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Seeing systemic design through policy eyes: A framework to navigate complexities of policy contexts

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Abstract: This paper examines why design practitioners experience tensions when applying systemic design approaches within policy contexts. Drawing on Bekkers' four analytical perspectives (rational, political, cultural, and institutional), we reinterpret the systemic design activities to reveal how each perspective places distinct, and at times conflicting, demands on design processes. By comparing the lenses across the dimensions of principles, framing, validity, appropriateness, and embedding, we develop a theoretical framework to shed light on how these tensions emerge. The framework also shows that each perspective puts different demands on a design process in the policy context. The framework helps both designers and policy professionals understand their own normative positioning, recognize competing logics, and identify pathways to navigate complexity when collaborating on transformative societal challenges.

Keywords: design and policy, design for policy, public sector design, policy design, tensions

1. Introduction

In facing systemic societal challenges, such as climate change or social inequality, governments respond with policy interventions and instruments (Howlett & Mukherjee, 2020). Addressing systemic societal challenges require not only technical and bureaucratic capabilities, but also the capacity to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty of these issues (Rittel & Webber, 1973). In addition, these challenges often require systemic transformation (Young, 2010), forcing governments to seek and adopt “*more explorative, experimental and reflexive approaches*” (Loorbach, 2010, p. 164). Design offers a wide range of approaches under labels like transition design, systemic design and social design (Ceschin & Gaziulusoy, 2016; De Koning, 2019; Tonkinwise, 2015; van



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der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020), that can help governments towards effective policy responses for transformative challenges. In particular, design approaches have been found to offer value in policy formulation, implementation and evaluation (Bason, 2017; van Buuren, Lewis, & Peters, 2023b), by placing co-creation with target groups at the core of the practice, questioning current framings, and generating creative solutions that spark imagination (van Buuren, Lewis, & Peters, 2023a; van Buuren, Lewis, & Voorberg, 2023).

Yet in applying design in policy contexts, tensions and conflicts arise (Boztepe et al., 2023; Pirinen et al., 2022). For example, design practitioners often face limited space for redefining existing problem definitions within a policy context, which restricts their possibilities to generate innovative solutions (Frankowski et al., 2025). However, in policy contexts, staying within initial problem definitions is crucial to justify decisions on spending resources. If designers do not stay within this definition, it may lead to a solution that is not perceived as legitimate within that context (Schaminée, 2019). Another example of possible conflict regards designers opening the process, by inviting diverse and often overlooked voices to the table. This varies from strategies that converge quickly in response to a problem (Mintrom et al., 2024). These examples show that different, sometimes opposing logics are at work when designing in a policy context. That raises the question of what these logics are and how they contribute to the creation of these tensions?

Several authors addressed the logics underlying design and policy. Bason (2014) contrasts *design* with *policy*, arguing that they differ in values, for instance, *inductive* versus *deductive* reasoning, and *intuitive* versus *logical* processes. Building on this, Clark and Craft (2019) describe differences between *design thinking* and *traditional* ways of working in a policy context. They state that design lacks the know-how to address political issues and the ability to anticipate currently existing ways of working. Brinkman et al. (2023) further detail that design is based on *creative-purposive* logic, whereas in a policy context, a *rational-instrumental* logic is the norm. They argue that design requires an organization that fosters exploration and experimentation, whereas policy contexts demand evidence-based action and predictability. Additionally, they conclude that different logics mainly lead to problems in social interactions, because this is where opposing logics meet and tensions arise. These examples illustrate how current understandings of tensions between design and policy are based on a dichotomy in logics between the two fields of design and policy.

However, policy design *is* design, so in this paper we regard the policy context as a domain where design already takes place (Brinkman & Kim, 2024; Junginger, 2013). This follows Simon's definition of design as intentional effort to change existing situations into preferred ones (Simon, 2008). The separation between design and policy is thus too narrow to explain tensions we observe in practice and may even exacerbate differences between approaches. However, the fact remains that design and policy practitioners perceive tensions when they use contemporary design approaches in policy contexts, such as transition, systemic and social design. In the remainder of this paper, we thus use design to refer to these design approaches.

