



Experio Lab 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.

This text is based on discussions between Matilda Legeby, Anders Printz, Kajsa Westling, Karin Petrusson, Kalle Pettersson and Tomas Edman centres around the role design can play in government policy-making. We are grateful to Vanessa Rodrigues for editorial support. These reflections stem from our collaboration with the Swedish public inquiry Vårdansvarskommittén.

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-centred development and system transformation.

An Analysis of Transdisciplinary Work Between Political Science and Systemic Design in Policy Development: Whipping up a Policy Mayonnaise

From Expert-Driven Processes to Co-Creation

Addressing today's complex public challenges — from healthcare pressures to the climate transition — requires new approaches, and design has come to play an increasingly important role in this context. Policy making has long relied on a primarily political science approach in which analysis, expert consultation, and negotiations among political and administrative actors are central. In recent years, however, *co-design* — co-creating policy with those affected — has become more prominent in policy development. By bringing empathy, inclusion, and future scenarios to the table, design offers a complementary approach when developing new policy.

One way to integrate design into policy formulation is through policy labs. Lucy Kimbell characterizes the role of policy labs in line with this shift: "policy making is an ill-defined professional practice in which civil servants mediate between politics, evidence and delivery to find solutions to public issues. A Policy Lab sets up and enables collective learning cycles in which problems and solutions co-evolve and problems are reframed".

Against this backdrop, our own design-for-policy-practice at Experio Lab, and our sister organization Karlstad University Samhällsnytta, has evolved in recent years. As part of that evolution, we have experimented with transdisciplinary teams that combine design expertise with knowledge of the relevant systems and subject domains—often political science or law.

In this text, we reflect on what a synthesis between design and political science can mean for policy formulation and for design-for-policy as a practice. We argue that combining these knowledge domains is akin to whisking mayonnaise—a craft that requires knowledge, timing, and adaptability. Our work does not consist of adding design to political science or vice versa, but is rather a shared practice in which the two domains together create something new. What we seek is an emulsion—not between eggs and oil, but between design and political science.

Case Study: Vårdansvarskommittén (Healthcare Responsibility Committee), 2024–2025

Our reasoning is grounded in a collaboration with the Swedish Government's Vårdansvarskommittén during 2024–2025. This parliamentary committee was tasked with exploring the pros and cons of shifting responsibility for the governance and delivery of healthcare from the regions to the state. Centralizing the Swedish healthcare system is both a complex and politically sensitive issue, and there is limited scientific evidence to anticipate the consequences of such a reform. The committee's secretariat therefore concluded that one way to shed light on potential implications and effects was to co-create knowledge together with experts and representatives from different parts of the healthcare system.

Method: Making the System and Diverse Perspectives Visible

Rooted in co-creative service design and systemic design, we did not treat the potential reform as an abstract policy problem. Instead, we facilitated a process that convened representatives from across the system—patients, professionals, regions, municipalities, national agencies, and researchers — to build a shared understanding of the possible consequences of state governance of the healthcare system. For instance, could such a reform contribute to more geographically equitable access to care and enhanced efficiency?

As a first step, we conducted a workshop in which participants' perspectives and experiences became the basis for scenario building about what a state-governed healthcare system could look like. The work took as its point of departure concrete values that should be realized through a reformed system—for example, improved access, equity, or system efficiency. Participants were asked to create scenarios of a state-governed system that would promote each value. A central element was a large "jigsaw puzzle" whose pieces represented components and actors in the future system. Participants in mixed groups built scenarios that advanced a given value using both pre-made pieces and new pieces they felt were missing in the system.



Designing a Space for Co-Creation

Given the challenge of making sense of a far-reaching reform in a complex system, we made several methodological choices:

Composition of the Transdisciplinary Team

The core of our methodology was not a single technique but the deliberate composition of our own team. It included senior colleagues with academic backgrounds in political science and law and long practical experience as leaders and analysts in the healthcare sector, alongside professional systemic designers skilled in participatory methods and experienced in public-sector work. This multifaceted competence proved crucial in collaborating with the secretariat. We understood their needs and constraints, opening up for constructive dialogue in which the secretariat actively shaped both workshops and subsequent analysis with us. Their expertise deepened our design work, enabling us to structure a co-creative process that was both imaginative and inclusive for diverse system actors, while also making room for depth and nuance in relation to the subject matter at hand.

