements of the design discourse that originate from UK-based authors, given the internationally interwoven nature of the texts (they all reference and riff off each other). But what discourse is used,



strategically, to do, and how it meshes together with practices, cultural norms, existing subjectivities, and so on, will produce a different set of effects in different places. So if this account feels unfamiliar to readers in other countries, or aspects of it don't ring true, then that in itself is interesting. And indeed, points to the possibility of further comparative research.

It is also not a condemnation of all design everywhere. There are many strains of design, ruled by very different logics. This is a study of just one of them. The question of how the apparatus of design – in its totality, and in its multiplicities – works to govern us, is surely very fertile territory for future research.

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# Appendix

## 1. Table of auto-ethnographic material

<b>Date</b>	<b>Source/ type</b>	<b>Name/ Description</b>
<b>Sep – November-14</b>	Notebook	Research notes
<b>Nov-14 – Feb-15</b>	Notebook	Research and work notes
<b>22.12.14</b>	Invitation to Tender	2014.12.22 ESA Project Design Strategist and ethnographer Commissioning FINAL.docx
<b>10.02.15</b>	Field notes	SEE conference report
<b>Mar-15</b>	Excel spreadsheet	Policy Lab impact assessment framework (prepared for/ with BOP Consulting)
<b>30.03.15</b>	Field notes	Reading and activities February 2015
<b>03.05.15</b>	Word document	15.05.03_Prototype-Policy_CfS_v0.2_JB additions
<b>10.05.15</b>	Word document	15.05.10_Jocelyn Bailey_Proposed Plan of Work
<b>May-Jul-15</b>	Evaluation interview notes	Policy Lab evaluation interview notes from interviews with 21 civil servants (conducted with/ for BOP Consulting)
<b>17.08.15</b>	Field notes	15.08.17_Family Policy - write up
<b>Sep-15</b>	Word document	PL Y1 Evaluation Public Report September 2015 (prepared for/ with BOP Consulting)
<b>Nov-15</b>	Notebook	Work notes
<b>20.11.15</b>	Field notes	15.11.20_Thoughts on Design Culture Salon
<b>Dec-15</b>	Field notes	15.12.xx Family Policy co-design
<b>Spring 2015-summer 2016</b>	Notebook	Research notes

<b>Jun-15 – Jun-16</b>	Notebook	Work notes
<b>Jan-16</b>	Invitation to tender	2016.01.xx_Homelessness Project call for design prototyper (1)
<b>03.02.16</b>	Field notes	16.02.03_Thoughts following transmediale
<b>12.06.16</b>	Field notes	16.06.12_PL workshop
<b>Jul-16</b>	Author's photographs	Labour force workshop with Policy Lab
<b>18.07.16</b>	Field notes	16.07.18_Write up_informed labour market choices
<b>03.08.16</b>	Field notes	Inside Design marketing workshop
<b>12.09.16</b>	Field notes	16.09.12_Prototyping the future of rail workshop notes
<b>19.10.16</b>	Field notes	16.10.19_Report from Lab Connections
<b>04.11.16</b>	Slide deck	2016.11.04_PL Uscreates presentation to Nesta innovation school
<b>14.11.16</b>	Field notes	16.11.14_Global Innovation Policy Accelerator Programme – report following workshop
<b>07.12.16</b>	Field notes	16.12.07 Early Intervention Prevention and Resilience project bid writing
<b>11.12.16</b>	Speaking notes	16.12.11_notes for Konstfack Symposium
<b>2016</b>	Diary/ notebook	Diary of daily jottings
<b>Nov-16 – May-17</b>	Notebook	Work and research notes
<b>07.01.17</b>	Field notes	17.01.07_PhD chapter structure_Jan 2017
<b>28.01.17</b>	Slide	17.01.28_socially responsible design framework - produced following Konstfack symposium
<b>Feb-17</b>	Slide deck	2017.02.xx_5 minutes of theory



