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research article

How do policy and design intersect? Three relationships

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'Design for policy' is a prominent framing of the intersection between policy and design. Here, we ask, if design is 'for' policy, then what exactly is it doing? We make a critique of literature that explains the interaction of design and policy by listing practices (prototyping or visualisation, for example) but that misses the reasons why those practices are being used. We build on and advance scholarship that anchors design in relation to the demands, constraints and politics of policy making, taking account of the quite different forms a relationship between design (as a thing) and policy design (as a process) can have. Within this debate we propose that design's relationship to policy is not always in service to ('for'), but also sometimes 'with', and even sometimes 'against'. We set out an original typology which differentiates roles of design in policy along the lines of their ultimate purpose, scope and terms on which design and policy interact. We identify an *instrumental* relationship, in which design is a tool to support achieving specified goals of policy making; an *improvisational* relationship, seeing design as a practice enabling policy making to be more open in the face of unfolding events and experiences; and a *generative* relationship where design facilitates the re-envisioning of policy making. Through our analysis and proposed typology, we aim to address overly specific and overly homogenising understandings of design in the policy space, enabling a more critical understanding of the different intents and implications at play within the 'design turn' in policy.

Keywords design • policy • government • policy design • policy making • policy process • typology

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The by-now established idea of 'design for policy' (Bason, 2014a) has been used to frame the emerging space at the intersection of policy, public administration and design. Design for policy was cogently argued as having the potential to 'reinvent the art and craft of policy-making for the twenty-first century' (Bason, 2014a: 2) through the adoption of design approaches. In this article, we ask, if design is 'for' policy, then what exactly is it doing? Our contribution to this debate is to propose that design's relationship to policy is not always in service to ('for'), but also sometimes 'with', and even sometimes 'against'.

Well-rehearsed policy challenges at local, national and global levels suggest a heightened urgency to act (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993), which has prompted innovations in the repertoires of policy makers, including new tools and approaches. How can governments best secure more coherent and effective policy-making processes? For the policy maker in search of the answer to this question, there are a variety of approaches promising to deliver shinier, more effective policy-making processes and better policies (Cairney et al, 2024). It is into a crowded marketplace of policy-making innovations that 'design' methods, tools and approaches have made an entrance.

There has been a rapid rise and expansion of design for policy in public administrations around the world since the early 2000s (Kimbell, 2015; Bason, 2017; Blomkamp, 2018; Clarke and Craft, 2019; van Buuren et al, 2020; Collier and Gruendel, 2022). The proliferation of 'innovation' or 'policy labs' (McGann et al, 2018; Olejniczak et al, 2020; Wellstead et al, 2021) or the recruitment of professional designers (Salinas, 2022) signals the increasing institutionalisation of design in central and local government. However, despite the growth of such institutional forms, and talk of the 'present day design wave' (van Buuren et al, 2020) and a 'design turn' (Mareis, 2018; Mazé, forthcoming), design has struggled to secure the level of traction, momentum and credibility to match levels of excitement about its potential. In part, this is because people outside of specialist design fields find it hard to pin down exactly what is being proffered. Design *for* policy suggests design is in service to policy. Such a framing risks implying a possibly homogenising definition of design practices as essentially helping to deliver existing government agendas. But for some design professionals, the emphasis has also been on 'disrupting' existing ways of understanding problems and responding to them, or on 'unsettling' dominant policy agendas or ways of doing policy making. How does this sit with the notion of design in service to policy?

Resisting a singular, homogenising definition, we recognise that there are multiple relationships emerging between design and policy (Kimbell et al, 2023). Here we build on a growing literature, drawing together different strands to conceptualise and elaborate the multiple relationships as a typology. Given the strong and growing 'design turn' in policy-making practice around the world and the as yet limited attention to theory in and around 'design for policy' (Meijer, 2025), we aim to contribute to growing scholarship through a critical and consciously interdisciplinary approach.

We outline a typology identifying three relationships, which differ from one another on the basis of the purpose, scope and the nature of policy making, and terms on which design and policy interact (Kimbell et al, 2023). First, we examine an *instrumental* relationship, in which design is a tool to support achievement of specified goals of policy making; second, an *improvisational* relationship, seeing design as a practice enabling policy making to be more open in the face of unfolding

events and experiences; and third, a *generative* relationship where design facilitates the re-envisioning of policy making. We further distinguish these relationships through their underpinning purpose, and by the assumptions they reveal about how policy making is understood, how it intersects with design, along with the knowledge and roles that each relationship relies upon. By doing so, we bring greater clarity to how the same design practices can be mobilised very differently. In further recognising how these different relationships are mediated through temporal, spatial and power dynamics of policy making, it allows us to anchor design in the politics of policy making and to clarify the distinctive value of design to policy.

What do we mean by 'policy design', what do we mean by 'design' and how do they relate?

