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# Public Organizations and Wicked Problems

Design thinking gives public organizations the tools for approaching problems in a new way. But for design thinking to be applied successfully, it must first be clear to stakeholders what design thinking actually entails and for which issues this approach is suitable. This chapter defines a few terms and outlines for which issues this way of working can be of added value.

## SOCIAL DESIGN, DESIGN THINKING... WHAT'S IN A NAME?

In the 2014 study *SOCIALDESIGNFORWICKEDPROBLEMS*<sup>7</sup>, Tabo Goudswaard, Klaas Kuitenbrouwer and I used the term 'social design'. This term is at the heart of what this book talks about. It's about design processes and solutions that have been created to have a positive influence on society's wellbeing. That said, 'social design' is also a term with many limitations. Can 'service design' also be 'social design'? And isn't every good design actually in principle 'social design'?

Another term that's used a lot (and equally maligned) is 'design thinking'. This term is used everywhere and refers to methods and techniques that designers use to achieve innovative solutions. The resistance to this term is due to the emphasis on 'thinking', among other things. After all, design is as much about the 'doing'. What's more, 'design thinking' has also become associated with such superficial practices that real designers no longer recognize themselves in the term.

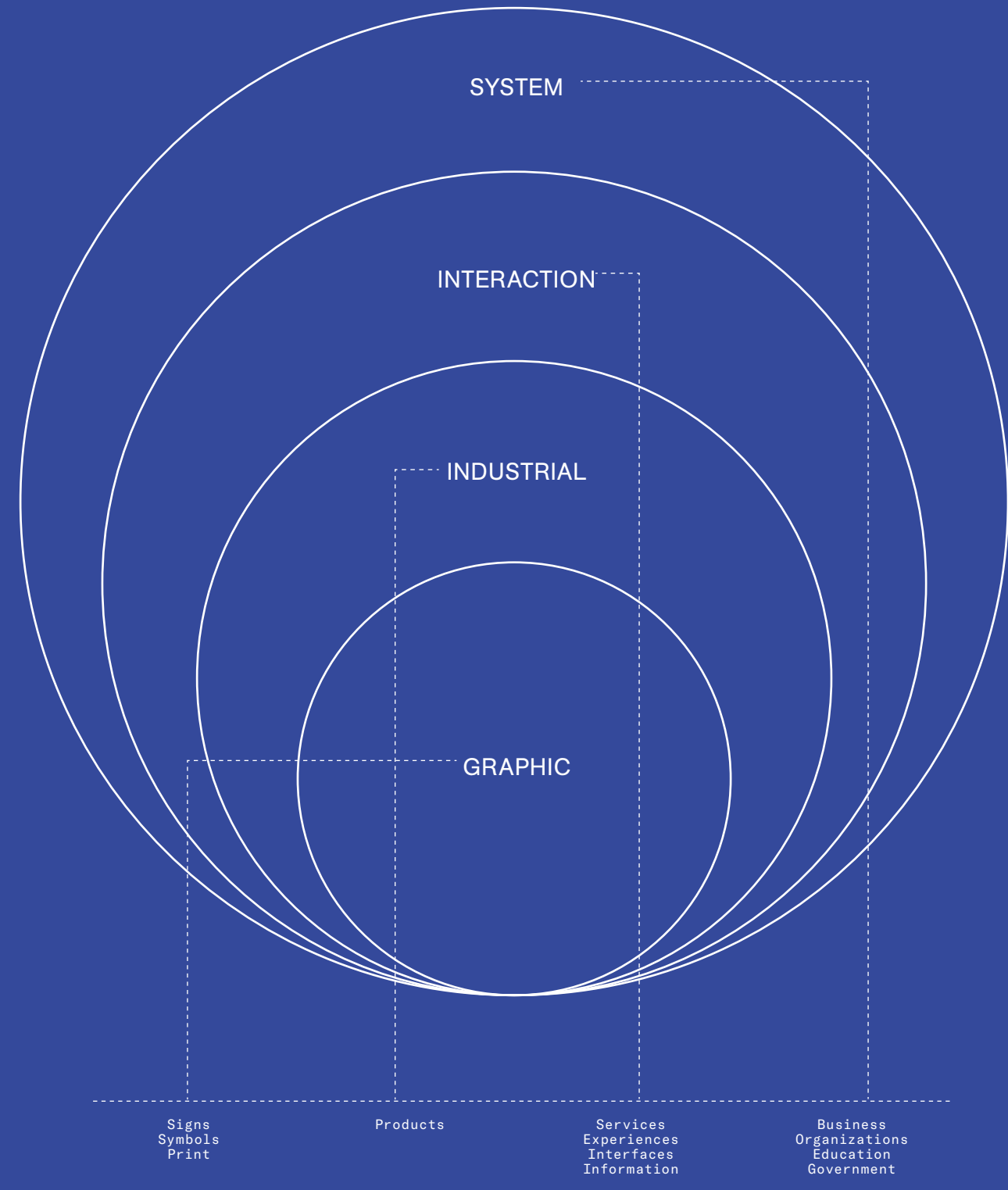
In this book, I don't address this discussion and instead use the most popular term: 'design thinking'. I may sometimes only use the word 'design', with which I mean the same thing. I also talk variously about the design process and the design-thinking process. I often refer to the professionals in this field as designers. I think it's more important to understand the types of issues you can deal with using design thinking and how you can achieve effective solutions than having a discussion about word choice. In which case, let me begin with the first question.