For fruitful use of design approaches in addressing transformative challenges in the policy context, there is a need for a more nuanced and broader perspective on the underlying structures, values, and practices that create tensions. The purpose of this paper is to offer a theoretical framework that explains tensions and suggests pathways for designers to address these tensions. The framework builds on a variety of perspectives on design dynamics in the policy context. The context in which policy is formulated, implemented and evaluated is complex as it is, because it concerns the political and bureaucratic acts to weigh public values and allocate resources accordingly (Bekkers, 2012). Numerous actors influence or want to influence the realization of values (Howlett & Mukherjee, 2020). These actors have different positions, interests, and ideas on what 'good' policy is and how it should come about, which contributes to the complexity in this domain. To understand differences in framing and interpretation of policy, policy science developed lenses that represent different perspectives on policy. We use four analytical lenses in this paper: the rational, the political, the cultural, and the institutional (Bekkers, 2012). These are used to re-interpret systemic design activities, represented in the Systemic Design Framework (Drew et al., 2021). This model was developed to advise the British Government on design, rendering it suitable to represent design activity in policy contexts. The discussion of design activities

from different perspectives surfaces competing and contradictory ideas on dynamics underlying design practices in the policy context. This forms the basis for the development of the framework, that uses Bekkers' lenses to prescriptively describe specific demands the lenses put on design processes.

2. Perspectives to understand the policy context

For this paper, we adopt the four perspectives on policy that Bekkers distinguishes (Bekkers, 2012). These perspectives are both comprehensive and straightforward to understand. The perspectives are not mutually exclusive: they all surface relevant concerns and dynamics that need to be considered simultaneously in a policy context. In the following paragraphs, we dive into the perspectives in more detail. Unless specified otherwise, this is based on the descriptions of Bekkers.

First, a **rational perspective** on policy conceptualizes policy design as systematic problem solving: a cognitive process of developing options and making decisions between them. Within rational policy design, problems are considered as knowable, which can thus be understood through thorough and systematic investigation of the facts. This leads to a goal-oriented search for evidence-based solutions. To come to optimal solutions efficiently, planning results in a step-by-step process. Within this perspective, rationalization through research is used to reduce ambiguity and value conflicts to objectified choices. In practice, design in policy contexts evolves as reality is constantly changes. The rational lens does not well account for this constant evolution, as the point of departure is that the entire process can be known and planned. This perspective explains that design processes and outcomes in policy contexts must be accountable and justifiable (Hemerijck, 2003).

The second lens, the **political perspective**, emphasizes the effect of politics, interest groups, and coalitions on the policy that is to be developed. Within this lens, policies result from negotiations, in which power and conflict are central. Policy design is a matter of strategic negotiation where goals are framed to support political goals. This results in a process where partnerships, alliances and coalitions are built that assist strategic objectives. Outcomes account for power balances between different actors. The political lens does not well account for situations where design is based on technical feasibility or guided by ethical desirability. This perspective explains that design processes and outcomes in policy contexts must serve the political and strategic interests of actors (Hemerijck, 2003).