Predating by some decades the contemporary 'design turn' is an established idea of policy design, including a sub-field with a history of efforts to establish studies of public administration as a 'design science' (van Buuren et al, 2020; Meijer, 2025). Public policy scholars often refer to the phrase 'policy design'. In this field, the term 'design' was notably adopted over alternatives such as policy formulation, creation, innovation and development (Peters, 2018). Broadly, policy design refers to processes of systematic, evidence-informed planning of public policies, and the choice of terminology also marks a shift in public administration studies beyond merely seeking to understanding the world as it is – specifically, drawing on Simon's (1996) conceptualisation of 'design science' – to planning around best courses of action or what *ought* to be. In essence, the associated literature evokes design-as-a-verb, describing policy-related processes in terms that are active, applied and even prescriptive. Meanwhile, over in the discipline of design, the term is conceptualised and applied in other ways (including but also beyond that of Simon), in which 'design' implies distinct practices enacted by professional designers (as well as others) often distinguished in terms of the objects to which it is applied.

Broadly, the difference of design between these disciplines could, on the surface, be characterised by the difference between design-as-a-verb (or, in the vein of 'design science', as 'design thinking') and design-as-a-noun (the objects to which design has traditionally been applied, such as spaces, products, services and systems, which are different enough to warrant distinct approaches, techniques and methods). Within and across the disciplines, there are efforts to bring together these different ideas of design across disciplines, for example in the growing 'design-orientation' (Howlett and Mukherjee, 2018) within studies of policy design. Peters (2020) distinguishes between 'old' and 'new' policy design, where the former is associated with more traditional, technocratic practices of engineering design and the latter with 'design for policy' and more recently emerging design sub-fields (for example, participatory and systems design), thus grouping different sets of design-as-a-noun underneath a broad (and periodicised) policy design field. Indeed, 'design for policy', as articulated by Bason and others (2014a), is a major advance in distinguishing the noun and the verb forms of design, clarifying the difference between 'designing' in a more generic sense as a process of making things (including public policies) and the idea of design as distinct, professionalised practices.

In some accounts, these are neatly integrated into the familiar policy design cycle (Howlett and Ramesh, 2003; Parsons, 2005; Junginger, 2014). This cycle can be

understood both as designed in itself (that is, policy making is seen as designing) and as composed of phases associated with different outcomes or objects – the objects in question being a policy, policy instruments and a public service (see Trippe, 2019) that can be designed with recourse to specific design sub-fields. This differentiates yet connects 'designing for policy' from 'designing of/for service', the former being upstream and associated with the sub-fields of strategic design or design thinking, the latter being downstream and associated with service design (Kimbell, 2015; Salinas, 2022; Strokosch and Osborne, 2023) and identifying of activities associated with design across stages in the cycle (Villa Alvarez et al, 2022).

Efforts to bring together different extant ideas of design remain as yet nascent, and more clarity is now needed to develop or go beyond these ideas. Further, the nature of the relation between design and policy remains under-specified. If we take on board design practices within policy design, what happens? If design is for policy, then what is it doing for policy? Is it really *for* policy, that is, in service to it? Which or whose purposes are served in the relationship? Our contribution to this body of extant work is to make a case for a re-examination of the conjunctions of 'design *and* policy'. Our premise is that the framing of design as in service to policy does not allow sufficient interrogation of the full range of meanings, purposes and consequences that could potentially be deployed through their relationship.

What does design bring to the relationship?

There is a literature that explains the relationships between policy and design by elaborating different ways that design brings more pizzazz to the policy party. A mix of practices, methods, techniques and principles are typically listed as characteristics that design uses that enhance policy making in some way. For example, the qualities of creativity, visuality and materiality (Kimbell et al, 2022) are said to enable lived experience and potential impacts of changes to be better represented and included in policy processes; meaningful and equitable participation to be enabled; and cross-disciplinary collaboration to be achieved. Design's emphases on collaboration, participation and ambiguity (Peters, 2020) have been argued to bring more diverse perspectives and equity into policy-making processes. Further contributions claimed include goal emergence, pattern recognition, anticipation, disruption, emotional engagement, nonconsistency, fabulation and risk protection (Considine, 2012).

Attempts to define the relationships between design and policy making by listing supposedly distinctive features are unsatisfying for several reasons. Such attempts to clarify what design is when applied to policy often fail to differentiate it from other efforts to meet the challenges of policy making. Thus, what is being defined is not necessarily specifically the relation of design to policy, but the idea of participation to policy, and so on. Indeed, design is not the only route to creativity, nor is it the only means of facilitating participation and collaboration. Practices such as visualisation or materialisation can be manifested and applied to policy in many different ways and become hard to separate out from other practices such as communications. It is entirely possible to be user-centred without doing design. An infographic does not a design process make.

Falling back on the characteristics of design not only overstates its uniqueness; it also under-specifies the relationship. At least, the nature of the relationship is not sufficiently explicit, for example examining what design does for policy by discussions

about the use of creativity. Is there a homogenised notion of improvements to policy but within existing policy agendas? Or does the idea of ambiguity and disruption start to suggest a different, if more agonistic, relationship? There may be clear resemblances in the object of design, or the design expertise applied, but with manifestly varied aims and results.

The nature of the relationship(s) between design and policy is our core interest here. Design in service to ('for') policy can be understood in the context of a deeply embedded lineage of the design profession. Often rooted in a market logic, designers have tended to frame design as an applied or service profession, rather than a particular or distinctive form of knowledge. This is understandable, particularly given that design has only quite recently become academicised within higher education and research compared to other disciplines (Hellström Reimer and Mazé, 2023). Considering the intertwinement of its history with that of trade guilds and industrialisation, design has traditionally been perceived as vocational or skills-based rather than knowledge-based. It can too easily be understood and treated as 'in service' to other people and other knowledges. A service mentality can indeed be traced in the phrase 'design *for* policy'.