## FOUR ORDERS OF DESIGN

Design has developed a lot over the years and has almost organically turned into a practice that is very appropriate for

Fig. 1: Four orders of design.

## FOUR ORDERS OF DESIGN



In my work, I prefer to use the frame innovation approach. The advantage of this approach is that it's thorough and the steps to be taken are easy for non-designers to understand—provided they're well supervised of course.

## FOCUS ON THE PUBLIC SECTOR

There's a real need at many organizations to look for new approaches to deal with wicked problems. A thorough design-thinking process is one such very promising approach, but, as mentioned earlier, it's no easy task to really bring this approach to life when working with organizations that are managed in a traditional fashion. This applies to all organizations: public, semi-public and private. That said, there are a number of key differences between public and private organizations when it comes to creating the right context for a successful process.

To start with, the public sector has a responsibility to citizens. That creates a different, more complex dynamic compared to having to be accountable to shareholders. What's more, innovation is part of the DNA of companies. If it isn't, they simply don't survive. That's different for the public sector. Without wanting to underestimate the role the public sector plays in innovation, government authorities have an almost natural resistance to change and innovation. This resistance plays a role—which I'll come back to later—but also means there's a lot more attention and energy needed to break down barriers between the primary (policy) processes and an innovative design process. As such, this book doesn't discuss organizations in general, but focuses on public organizations.

Design thinking is both an inviting perspective for public organizations as well as an intervention in the way they work on change, the way in which they collaborate and the resources they commit to that. Design thinking also breaks through the barrier between inside and outside, between the life-world and the systems world. Chapters 2 through 5 will cover this in detail.

# Key Ideas in This Chapter

- ➔ Public organizations are increasingly facing wicked problems; these are (social) issues that no one entirely understands and that cannot be effectively addressed by any one person. To tackle these decisively, public organizations are looking for new approaches. Design thinking offers an inviting perspective.
- ➔ That said, a thorough design-thinking process is hard to realize in a traditionally managed system. In that case, the danger of jumping to solutions looms large.
- ➔ The more experience of collaborations between designers and public organizations there are, the smoother these coalitions will go. But for the time being, mutual unfamiliarity with methodology, tools and mentality often stands in the way of an impactful collaboration.
- ➔ As such, creating a design space in (the primary processes of) public organizations deserves the fullest attention in a design-thinking process.
- ➔ It's important to understand which issues can benefit from a design thinking approach and in what way design thinking differs from the traditional approaches to these issues. The next few chapters will discuss these differences and how these can be put to good use.