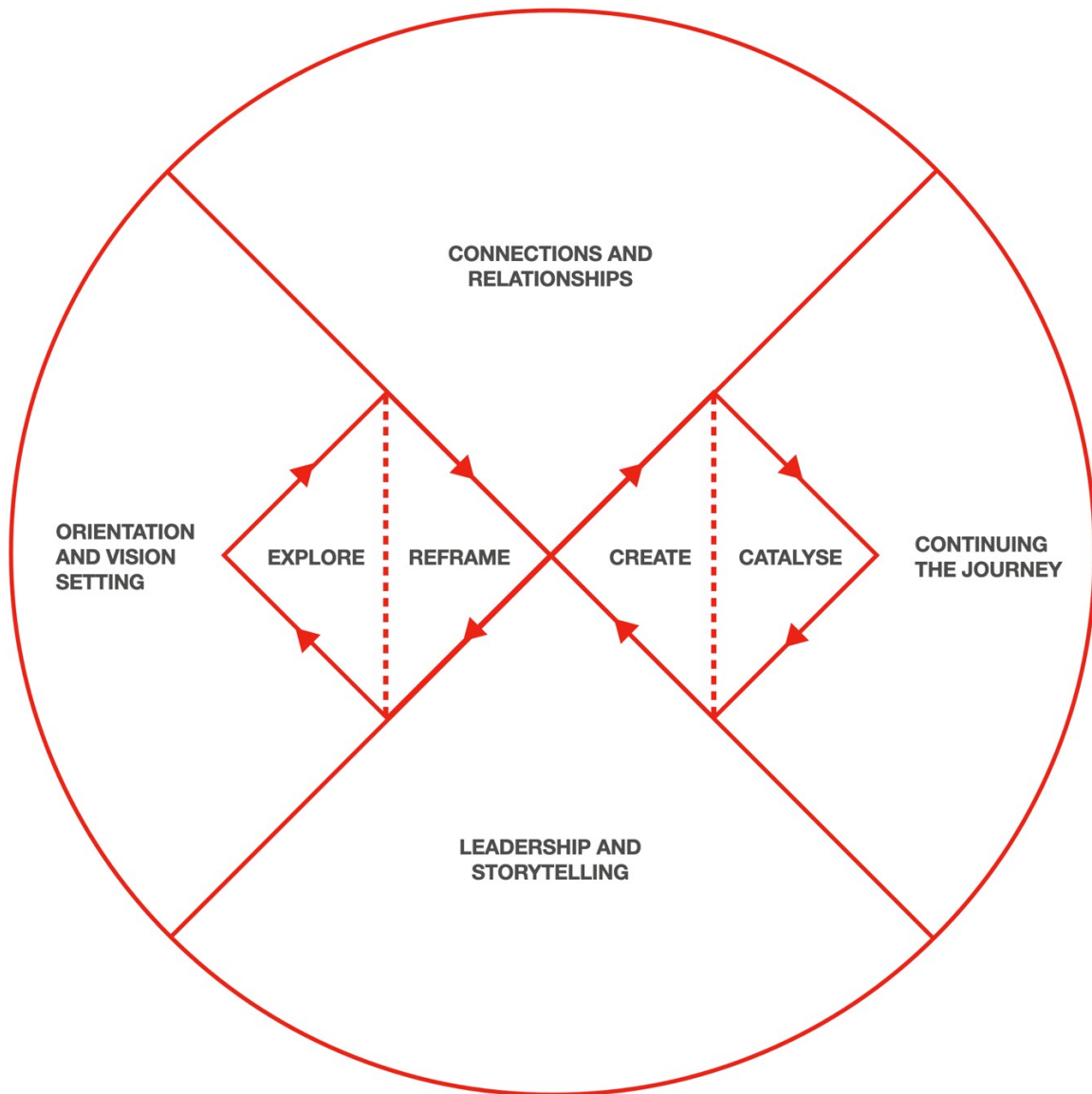
Third, Bekkers shows that policy design can result from how society or societal groups frame the problem. The **cultural perspective** depends on cultural narratives, norms, and shared meanings (Yanow, 1996). It emphasizes that problems are interpreted through cultural narratives, symbols, and identities (Fischer & Gottweis, 2013). A policy design process is viewed as a practice embedded in social structures and a search for resonance with communities. Outcomes are often culturally embedded: they are adjusted to situated narratives and framings. The cultural lens does not well account for situations where outcomes must be generalized and designed for institutional uptake. This perspective explains that design outcomes and processes in policy contexts must be meaningful for actors influenced by them (Hemerijck, 2003).