<b>28.02.17</b>	Field notes	17.02.28_DWP Journal Club
<b>Feb – Mar-17</b>	Author's photographs	Early Intervention Prevention and Resilience project_Design workshops
<b>02.03.17</b>	Field notes	17.03.02_multiple disadvantage conference
<b>16.03.17</b>	Field notes	17.03.16_Workshop with councillors_ Early Intervention Prevention and Resilience project
<b>14.04.17</b>	Field notes	Notes for trust blog
<b>19.04.17</b>	Field notes	17.04.19_ front line staff workshop_ Early Intervention Prevention and Resilience project
<b>21.04.17</b>	Field notes	17.04.21_PHE design clinic - notes
<b>08.05.17</b>	Field notes	17.05.08_May - June 2017 reporting_ Early Intervention Prevention and Resilience project
<b>25.05.17</b>	Field notes	17.05.25_Homelessness Project_ Day One
<b>May – Jun-17</b>	Notebook	Research and work notes
<b>Jun-17</b>	Author's photographs	Synthesis workshops with Council_EI P &R
<b>Jun – Aug-17</b>	Notebook	Work notes
<b>13.07.17</b>	Photograph of author's sketch	2017.07.13_Homelessness prevention map
<b>17.07.17</b>	Word document	2017.07.17_Bailey Webb_How labs will create change_working paper
<b>Jul-17</b>	Photograph from design agency website	2017.07.xx inside design img
<b>18.07.17</b>	Field notes	17.07.18_ Homelessness Ideas Day
<b>28.07.17</b>	Field notes	17.07.28_Reflections following Nordes

<b>07.08.17</b>	Field notes	17.08.07_Homelessness end of project
<b>08.08.17</b>	Field notes	17.08.08_Five minutes of theory_
<b>Aug-17</b>	Author photograph of own sketch	17.08.xx_map of work and research development
<b>07.09.17</b>	Field notes	17.09.07 BBC The Fix
<b>20.09.17</b>	Field notes	17.09.20_Design research and policy roundtable
<b>28.09.17</b>	Field notes	17.09.28_Diary review_themes
<b>Sep-17</b>	Field notes	17.09.xx_Themes from diary review 2
<b>02.11.17</b>	Screenshots	Tweets from SDGC17
<b>2017</b>	Diary/ notebook	Diary of daily jottings
<b>Aug-17- summer 2018</b>	Notebook	Work and research notes
<b>09.02.18</b>	Screenshots	Tweets from gov design meetup
<b>Mar-18</b>	Field notes	18.03.xx_Themes from projects
<b>18.04.18</b>	Field notes	18.04.18_analysis of projects
<b>2018</b>	Diary/ notebook	Analytical notes

## 2. Literature search process

Locating the 'design for government' literature was not straightforward. I was interested in any research that addressed a cluster of things (design consultancy to government/ the public sector; HEI design work with the public sector; designers employed by the state, or non-designer civil servants taking on design roles and projects; innovation 'labs' inside governments/ public sector organisations making use of design practices, methods and tools) that are referred to in many different ways. Conversely, it also became clear that many contributions which make use of the same terms ('design', 'policy', 'government') are not relevant at all. So my strategy for finding the literature was initially organic, searching through bibliographies and following up references. I subsequently employed a more systematic approach in relation to a number of key design journals, with keyword searches (for 'government'/ 'public sector'), and an issue-by-issue review over the last 10 years (before that there is simply less to talk about), in *Design and Culture*, *Co-Design*, *Design Issues*, *Design Studies*, *Journal of Design History*, *The Design Journal*, *The International Journal of Design*, *She Ji*, *Design Philosophy Papers*, *Modes of Criticism*, and *PDC: participatory design*. Finally, I conducted a key word search using Brighton University's One Search tool, for design/ co-design/ social design/ service design/ human centred design/ strategic design AND public sector/ government/ policy/ policymaking. This yielded a few additional items. A detailed bibliography on the very closely related topic of design research in the public sector has also recently been collated by Matt Malpass and Lara Salinas (Malpass & Salinas, 2020).

