



# TRANSFORMATION DESIGN

WHEN DESIGNERS AND POLITICIANS PUT THEIR HEADS TOGETHER, ARE WE SEEING THE DAWN OF A BRAVE NEW WORLD OR JUST THE RE-BIRTH OF BIG BROTHER?  
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*ILLUSTRATIONS BY SIMON PEMBERTON*

The pace of change is often overstated, but a few years ago something genuinely new began to happen to design. Invitations from political think tanks started to drop into designers' in-boxes and policy wonks began to hang out with creatives. A clear outcome of this intersection between design and politics is the emergent discipline of design for public services.

Public service design has been welcomed in some quarters and has raised eyebrows in others. Its small, but vocal advocates often present what some of them call 'Transformation Design' as a challenge to the 'top down' arrogance of the all-knowing designer. Evangelists like Charles Leadbeater draw heavily on James Surowiecki's 2004 bestseller, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, and are inspired by the Open Source software movement. The source code of the operating system Linux is freely available to everyone. The web-based

encyclopedia Wikipedia is written collaboratively by volunteers around the world. Public service design aims to harness the creativity of the masses in a similar way. But instead of building software, the aim is to redesign healthcare or education.

Evidence of this new emphasis is already being felt. Led by Hilary Cottam, The Design Council's old Red unit began the populist approach in 2005, when it teamed up with the Bolton Diabetes Network. Type II diabetes was targeted, as its treatment largely depends on patient self-management of medicine, diet and exercise. Type II also costs the NHS £10m a year to treat. Research determined that some patients were not sufficiently motivated to change their lifestyles. A multidisciplinary team including designers, patients and healthcare workers co-designed agenda cards that contained a range of statements such as 'Diabetes makes my >>

love life difficult'. These helped patients to raise difficult issues and suggest solutions, such as 'I need someone to coach me through this'.

There is of course nothing new in the concept of public services; they are centuries old and grew rapidly in the form of the post-Second World War welfare state. Nor did they arrive by accident. They were researched, conceived, piloted and rolled out – but few trained designers were involved.

The new service design movement, however, has introduced some genuine innovations. The key trend from the world of design is the focus on the user. User-centred design emerged from software design in the eighties through figures such as the cognitive scientist and author Donald Norman. These ideas were applied by design researchers, who observed people in the context of use.

The next step was to involve users in the design process itself, a technique first pioneered by Scandinavian community architects in the seventies. While many designers considered this to be an abrogation of responsibility, some clients embraced the idea of participatory design as the ultimate in getting 'close to the consumer.' Joe Heapy, director of the London-based service design consultancy Engine, confirms that a key new skill for service designers is the 'facilitation of other people's creativity.' On top of the focus on users, a new generation of designers has also laid much emphasis on ethics. A growing number of young designers have rejected aesthetic concerns in favour of adopting strident moral stances on issues such as sustainability, public health and transport.

In addition, design consultancies such as IDEO have been developing service design methodologies for private clients in industries such as financial services. The new public service design also draws in ideas from the world of management, such

as working in multidisciplinary teams and encouraging the involvement of front-line workers. Work groups made up of people with different areas of expertise were pioneered in the Eighties by corporations such as Boeing. Thirty years earlier, Japanese manufacturers such as Toyota started looking to employees as a source of innovation. They strove for 'continuous improvement' through 'quality circles', which implemented employee ideas on how to advance quality or productivity.

What makes 'Transformation Design' so distinctive, however, is the influence that policy wonks have had upon it. The vocabulary is littered with phrases such as 'public engagement', 'reconnection', 'intervention', and 'empowerment.' More importantly, social engineering has made a comeback as a design objective, after almost 40 years in the cold. As Hilary Cottam argues, 'Transformation design asks designers to shape behaviour – of people, systems and organisations – as well as form'.

Joe Heapy agrees that behaviour change is a part of every brief and admits that it does present an ethical dilemma, but suggests that designers have always been in the behaviour-changing business. After all when Sony designed the Walkman, he notes, it 'changed the whole way people listened to music.'

