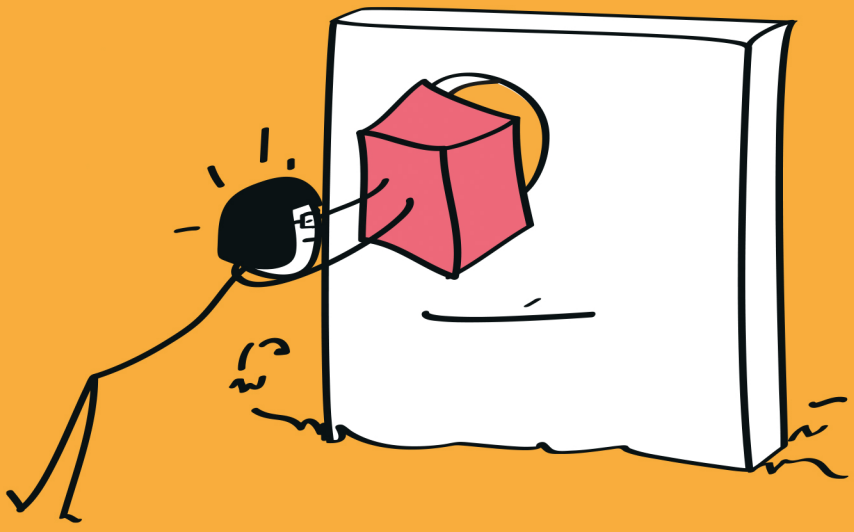
THE SOCIAL DESIGNER'S PARADOX

WHY SOCIAL DESIGNERS MATTER AND STRUGGLE IN PUBLIC ORGANISATIONS



WILLEMIJN BROUWER

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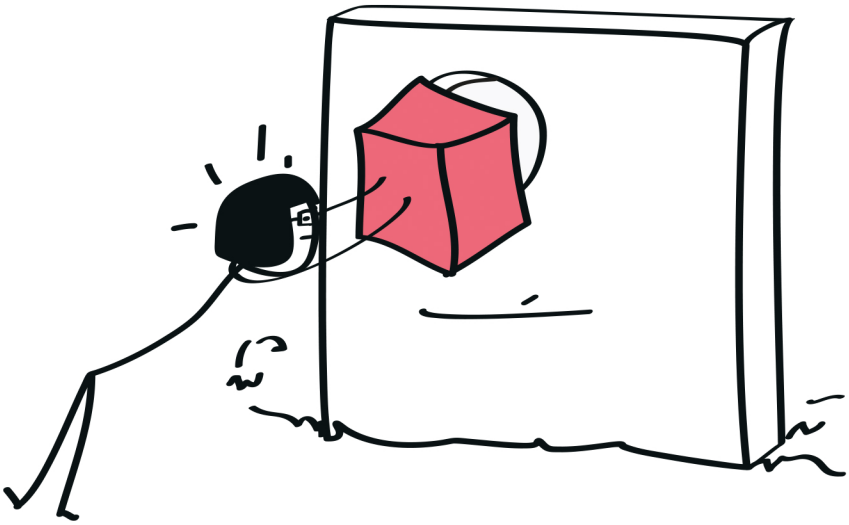

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THE SOCIAL DESIGNER'S PARADOX

WHY SOCIAL DESIGNERS STRUGGLE AND MATTER IN PUBLIC ORGANISATIONS

WILLEMIJN BROUWER

BIS PUBLISHERS

To

my dad: the diverger who taught me to keep my head in the clouds,

my mom: the converger who taught me to keep my feet on the ground,

and myself: for actually putting my ideas on paper with my head, heart and hands. We should applaud our efforts!

Before you start, read this

Dear Reader,

Designers, armed with good intentions and a touch of naiveté, dive headfirst into the chaos of governments, only to encounter obstacles along the way. What exactly is the value of designers working on societal issues? Describing the work of a doctor or police officer is as simple as reciting the alphabet. However, when it comes to unravelling the enigma of a designer's purpose working in or with governments, we find ourselves lost in a labyrinth of abstract words.

Caught in the crossfire between theory and practice, I have witnessed firsthand the comedy and tragedy that unfold. As an Industrial Product Design Engineer with a passion for society, I am guilty of advocating for design in governments and facilitating workshops that failed to make the impact I want. In my role as an educator, I have seen the earnest enthusiasm of students clash with the harsh realities of the field and experienced how brilliant academics produce abstract works that fail to reach practitioners.

So, here we are, on a noble quest to bring clarity to the murky swamps of social design. Driven by the mission to place more designers in strategic positions within governments, I think this book should exist for designers trying to make a positive impact the public domain.