Lastly, policy design can be viewed from an **institutional perspective**. In this perspective, institutional norms and rules shape a design process in the policy context (Scott, 2013). Actors operate within institutional logics, with those logics determining their choices when designing a new policy. The norms and unwritten rules lead to path dependency when policy design is necessary, meaning that outcomes are often 'more of the same'. The institutional lens does not account for agency of organizations and individuals that decide for pathways beyond institutionalized practices. This perspective explains that design processes and outcomes in policy contexts must take into account institutional logics, norms and rules, and that the call for adaption to these logics can be coercive (Hemerijck, 2003).

3. Systemic design process

To develop the theoretical framework to understand tensions occurring in design practice from the four perspectives presented in the last section, we use the Systemic Design Framework (SDF) as presented by the Design Council (Drew et al., 2021). This framework presents eight activities taking place in a systemic design process. The SDF is based on the widely used Double Diamond, as introduced in 2003-4 (Kochanowska et al., 2022), with a recent update that aims to better represent design for complex societal and systemic challenges. This also responds to common critiques on the Double Diamond model being a too linear representation of a design process (Kochanowska et al., 2022), because design practice is much more fluid than four sequential stages. The original Double Diamond is still recognizable in the model as the central two diamonds, but the original four activities are renamed and reframed in the update. Both diamonds consisting of diverging activity (*explore, create*) and converging activity (*reframe, catalyse*). Around those four central design activities, four additional activities are added. The next paragraph details these eight activities based on the descriptions of the Design Council (Drew et al., 2021), which are represented in figure 1. In the following detailing, the activities are presented in a sequential manner for the sake of clarity, but we recognize that systemic design processes are iterative and non-linear in practice.

Fig. 1: The eight activities in the Systemic Design Framework, from Drew et al. (2021)



The *explore* activity starts after the initial briefing and includes accumulation of expert and experiential knowledge and perspectives on the situation. This is closely interlinked with the *reframe* activity, where the converging point is a proposition for the desired change, possibly adjusting the initial briefing. This serves the *create* activity, where ideas and actions are developed to work towards the desired change. The ideas and actions with the highest priority are then prototyped to test their consequences and impact on the system, which forms the *catalyse* activity. The four additional design activities embed and strengthen the design process by actively considering the process leading to an initial briefing and the activities needed to scale solutions to the entire system. *Orientation and vision setting* regards creating trust and commitment among initial stakeholders. *Continuing the journey* concerns sharing outcomes and finding new opportunities, through reinforcing connections and alliances. They also widen the process to include activities necessary to work towards impact across the system. *Connections and relationships* activity regards bringing together actors to work on the systemic challenge and including different perspectives. *Leadership and storytelling* highlight reflexive activity in the design process, which is important to open the space for deep and sustained changes.

4. Using policy perspectives to understand design activities in policy contexts

This paper aims to develop a framework to explain tensions practitioners experience in designing in policy contexts. To do so, this section uses the four lenses used to explain the policy context (rational, political, cultural, institutional) to re-interpret the activities the SDF presents as being part of a systemic design process. This leads to four descriptions of the design activities that are summarized in figure 2.1 and 2.2.

The rational lens on a systemic design process

The rational lens emphasizes effective and efficient solution finding through a plannable process. For approaching a design process, this means that the problem is defined at the start, followed by technocratic steps to arrive at a legitimate solution. The *orientation and vision setting* and the *exploration phase* mainly involve gathering knowledge from scientific and professional experts on the problem. Building a vision is a matter of projective anticipation and involves models with prognoses on the future. This builds a *frame* that sets objectively measurable goals and solution criteria. The *creation* and *catalyse phase* are approached as a step-by-step product innovation process where stages and gates follow each other. A choice for a solution is made based on weighing alternatives on criteria regarding the projected evidence-based effectiveness and efficiency. The *continuation of the journey* is about scaling up a proven effective solution across an organization. *Connections and relationships* are mainly built to bring in expertise to address the issue, either through their knowledge or through their proven access to key communities. *Leadership and storytelling* activity within the rational lens give room to reflections of experts on the process or outcomes.