Indeed, behaviour change is not a new subject for designers. Product and interaction designers spend a lot of time observing existing behaviour patterns and anticipating how people might use their designs. However, a line has been crossed: rather than considering how an object might affect behaviours, designers are now looking at behaviour as being the object of the design process. This element of public service design has not been widely discussed. >>

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Chris Downs, from service design consultancy Live!Work, agrees that behaviour change is one of the key characteristics of the new discipline, but is relaxed about it. 'We have very strong triple-bottom-line values and only take on work that we agree with,' he says. Meanwhile, John Thackara is critical of official efforts to promote lifestyle change in areas where our behaviour is determined by policy. Taking mobility as an example, he argues that when the Government lets the cost of public transport rise too high, and allows the price of driving to fall falsely low, the subsequent focus on individual behaviour change deflects blame on to the public for something that is not its fault. 'So-called criticism of the state's intervention in the personal decisions of private citizens doesn't oppose the need to intervene, it just criticises the heavy-handed or ineffectual way that it's done,' argues Austin Williams, director of the Future Cities Project.

Where has this demand from government to mould behaviour come from? There is nothing new about the state tending towards social control. The early welfare state had a keen moralistic zeal for control. In 1937, Douglas Jay, a future Labour MP, wrote: 'In the case of nutrition and health, just as in the case of education, the gentleman in Whitehall really does know better what is good for people than the people know themselves.'

Such overt paternalism was discredited in the late Sixties, mainly due to a rise in the public's political consciousness. After 1968, the New Left highlighted the coercive nature of state policy on incomes and industrial relations. Then, in the late Seventies, the Thatcherite right attacked what it called the 'nanny state.' Finally, suspicion of the state began to wane in the Nineties, following the

end of the Cold War and any meaningful distinction between the political left and right.

As political parties and trade unions haemorrhaged members in the Eighties and Nineties, politics became the preserve of business interests and 'enlightened' experts who claimed to know what was best for the public. Politics changed in character, from the contest of opposing visions of the future to the technocratic management of a politically passive public. Thus instead of rehearsing arguments and providing facts for quitting smoking and letting us make up our own minds, we are now simply banned from smoking in most public places.

Yet no sooner had politicians celebrated the defeat of communism abroad and militancy at home, than they started to notice an increasingly disengaged and fragmented populace. Not only had political institutions lost legitimacy, but people weren't joining social institutions such as churches, the Women's Institute or sports clubs. People were not only becoming estranged from politics, but also from each other.

Ever since New Labour came to power it has been haunted by this perceived loss of authority and trust, and a fear of social breakdown. Hence its constant mantra of social inclusion, public engagement, citizenship and encouraging the youth of the nation to vote. From the Millennium Dome through to the Olympics, each mass attraction is about making a new connection with a public regarded as ignorant.

The recent film *Taking Liberties* ridiculed New Labour's illiberal agenda in the public realm, from banning protests near Parliament to ASBOs. Even more insidious are the interventions being made into our private lives, such as advertising

bans on smoking and junk food. It is in this context of politicians' concern about the masses that we should understand their discovery of public service design. Not only do ministers imagine that designers exemplify the new creative knowledge economy, they also see designers as being in touch with the public, and thus able to offer fresh, aspirational ways of influencing it.

In a Demos pamphlet, co-written by Heapy, called *Journey to the Interface: How public service design can reconnect users to reform*, design is framed as offering a 'route to securing the legitimacy that public services in the 21st Century so desperately need.' Designers offer the very practical skills of being creative problem solvers, good visualisers, and flexible multidisciplinary teamworkers. What really appeals to the state however, is their ability to engage with the public through user research methods and influence it through their aspirational workstyle.

The new approach, though, is not without its critics. For James Woudhuysen, professor of forecasting and innovation at Leicester's De Montfort University, the democratic credentials of the co-design of public services are illusory: 'Before all the user research gets done, its ends – saving the planet, saving public expenditure, cutting down consumption – have already been determined. Only the means are negotiable. That's undemocratic and condescending'.

As the recent floods in England demonstrated, decades of under-investment in public services and infrastructure have led to real problems. Clearly designers have a role to play in improving the UK public sector, yet the profession must debate the extent to which it is appropriate for designers to help the state to change lifestyles ■

