Design as a phronetic approach to policy making

This position paper is an expansion on a talk given at the Faultlines Design Research Conference in June 2015.

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Taking as a starting point the contention by Smith and Otto (2014) that design anthropology offers a "distinct way of knowing that incorporates both analysing and doing in the process of constructing knowledge" this position paper explores what this distinctiveness may mean in a policy design context. The position paper broadly supports the contention but will use environmental policy as frame through which the value of the distinctiveness can be expressed.

In order to put some shape on this value, Flyvbjerg's contemporary interpretation of the Aristotelian intellectual virtue of phronesis will be adopted. While Flyvbjerg argued that social science needed to become phronetic in order to remain meaningful and relevant, this position paper is suggesting that design anthropology is in a sense already phronetic but that this can be amplified to increase its perceived value within a policy context. It will argue in support of the development of design anthropology as a way of doing policy design but also argue that a phronetic approach can help situate design anthropology in contrast to the other disciplines that have traditionally informed policy design.

It is accepted that there is a deeper and wider debate on the distinctiveness of design in relation to other disciplines, particularly science, but this is not something that can be dealt with effectively in a short position paper.

Policy design

If you happen to have an interest in the relationships between policy and publics, this is an exciting time to be conducting design research. Having said that, the design research and practice community is a relatively new entrant to the debate on policy design as it is already a decades old topic of study (Bobrow, 2006; Dryzek, 1983; Howlett, 2011; May, 1991; Parsons, 1995).

The existing literature, particularly from the political sciences, defines policy design in various ways that may seem intuitive or axiomatic to designers. For

example, Dryzek and Ripley (2008) defined policy design as the "conscious invention, development, and application of patterns of action in problem resolution". Howlett (Howlett, 2011) suggested that policy design can be considered as the ideal configurations of "policy elements" that are directed at achieving specific outcomes within a governance context and that "meta-policy designing" is the process by which these ideal types are identified and refined.

Lejano (2006) suggests that policy design is a dialectic between the "social construction" and "ecological adaptation" of policy or in other terms finding a balance between 'principle' and 'context'. In this sense, policy design is much more than simple solutionism in that it considers the practices of policy making, framing of policy problems and the evaluation and learning mechanisms of policy makers.

More recently a growing community of design researchers and practitioners have been presenting design as a pragmatic yet speculative approach that counterpoints the dominant normative, ideological or utopian approaches to policy making.

Policy as designed, the dilemma

Now that design researchers and practitioners are more frequently working in the policy space there is a need to understand the distinctiveness of their 'way of knowing' compared to other disciplines. Rather than discuss policy in a generalised and all encompassing sense it will be useful to focus on one policy domain, in this case environmental policy.

Many governments seek to bring about pro-environmental behaviour through the design of semi-public infrastructures, public information campaigns and various demand-side interventions (e.g. procurement) as well as non-regulatory interventions (e.g. business support programmes, demonstration projects). There is a recognition that many of these interventions are ineffective, especially when viewed from the perspective of macro-level sustainability outcomes.

As a response to the ineffectiveness of policy interventions, the current approaches to policy making have been contested in the literature from a number of perspectives. Two areas where these approaches to policy have been contested in include (1) the linear perspectives that underpin the design of policy interventions for

eco-innovation and sustainable design (O'Rafferty, 2012) and (2) the dominance of natural science perspectives in the formation of policies for pro-environmental behaviour change of individuals (Hargreaves, 2012).

While both these challenges to the existing approaches to policy making focus on different areas within the environmental policy context (i.e. Business and individuals) they share similar concerns. For example, the policy interventions aimed at eco-innovation and sustainable design are flawed because they undervalue the systemic, socio-technical and co-evolutionary nature of innovation and design. Whereas, the policy interventions for pro-environmental behaviour are flawed because they undervalue the emerging social practice perspectives, embodied dimensions of everyday life and the dynamic socio-materiality of behaviour.

Across these two areas there has been a demand to focus on what Hobson terms 'actual practices in situ' (2006). This suggests that policy design should be less focussed on the mechanisms and instrumental rationality of policy making and instead focus on the different aspects of sense making and meaning making in policy. This would place greater emphasis on the role of lived experience in shaping interpretation and sense making. In this context design anthropology can play a key role through the use of participant-observer ethnographic methods and artefact mediated experimentalism.

Distinctiveness as phronesis

To take this one step further and elaborate on the potential distinctiveness of design anthropology, we can build on the principles contained in Flyvbjerg's call for a phronetic social science. In 2001, Flyvbjerg argued that, in its form at that time, social science had "failed as science" (Flyvbjerg, 2001). A key basis of Flyvbjerg's argument was that social science had sought to emulate natural sciences and engineering in producing universal and context-independent models and theories. He argued that the dominant emphasis on scientific and technical knowledge (episteme and techne) was unable adequately to "capture the role of context, values and power in social life".

Flyvbjerg drew on a number of theoretical perspectives when making his argument not least the Bourdieun understanding that social behaviour draws its

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meaning from its temporal and social context. Flyvbjerg was arguing that instead of social science seeking to emulate the natural sciences or engineering in pursuit of episteme or techne, social science should seek to act as a form of phronesis for society. Importantly Flyvbjerg argued that phronesis is a form of practical wisdom originating from research in the "real world" and it should concern the analysis of values through deliberation, judgement and choice.

When we look to the emerging role of design anthropology we can see a number of potential benefits. These include the potential to work through a social practice lens and to develop 'practical consciousness' though the process of co-creation and experimentalism. Despite these possibilities of design anthropology there is a risk that the design research and practice community will adopt a narrow instrumentalism with a view to acting as a consultant to dominant interests. Hargraves (2011) suggested that a narrow instrumentalism can only facilitate incremental reforms that reproduce and reinforce particular realities, rather than question the dominant social conventions for example, those that may be the root causes of unsustainability. Blühdorn and Welsh (2007) described this dilemma in the environmental context as the risk of 'a service-provider mentality' that acts solely in the interests of weak ecological modernisation.

In addition to the analytical and constructive nature of design anthropology which is in part phronetic, there is a need to develop the value-rational checks and balances. From a design anthropology perspective, a truely phronetic approach would demand that design shifts from solely articulating and making desirable and reinforcing existing policy perspectives and power structures towards seeking to articulate dialogically the values and interests of the public within policymaking. In doing so, design anthropology may temper the instrumental rationality of policy making and challenge the dominance of scientific and technical knowledge by providing an approach that is human centered, action oriented, reflexive and communicative.

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