### **3. Ethics paperwork**

I include here the form I originally filled in and submitted to my supervisor. As it was not deemed to require further clearance at that point, this was as far as the matter went. However, it will be noted that this form proposes a slightly different methodology than that which I ultimately developed. I did conduct interviews with civil servants as part of my role at BOP Consulting, for an evaluation that Policy Lab had commissioned, but unfortunately I only obtained verbal consent to use the data for my own research as well. I discuss my usage of these interviews in chapter 1.

As I developed an autoethnographic approach I discussed with my supervisor the ethical implications of this. The Tier 1 Ethics checklist states that it must be completed 'for every research project that involves human participants'. However as noted in chapter 1, my interactions with others were for the purposes of my professional role (I did not involve any vulnerable people in my research), and switching methodology meant that the project then did not technically come under Tier 1 review.

However, I am very aware of the need to proceed ethically, and discuss how I have handled this in more detail in chapter 1.



**University of Brighton**

**Arts and Humanities**

## Research Ethics Review Tier 1 Checklist

This Tier 1 checklist should be completed for every research project that involves human participants. It is used to identify whether a Tier 2 application for ethics approval needs to be submitted. If a Tier 2 application is required, please use the Tier 2 Ethics Approval Application Form.

Before completing this form, please refer to the *Ethical Research Guidelines for Staff and Students* and the University's *Guidance on Good Practice in Research Ethics and Governance*; both are available at: [http://staffcentral.brighton.ac.uk/ro/ethics\\_govern.shtm](http://staffcentral.brighton.ac.uk/ro/ethics_govern.shtm). The principal investigator or, where the principal investigator is a student, the supervisor, is responsible for exercising appropriate professional judgement in this review. This checklist must be completed before potential participants are approached to take part in any research.

☐ The principal investigator/student has read and understood the *Ethical Research Guidelines for Staff and Students* and referred to the *University Guidance on Good Practice in Research Ethics and Governance*.

### Section A: Applicant Details

1	Project title	Doing Political Work: design in policymaking
2	Name of researcher (applicant)	Jocelyn Bailey
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5b	Telephone number	07962 229 533

### Section B: For Students Only

6	Module or Unit name and number – or MA/MPhil/PhD course & School	MPhil, College of Arts and Humanities
7	Supervisor / tutor's name	Peter Lloyd, Guy Julier
8	Email address	<a href="mailto:p.a.lloyd@brighton.ac.uk">p.a.lloyd@brighton.ac.uk</a> / <a href="mailto:g.julier@vam.ac.uk">g.julier@vam.ac.uk</a>
9	Contact address	

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**Arts and Humanities**

**Supervisor / tutor: Please answer Yes / No to the statements below (or N/A where not applicable). The study should not begin until 'Yes' is applied to all statements where relevant**

The topic and ethical implications of the research have been addressed with the student.	YES		
The topic merits further research of the kind being proposed and this is appropriate to their level of study	YES		
The student has confirmed they understand the Ethical Research Guidelines for Staff and Students	YES		
The student has the skills to carry out the research	YES		
The participant information sheet or leaflet and consent form are appropriate	YES	NO	N/A
The procedures for recruitment and obtaining informed consent are appropriate	YES	NO	N/A
The procedures for ensuring confidentiality/anonymity of respondent data are appropriate	YES	NO	N/A
Risk assessment has been carried out and the form completed where necessary	YES	NO	N/A

**Comments from supervisor / tutor**

### Section C: Project Details

*Brief description of project:*

#### **Research questions**

1. What is design doing in policymaking processes?
2. How might this be understood within a wider socio-political and economic context? (What is the socio-political situatedness of these practices?)
3. What are the future possibilities for this kind of design practice?