The political lens on a systemic design process

The political lens highlights that solutions are strategically negotiated in a power-driven process. This means that a successful solution depends on the alignment of interest with goals, so that political willpower can be created. Therefore, *orientation and vision setting*, involves developing feeling how actors with strategic and political power view the goal and what their interests are. The *exploration*, *reframing*, *creation*, and *catalyse* activities are not linearly followed in the process of finding coalitions and partnerships that shape negotiation. The process ends as an agreement is found between the actors. The *continuation of the journey* is characterized by showing how solutions help to achieve strategic goals and reflection on how actor-coalitions might aid future goals. *Connections and relationships* are shaped by actors with power over the problem and solution, as collaborations serve their interests. Similarly, *leadership and storytelling* give room to a narrative that attends to those with power.

The cultural lens on a systemic design process

The cultural lens emphasizes that design processes and outcomes resonate with involved communities. A deep understanding of different values and interpretations of diverse actors characterizes the cultural design process. The process starts by bringing together people and building trust towards a collective endeavor. *Orientation and vision setting* focus on bringing together those affected by a problem on an equal basis. Especially groups that are marginalized are invited to come to the table and be a partner in the design process. The *explore* and *reframe* activities thus evolve around understanding the different perspectives of each actor, and the *create* and *catalyse* activities around finding solutions meaningful to those actors. *Continuing the journey* is characterized by celebrating the success and learnings of the project and by reinforcing the connections between actors for future endeavors. This comes in place of literal transfer of solutions from one to the other cultural context, valuable solutions are situated in the cultural perspective. As for *connections and relationships*, these activities are about building empathy for communities by spending time and place with them, as well as creating space for democratic dialogue around a problem. *Leadership and storytelling* activity are essential to reflect on values of individuals and groups within the process, so that understanding between them are fostered in their collective process.

The institutional lens on a systemic design process

The institutional lens shows a design process that evolves around identification of solutions that consider institutional routines and norms. In the institutional approach, the *orientation and vision setting* is about understanding the values, norms and routines that compose current institutions and systems to come to a first scoping for the design process. The *exploration* evolves along the lines of the ways in which the institution is used to work, through 'known' pathways. The *framing* give space for the current institutional view. Newly *created* and *catalyzed* solutions must consider how institutional limitations and possibilities for change. The *continuation of the journey* depends on how well current institutions are considered in the solutions. The process must thus give space for actors to build *connections and relationships* that help them shape the future of their institution. *Leadership and storytelling* activities thus give room for them to clarify and explicate what is at stake for these actors in changing towards a new system.

Fig. 2.1: four perspectives on activities in the SDF

Activities in the Systemic Design Framework	 Rational perspective	 Political perspective
	Explore	
	Gathering objective data on the problem by using expert and academic knowledge.	Explore political and strategic goals and interests of involved actors.
	Reframe	
	Formulating goals and constraints and define criteria for success.	Frame and position the problem to fit with goals and interests, particularly of dominant groups.
	Create	
	Evidence-based generation of solutions and testing them against defined criteria to assess their effectiveness.	Finding agreement on solutions through negotiations and trade-offs.
	Catalyze	
	Implement the most feasible solutions following objective criteria.	Gathering political will and support to implement the solutions.
	Orientation and vision setting	
	Defining the problem and important actors according to expert definitions.	Developing understanding for differing interests and values.
	Leadership and storytelling	
	Fact-based reflection and monitoring involved values and the design process.	Reflection on involved political values and the process according to interests.
	Connections and relationships	
	Building connections with experts and through their inputs.	Create partnerships and coalitions to foster connections and build agenda's.
	Continuing the journey	
	Scaling up the solution across the organization and monitoring outcomes based on performance indicators.	Showing how solutions help to contribute to (future) strategic goals.