Fig. 9  
Road sign for the detour. This sign doesn't tell you how much longer your journey will be because of the detour or how much more time you'll spend travelling; it tells you how many calories you'll lose.

more senior management linking empirical understanding and negotiating. Content-based proposals are tested at this level in terms of 'sensitivity to the complexities of (politics and) governance' and 'political desirability and feasibility'. There are very few established ways of working between a negotiating approach and a design-thinking one, and cognitive change and design thinking. This, too, is a job for the process leader of design thinking.

## A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF HOW DIFFERENT STYLES OF CHANGE MANAGEMENT INTERACT

This chapter outlines how design thinking works as a learning style of change management, supported by an organic style of change management. It then compares design thinking with the characteristics of the two other styles of change management that dominate the public sector: negotiation and empirical understanding. These styles are like different planets spinning in the same universe. The figure on pages 46 and 47 presents their fundamental differences.

### CASE STUDY PART 3

## THE BEST DETOUR OF THE NETHERLANDS

We encountered friendly fire a number of times when dealing with the issue of bike tunnel closures in the Amsterdam area, primarily between proponents of a cognitive style of change management and designers. We were also able to avoid it a number of times.

Our field research with the users of the tunnels resulted in two key insights. The first was that for most people the detour time was not such an important point; instead there were greater concerns about the social and physical safety. That's understandable because the detour went past the building site and also



through a poorly lit park. These facts made most users worry about the safety of their children. Armed with these insights, we approached the aldermen in charge. We told them about the process and the insights, and said that we'd shortly be conducting design sessions with the youngsters to optimize the route of the detour in terms of social and physical safety. To underline that we were setting the bar high, we unveiled a board with the street name 'The Best Detour of the Netherlands'.

The aldermen were enthusiastic about the reframing; it eradicated the sense that a proper closure primarily depended on the detour time. The aldermen asked us to flesh out some things and present a more detailed plan two weeks later. They wanted to have an idea of the measures the design sessions might produce. What's more, they wanted additional assurance that we'd be able to reach enough people during the summer period—the period in which this issue arose—to ensure community support.

We were very happy with the discussions. After all, one of the most important steps of the design process had been taken. We'd introduced a new way of looking at things that people went along with and that offered a lot of perspective. As such, we were incredibly surprised to learn the very next day from our client at

Rijkswaterstaat that they'd concluded our attempts had failed.

It took a while before it was clear to us what was going on. It'd been assumed that we'd present our proposals and that the municipality would give a go/no-go sign. This expectation is very much in line with an organization where the predominant styles of change management are founded on negotiating and empirical understanding: you analyze, make a proposal and ensure agreement. The people at the ministry didn't understand our design-think-ing process explanation that we were not far along enough in our design process yet to have concrete proposals. "Why," they asked, "did you then go to the aldermen?"

Looking back, we should have better informed the organizations involved of the nature of a design process. We should have made it more widely known that our presentation was a step in the process, the aim of which was to assess the feasibility of the new frame; it was not intended to be used to reach a compromise. In retrospect, we would have done ourselves a favour had we shared the schedule we were aiming for at the start of the process with all the stakeholders. By neglecting the right interventions that support the design process, we got caught in some friendly fire.

Fig. 10: The dominant approaches to change compared to design thinking

# THREE APPROACHES TO TACKLING PROBLEMS

|                                | NEGOTIATION<br>(Power) | EMPIRICAL<br>UNDERSTANDING<br>(Cognitive) | DESIGN<br>THINKING           |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| ROOT                           | Ideology               | Logic                                     | Aesthetics                   |
| BASIC STANCE                   | Wanting<br>(ethical)   | Thinking<br>(intellectual)                | Feeling<br>(empathetic)      |
| CORE VALUE                     | Intersubjective        | Objective                                 | Subjective                   |
| EXPLANATION                    | Argumentation          | Evaluation                                | Interpretation               |
| STARTING POINT                 | Conflict<br>(urgency)  | Definition<br>(curiosity)                 | Illustration<br>(engagement) |
| RELATION TO<br>SUBJECT         | Influence              | Distance                                  | Participation                |
| AUTHORITY DUE<br>TO ABILITY TO | Connect                | Explain                                   | Inspire                      |
| RESULT                         | Agreement              | Model                                     | New Meaning                  |

With wicked problems, nobody's in charge. As such, no person or organization can take a directive role in a coalition.