An Arena for Co-Creation

We brought together representatives from all parts of the system—patients, professionals, regions, municipalities, researchers, and policy experts. By creating an arena where perspectives can meet and collide within a structured safe space, people in the room became aware of others' viewpoints as well as their own. This fostered a richer understanding of how the system works and enabled participants to co-create knowledge about the potential effects of this complex reform.

Visual Facilitation and Scenario Development

A central tool was the aforementioned "jigsaw puzzle" used to build scenarios of a state-governed healthcare system. The method served several functions:

- *Externalizing mental models:* It compelled participants to make implicit assumptions explicit and visible to others while jointly constructing the system.
- *Concrete handling of complexity:* The abstract notion of a "healthcare system" became a tangible, malleable artifact that can be reshaped and debated. The puzzle made the system visible and the conversations concrete. Participants could see, move, and reconfigure the system before their eyes, build on each other's ideas, and identify gaps, risks, and opportunities in the reform. In this way, the abstract system was populated with participants' knowledge, experiences, and ideas.

- *Populating the system:* The method helped people imagine the humans who constitute the system. Once a puzzle was assembled, relationships among actors in the new system became visible, enabling reflection on how those relationships would need to function to advance the chosen value.
- *Lowering participation barriers and building trust:* The visual and tactile approach creates a more equitable dialogue in which formal status and rhetorical skill matter less than the shared will to build understanding. The secretariat also observed that the method did more than generate ideas for their analysis; our transdisciplinary competencies fostered trust and openness. Many participants held very senior roles and arrived with different expectations. Some were sceptical of centralization of the healthcare system. Demonstrating knowledge of the healthcare system and its actors, and careful planning and organisation of the workshop together with the secretariat, made it easier for participants to trust the process and contribute actively.

From Two Knowledge Traditions to One Policy Emulsion

Here we introduce mayonnaise as a metaphor and analytic frame to understand our transdisciplinary design-for-policy work. Just as oil and eggs—two fundamentally different substances—can be combined into a stable, flavourful emulsion, design and political science can be combined to create a policy process that is more than the sum of its parts. To understand the conditions for such an emulsion, we first disentangle the two main ingredients. Although both disciplines aim to shape and improve society, they differ in epistemological groundings, methodological repertoires, and underlying value orientations.

Political Science as the Stabilizing Base

In our metaphor, political science is the egg—the stabilizing, structure-giving component. Its theoretical foundations rest on democratic theory, institutional theory, and governance research. In problem definition and goal setting, the focus is on how political aims are translated into effective and legitimate instruments, institutions, and organizational solutions. The core question concerns which tools best support democratic steering and accountability. Analyses are often textual, quantitative, or qualitative-comparative, focusing on policy instruments such as legislation, regulation, economic incentives, and network governance. Effects, side effects, and consequences for democratic legitimacy are assessed. Implementation is seen as a complex process in which the administration acts as an active interpreter and co-producer of policy. Power relations, transparency, and responsibility allocation are central analytic concepts.

Political science provides essential understanding of the logic, constraints, and formal requirements of the politico-administrative system. Without this base, policy development risks becoming ineffectual, decoupled from knowledge of the practices and power structures that in effect govern the system.

Design Practice as the Generative Component

Design represents the oil—the fluid, energizing, form-giving ingredient. Design practice is grounded in intentional form-giving. Its methods aim to surface a plurality of perspectives through participation, attending to power relations and norms, and to those whose voices might need strengthening. Creative methods build new understanding of complex challenges and open possibilities for new ways of doing. The goal is to shape policy that is genuinely understandable, usable, and meaningful for the citizens, patients, and civil servants who will live with it.

The focus is consistently on lived experience and needs in the system. The methodological stance is generative, exploratory, and co-creative, using tools such as prototyping, visualization, and future scenario work—often in workshops that gather diverse perspectives. The design perspective brings a distinctive capacity to work with uncertainty, to render abstract systems concrete, and to create shared platforms for dialogue that bridge professional and hierarchical boundaries.