Fig. 2.2: four perspectives on activities in the SDF

<i>Activities in the Systemic Design Framework</i>		
	Cultural perspective	Institutional perspective
<i>Explore</i>	Empathizing with involved values and interpretations of actors.	Understand norms, legacies, organizational structures and institutional constraints that define the problem.
<i>Reframe</i>	Co-create problem understandings to seek resonance with actors.	(Re)align problem definition to consider institutional logics and norms.
<i>Create</i>	Co-create propositions and solutions and test their meaning for involved actors.	Norms and logics lead the way towards fitting solutions, although strategically challenging the status quo is possible.
<i>Catalyze</i>	Finding acceptance and resonance for solutions with actors towards adoption.	Building institutional capacity to adopt and implement the solutions.
<i>Orientation and vision setting</i>	Bringing together those affected by a problem and building trust between them.	Understand what is at stake for different actors when changing the system.
<i>Leadership and storytelling</i>	All actors reflect on individual and collective values and the design process.	Help individual actors reflect on what is at stake and to gain for them in a new system.
<i>Connections and relationships</i>	Building empathy with communities and creating space for democratic dialogue.	Understanding and building routines and institutional logics by building trust with actors in the system.
<i>Continuing the journey</i>	Celebrating success, sharing learnings and reinforcing connections between actors.	Showing how the new value system can aid actors.

5. Developing the framework: perspectives at play in design practice

With the discussion of the SDF from four perspectives laid out in the last section, differences and even conflicting views on the design process surface. This section aims to elucidate tensions that follow from these differences. Secondly, it aims to shed light on the implications the four perspectives may have for design activities in policy contexts. Here we take the viewpoint that each of Bekkers' four lenses is an inherently valuable way to focus on important aspects of the policy context. This means that all four lead to a set of demands or criteria for design processes taking place. The aspects important for design are found by discussing the differences on five key dimensions: principles, framing, validity, appropriateness and embedding. While not exhaustive, these dimensions were chosen for their collective representation of key points of variation across perspectives. The section concludes with figure 3 that summarizes the differences on these dimensions.

Principle: what paradigm underpins reasoning?

Each analytical lens is grounded in a distinct paradigmatic framework, fundamentally shaping how the policy context is interpreted and understood. The critical note here is that paradigm should not be confused with individual world views, as the use of certain paradigms are highly influenced by context and individuals may use different lenses to reason about their context (Braams, 2023). In using the paradigm approach, four values come forward as relevant in the policy context: efficiency and effectiveness (rational lens), normative or ideological commitment (political lens), inclusivity and contextual validity (cultural lens) and institutional legitimacy and procedural integrity (institutional lens). These paradigms are simultaneously occurring, but also contradictory and conflicting.

Using a paradigm approach, the key question is: where does design fit in, and what unique perspective does it bring? The SDF appears to be most attuned to a cultural view of policy. It incorporates relationships and storytelling as central aspects of the design process. The Design Council refers to spending *"time with communities on their terms"* (Drew et al., 2021, p. 49), emphasizing the creation of something valuable for the involved actors. This explains tensions that arise because designers are unaware of how their own perspective and norms position them in relation to the policy context (Frankowski et al., 2025). If design practitioners use the SDF, they must be aware that other perspectives on the policy context are also present and valid. Raised understanding of the difference between the lenses can aid effective and conscious use of design approaches (Torfing et al., 2020). Additionally, this calls for the development of design practices directed at specific paradigms or for the inclusion of all paradigms. The following four dimensions detail further how this may take shape in design practice.

Framing: what defines the problem-solution?