## THE SPECTRUM OF FORMING A COALITION

The difficulties parties experience when collaborating often hinder the search for a solution. There can be dozens of reasons why a coalition between different parties doesn't have the desired dynamic or isn't delivering the desired result. For instance, those involved may have strong, differing characters or conflicting opinions. One of the parties may not have enough knowledge or may have a hidden agenda. But even if this isn't the case and everyone is competent and has good intentions, a coalition can still experience some ugly hiccups. This can happen if someone takes on a role that isn't in line with what the coalition aims to achieve.

My outline of the roles in different types of coalition is again based on a meta-theory, namely the 'spectrum of forming a coalition' devised by Martine de Jong<sup>21</sup>. This spectrum defines three roles that a public organization can play: a directing role, a partnering role and a facilitating role. None of these roles is better than the other per se and each situation will dictate which role is the most suitable. These roles are very different however. The behaviour and types of coalition of one role are unsuitable for another. Recognizing and discussing these roles helps to properly position a design approach.

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### CASE STUDY PART I

## SOCIAL SUPPORT ACT

Legislation regarding long-term care in the Netherlands was reformed in 2015 and laid down in the Social Support Act (Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning, Wmo). With this act, the quality of social support was adapted to be more in line with society's changing needs. People want

to be able to live at home for as long as possible, keep control of their own lives and not be lonely. The government wants to offer suitable support in people's living environments and wants social networks and community facilities to supplement each other as much as possible. When the Wmo



## HOW DO YOU ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS?

Stakeholder managers work inside a public organization as part of a bigger project or programme team. They often combine a cognitive style of change management (in the form of project-based work) and a negotiating style of change management. After all, these are the predominant styles of change management at public organizations.

In practice, their way of working looks like this: a boundary is drawn around an issue and inside that boundary all the stakeholders are uniformly invited to participate in a project, e.g. either by letter or through a website. Meetings are organized at a location accessible to everyone at a time convenient to most.

That's an efficient way of working, and in terms of the system it makes sense too: all the stakeholders get access to the process in the same manner, thereby safeguarding equality before the law. Nevertheless, this seemingly objective and honest approach leaves many key stakeholders out of the process. Some end-users are literally not seen. Others don't feel invited because for them the communication is written in an incomprehensible language and in inaccessible forms, i.e. in letters or on a website.

A large municipality was about to start discussions with the neighbourhood about planned restructuring. However, the project leader was not at all convinced that the municipality's story would be in line with the residents' experience.

The neighbourhood in question had already experienced a participation project a few years ago that had not gone as planned, so I was asked to take another look at what was going on in the neighbourhood with one of the members of my team.

We spoke to a lot of people. Those that were able to tell us the most about what was going on in the neighbourhood were the hotdog sellers (see figure 12). They've had a spot in the area for more than a decade, they know everyone well and see what happens to the others: "This street is our television." And yet, they'd never been invited by the municipality to collaborate on the intended restructuring. On enquiry, we learned why: they didn't have an address in the neighbourhood and as such didn't receive any letters inviting them to the residents evening.

Fig. 12: Not everyone who has great knowledge of a local situation is a resident.





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CASE STUDY PART 4

## THE A9 LAND TUNNEL

The Buurbouw helped establish a co-creative process, as opposed to a negotiating one. That process required that public organizations take on a different role, namely a facilitating one – a role that the stakeholder managers eagerly carried out. They knew how to speak to residents about their entrepreneurship and connection with the area. This led to a large number of impressive results, such as the following.

A large amount of the wood from the trees that were cut down went to Stadshout Amsterdam<sup>33</sup>. This organization creates meeting places for the city and communities. Neighbourhood projects were developed and brought to life by designers, craftsmen (in training) and residents. Playground equipment and street furniture was made as part of the project; this ended up in the park on the roof of the tunnel. A bench for Mrs. Van Teeffelen was made, too. Her now deceased husband had (illegally) planted a cypress tree once upon a time and this tree now had to be cut down. Wood from this tree was used to make the bench that now sits in her garden.