Such an understanding has also perhaps been inadvertently reinforced by some of the emerging empirical base in the field. Given that practice has arguably outpaced scholarship at the intersection of the design and policy fields, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is a large and ever-increasing number of case studies about specific projects where design practices have been deployed in central or local government, often in 'policy lab' teams (for example, McGann et al, 2018; Olejniczak et al, 2020; Wellstead et al, 2021). Such accounts are useful particularly in terms of relatability and communicability of design-in-action for policy makers. Case-based work also allows attention to the detailed 'look and feel' and process of design, as well as evidence-based understanding through ethnographic study. While such case studies have served to delineate an emerging area of professional practice, they also underscore a singular definition of the relationship between design and policy design, typically focusing on 'what worked' to improve policy effectiveness within specific practical cases. Challenges, alternatives and comparative analysis are often beyond the scope of such studies, with the result that such cases may lack criticality in themselves and especially across cases and in relation to wider contexts. Outside of these cases, there also is an emerging 'activist' body of grey and academic material, with a wealth of cases that challenge such accounts (DiSalvo, 2009; 2022; Hillgren et al, 2020). In these grassroots case studies, there have been framings of a more robust, challenging, and even agonistic relationship (DiSalvo, 2012; Björgvinsson et al, 2012). Here, the focus has been on disrupting existing policy agendas, and the relationships between design and policy might be fractious, or conflictual.

What is suggested by the empirical material is that there are different ways in which the practices of design might be applied to the objects of policy, for different purposes, by different actors. We argue here these nuances are currently underexplored. What might be more configurations of the purpose, scope and nature, and the terms on which design and policy interact? We start to problematise the 'for' in design for policy. Such nuance has been acknowledged by the emergence of 'meta' level definitions, producing sets of categories, typologies or taxonomies. Not only does this avoid the traps of attempting to generalise across, up or down from a particular field (or sub-field), a generic model, or discrete empirical cases, it also supports efforts to understand potentially contrasting orientations in the relationship between design and

policy. However, theorising so far has been only at outline stages. Our contribution is to advance these outlines into a elaborated typology.

For example, Hermus et al's (2020) literature review proposed six design approaches ranging from traditional, scientific and 'informational' approaches to more 'inspirational', innovative and user-driven ones. However, this downplays how the same design tools or methods can be mobilised differently in different settings, obscures the purposes to which they are put, and ignores variations in understanding policy making itself. Van Buuren et al (2020; 2023) have usefully sketched out an outline of three ideal-type approaches to 'design science' in public administration: design as optimisation, exploration and co-creation. The work was a conceptual proposal, suggesting a future research agenda to which our work responds. Our work seeks to build on such directions of travel by (1) elaborating in greater depth the argumentation to support the sympathetic development of classifications of types of design work building on van Buuren et al, and (2) integrating perspectives through an interdisciplinary approach.

To summarise our argument thus far, the phrase 'design for policy' (Bason, 2014a) is a particular framing of design as in service to policy, which fits some instances of practice or potential uses, but not others. Different traditions of empirical cases – what works cases versus activist examples – suggest potential multiple, overlapping, contrasting or competing forms of the relationship. Extant attempts to offer analytical framings of the relationships between design and policy making point in a direction of travel on which we seek to build. However, this 'meta-definitional' theoretical work has so far failed to recognise varied understandings of design and of policy, neglects contributions from studies of design, and is therefore under-specified. Therefore, we make the case that the intersections between design and policy making as yet lack sufficient elaboration and grounding (Clarke and Craft, 2019; Hermus et al, 2020; Kimbell et al, 2022; Mortati et al, 2022).

Three relationships between design and policy making

To address the question of how to better understand the scope of interactions between design and policy making, we draw on and integrate perspectives from across literatures in design and political science. General or essentialising frameworks are tempting as a way of synthesising, but ultimately analytically problematic (Richardson et al, 2019). We set out a typology that seeks to advance scholarship through its criticality and be applicable to a range of complex and specific cases (Kimbell et al., 2023). We focus on *relationships* between design and policy making to explicitly problematise and move beyond the particular framing of 'design *for* policy', including the narrow and homogenising tendencies of this label.

Instead, we recognise and foreground the interdependencies and interactions that characterise the situated, unfolding and dynamic way in which design and policy making relate (Bartels and Turnbull, 2020; Lejano, 2022). We differentiate between relations on the basis of the intended purpose of design within policy making, the scope and nature of policy making and the terms of interaction between design and policy. We focus on *purpose* to refer to a particular rationale for the employ of design within policy making. We address the *scope and nature* of policy making, recognising the contested nature of policy making (Cairney, 2023), within which different

understandings of the potential for design emerge. In developing our typology, like Durose and Lowndes's (2021), we seek to build 'mid-range' theory that connects practice and normative intentions.

We identify three different relationships between design and policy making – *instrumental*, *improvisational* and *generative*. We summarise here the three types of relationship, shown in Table 1, identifying the purpose, scope and nature, and terms of which design and policy interact, before elaborating the grounds for this classification in more depth in the following sections.