#### **Aims of the investigation**

1. To critique and analyse an emergent form of design practice
2. To develop a conceptual framework for understanding design practice in government decision-making processes
3. To set this emerging practice both in terms of design history and discourse, and policy discourse, thereby contributing knowledge to both design studies and political theory domains
4. To conceptually open up the possibilities around non-traditional approaches to policymaking

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## Arts and Humanities

In order to answer the research questions identified above, I plan to study the design-for-policy phenomenon in depth in a number of different contexts/ countries – most likely the UK, Denmark and Australia. As the unit of work in design-for-policy practice tends to be the project, I will take as the site/s of my research a small number projects from across 3-4 different design-for-policy teams. I envisage my research methods including:

participant observation,  
semi-structured interviews,  
visual analysis of working materials and spaces,  
discourse analysis of written output.

I will supplement this with a more general study of the methods, theories and epistemological positions that underpin the work of these teams, through interviews with practitioners (designers and civil servants). Using this material, plus ideas from my reading across the literatures mentioned above, I will develop my research around a range of conceptual themes. These might be things like:

Context  
Expertise  
Cognitive processes  
Materiality  
Political reasoning and negotiating

However I will use a pilot study to develop a more definitive list. This pilot will be based on the work of the UK Policy Lab, through interviews with a number of people (10-20) who have been involved in Policy Lab projects – from across the civil service, within Policy Lab itself, and with design practitioners who have delivered some of Policy Lab's projects.

*Approximately how many participants do you anticipate will be involved in your research?*

Between 20 and 60 people – a mixture of civil servants and design practitioners.

### Section D: Research Checklist

Please answer each question by indicating the appropriate answer: **YES / NO**

1	Does the study involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent? (For example, children, people with learning disabilities, your own students)* <i>See below for more details.</i>		<b>NO</b>
2	Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited? (e.g. students at school, members of self-help group, residents of nursing home)		<b>NO</b>
3	Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time? (e.g. covert observation of people in non-public places)		<b>NO</b>

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Arts and Humanities

4	Will the study involve discussion of sensitive topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use)?		NO
5	Will the study involve invasive, intrusive or potentially harmful procedures of any kind?		NO
6	Is pain or more than mild discomfort likely to result from the study?		NO
7	Is the study likely to induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life?		NO
8	Will the study involve prolonged or repetitive testing?		NO
9	Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?		NO

Comments from supervisor/tutor

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\* Children are defined as those under the age of 16 years. Any research activities involving children or vulnerable adults must be referred to the Arts & Humanities Research Ethics and Governance Committee for Tier 2 approval prior to the start of the research. Vulnerable participants are those who are vulnerable by reason of temporary or permanent mental or physical disability or incapacity, age or illness. They could also include people who are vulnerable for reasons such as social inequality or marginalisation, or their status as homeless people, drug users, sex workers, victims of crime, bullying or domestic violence, as well as those who may be vulnerable due to their sexual orientation. People who have undergone traumatic or adverse emotional events may also be vulnerable, especially with regard to research relating to that event.

In cases where researchers are working with children, Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks may be required, notably if researchers are working unsupervised. Researchers should liaise in advance with the organisation(s) in which they plan to work to discuss this and clarify those details on the *Tier 2 Ethics Approval Application Form*.

If you have answered 'NO' to all questions:

- Submit the completed and signed form to the supervisor/tutor for approval
- Attach copies of any relevant documentation, i.e. questionnaires/interviews and/or focus group questions; participant information sheets; consent forms; risk assessment forms; feedback forms; and procedures for ensuring confidentiality/anonymity in the storage and use of data.

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the questions in Section D:

- You will need to describe more fully how you plan to deal with the ethical issues raised by your research. **This does not mean that you cannot do the research, only that your proposal will require further review, and possibly referral to the Arts & Humanities**

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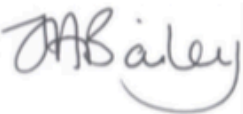
### Arts and Humanities

**Research Ethics and Governance Committee.** You will need to submit your plans for addressing the ethical issues raised by your proposal using the Tier 2 Ethics Approval Application Form and in the first instance submit this to your supervisor/tutor. He/she will decide the level of approval required.