There were a lot of complaints from the neighbourhood when the piles for

the foundations were being noisily driven into the ground. This work continued throughout the spring, including the time before the exam period. Because of the noise, the children found it difficult to concentrate. The Buurbouw provided a quiet study area and asked two local tutoring institutes to take on the supervision. All 150 children passed: the highest pass rate ever. And not despite the project, but thanks to it.

One of the residents, Dave, also endured the daily racket. The stakeholder managers discovered that he actually wanted to be a caterer, specifically to make sandwiches. But because of all the stress, he didn't get his business going. It was agreed that the Buurbouw would be his first customer. What started off as a one-time thing turned into a permanent relationship with all the Buurbouw parties, i.e. the contractor, the state and the municipality. What's more, during the A9 project, Dave also got other customers, which means that his business will continue once the project is finished<sup>34</sup>.

There was also a lot of knowledge-sharing with the schools in the area in particular. Those building the A9 gave engineering lessons, but also

showed that large machines have potentially dangerous blind spots. Also, under the supervision of a biologist, children helped plant the verges and protect fauna, like bats and birds (see figure 16).

One of the stakeholder managers spotted a man with a camera rummaging around the building site a few times. He proved to be an enthusiastic amateur photographer.

Ordinarily, someone like that would've been sent away to prevent any accidents in and around the building site. In this case, however, he was given a vest, a hardhat and a pair of boots, and the telephone number of the site foreman. The photos he took were used on the building site fences and on the project website. The man even organized photography workshops on the building site for young people in the neighbourhood.

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**A stakeholder manager can respond to this together with the designer. Stakeholder managers know like no one else where the boundaries for an acceptable solution lie.**

**Stakeholder managers who emerge as innovators in public organizations know how things work at their organizations and what's needed to stretch the boundaries of what's possible.**

### STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT AND FRIENDLY FIRE

**Design thinking can help to reframe a wicked problem and to establish a co-creative coalition with the community. However, there are some things about design thinking that, although well intended, could lead to friendly fire, obstruction or even sabotage of the design process by the public organizations involved.**

**The beginning of this chapter talked about the reactions you could get as a stakeholder manager taking a broad approach to the field: "no one has any time for that!" and "our responsibility has to end somewhere". Being goal-oriented and efficient sometimes impedes an empathic approach. Secondly, permitting experience can prompt a systemic**



revealed through our empathic research. This is what we call a ‘controlled crash test’.

CASE STUDY PART 2

# MAYBORHOOD

About 15 organizations, including municipalities, the state, a water board and housing associations asked us to come up with a strategy with designers that was both local and customized to encourage participation and make things a success. My team was repeatedly approached with a question that boiled down to this: “how can we ensure that people take more initiative for the quality of life in their own environment?” Each time, our hypothesis was the same: that initiative is already there. In our view, the most important job wasn’t to activate citizens; we thought it was more important to connect the public organizations to the existing energy in society.

That’s why our first action was to look for the initiatives the government agencies weren’t reaching. During our fieldwork, which involved designers and representatives of the public organizations joining forces, we discovered numerous and surprising initiatives. To find out why these initiatives weren’t reaching the bureaucratic agencies, we created a theory test for which we took photos

of a whole host of examples of local initiatives. We then presented these examples to a large, diverse group of staff, posing the question: “Is this allowed?” (see figure 25). The participants were given a semi-official sheet of answers and we intimated that the result would be included in their next performance review. This proved an interesting experiment each time because nearly every initiative we presented to the group was endorsed by some and met with resistance from others. And both responses could be easily defended.

The test asked the participants straightforward yes/no questions, like “cutting the hedge yourself, is this allowed?” If the municipality doesn’t have any money for maintaining public spaces, are you as a citizen allowed to look after the upkeep of the square. Some said they’d be very happy for that to happen, while others said the question was whether citizens knew how to prune responsibly, when that pruning should be done, e.g. in conjunction with the breeding season, and where the garden waste should go.

Fig. 25: Four examples of the Mayborhood Theory Exam. (1/2)