First, an *instrumental* relationship of design and policy regards design as a tool to support policy makers to achieve their prior or existing goals of policy making and support effective delivery. Within this relationship, policy making is understood as emphasising specific professionalised forms of knowledge useful to the policy process, and as operating within a given world view. Design and policy here interact in terms such that design is employed to help generate and deliver solutions to policy problems as presented or politically driven.

Second, an *improvisational* relationship regards design as necessary for improvising within policy making. The purpose of design within this relationship is to enable policy making to be more agile in the face of complexity and uncertainty. Here, policy making is understood as a responsive process where policy necessarily needs to negotiate between different world views. Thus, design and policy here are relating in terms such that design is used to amend and expand upon existing policy making, based on explicit recognition of plural kinds of knowledge, closing the gaps between policy making and delivery.

Third, a *generative* relationship between design and policy recognises a role of design to challenge or unsettle assumptions built into policy making and to enable the generation of alternatives. Here, policy making is understood as a *generative* or even agonistic space where policy emerges from the decentring of dominant knowledge and a conscious effort to engage hidden, unknown or occluded knowledges. Thus, design and policy here interact in terms such that design is used to re-envision the basis for policy making, challenging the ways we can think about a policy issue and the delivery of policy.

Table 1: Three relationships between design and policy making

Relationship between design and policy making		Purpose of design	Scope and nature of policy making	Terms on which design and policy interact
Instrumental	Design as a tool for policy making	To support achieving prior specified goals of policy making	A technocratic endeavour where policy operates within a single-world view	Design to generate solutions to agreed policy problems
Improvisational	Design as a practice of interacting within policy making	To enable policy making to be more open in the face of unfolding events and experiences	A responsive process where policy negotiates among plural world views	Design to open up policy making to plural views
Generative	Design regenerating policy making	To facilitate the re-envisioning of policy making	A generative space where policy emerges from the decentring of different world views	Design disrupting or unsettling assumptions about policy making

An instrumental relationship between design and policy

In this relationship, design is seen as providing a particular set of methods that can be instrumentalised in policy making to achieve goals that have already been specified. Design is valued in terms of how it can improve the way things are already being done. Theoretically this kind of relationship aligns with Simon's 'design science' (1969), in which design takes the form of methodical activities in which 'problems' are narrow or 'tame', amenable to calculations about where a good course of action lies (Simon, 1996). Other scholars have identified the strong utilitarian roots of much policy design thinking and the 'optimisation', 'compliance' and 'deterrence' goals to which such design can be put (Howlett, 2018). Problems and goals are given and conceived of as internal to the policy ecology rather than as multidimensional and existing beyond the boundaries of a given policy issue.

The policy process is largely perceived as a technocratic endeavour, primarily because the aim is to deliver democratically mandated policy goals, aligned with the Weberian distinction between the underlying values and goals of policy being set by politicians, with civil servants carrying out the operational work of policy implementation. Policy making involves the selection of tools best suited to the optimal process within a given context, set of political and ideological priorities, and understanding of how the world is. A given 'problem' and a 'solution' towards a given goal, can be seen as discrete and separate things to be bridged methodically in a rational and linear way through the expert selection of the 'right' building blocks to achieve an intended purpose. In an *instrumental* relationship, designers are seen as expert on these methods, but policy makers retain authority in relation to the overall policy domain, wider system, process, paths/goals and quality/valuation criteria.

A particular concern in policy making is how to ensure various forms of 'compliance' (Howlett, 2018: 101) with the intended aims of a policy, whether that be citizens responding in particular ways to interventions (John et al, 2019), or the avoidance of unintended uses of discretion by 'alienated' policy delivery agents (Aktas et al, 2023). *Instrumental* design approaches have been used to increase compliance, leading to improved policy outcomes, with benefits for some groups of citizens in terms of health and wealth, for example (Hallsworth and Kirkman, 2020). Design methods, alongside others available to policy makers, are valued in terms of qualities such as efficacy, efficiency and certainty (for example, Howlett, 2018).

An illustration of an *instrumental* use of design in policy may be the use of design practices to reduce the bureaucratic burden of navigating government systems so that users have a clear, consistent, streamlined and reliable way of accessing a service or resource. For example, by designers researching user needs through interviews observations or ethnographic film-making or collaborative mapping (Drew, 2016) they could identify the difficulties being experienced. This evidence may then be used to develop detailed evidence-based visualisation of a user's 'journey' through a service (Hope and Knight, 2021; Villa Alvarez et al, 2022). Through using co-design workshops with those trying to use or access government services (Dimopoulos-Bick et al, 2018; Trischler et al, 2019), designers can secure further feedback and input, which would allow them to put forward improvements to 'touchpoints' where citizens engage with public services (Hope and Knight, 2021). The focus of these improvements may include reducing demand (Cairney and St. Denny, 2020) digitising a service to increase accessibility, tailoring how a service is communicated to be more appropriate

to target groups to reduce reliance on government support and errors in completing forms and increase understanding of any eligibility criteria. Such measures are not only likely to enhance the compliance and satisfaction of services users, but also create efficiencies in administering a service, and help to better fulfil the original policy intent. Cycles of prototyping could also be used to test these improvements at a small scale before implementing more widely (Kimbell and Bailey, 2017; Dixon, 2023).