I don't claim to hold the ultimate truth, nor pretending that this book meets strict academic standards. Whenever

possible, I've supported my claims with literature from design, creativity studies, public administration, and management & organisation. Other parts of what you'll read are grounded in field research—particularly within the context of the Dutch national government.

Over the past years, I've had one-on-one conversations with dozens of civil servants (none of them formally trained as designers) about creativity, innovation, and the ever-popular concept of 'Design Thinking' in government. I've spoken face-to-face with about twenty civil servants who do have a background in design—most of whom were educated in faculties rooted in industrial product design engineering. Beyond that, I've gathered insights from ongoing conversations on LinkedIn and other professional network, and mentored a handful of graduating social design students working with government clients (more, if you count projects in the broader public sector), . I've designed a couple of serious games commissioned by governmental bodies and facilitated dozens of sessions on creativity and design, all with civil servants as participants. And I've had valuable conversations with researchers in the field of design and public administration, teach creativity theory and train others to facilitate creative processes in the public sector. For context: I studied Industrial Design Engineering myself—so yes, I too was educated as an industrial product designer; my lack of engineering talent made me choose the organising part of designing.

This is the foundation of what you're about to read.

Because yes, I do believe there is a place for designers in

government. And no, it's not in the basement with the broken printer or in a policy lab somewhere in a creative hub. Designers can help accelerate the transitions we so desperately need.

This book, a labour of love and a testament to Human Creation, is my humble attempt to put social designers in the spotlight and explain their ways of making sense of the world. I hope to offer insights, reflections, and perhaps even a chuckle or two along the way. And even though the world isn't short on opinions about design these days, I believe this book brings something worth adding to the conversation—it is the book I wish to give to my younger self.

Yours truly,

Willemijn Brouwer

Strategic Product Design Engineer
Lecturer in Creativity & Designing for Societal Missions
Creativity Facilitator & Trainer
Hobbyist Philosopher
Dutch World-Citizen
Mother, Wife, Sister, Daughter, Friend
Human Being (not Resource, thank you)

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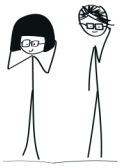

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‘Not until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves.’

Henry David Thoreau

Prologue

Imagine a designer wanting to use her design skills for the common good. Her name is Francis. She tells her friends and family she is a 'social designer'.
Her friend James studied Public Administration and Sociology. Francis always found him a bit of a 'know-it-all' and teases him that he will always be a risk-averse study nerd. He works in the Ministry of Housing and Spatial Planning and has been working there for over ten years. He started out as a policy executor and made his way up the career ladder. James is currently in a position in which he is responsible for multiple programs on social housing. Now and then, he is in a meeting with the Minister to share his advice on the matter.
James helped Francis prepare for her job interview for a position in the government as a policy innovation officer for elderly care. Before the interview, Francis just knew she was going to nail it! Now, she is not so sure anymore.
We listen in to the conversation between the recruiter, Roy, and Francis, entering somewhere in the middle:

> 'So, what are your strengths?' asks Roy.
> 'I'm good at integrating, orchestrating, visualising and reframing[1]', says Francis with confidence.
> 'Can you give me an example?' says Roy, he has no idea what Francis means with the words.

1 Van Arkel and Tromp (2024).

‘Well, here you can see how I can visualise complex information.’ Francis puts a print of one of her visualisations on the table.
‘Oh wow, that looks beautiful’, says Roy. At the same time, he thinks: ‘Why would we need this type of picture? It costs a lot of time; we can outsource this.’
He smiles kindly so Francis keeps talking:
‘I made this visual as a result of several co-creative sessions with different stakeholders. The question was to create a new vision for collaboration in care for diabetic children. I organised and designed the co-creative sessions; that is how I orchestrate. And I have integrated all viewpoints into a visual. Moreover, in the sessions, it turned out that all stakeholders had different perspectives. I was able to get all these perspectives to the surface without making people feel political about it.’
‘So, you are an expert in organisational change issues then?’ Roy asks, who honestly didn’t understand what she just said.
‘Well, expert in organisational change, I never thought of it that way, but perhaps yes’, answers Francis. ‘I’m good at reframing, so I guess that is the same.’
‘How is that the same? What is reframing?’ asks Roy, who has a political, quite negative association with the term ‘framing.’
‘Reframing is looking from a different perspective’, Francis continues. ‘Taking another angle towards the problem. So often, the problem we define is not the real

problem we need to solve; we have already chosen a frame. To solve a problem, we need to take a different frame', explains Francis.
'But you do not decide what problems to solve; that is for politicians or your manager to decide', Roy says.
'OK, yeah, but that is not what I mean', tries Francis.
'I'm sorry, perhaps I misunderstood, but can you explain what you mean?' Impatience is getting the best of Roy.
'Well,... it is different...' Francis gets stuck.
'OK... is it like Design Thinking?' Roy tries. He has heard his colleagues talk about this method. 'You empathise with the user, right, and do Design Sprints?'
'That could be part of it, yes. But that does not give the complete picture. Designing is more than doing Sprints and empathising with the user. I'm also good at dealing with different stakeholders.'
'Not with me', Roy silently thinks.

