2025:1

Reflections

EXPERIO LAB

A reflection based on discussions between Joseph Harrington, Matilda Legeby, Karin Petrusson and Kajsa Westling

ExperioLab Reflections

Experio Lab proudly presents Experio Reflections – a series of texts, films, or conversations designed to spark dialogue about design-driven practice and its intersections with present-day society, as well as its role in shaping the future we aspire to create. From Experio Lab's perspective as practitioners, we reflect on our journey to understand and define the role of design within the public sector. Through sharing our insights, experiences, and reflections, we invite readers to join us in exploring these topics. Our hope is to spark meaningful conversations, exchange perspectives, and contribute to rethinking public sector structures, norms, and operations.

For this first reflection, we took a broader view of our design practice in the public sector and asked ourselves: Why are we developing our practices the way we are? What influences and shape our work? And what directions do we see as essential for the future development of design in public systems?

To help us navigate the evolution of design in the public sector, Joseph Harrington helped us by providing insights into how three dominant paradigms have shaped public systems over time. These paradigms do not follow a strictly linear progression; instead, they often overlap, with remnants of previous approaches persisting within new frameworks. Rather than attempting to provide a comprehensive historical account of these shifts, we offer a perspective on how design and Experio Lab's practices intersect with and contribute to the ongoing evolution of public systems.

This text is based on discussions between Joseph Harrington, Matilda Legeby, Karin Petrusson and Kajsa Westling. Visual design by Karin Petrusson and Jo Harrington.

About us

Experio Lab is a collaborative hub where individuals, public organizations, and researchers come together to exchange experiences, co-create knowledge and build capacity around design, service innovation and user-driven development in the welfare sector. Founded within Region Värmland, Experio Lab has since 2013 expanded its reach through collaboration with a network of regions and municipalities across Sweden. Experio Lab is shaped by many and brings together those who design within the public sector with a shared commitment to person-centered development.

Finding a place: Designing in the shifting paradigms of public systems management

Overview

In this text we present a perspective on the evolution of public systems and public sector management, and how design and the act of designing have adapted to meet these shifting paradigms. At the heart of these dynamics is the increasing awareness of the complexity of human needs and the interdependence of the systems that seek to meet them. This challenge has driven the need for new ways of thinking and working, in which designing has been, and continues to be, well-positioned to contribute.

We present an outline of the development of public system paradigms and their related shift in design practices:

- ***New Public Management (NPM) // Service Design:*** *The rise of user centric design focus with-in silo structures*

- ***Joined-Up and Integrated Public Systems // Systemic Design:*** *The rise of integrated practices*

- ***Missions-Oriented approaches // Emergent Design:*** *The rise of designing across levels, creating conditions for collaborations and ideas to emerge from local contexts.*
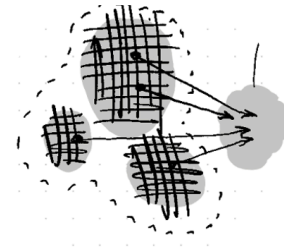
Through bringing to our attention these paradigms and how they shape our ways of thinking and doing, we hope to provide a lens in which to better enable us to reflect on *the role of designing* in this evolving landscape. By *designing*, we mean the act of intentionally creating or transforming through considered, creative and critical processes.
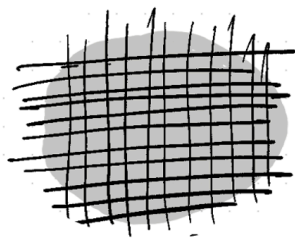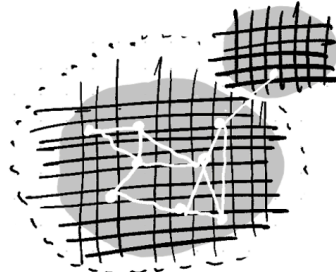
New Public Management   **Joined-up government**   **Missions-oriented government**

Three Dominant Paradigms of Public Systems

New Public Management (NPM) // Service Design: *The rise of user centric design focus with-in silo structures*

Emerging in the latter half of the 20th century, NPM is a term that emerged as a way to understand the dominant paradigms of public management and administration. We can understand NPM as rooted in principles of efficiency, specialization, and performance measurement. It draws inspiration from wider sector management techniques to optimize public services by breaking them down into discrete, measurable components. The idea is to atomize systems to improve each part through careful performance tracking, standardization, and specialization. This approach promises improved outcomes through precision and accountability. Although seen as a paradigm of public management from a previous millenia - NPM can still be seen as a potent and often dominating way of understanding what good public management is. There are also valuable aspects of NPM that can be developed and transferred into future paradigms.