An improvisational relationship between design and policy

The second relationship between design and policy that we identify is *improvisational*, in which the purpose of design is to support policy making in responding pragmatically to situations and problems within an unfolding and dynamic policy landscape (Turnbull, 2017; Colebatch, 2018; Hoppe, 2018).

Here, design is seen as a capability embedded within skilled practices of policy making, in response to 'problems' that are seen to include those both tame and 'wicked' (Rittel and Webber, 1973). The relation between problem(s) and solution(s) may not be straightforward but rather be understood as 'concomitant' (Rittel and Webber, 1973), 'oscillating' (Cross, 1992), 'co-evolving' (Maher and Boulanger, 1996; Dorst and Cross, 2001), and amenable to 'reframing' (Dorst, 2006). Design methods allow active inquiry to problems and solutions through a flexible, fluid and expansive repertoire of approaches that can be brought to bear in particular ways throughout dynamic policy-making processes (Chua, 2009; Crilly, 2021).

Policy making is perceived as operating in relation to multiple complex processes and institutions understood in terms of 'bricolage' (Lanzara, 1998). This perception acknowledges limitations of traditional linear approaches, including practical limits such as the necessarily partial access to information available to policy makers, and their limited cognitive capacity to model and analyse all possible alternatives. Design offers ways of acknowledging and navigating uncertainties, as well as bringing a prospective and creative perspective (Romme and Meijer, 2020) in contexts of policy making characterised by 'conflict, confusion, cross purposes, inefficiencies, and learning-by-doing' (Grindle, 2004: 545). In such contexts, policy making is not fixed, linear or finite but a continuous process of 'muddling through' (Lindblom, 1959), where policy is always in flux and incrementalism is the only change possible (Kingdon, 1984). Here, design draws together advanced professional expertise, intuitive ways of knowing, and iteration through trial and error rooted in Deweyan 'commonsense inquiry' (Schön, 1983; Dixon, 2019), thereby contributing to innovation in the face of path dependency, and in a broader context of resource constraint, risk aversion and lack of trust (Durose and Lowndes, 2021). Design 'knowledge-in-action' (Dixon, 2023) makes things happen through, for example, exploratory research and prototyping that foreground design capacity to engage with the 'particular' rather than the general (Buchanan, 1992), connecting abstract concepts and principles to lived experience.

An example of an *improvisational* use of design in policy would be using different methods to gather user insight on the development of a new policy intervention, such as the introduction of a new tax or benefit, where little existing guidance was available. Public input could, for instance, be sought through forums to bring together different stakeholders to express their opinions and contribute to mapping the policy problem that the intervention is intended to address (Trischler and Scott, 2016) or

testing different scenarios (Bason, 2017). Through such conversations – alongside interviews or observational field studies (Trischler and Scott, 2016) – public priorities and areas of mutual compromise may be identified. Working in this way – alongside synthesising other forms of evidence and research – can help to develop an approach that resonates or would be credible with those it aims to benefit or target. In addition, such approaches can help to surface uncertainties, as well as pre-empting unintended consequences or problems, mitigating challenges such as complexity or confusion, and exploring options before implementation (Williams et al, 2023).

A generative relationship between design and policy

Third, we identify a *generative* relationship between design and policy, in which the purpose of design is to transform the policy domain by facilitating a re-envisioning of policy that accommodates other, emergent and future political subjectivities. Here, design creates or supports *generative* spaces where policy can emerge from decentring dominant world views and articulating ontological assumptions. Design can thus open for the imagination and proposal of alternatives, including other world views, perspectives and priorities, thus potentially redistributing agency to policy actors beyond existing institutional framings.

Here, the starting point is recognition that, fundamentally, 'problems' are constructed (Keshavarz, 2018; Najar, 2022: 33). Policy institutions and processes are constituted as porous, open-ended and irreducibly contestable, to be investigated and remade, in part through design (DiSalvo, 2022). In this relationship, goals are not about 'solving' problems but, rather, articulations that make visible or even tangible underlying assumptions, paradoxes, alternatives and new possibilities (Lury and Marres, 2015). Indeed, speculating on possible 'problems' becomes a constructive part of processes in this relationship, for example 'inventive problem-making' (Fraser, 2006; DiSalvo, 2022). There is no end-state at which to arrive, but an anticipation of multiple possible future states to explore, through 'future world-making' (Hillgren et al, 2020) taking note of who or what is included and excluded.

In this relationship, policy making would welcome 'agonistic pluralism' not only as endemic but also as a prerequisite for democracy (Mouffe, 2020). Policy making would then engage with processes of (re)politicisation that are vital in the public sphere and to avoid narrowing democracy, and which can also work to help counter public mistrust (Flinders and Wood, 2014). 'Incompleteness' (Garud et al, 2008; Telier et al, 2011; Durose and Lowndes, 2021) is an intended positive design outcome. Policies come into being through practice in ways that cannot be specified in advance (Marres et al, 2018; Dixon, 2019). Design may try to unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of, and stability within, worlds (or domains) addressed through policy making, also productively acknowledging difference and contestation (DiSalvo, 2012; Björgvinsson et al, 2012). Contestation is seen as continuous and permanent, whether due to recognition of inescapable power relations and asymmetries (Mouffe, 2005) or to more fundamental incommensurabilities (Foucault, 1970), in which, arguably, it is precisely the ongoing possibility of 'gaps' and 'other worlds' that constitute 'democracy' (Rancière, 1995).