If you answered 'YES' to **question 1**:

- You will need to consult the *Ethical Research Guidelines for Staff and Students* and the *University Guidance on Good Practice in Research Ethics and Governance*. If you or anyone connected with the research will be working directly with young people you may also need to conduct a DBS in order to carry out this work. It is advisable to initiate this process well in advance of your project start date. Please consult your supervisor/tutor for further advice as to whether a check is required. If it is advised, you should liaise in advance with the organisation(s) in which you are planning to work to discuss this.

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the College's and University's *Guidance on Good Practice in Research Ethics and Governance* including providing appropriate information sheets and consent forms, and ensuring confidentiality in the storage and use of data. Any significant change in the question, design or conduct over the course of the research should be notified to your supervisor/tutor and may require a new application for ethics approval.

Signed:		Date:	28 <sup>th</sup> July 2015
Principal Investigator:	Jocelyn Bailey		
Signed:		Date:	
Supervisor / tutor (where appropriate):			

Emailed version with names in the signature boxes is acceptable.

In the case of students, supervisors/tutors should retain the completed forms.

In the case of staff they should be submitted to the Secretary of the Arts & Humanities Research Ethics and Governance Committee. Secretary to A&HREGC: [j.emberton@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:j.emberton@brighton.ac.uk)

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#### 4. Some thoughts on criticality in design

There are of course many established critical accounts of, and approaches to, design: utopian movements (e.g. William Morris); politicised professional design groups and their refusal to work (Elfine, 2016); radical and counter-cultural critiques of mainstream commercial design (Papanek, 1971) which in more recent times have transformed into design activism and social design (although the extent to which professional social design remains an activity of resistance is questionable); environmental and anti-capitalist critiques (Fry, 2010) and the articulation of alternative design movements in response (Irwin, 2015); decolonising movements and challenges to the hegemony of modernism and the global north in design practice and research (Abdulla, et al., 2019) (Schultz, et al., 2018); critical design practice (Dunne, 1999; Ericson & Mazé, 2011); adversarial and political design practice (DiSalvo, 2012); the articulation of design as tied to neoliberalisation (Julier & Kimbell, 2019; Stern & Siegelbaum, 2019) and the logics of capitalism (Seitz, 2019); and feminist revisionist approaches to design history (Buckley, 1986). However the question of how one can 'do' criticality in design scholarship has been under-discussed. More explicit dialogue about, and strategies for, critical approaches to scholarship would help the field as a whole progress.

There are calls for greater deliberation on this within the 'what is design research?' debate. In an eloquent reflection on the role of language in the construction of theory, Erlhoff (2015) argues that the preoccupation with 'knowledge-bagging' is a product of the anglophone origins of the academic design research field, and calls for a 'radical critique of the category of 'knowledge'' (p. 77). In English words are trusted, things are named and owned: 'by giving concepts a name, we can bring home what we name' (p. 73). In German, by contrast, words are constantly questioned and re-evaluated. There is a permanent reflection on language going on, enabled by the flexibility of German grammar. And this difference makes its way into research practices: a search for knowledge, and truth, on one hand, and cognition on the other; taking perception as empirical evidence, or as something to be carefully and selectively considered. The pragmatism of the English language approach is what has allowed an explicitly design-focused field of research to become established, but it does also run the risk of 'banality or naivete': 'If you

know, you can stop asking questions. Hence, knowledge is stored and filed according to a predefined order. We need no reference to cognition, to the reflection of confusing experiences, to the painstaking effort of deep contemplation, and to memory-aided judgment' (p. 76).<sup>57</sup> Is the only point of design scholarship to nail down some new knowledge, to 'bag it' and move on? Or to ask questions, re-evaluate, ruminate, speculate and critique? And if the latter, how do we do it?