Across the four perspectives, large differences can be observed in how the problem-solution framings are defined. The cultural lens explains designers' preference towards a framing that shows deep understanding for involved actors. However, a meaningful framing is not necessarily efficient based on evidence, does not inherently serve any political goals nor does it include current institutionalized norms and routines. Let's focus on how design framings may serve political goals. As design seeks to create solutions that are of value to individuals and the system as a whole (Van Der Bijl-Brouwer et al., 2024), the interest-driven activity of strategic positioning common in political processes can feel very empty and insufficiently informed from a design perspective (Lewis et al., 2023). Design falls short in guidance on how to deal with these power dynamics (Clarke & Craft, 2019). This leads to issues regarding the alignment between design activities and politically driven processes (Kimbell et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2023). To resolve this, design practitioners must improve their power literacy to design within a public sector context (Goodwill et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2023). Methods like actor-network analysis can help to map stakeholders and understand their political interests to better inform framings. Second, the political lens puts forward the importance of conflict. Making conflicts explicit through the creation of artefacts can improve this process (DiSalvo, 2012). Artefacts made as part of design activity can represent

certain framings that serve political interest. Third, design practices may need boundary spanning or orchestration driven activities to facilitate the translation between design framings and political framings (Brinkman et al., 2025; Meijer-Wassenaar & Bakker-Joose, 2023; Van Arkel & Tromp, 2024). This helps political actors in how they could utilize design framings directed at meaning for their strategic interests.

Validity: whose and what knowledge is decisive?

Each lens weights different actors and knowledge as critical to a design process in the policy context. The rational view values professional and academic experts bringing in facts and statistics. The political view values influential actors with power and their interests and strategic goals. The cultural view values societal actors affected by the current or future situation and their personal or collective interpretations and values. The institutional view values actors that understand the current institutions and their knowledge on routines and historical legacies. If design is working from the cultural view, it prioritizes the voices of those in society that are affected but does not do justice to potential important factual knowledge, political goals and actors within existing institutions. This is also what design is valued for in policy contexts, as bringing in voices of (marginalized) groups is considered one of its key advantages (van Buuren, Lewis, & Voorberg, 2023). Recent research and practice focus on how co-creative and design activities can help to better include other views as those from citizens. Especially when designing for institutional change, including those that work from within the system is emphasized. This can be done by using ethnographic methods to map what is at stake for these actors when the system and institutions must change (Vink et al., 2021). Design can also help to develop visions for how these actors may take a leading role in a new system, for instance through collective reimagination of those institutions (Vink et al., 2021).

Appropriateness: what process is considered suitable?

Section 4 indicates that different lenses show variations in how the design process and outcomes are arranged. The rational lens emphasizes a plannable and stepwise process. The political lens emphasizes a process that makes space for political goals. The cultural lens highlights an inclusive process. The institutional lens stresses the importance of considering organizational norms, rules and routines. Policy makers often implicitly use the rational lens as the ideal-type for designing policy, as this helps them to come to accountable and justifiable processes and outcomes (Hermus et al., 2023; Howlett, 2019). This explains tensions that arise around the basis of evidence of design practice and its outcomes, and the desire for a step-by-step planned process in a policy context (Blomkamp, 2022; Frankowski et al., 2025). Design puts forward another ideal type next to the rational perspective, which is largely based on the cultural perspective. In essence, this calls for reflection on principles and standards that the policy realm implicitly upholds. Being explicit about what type of process is suitable in a specific context thus is vital. In addition to widening understanding of appropriateness of process, design practitioners may need to employ specific strategies to bridge the gap to the current ideal type. Adjusting the approach to the context can help to bridge the gap, for instance by doing a cost-benefit analysis or actively exposing the progress made (Brinkman et al., 2023).

Embedding: when are outcomes successful and sustained?