Its view of implementation differs from traditional models. Policy is not a finished decision to be “rolled out” from above, but a living artifact that must be tested, adjusted, and iterated in close interaction with actual users and practices. Empathy, creativity, and an experimental stance guide the process throughout.

In our collaboration with Vårdansvarskommittén, the political-science and administrative perspective provided the base. Both the secretariat and invited participants were deeply rooted in that tradition. The challenge was to slowly but steadily, with constant stirring, whisk in the design perspective—the oil—to create a stable emulsion rather than a separation.

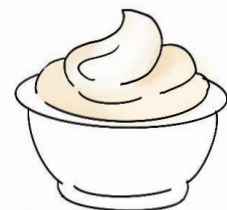
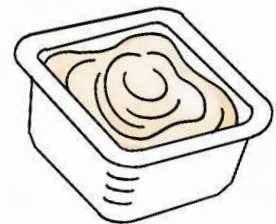
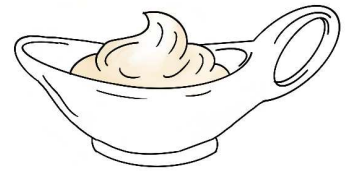
The decisive factor was the tacit knowledge held by the transdisciplinary team. Colleagues with political-science competence, through their deep grasp of the system's logic and political institutional relevance, acted as a bridge to the secretariat and workshop participants, establishing credibility and trust. They understood the needs and constraints of the inquiry, enabling a constructive dialogue in which design methods could be adapted and add value in context. Designers' tools for visualization and participation then became meaningful means to explore and illuminate the complex interdependencies the committee wished to analyse.

Transdisciplinary Teams as a Path to a More Realistic and Pluralistic Policy Practice?

The collaboration highlighted design's potential for co-creating knowledge around complex issues where clear solutions are difficult to identify. "Muddling through," a term coined by Charles E. Lindblomⁱⁱ, describes the incremental, pragmatic, and often slow character of governmental policymaking, where decisions are made through a series of small, successive comparisons rather than by implementing a grand rational plan. This approach offers a realistic alternative to comprehensive rational models. It acknowledges the complexity and constraints of real-world governance, allows for adjustments, and limits the impact of potential errors by confining decisions to the near future and to existing policy.

Transdisciplinary teams that cultivate trust in the design process through tacit knowledge and experience—enabling an understanding of relationships, positions, and nuances within the system—can potentially expand the boundaries of what design can contribute to policy formulation. When transdisciplinary teams successfully combine knowledge, sensitivity, and adaptability, design can extend the horizon of what policy can achieve. Instead of being a more technocratic practice, grounded in a single worldview, it can become a more improvisational and polyphonic practiceⁱⁱⁱ where perspectives meet, clash, and converge — where a stable, flavourful emulsion can, in fact, make decision-making both more intelligible and more effective.

At Experio Lab and Samhällsnytta, we continue to explore how transdisciplinary teams can deepen the understanding of complex societal challenges, where the interplay between design and political science serves as a catalyst for more learning-oriented, inclusive, and meaningful policy processes—processes that hopefully create real value for the citizens and public servants whom policy ultimately affects.



ⁱKimbell, Lucy (2015) Applying Design Approaches to Policy Making: Discovering Policy Lab. Discussion Paper. University of Brighton, Brighton.

ⁱⁱLindblom, C.E (1959) The Science of "Muddling Through", Vol. 19, No. 2. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/973677>

ⁱⁱⁱKimbell, L., & Bailey, J. (2017). Prototyping and the new spirit of policy-making. *CoDesign* 13(3):214-226.

Reflection questions

- What factors do you consider essential for creating a stable and effective “emulsion” between different knowledge traditions in policy development?
- In what ways do you think design has contributed, or could contribute, to deepening the understanding of complex societal challenges?
- How might tools such as prototyping, visualization, and scenario development be further developed to strengthen co-creation and improve the quality of future policy processes?

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.

Reflections