Introducing 'Critical Service Design': A paradigm shift for place-based climate action

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This article proposes 'critical service design' as an innovative and effective alternative approach for service designers who are actively seeking to support and facilitate sustainable and ethical place-based climate transitions.

Critical service design[1] refers to the design of fictional services as a means of exploring alternative futures with multiple stakeholders, in order to inform action today. It seeks to emphasise the critical aspect of design by inviting diverse stakeholders to share their positionalities and desires about the future, enabling collaborative reflection and creative dissent. By incorporating critical service design methodology, service designers can play a pivotal role in addressing the complex challenges associated with climate transitions as well as drive positive change for communities and the environment.

The role of local authorities' organisations in achieving net zero

Achieving net zero is the most important challenge of our time. Nearly two-thirds of emissions reductions depend on the adoption of low-carbon technologies and lifestyles. Therefore, success depends on societal-driven innovation that prioritises people as agents of change. The role of local authorities in addressing the climate emergency is undeniable: in the UK, 82 percent of emissions fall within the influence of local government. These emissions relate to citizens' lifestyles: how we travel, what we eat, what we buy and how we use energy at home.

Therefore, local governments are on the front lines of this challenge, responsible for envisioning and implementing strategies to achieve ambitious carbon reduction targets. This often requires a radical redesign of the service ecosystems within and beyond their municipalities. Local authorities play a vital role in translating objectives

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into action, driving place-based approaches that contribute to both net zero ambitions and local co-benefits for people, society and the economy.

More than two thousand local governments across 39 countries worldwide have declared a climate emergency. While many are swiftly crafting strategies and action plans to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change, societies are largely failing to meet the projected objectives of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, as called for in the Paris Agreement. The scale of change required necessitates governments to adopt radically innovative approaches to collaboration in order to facilitate the transition to low-carbon lifestyles.

Over the past decade, local government organisations have developed design capability, either through collaboration or by establishing in-house service design teams. This has brought significant value to public service provision in an era marked by ongoing crises. However, despite their increased design capabilities, local government organisations still face challenges such as systemic underfunding, narrow performance-based indicators in management, and the short-term pressures of public service provision that leave no space for error and therefore limit opportunities for experimentation and innovation.

While risk aversion is accepted in public management, and a review of the blunders of our governments may suggest that for good reason[2], transitioning to low-carbon lifestyles is complex and will not be achieved with business-as-usual. Designers can bring small scale experiments that provide opportunities for de-risked experimentation and learning[3]. I propose embracing 'critical service design' (CSD) as a means of integrating service design into new contexts and transforming conventional approaches to public policy and services in the context of place-based climate action.

What is 'critical service design'?

[2] King, A. and Crewe, I. (2013) The Blunders of Our Governments. Oneworld Publications.

[3] Thorpe, A. and Rhodes, S. (2018) 'The Public Collaboration Lab—Infrastructuring Redundancy with Communities-in-Place', She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation, 4(1), pp. 60–74. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2018.02.008.

Critical service design is concerned with designing fictional services as a way of building new worlds. CSD is not concerned with predicting the future, but rather with exploring alternative and potentially more desirable future scenarios, in order to generate insights which can inform present day decision-making. While linear problem-solving methods often make it challenging to reframe public policy issues as opportunities for positive change, CSD shifts the focus of service design from present-day problem-solving to the collective exploration of new possibilities.

In essence, CSD facilitates a rehearsal of a complete policy cycle in a fictional future with diverse stakeholders. By mirroring a policy cycle within a parallel future framework, the practice of CSD provides an opportunity for experimentation and learning without posing risks, generating insights to aid present day policy formulation in a different way.

In 2019, I began collaborating with the London Borough of Southwark to assist them in their pursuit of achieving net zero. Our collaboration involved incorporating design-led approaches and adopting a more people- and place-centred approach to policy-making and public service provision.

In 2022, Service Futures Lab initiated a year-long collaboration to pilot design-led methods aimed at supporting climate action. This collaboration involved partnering with local organisations and involving 30 postgraduate service design students from London College of Communication to create a temporary 'Climate Studio'[4] in which local government was supported in the delivery of their Climate Action Plan, using design-led approaches, including service design.

This new approach kept local democracy vibrant, because designing is an act of togetherness, of care, and of collective futuring[5]. We engaged over 100 young residents across four locations in south London and facilitated creative sessions to design touchpoints to food systems that existed in alternative future worlds. The borough's sustainable food strategy built on insights gained from these

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[4] University of the Arts London (2022) UAL Climate Studio – South Cluster. Available in https://vimeo.com/769027746?share=copy

[5] DiSalvo, C. (2022) Design as Democratic Inquiry: Putting Experimental Civics into Practice. The MIT Press.

engagements, and later achieved national recognition for its success in securing good food for residents.

The CSD approach varies depending on the context, but in essence it is a three-step iterative process that combines foresight, critical design and service design approaches:

1. **Reframing**: The first step is to reframe strategic objectives and policy problems around climate action, to allow for the exploration of possibilities that are otherwise difficult to imagine. When I asked a room full of designers to draw the future, I always got way more spaceships than I anticipated, without any rationale as to why spaceships were required. We need to let go of those technology-based futures, so that we can start exploring alternatives. Therefore, the first step is to conduct preliminary research aimed at unlearning what we know about the future. We conduct a scanning analysis, exploring political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental factors across geographies and scale, and across time: past, present and future. The scanning results in a large map containing insightful data, services, news headlines or weak signals of change, and lead us to formulate 'what if…' questions to start envisioning alternative courses of action, exploring futures that might be preferable. The 'what if…' questions are unconventional yet plausible responses to address policy problems, and they propose alternative courses of action[6].

2. **Future service prototyping**: This involves creative engagement with local residents to co-design fictional services that illustrate new possibilities and visions of the future. This is followed up by curated discussions, in which key local stakeholders explore how these services contribute to creating a better future and identify who benefits from this future[7]. This process allows participants to delve into competing worldviews, because preferences for better futures are influenced by individuals' ideological narratives and

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[6] Dunne, A, and F. Raby.2013.Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming.Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press

[7] Leitão, R.M. (2022) 'From Needs to Desire: Pluriversal Design as a Desire-Based Design', *Design and Culture*, pp. 1–22. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2022.2103949.

perspectives. The critical spin to designing for services seeks to shift the focus from problem-solving to sense-making.

3. **Backcasting**: Together, participants advocate for their preferred futures and collectively explore how the desirable futures could be attained through engaging in a back-casting exercise[8]. The focus is on 'what can I do now to attain this future?' and 'what support do I need from others?'.

4. Finally, a report with the key insights is produced to be considered by policymakers.

A new paradigm

This article has outlined the practice of CSD as an effective approach for service designers who seek to support change in their organisations and facilitate sustainable and ethical place-based climate transitions. Fictional services propose systemic challenges at scale, with a focus on new relationships and the impact on everyday lives. Alternative futures are a good space in which to experiment, to learn without fear of failing, coming back to the present better equipped to deal with highly complex challenges.

Acknowledgements

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[8] Robinson, J. B.1990."Futures Under Glass: A Recipe for People Who Hate to Predict." Futures 22 (8): 820–842. doi:10.1016/0016-3287(90)90018-D