Designing for the NPM paradigm

It was within the dominant paradigm of NPM that we can see designing becoming increasingly valued and utilised in public systems. From being applied to industrial and product development it offered tools and approaches to better understand and improve service delivery and results. Key to this was taking the customer or user centered development approach from the private sector, and working with this in public service environments such as healthcare. The main focus was to see service users as customers in order to improve experiences of services, and by doing so increasing their efficacy. It also included increased engagement of people in specific touchpoints or processes. Here the design-facilitation was focused on logical, linear processes where different factors were analysed to understand the experience of the end-user.

This development led to the emergence of new distinct disciplinary perspectives of designing, such as service design. These perspectives aimed to emphasise the underlying principles and processes of designing services, and by doing so better increase their quality, efficacy and applicability.

The foundation and establishment of Experio Lab can be seen in the light of this development. Experio Lab, which was founded in 2013 within the region of Värmland, initially contributed to introducing design-led and participatory methods within the healthcare sector. By co-creating better services with patients, families, and staff, the lab sought to enhance the user experience and improve outcomes.

One example comes from Region Västernorrland, where service design was used to improve the patient journey for patients with suspected hip fractures—from the moment of the fall to the operating table. Another example is Sös Innovation, using service design methods to enhance the sense of security and well-being among patients and their relatives visiting Södersjukhuset's emergency room, thereby improving their overall experience during their stay.

Joined-Up Public Systems // Systemic Design: *The rise of integrated practices*

For the last three decades there has been a growing awareness that NPM's focus on atomization and specialization has led to siloed and mechanistic service delivery and organisation. These conditions, rather than improve efficiencies and effectiveness, instead appear to lead to limited or poor outcomes when dealing with the complex, interrelated challenges of people's lives. As a result, NPMs dominance as a paradigm of public service has been challenged by a paradigm that instead emphasizes joining-up and integration over separation and specialisation. This aims at creating more holistic and person-centered systems. We can witness the prevalence of this second paradigm in the many integration projects within and across different silos of public services, such as programmes seeking to integrate healthcare services with social care, employment, housing, etc.

Designing for Joined-Up Public Systems

The emergence of this paradigm has seen the activity of designing shift and expand from a focus on improving individual service elements, to being applied to facilitating processes and coordination of multiple services. Here we see a shift from the traditional disciplinary craft orientation of design (product, graphic, etc.) to being promoted as a strategy or "way of thinking".

With this expanded attention of designing came greater attention to system perspectives, with greater emphasis placed on mapping and understanding the interactions and relationships between different elements of a service system.

Similarly in Experio Lab's evolution, the focus has over time shifted towards trying to foster more systemic design practices—working within and across systems to help public sector actors address a fragmented service delivery. Experio Lab in 2020 partnered with the Center for Service Research at Karlstad University to establish Samhällsnytta, a non-profit organization owned by the university. This initiative aims to host and drive national projects to further develop methods for systemic design, reinforcing the lab's mission to reshape how the public sector approaches complex societal issues.

Practices of systemic designing within Experio Lab and Samhällsnytta have been developed through collaboration with seven governmental inquiries. These inquiries have been tasked with reforming healthcare and social service systems for citizens with complex needs, ranging from topics such as elderly care, individuals with substance use disorder, children and youth taken into care, and the interoperable exchange of health data across sectors. Another example is Samsjuklighetsutredningen, aiming at improving services for individuals with both mental health and addiction issues. Designers in Experio Lab have constructed a co-creative policy design process where all actors in the system - patients and their families, health and social care professionals and managers at local, regional and national levels - participate.