What this can look like in practice is using a range of design techniques to explore and discuss possibilities, framed as adversarial (DiSalvo, 2012), dissensual (Kesharvarz

and Mazé, 2013) or counterfactual (Hillgren et al, 2020) activities, to challenge the limits and stable order of what and who counts in politics and policy making, thus expanding our sensibilities about the limits of what is possible, or what has been called a 'distribution of the sensible' (Rancière, 2004). Exposing, representing and designing on behalf of political subjects and subjectivities that may be excluded or invisible, for example, may address 'democratic deficits' by including 'more than human' approaches to spatial design and policy (Metzger, 2014), for example, through 'reworlding' (Huybrechts et al, 2022).

An example of a *generative* use of design within policy may involve different ways to nurture a 'capacity for imagination' (Hillgren et al, 2020: 110). The use of design approaches here is to challenge entrenched ways of thinking and doing, and to foster alternative ways to address critical policy challenges such as the climate emergency or to embed values within policy, such as equality or justice. Speculative techniques combining the use of designed objects or 'props' – offering a tangible focus for engagement but sufficient ambiguity to allow discussion and interpretation – can be coupled with provocative 'what if' questions to help imagine new possibilities (Light, 2020; Drew, 2016; Hillgren et al, 2020). Another approach could be 'world-making', using short written narratives to depict different counterfactual worlds that can then be constituted and materially represented to promote critical reflection (Hillgren et al, 2020). Huybrechts et al (2022) refer to 'reworlding' to describe the use of 'everyday utopias' (Cooper, 2013) exemplifying alternative responses to, for example, climate change – such as local food cooperatives, community gardens or renewable energy projects – as a situated means of challenging dominant perspectives on a given issue, as well as to inspire and engage. Across these methods, emphasis is given to perceiving the world as 'designed, therefore designable' (Light, 2020).

What are the implications of different relationships between design and policy making?

Our distinction between the three relationships allows us to bring greater clarity to how the same design practices can be mobilised very differently depending on the design–policy relationship. There may be clear resemblances in the object of design or the design expertise manifested in each of three relationships; however, these can have very different purposes within policy making: for example, for *instrumental* purposes as a tool, for facilitating *improvisation* or for *generating* ways of understanding policy including other world views. The design of 'prototypes', for instance, can be found in all three relations. In the first relationship, when design is used as a tool for policy making, iterative prototyping can help fine-tune policy development and the effective delivery of a new service to achieve policy objectives, aligning policy intent with service delivery. Within improvisational policy making, prototyping can help ongoing learning and adjustment to a changing environment, including emergent data sources, public perceptions and policy (re)framings. In the third relation, in which design regenerates policy making, exploratory prototyping can help articulate different understandings of a policy domain and negotiate alignment between competing world views.

Each of the three relationships also poses questions about whose knowledge or expertise is recognised, and who are the 'designers' (see Table 2). While some studies of design and policy have foregrounded the expertise of professional designers, there

Table 2: Who designs and what knowledge is foregrounded in the different relationships

Relationship between design and policy making	Whose/what knowledge	Who are the designers?	Relationship to design research literatures
Design as a tool for policy making	Emphasis on specific professionalised forms of knowledge useful to the policy process	Polic makers and professional designers	First- and second-generation design methods, service design
Design as improvisation within policy making	Explicit recognition of plural kinds of knowledge/ co-construction of knowledge	Policy makers and designers, plus users/those with lived experience of a given policy issue	Participatory design, service design, transition design
Design regenerating policy making	Conscious effort to engage hidden, unknown or occluded knowledges	Recognition of diverse knowledges and perspectives	Anticipatory/speculative design, ecosystem design

is also potential to look more broadly at design capabilities spread across teams and organisations, which may not consider themselves as 'designers'.

Design as a tool for policy making, as set out in Table 2, implies a narrow recognition of the kind of expertise or knowledge that may be valuable, in which design capability is one set of competences among many required within policy institutions. Such capability is seen as primarily held by professional designers, though it can be accessed by policy makers through specialised training and toolkits. Such forms of design are associated with the first or second generation of 'design methods' (compare Huppatz, 2015). Examples of how this relationship is manifested in practice are design toolkits comprising methods and techniques premised on an established problem and clear solution and set out a series of widely applicable clear steps or formula of 'how you do design', ideally replicable across contexts. This approach is a prevalent form of 'design for policy', but risks playing into the idea of design as a set of tools to be picked up and put down, with limited scope and potential for changing or further developing the policy process itself. As a result, opportunities to address policy issues through new kinds of thinking and practice may be missed, because the dominant world view, or simply the constraints of the political context, are reinforced rather than explored or challenged.