-

'Hey, how was that job interview you did a few weeks ago?' James asks Francis.
'Didn't get the job', Francis sighs.
'I'm sorry. Did you use the term Design Thinking again? I told you not to do that.'
'No, the recruiter mentioned Design Thinking at one point. But I couldn't explain myself. I feel so frustrated. I strut around with a fancy Master's degree in Design,

taking me years of blood, sweat, and tears to obtain. But then, there are these folks who breeze through a quick three-day Design Thinking course, and I can't articulate why my expertise is light-years ahead of their crash course. It feels downright embarrassing.'

'Oh, right.' James does not know what to say.

0. Introduction

0.1 The Francis-James Situation

Francis is one of many designers motivated by a passion for contributing to the common good. She believes her knowledge and skills can provide significant value to governments and public sector organisations. However, when she ventures beyond her expertise in industrial product design into the public sector, Francis often feels her contributions are lost in translation. Her approaches are frequently misunderstood by colleagues like her friend James.

James finds himself in a challenging position. He aspires to combat poverty but is also navigating the complexities of working in government during a time dominated by social media, artificial intelligence, and neoliberalism. This era highlights the impact of human behaviour on nature, features ongoing proxy wars worldwide, and sees the rise of right-wing politicians disrupting democracies. As a program manager in the civil service, James feels that change is being imposed upon him, and he is eager to improve how his programs are

structured. Yet, he grapples with limited decision-making power and struggles to determine the best course of action. Alongside some colleagues, he feels they are merely spinning their wheels. While they all agree that change is necessary, their meetings yield no actionable plans—only the conclusion that 'we need more information'. Consequently, they continue to gather data but find themselves in the same predicament at each subsequent meeting.

Francis jokingly suggests that he should hire her for assistance, pointing out that designers excel at navigating situations with uncertain outcomes.

James struggles to respond. Lacking a design background, he fails to see the connection between his work on social housing and Francis's expertise as an industrial product designer. He silently thinks that Francis does not grasp the political and complex nature of his situation. He laughs awkwardly, but in truth, he is becoming increasingly frustrated, feeling that she seems to understand his work better than he does.

Blind Spot

Francis wants to use all her strengths in her work habits within the context of government. However, a government operates differently from a business, and a citizen is not merely a consumer—though they can be the same person. The outcomes in government are not products, and the working dynamics differ from those Francis is accustomed to in her design background.

Designers like Francis are trained to empathise with the end

users of their creations, yet they often overlook the importance of empathising with their collaborators and themselves. Their expertise primarily stems from understanding the world they are designing for, rather than the context of government—or any other public organisation—in which they are designing. Francis does not recognise that she carries her own biases and assumptions into these new environments. Ironically, while she claims to excel at seeing multiple perspectives, she fails to acknowledge her own. Her implicit values and norms, shaped by her design, education and experience in a different context. These have shaped her professional identity and influenced her approach to work. Transitioning into the realm of governance as a designer is akin to trying to fit a square peg into a round hole (see figure 1).

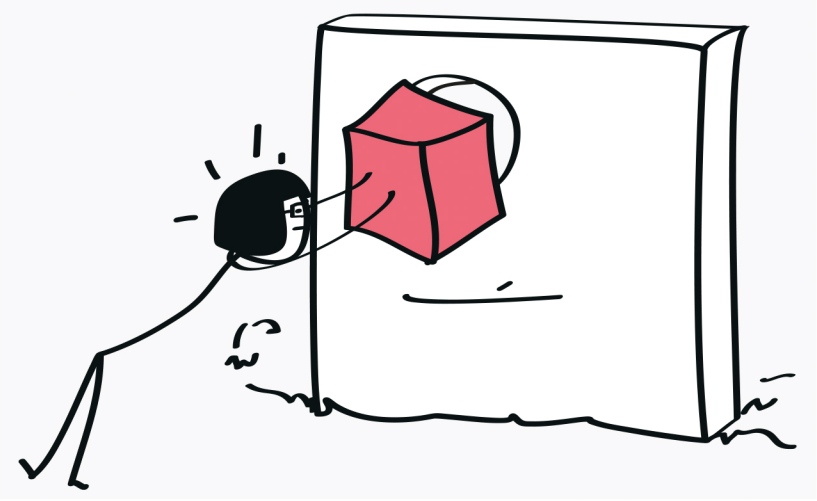

Figure 1: The obvious metaphor of trying to fit a square into a circle.