In the first element of this process, interviews and workshops with users inform goals that state what individuals value when interacting with the system. The second step brings together professionals and managers to pinpoint the obstacles in the current system—both operational and institutional—that limit the ability to meet these goals. The third step focuses on early testing and evaluation of different proposals by a range of system actors by using prototypes, creating opportunities for the inquiry to present swift and well-founded solutions that can lead to real change.

Read more: (Systemdesign-och-oppen-policy---inspiration-for-regioner-och-kommuner-230322-2-1.pdf)

Missions-Oriented approaches // Emergent Design: *The rise of designing across levels, creating conditions for collaborations and ideas to emerge from local contexts.*

Despite the greater degrees of coordination achieved through integrated approaches, it is becoming increasingly clear that being more joined-up alone might not be enough to meet the complex challenges facing contemporary society. Examples here are challenges such as climate change and demographic developments putting mounting pressures on welfare systems. These issues often require innovative approaches where a range of actors, such as the public sector, businesses and civil society, need to collaborate to find new solutions and practices. There has consequently been a growing recognition that public systems, when dealing with complex challenges at great scale, need to encourage the entrepreneurial spirit of a more mission-oriented framework.

The concept of missions in public systems has been propelled by the work of Mariana Mazzucato, who drew inspiration from the apparent successes of grand projects like the US 1960s Apollo program. Here, we saw the use of missions (put the first US man on the moon and win the space race against the Soviets) to mobilise different parts of the system and to unite them around a common, ambitious goal.

Missions aim for system-wide impact, mobilizing resources and actors to address global challenges. Missions require a broad range of innovations and changes across systems. These can't be managed in isolated projects, and are often too complex to be bound within single programmes. Instead missions are often managed by a portfolio based approach, where activities can be distributed, but their connected and overall development and impact can be better tracked and understood.

Designing for Missions-Oriented public systems

The evolution of designing and the shifting focus towards a more missions-oriented paradigm are deeply interrelated. Much of the potential of designing has seen to be restricted by the constraining contexts of the ways systems are organised in silos. Missions promise a comparatively unrestrained context for designing, and designing offers the expertise, processes and tools to achieve the mission as quickly and cheaply as possible.

Missions also require processes of designing at many levels: from the identifying of the goals that they are oriented by, to the development processes that guide activity, to the array of experiments needed to break new ground.

Particularly in the Nordics, the missions-oriented paradigm is fast expanding and becoming a tenet in both political narratives and programmes of governmental reform, for example the strategic innovation program SustainGov.

This can be seen as a shift of designing from the margins to designing in the mainstream. As a practice, expertise and professional identity, designing might be seen to hold a more central place in the story of large scale public system development than ever before.

Emergent practices to meet the needs and opportunities of today

However, there are weaknesses in the missions oriented approach. The evidence of the impact of missions-oriented approaches is still weak and missions around the world can be seen to be struggling to realise the change they promised. Mission-oriented approaches can overly emphasise top down direction; such as aiming to achieve fixed goals, often defined by those currently in authority. Approaches that seek to explore complex issues and allow for more emergent development can be limited by a strong top-down focus. To avoid this, top-down processes should be balanced with so-called "bottom-up" approaches. The goal is to create an environment that supports ongoing adaptation and change, while keeping the needs of people and society at the center.

A key distinction between missions and emergent approaches is that, in the latter, the drive for change comes from individuals within the system itself. They identify challenges and opportunities based on their own context and experiences. Design is no longer solely a tool for problem-solving; instead, it is used to create conditions that foster environments where new ideas and collaborations can naturally emerge from within the system.

Reflection questions

- How do you experience the influence of the paradigms outlined in the text on your own practice?

- How can you balance bottom-up emergent approaches with top-down mission-driven approaches in your work?

Building Collaborative Arenas for Systemic Transformation

Our work in Experio Lab together with Samhällsnytta and Karlstads University has recognized the importance of creating "arenas" within public systems as a response to the shift towards more missions-oriented work, whilst maintaining the need for more emergent approaches in the public sector. We see that these spaces are essential for creating environments where actors can both develop greater alignment around shared missions, whilst also discovering deeper societal and institutional challenges that require ongoing change in the system.