The second policy–design relationship in Table 2 outlines the implications for knowledge and roles in design as a practice of interaction. This relationship suggests a recognition of and valuing the knowledge and expertise of those with lived experience of a given issue, as active participants in the (re)construction and exploration of 'problems' and 'solutions' within the policy process. For example, such relationships often involve practical experiments involving intervention, negotiation, iteration and evaluation within spaces such as 'living labs', 'design sprints' or even 'experimental governance' (Annala et al, 2015). This use of design within policy is evident in contemporary practice, but its value may depend on how a given policy issue is framed, its amenability to reframing and interaction with external factors. While expertise concerning interaction is recognised as being held by designers, relevant knowledge is seen as more widespread, distributed across practitioners and stakeholders engaged or supported to accumulate relevant experience within complex policy processes. Design in/as interaction can be a means to resolve paradoxes between discourses in

a design situation (Dorst, 2006), to allow porosity to and synthesis of varied forms of expertise, and to challenge institutional constraints. An improvisational relation between design and policy entails a balancing act between achieving a (potentially uneasy) consensus and celebrating plurality in participation, in which legitimacy of this approach typically relies on stakeholder buy-in rather than hard data and replicability. While this relationship is premised on innovation and novel solutions and framings within policy making, a limitation is that outcomes are often incremental.

In the design-regenerating, policy-making relationship, there is implied a recognition of the need to engage with invisible or as yet unformulated perspectives and forms of knowledge, including those previously or regularly excluded from policy making. The expertise mobilised is technical and material, and also humanistic and social (Buchanan, 1989), involving meaning-making (Krippendorff, 2006), and even post-humanistic recognition of the entanglement, agency and impacts of others, including natural and non-human entities, (im)material infrastructures, and climate systems as political matters relevant to policy making. While some such expertise is held by designers, relevant knowledge is often more widespread, distributed across various advanced practitioners, holders of specifically situated, indigenous and otherwise specialised knowledges, and those who can integrate such world views within complex policy processes. Design here can have a critical and disruptive purpose, thus relevant practice may fall outside the connotation of 'design *for* policy' that design may only ever take a service or subordinate relation to policy making and policy makers. This may be aligned with literatures on agonism, anticipation and fabulation in design, and may be manifested through, for example, the use of creative practices for transformational futuring or even 'reworlding' (Huybrechts et al, 2022). This use of design within policy is as yet the most nascent, perhaps because of the implicit political challenge posed, which may put off incumbent policy makers charged with making policy work as it is.

Discussion

We can imagine that these relationships may be evident simultaneously within policy making, possibly used in complementary or competing ways within the same process, at the same time, by different stakeholders. In this section, we consider how these relationships may be mediated by temporal dynamics, such as the point in the policy process or in the electoral cycle, and spatial dynamics, for example, at different levels of and in different environments for policy making. Consideration of these dynamics inevitably foregrounds questions of power (see Durose and Lowndes, 2021).

Recognising that policy making takes place in a political environment, policy makers are necessarily influenced by factors beyond their control, notably the electoral cycle, which can influence the kinds of relationships with design that policy makers can engage with. For example, proximity to an election may limit more *generative* relationships, the immediate aftermath of an election may conversely allow for more *generative* relationships or bring closer focus to an *instrumental* relationship focused on simply getting things done. *Improvisational* relationships may be noted if an election result is particularly close and it is of clear political importance to reach out to shore up legitimacy.

We may also think about spatial dynamics in terms of central–local relations. For example, there may be differences between levels of government in the degree to

which actors have space to experiment with different relationships: for example, those in central government charged with formulating policy to respond to a new challenge where policy has not previously been developed may have greater scope to engage in a *generative* relationship with design, whereas local policy makers charged with delivery of a policy with strict performance targets and measures may be limited to more *instrumental* or *improvisational* relationships. If we further consider not only policy design, but policy implementation, while 'top down' policy intentions might be engaging with design *instrumentally* there may also be scope for policy actors on the frontline to embrace contrasting *improvisational* and/or *generative* logics of design for policy. Although, discretion remains bounded, policy actors face constraints, and it is not necessarily in their gift to be wholly *generative*.

It is relevant to acknowledge that the term 'policy maker' is a shorthand that obscures different kinds of clearly demarcated public service roles, ranging from policy makers in central government working closely with politicians to translate and realise their agendas, to analysts focusing on evidence-informed approaches to underpin policy options and decisions. It is also important to look beyond central government, and consider those policy makers working at subnational levels but in a context of a highly centralised governance landscape, and the different informal policy communities and networks seeking to mobilise for change. The positioning of actors within this broader policy-making landscape shapes the motivation and scope of their potential engagement with new repertoires of practice, including design. As noted, the *political* in the context of policy making is not only that with a small 'p' concerned with the role of public servants in delivering democratically mandated policy goals.

We also note that the different relationships between design and policy are, as always, mediated by power (Lewis et al, 2020; Durose and Lowndes, 2021). Current policy making predominantly involves design in terms of an *instrumental* relationship, which reflects limits not only on design but on policy makers to shape and challenge policy making. However, there are examples of use of design as *improvisation*, often related to demands for greater legitimacy within policy making. The level of challenge currently faced by policy making – from heightened urgency to radical uncertainty – perhaps suggests the need and indeed demand for greater future use of design as a means of enabling a more *(re)generative* approach to policy making.

