

Perspectives on Design Thinking for Social Innovation

Catherine Docherty

To cite this article: Catherine Docherty (2017) Perspectives on Design Thinking for Social Innovation, The Design Journal, 20:6, 719-724, DOI: [10.1080/14606925.2017.1372005](https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2017.1372005)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2017.1372005>



Published online: 17 Oct 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 9449



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 8 View citing articles [↗](#)



EDITORIAL

Perspectives on Design Thinking for Social Innovation

Catherine Docherty
Journey Associates, Glasgow, UK

Introduction



This issue's special themed section has its origins in a casual suggestion by my colleague at the Yunus Centre for Social Business and Health at Glasgow Caledonian University, Professor Simon Teasdale, to run a Design Thinking and Social Innovation stream at the International Social Innovation Research Conference (ISIRC) in September 2016.

The conference stream invited papers that would evidence or explore the role of design thinking in social innovation. The response to the call was way beyond expectations with the second highest number of papers of any stream culminating in five sessions over the two and a half days. This special themed section therefore provides a brief overview of the diversity of perspectives from across the 15 presentations from Australia, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

A highlight of this inaugural stream was when presenter George Cairns' paper was awarded the best paper of the conference. Some of the key concepts presented are shared in a short paper below.

Design thinking and social innovation are both contested concepts with multiple meanings in different contexts. Design thinking can be considered a process as well as a mindset and is widely viewed as a mechanism for addressing 'wicked problems' and exploring possible futures. Social innovation enables new ways of tackling social needs and creating new relationships by both empowering citizens and generating social benefit. Design thinking, therefore, seems well placed to facilitate new solutions to the complex and challenging civic issues that face our communities and society more widely.

The ISIRC conference stream brought to the surface a diversity of research relating design thinking to social innovation, which is greatly welcomed. The level of interest in the subject area (some sessions had standing room only) is perhaps indicative of the increasingly pervasive presence of design thinking and design-informed approaches in seeking to tackle complex and intractable social challenges. Indeed, design thinking has been adopted to address economic and social challenges by governments in the UK, Denmark, Finland, and the USA, among others (Bason 2013; Durose and Richardson 2016).

Despite being widely embraced in the public and private sectors, design thinking continues to draw criticism. It has been viewed as mechanistic, being limited in its application, and with over-zealous claims on its impact. As a practitioner, I recognize that, while not a panacea for social or economic challenges, design thinking does add value to knowledge creation within the innovation process by being inclusive, allowing a shared understanding to evolve, being motivating and empowering, and through practical learning has the potential to be embedded among participants. However, without due consideration of the purpose of a design thinking intervention, combined with robust and considered delivery and support for implementation, it is in danger of being seen as a fun and energizing activity that is purely tokenistic. In my academic role, I also realise that it is through robust research, documentation of impact, and examples of what 'good' looks like that the real value of design thinking will be fully understood and appreciated. My own research in understanding how design thinking can enable social enterprises to achieve their mission is in the early stages and will, hopefully, add to this debate in the future.

It is with these thoughts in mind that I present a brief overview of some of the key themes arising from the papers presented here.

Can Design Inform Effective Social Innovation?

The first paper is by George Cairns and presents a fresh perspective on design thinking within a social innovation context. It starts with recognition of the ever-revolving challenges related to the meaning of the term design and acknowledges that it remains multifaceted with applications that can be functional or strategic, as well as a way of thinking

which requires us to consider meaning beyond the commercial and business context, and to focus on the value to the end user. Connecting design to thinking, reference is made to the role of Aristotle's virtue of *phronēsis* – practical wisdom to inform action – within social innovation projects.

Combining these perspectives on design and thinking, Cairns proposes 'designerly thinking' as a mechanism that is both strategic and the outputs of which must add value to the end user community. The reference points for this strategic approach extend beyond those used in a functional approach to problem solving, drawing on contextual wisdom, and seeking solutions that are ethically/morally 'good', informed by the senses, and are action-oriented.

Collaborative realisation is the term that Cairns gives to the application of designerly thinking for social benefit. Six principles are outlined for collaborative realisation to be enacted. To be of real value, the engagement of end users is not enough; they must be embedded throughout the process. The role of the design thinker is to apply their expertise to elicit tacit knowledge of users that can enable new insights to be generated for the greater good. They do this through facilitation and through a process of collaboration based on equality and mutual respect, where traditional power dynamics are challenged.

Designing Public Health: Synergy and Discord

In the second paper, by Alessandra Bazanno and Jane Martin, the concept of practical wisdom is also alluded to by means of aesthetic knowing, which is considered a distinguishing feature of design thinking for addressing social problems. The paper is rooted in the increasing use of design oriented approaches, to public health initiatives aimed at reducing health inequalities and enhancing health and well-being. Similarities exist between techniques used in public health and human-centred design (HCD), and particular design-led approaches such as prototyping and empathizing, are noted as having the potential to be particularly beneficial in addressing social challenges.

The paper reports key synergies and discordant aspects arising from a scoping study of literature on the application of design thinking/HCD to public health. Much of the published research related to technology, whether software design, clinical assessment tools, or online resources to support improved health. Important gaps in the literature included an absence of replicable and/or scalable approaches, as well as evidence of impact, and the role of social enterprises in delivering health outcomes.