Establishing what is meant by criticality is not easy. Critical, in everyday language, already has a range of meanings – crucial or decisive, finding fault, or simply careful judgment. It appears that what academics mean when they talk about being 'critical' in the context of scholarly work also varies a great deal: Moore (2013) identifies seven different definitions within small handful of disciplines. For some philosophers, criticality implies emancipatory intent – 'critical thinking... is motivated today by the effort... to abolish the opposition between the individual's purposefulness, spontaneity and rationality, and those work-process relationships on which society is built. ... Its goal is man's emancipation from slavery' (Horkheimer, 1976, pp. 220-4). For others it simply means a kind of 'suspended judgment' in order to 'determine the nature of the problem before proceeding to attempts at its solution' (Dewey, 2019 (1909), p. 74). Raymond Williams concluded, in summary, that it has become 'a very difficult word' (Williams, 1983, p. 84).

The concept – formulated as 'critical thinking' – has received more attention and deliberation recently in the field of higher education (Barnett, 1997; Bailin, et al., 1999; Moore, 2013; Brumfit, et al., 2004), specifically because the development of critical thinking 'skills' is supposed to be one of the results of pursuing a university education. However, as Barnett (1997) notes, until recently higher education has done little critical thinking about critical thinking. He advanced a framework of two intersecting axes: different levels of criticality (from critical skills to transformatory critique), and different domains of critique (knowledge, self and the world) (p. 7). He

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<sup>57</sup> Erlhoff's contribution points to the need for a greater reflexivity about the conditions of construction of the field, which has hitherto been a predominantly male (Lloyd 2019: 177), western, white, positivist – and anglophone affair. Although some (e.g. Abdulla et al) would argue that we need to challenge ourselves even further by pushing beyond Europe's intellectual borders.

argued for ‘critical being’<sup>58</sup> as a more comprehensive concept: ‘which embraces critical thinking, critical action and critical self-reflection’ (p. 1). He defines ‘criticality’ quite simply as ‘a human disposition of engagement where it is recognised that the object of attention could be other than it is’ (p. 179).

*Table 8.1 Levels, domains and forms of critical being*

<i>Levels of criticality</i>	<i>Domains</i>		
	<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Self</i>	<i>World</i>
4. Transformatory critique	Knowledge critique	Reconstruction of self	Critique-in-action (collective reconstruction of world)
3. Refashioning of traditions	Critical thought (malleable traditions of thought)	Development of self within traditions	Mutual understanding and development of traditions
2. Reflexivity	Critical thinking (reflection on one’s understanding)	Self-reflection (reflection on one’s own projects)	Reflective practice (‘metacompetence’, ‘adaptability’, ‘flexibility’)
1. Critical skills	Discipline-specific critical thinking skills	Self-monitoring to given standards and norms	Problem-solving (means–end instrumentalism)
<i>Forms of criticality</i>	<i>Critical reason</i>	<i>Critical self-reflection</i>	<i>Critical action</i>

(Barnett 1997, p. 107)

Returning to design research, the trouble with this definition of criticality is that it could just as easily be a description of a designerly mode of engagement in the world. Design is understood to be inherently critical in as much as designing involves seeking to change a situation, and being discerning about choosing between alternatives. Designers, and often design researchers, are already engaging in acts of reimagining and reforming the world; they tend to already think

<sup>58</sup> Which is perhaps not too far off Paulo Freire’s concept of ‘conscientization’ in Critical Pedagogy.

of themselves as critical reflective practitioners. Holding on to a sense of criticality with teeth, then, can be difficult. I have experienced this in my own interactions, struggling to communicate an idea of criticality that is something more than being discerning about 'what works' and sensitive to other disciplinary knowledges. Such a 'turning inward' of criticality – toward the practice itself rather than the conditions of production – has been noted and described, in relation to architecture and graphic design (Laranjo, 2015), as a shift from political to aesthetic critique (Martin, 2005). This detachment from the social-and-political-critique sense of the term (that is present in the concept of critical theory, for example) has been seen in itself as an effect of de-politicisation, producing 'a new uncritical form of criticality' (Laranjo 2015). Or, to make use of Barnett's framework, it is possible for design and design research, especially when engaged in so-called complex/ wicked/ public problems, to make claims about 'collectively reconstructing the world' (level 4) without really getting very far beyond 'level one' achievements in criticality.

It is this challenge of how to 'do' criticality in design scholarship that I have tried to address in chapter 2.