Distinguishing between 'politics' and 'the political' (Mouffe, 2005) can add to understanding the potential scope for design in policy making. In effect, the policy process may be understood as a manifestation of politics. If the policy process is seen as the attempt to find an answer to an agreed problem, design may be understood *instrumentally* simply as a tool that can be easily picked up and put down, in service to policy makers reaching their existing goals. Design is also, however, recognised for its potential to challenge ontological assumptions, to open and hold space for agonistic debate. In this sense, design could be seen as a force for a more political, thus contingent and contestable, policy process that revisits and *regenerates* the core of what and who policy making is for. In policy making seen as inherently uncertain, design can be a means to enhance *interaction* that allows policy makers to navigate their environment. In this article, we suggest that the design can be all three, but that this is mediated through not only spatial and temporal, but also through power dynamics, which include the tenacious antecedents of the electoral cycle, central–local relations and entrenched practices of policy making.

Conclusion

We make two contributions in this article. The first is to problematise the 'for' in design for policy. The second contribution is to start to answer the question – if design is for policy, then what is it doing? The typology set out in the article distinguishes different relationships between design and policy making, putting forward a range of potentially fruitful relationships between design and policy, beyond design being in service to policy. While a typology such as ours can have applied value (as a 'heuristic' relevant to practitioners), we also aim to contribute beyond 'field problems' to academic knowledge (Meijer, 2025) as well as to critical and interdisciplinary discussions sensitised to context and politics. We offer a critique of literature that explains the interaction of design and policy by listing practices (such as prototyping or visualisation), but that misses the reasons why and how those practices are being used. Practices do not stand on their own; their purpose gives them meaning and shape. We build on and advance scholarship (for example, Howlett, 2020; Lewis et al, 2020; Peters, 2020) that anchors design in relation to the demands, constraints and politics of policy making, taking account of the quite different forms of relationship between design (as a thing) and policy design (as a process) can have; for, but also with, or sometimes against.

Our typology differentiates roles of design in policy along the lines of their ultimate purpose, scope and terms on which design and policy interact, rather than in terms of the object to which design is applied. A defensible analytical typology must be able to delineate among concepts (Durose et al, 2022), and take explanation beyond the merely tautological. If the relationship between design and policy is defined by the object of design – for example, service design or user-experience design and so on – this does not advance our understanding of what design is beyond the object to which design is applied. Analytically strong explanations also need to be able to explain the different purposes to which design might be put, which in our case also includes contestation over whether and how far design serves or challenges existing paradigms. Thus, we move the debate beyond discussions of 'design *for* policy'. Furthermore, articulating a *generative* relationship brings into the conversation intellectual and knowledge areas within design that go beyond serving the well-recognised needs of technocratic and political framings of policy making – including the challenges of radical uncertainty, public legitimacy and depoliticisation and repoliticisation that also characterise policy making today. Through our analysis and proposed typology, we aim to address the shortcomings of overly specific and overly homogenising understandings of design in the policy space.

One question a heuristic like ours might raise is whether there is an implied hierarchy between the three relationships. Ultimately this is a question that is answerable by those engaging in policy and design. It might be adjudicated based on a contingent understanding of the need for different kinds of purposes, at different points in time, for different actors. Which kind of relationship is preferred can also be informed by the values of the advocate. Inevitably some of our biases will probably show through in the tone and presentation – biases that may also differ between the authors based on our intellectual and disciplinary leanings. However, the typology itself seeks to be agnostic on such matters of judgement.

What kinds of contexts, or what kinds of capacities are needed if such heuristics are to be used and useful? Policy actors (including and not limited to politicians, civil servants, designers, civil society actors, and academics) are 'reflective practitioners'

(Schön, 1983; Boswell, 2023), who 'work in the context of multiple, and not necessarily compatible frames of meaning' (Durose and Lowndes, 2021: 1785). They operate between the political realities that constrain policy choices and the lived experience of those affected by such choices (Boswell, 2023). Indeed, such actors may find 'advantages in accepting contradiction and friction' (Durose and Lowndes, 2021: 1785) between the different relationships, particularly in a context of uncertainty, complexity and contestation (Boswell, 2023). So, policy actors may draw on an *instrumental* relationship with design to advance 'simple claims' (in the face of complexity), engage in an *improvisational* relationship to justify action in the face of uncertainty, and approach design more *generatively* to sustain buy-in (in the face of a plurality of clashing values and interests) (Boswell, 2023). In this sense, it is important to understand policy actors as agents who are aware of, and can draw upon, design to respond to the challenges of the policy environment they work within. Acknowledging design in relation to policy in terms that are differentiated and nuanced also means recognising policy makers as sophisticated, thoughtful actors within the policy process, while acknowledging and critically examining where expertise and power lies.

We argue that identifying and surfacing different relationships between design and policy help us understand the potential and consequences for change in public policy today. In relation to our typology, we will continue to refine our understanding through systematic examination of the articulations and manifestations of design for/and policy in the emerging and rapidly growing field in between. Future research and practice development could start to map out variations in practices, thus advancing understandings of under what conditions, and at what places and times, these different relationships play out and interact. Our intention is that our typology enables a more critical understanding of the different intents and implications at play within the 'design turn' in policy and opens up new agendas within design research and political science, and indeed in policy making and practice.

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Research ethics statement

Ethical approval was not sought for the present study because it did not include human or non-human participants.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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