An arena is designed to make multiple perspectives visible—from citizens with lived experiences of the system to frontline practitioners and decision-makers who holds authority of the system at different levels. It serves as a space where stakeholders can collectively explore complex challenges, helping participants gain a broader understanding of the system, its relationships, key obstacles, opportunities, and leverage points. Additionally, the arena facilitates the identification and navigation of existing barriers between stakeholders, fostering new ways of collaborating. The work in the arena is also helped by a vision-led and speculative approach, allowing participants to explore new possibilities and reimagine what the future could look like.

Examples of Arena-building from Experio Lab

Over the past few years, Experio Lab and Samhällsnytta has established multiple arenas, each designed with distinct purposes and approaches. One such arena, initiated by ExperioLab and Samhällsnytta and the Swedish government's Agenda 2030 Delegation, was the project "Nu börjar vi med barnen!" / "Now We Start with the Children!" This arena served as a platform for dialogue and policy development, focusing on building a proactive promotion system for the well-being of children and young people. One important goal was to explore how children's and young people's well-being could be strengthened through proactive and preventive measures. The initiative engaged approximately 330 children and youth, six municipalities, four regions, five governmental agencies, five national organizations, and researchers from three universities.

Experio Labs network of regions and municipalities, with its embedded design capacity, played a key role in shaping the structure of the arena, and leading the work in six local pilots. Within these local pilots a diverse range of experiments was initiated, exploring what a promotional system could be together with children and youth. The arena fostered both sustainable local engagement and development while contributing to national policy discussions. The insights and learnings from this initiative were included in the final report from the National Coordinator for Agenda 2030 to the Swedish government.

Read more: https://www.kau.se/samhallsnytta/nu-borjar-vi-med-barnen

Another arena has been constructed together with SALAR (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, SKR) to support the transition to the new Social Services Act, set to take effect in the summer of 2025. This arena was intentionally designed to foster collective exploration of new responses and initiatives that contribute to a more proactive and citizen-centered social service. The arena featured three interconnected explorations across different levels of society.

1. Micro: A network of 13 pilot municipalities testing new forms of social welfare services on a small scale, guided by the identified needs of citizens and frontline staff.

2. Meso: Insights from the micro arena are brought into a broader space for analysis, where representatives from government agencies, academia, politics, unions and civil society organizations collaborate to refine and assess potential solutions.

3. Macro: Key findings and joint analyses are elevated to a strategic decision-making level, where director-generals from several government authorities—each with significant influence on social welfare—engage in shaping policy direction and systemic transformation.

Read more: https://www.kau.se/samhallsnytta/tidiga-insikter-tidiga-insatser

These two examples of arenas were both designed to help stakeholders understand the system—its relationships, challenges, opportunities, and key leverage points—and to transform it by fostering collaboration across micro, meso, and macro levels. We are committed to deepening our understanding of "arena-ing" and refining approaches and methods that effectively bring system actors together to tackle complex societal challenges.

Samhällsnytta is also in the process of establishing a new arena for sustainable food production in collaboration with key stakeholders from the agricultural sector, aiming to foster innovation and long-term sustainability in food systems. This underlines the need to develop emergent design practices across several sectors of society, not just within the welfare sector.

At Experio Lab, our work continues as we explore emergent design practices within collaborative arenas, driven by our commitment to democratizing societal development. We believe that the voices and experiences of often marginalized groups—such as citizens and frontline staff—must carry greater weight in efforts to improve our systems. Policy should be developed together with the users of public services, ensuring that the way we organize and manage public systems supports frontline staff rather than adding to their burden.

We remain dedicated to deepening our understanding of the theories and approaches that shape these practices, continuously learning and evolving alongside other practitioners.

Reflection questions

- What role does design currently play in your organization or field?

- How has your own approach to design or development evolved over time in response to changes in public systems?

- What new skills or mindsets might be needed for the act of designing and for public servants to work effectively in complex, evolving systems?

- If you could create an arena for meaningful dialogue and co-creation, what would it look like? Who would need to be involved? What existing spaces in your organization or sector serve as arenas for reflection and experimentation?

This article will be followed up with further Reflections from Experio Lab, with its focus on methods we have developed and tested when working with emergent design practices.