Areas of tension included the lack of a clear definition or consistent application of design thinking/HCD. The differences in ethical requirements and the use of hypotheses to guide public health research projects are at odds with core design concepts such as embracing ambiguity and failing fast, and could present potential barriers to future use of design-led approaches in public health research. Furthermore, the nature of interventions differs such that the impact of design

interventions may not fit with public health metrics. This is compounded by the fact that the timeframe for the design impact to be realised may be beyond the active engagement of the design team. The potential for design thinking in public health will surely benefit from a common language, clear guidance, and processes for implementation, backed up by examples of best practice and mechanisms to measure impact.

Design Thinking for Social Innovation in Healthcare

To deliver innovative approaches to social innovation through design thinking, we need to have skilled practitioners who can identify opportunities, design enabling tools that support the process, and have the ability to analyse and synthesise information and outputs in a meaningful way. In this paper, Louise Valentine, Thilo Kroll, Fraser Bruce, Chris Lim, and Rodney Mountain explore how design students might be equipped with the necessary skills and tools to tackle complex challenges related to health and wellbeing. Here, design thinking is viewed as a strategic approach to cultural transformation which embraces diversity and ambiguity and, in line with the previous authors, is recognized as a departure from the traditional approach to clinical research.

An overview of national and regional strategies highlights the desire for a more person-centred approach to healthcare, which closely aligns with the key principles of design thinking. The authors recognise that while widely supported, holistic and user-centred approaches in the design of healthcare are rare, though needed. To facilitate this shift, they propose a Design Sprint as a framework for delivery by combining aspects of design thinking and Sprint methods used in software design. Running over five consecutive days and comprising 15 elements, healthcare is explored from a social and cultural rather than clinical perspective. The pedagogical approaches to healthcare innovation introduced demonstrate the desire of design students to embrace these intractable civic challenges.

The approach places design as a strategy for change and as a more democratic approach to innovation by challenging traditional hierarchies and devolving power to enable the wider community to actively engage in and shape the services needed. The paper ends with a practical proposition highlighting six areas where design thinking has the potential to add value to and enable the delivery of the national clinical strategy in Scotland.

Design for Social Enterprises: How Design Thinking can Support Social Innovation Within Social Enterprises

In the final paper Daniella Selloni and Marta Corubolo present a case study that connects design thinking with social innovation through the lens of a social enterprise in the Northeastern region of Italy. For some social enterprise, an over-reliance on public funds has become a distraction from their social enterprises, purpose and community focus. Combined with changing social circumstances, such as ageing

populations, the need for design thinking to enhance social innovation is identified. In particular, to enable social enterprises to engage their local communities and empower them to help orient the organization to meet changing needs.

Six design principles were used to guide collaboration and empower community participants to share fundamental aspects of service development. A five phase delivery process was guided by bespoke tools designed to elicit particular information and insights, and to enable appreciation of the multiplicity of stakeholder roles and activities in service design and delivery. The Collaborative Organizational Model, for example, identifies actions required to integrate new services into the organization by exploring the internal factors; external factors; and infrastructure and tools needed. This mapping of innovative approaches is proposed as a means of supporting cultural change by enabling a shift in power relations between stakeholders.

The authors propose that social enterprises may benefit from new models of working that engage customers and other stakeholders not only in the design and delivery of services, but also in the co-management of them. Design thinking supports a power shift, enabling a network of relationships within the local community and eliciting a more democratic approach to governance. By enabling a deeper connection not only with customers but also with staff, the authors propose that the designer takes on a new role in the process, as 'cultural operator'.

In Summary

In my own experience as a practitioner, the most successful innovative approaches resulting from the design thinking process require a visionary leader who supports a democratic approach to decision-making, and who is not deterred by conflicting opinions. Appropriately deployed, design thinking can be an enabler in the innovation process, by providing a 'safe' space for diverse perspectives to be openly shared, for new insights to emerge, for knowledge to be created, and empowering participants in the co-creation of shared visions.

With reference to the papers presented here, some themes emerging that researchers may wish to consider to support the use of design thinking for social innovation, include: How can we make the design thinking process for social innovation more transparent and accessible? How can we document its impact in a robust and meaningful way? How can we encourage the embedding of design thinkers and design thinking throughout the process including through implementation? How can design thinking support the application of practical wisdom to enable a shift in power domains and allow the design, development, and implementation of social innovation to be owned by local communities? What are the mechanisms that will allow design thinking in social innovation to support culture change for the greater good?

It may be that some of these themes are explored at the second Design Thinking and Social Innovation stream of ISIRC in Swinburne University, Melbourne in December 2017.

References

- Bason, C. 2013. "Design-Led Innovation in Government." *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Spring): 15–17.
- Durose, C., and L. Richardson. 2016. *Designing Public Policy for Co-Production: Theory, Practice and Change*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Biography

Catherine Docherty is the founder of Journey Associates, a dynamic innovation consultancy applying creative techniques to business and social challenges. Catherine has extensive experience as a researcher and consultant in the fields of design and innovation for over 20 years, having worked with senior management in government, the public sector, and industry. She has directed and delivered a range of national and international projects and publications, many of which are leading edge, relating to strategic aspects of design, innovation, and sustainability. Clients include the BBC, the British Council, the Design Council, Glasgow School of Art, NESTA, the NHS, Scottish Enterprise, the Scottish Government, and the V&A. Recently, she designed the Creative Enterprise Programme, a 3-day business development programme delivered internationally for Nesta and the British Council. Catherine is also a senior research fellow in CommonHealth, a £2 m MRC/ESRC funded research project exploring the role of social enterprise on health and wellbeing.

Address for Correspondence

Catherine Docherty, 53 – 61 King Street, Glasgow G1 5RA.

www.journeyassociates.com.

Tel: 07932 739 369.

Email: catherine@journeyassociates.com