Most designers hope to contribute to impactful and sustained change. The perspectives show four factors to consider when striving for embedding an outcome towards a new system. The rational view emphasizes that the success of outcomes is determined by its ability to fulfill objective criteria. The political view shows successful outcomes are when political interests are served. The cultural lens emphasizes that success depends on the meaningfulness outcomes have for those involved. The institutional lens stresses successful outcomes show understanding and incorporation of current and future organizational norms and routines. Design often tends to define successful outcomes by their ability to create something innovative or new (Cross, 1982; Schön, 2013), that creates new meanings (Verganti, 2008). This brings the definition of success designers use best explicated by the cultural lens. In striving for something new, design tends to surpass existing, proven outcomes in search of something innovative. Additionally, outcomes that create new meaning do not necessarily serve political interest, leading to misunderstanding and refusal of outcomes. Also, design tends to surpass existing outcomes that historically developed (Vink & Koskela-Huotari, 2021). For instance, issues can arise if

outcomes do not align with institutional logics and are perceived as an attack, making it challenging to engage management or embed solutions within the organization (van Arkel et al., 2025). Therefore, design practitioners need to actively understand and anticipate norms and current routines in their activities (Junginger, 2015).

Fig. 3 Key dimensions between the four perspectives on the policy context

	 Rational perspective	 Political perspective	 Cultural perspective	 Institutional perspective
Key dimensions				
Principle <i>What paradigm underpins reasoning?</i>	Efficiency and effectiveness	Normative and ideological commitment	Inclusivity and contextual validity	Institutional legitimacy and procedural integrity
Framing <i>What defines the problem-solution?</i>	Framing must be based on evidence to be legitimate.	Framing must serve political and strategic goals and interests.	Framing must show deep understanding for actors affected by the problematic or future situation.	Framing must include current and future institutional norms and routines.
Validity <i>Whose and what knowledge is decisive?</i>	Decisions are based on academic or professional expertise.	Decisions are based on the interests of political actors. A stronger political voice yields greater decision-making power.	Decisions are based on a pluriform view of cultural and societal voices.	Decisions are based on what fits routines, norms and historical legacies of involved organizations.
Appropriateness <i>What process is considered suitable?</i>	A design process must be planned in steps to be justifiable and transparent.	A design process must make space to achieve politically driven goals.	A design process must inclusively give space to diverse societal voices.	A design process must consider organizational norms, rules and routines.
Embedding <i>When are outcomes successful and sustained?</i>	An outcome is embedded according to its ability to fulfill objective criteria.	An outcome is embedded according to its ability to serve political interests.	An outcome is embedded according to its ability to create something meaningful for those involved.	An outcome is embedded according to its ability to incorporate current and future organizational norms and routines.

6. Conclusion

In addressing systemic societal challenges, governments increasingly use design approaches in policy making (Bason, 2014; van Buuren, Lewis, & Peters, 2023b). Applying design in this context is no sinecure, as the policy context is full of conflicting perspectives on what approaches and outcomes are appropriate. Therefore, the question what the field of design can learn from policy science, and vice versa, remains prevalent (Clarke & Craft, 2019). In this paper we develop a theoretical framework to understand a systemic design process in policy contexts from four perspectives offered by Bekkers (2012): the rational, political, cultural and institutional lens. The first step of development is to re-interpret systemic design activities through these four lenses. This yields insight in how systemic design may occur in policy contexts. The second step is to shed light on tensions that may follow from the different approaches and what implications these have for design activities in policy contexts. The resulting framework is a theoretical exploration, so future studies need to find empirical evidence for the roles these perspectives have in design practice in policy contexts. However, the framework indicates that the values and paradigms each perspective represents lead to different demands on design taking place in the policy context.

In this conclusion, we want to indicate how this framework may be of use to design and policy practitioners, in communication between design and policy professionals and in future research. First, design practitioners may use the framework to understand their own normative positioning. This can help them manage the challenges

and tensions they encounter while designing in policy contexts, because it gives them a reference on where specific demands originate. In designing for systemic change, the demands following from an institutional perspective become relevant, mainly because such design often poses solutions that require institutional change (van Arkel et al., 2025). The demands the framework describes can also help to design actions to manage these challenges.

Second, in the introduction we pointed to the idea that a policy context is a context where design already takes place. This means that policy practitioners may have equal use for the developed framework as design practitioners. It can help them understand their positioning and help them to interpret the context they operate in. Additionally, it may help them understand how social, systemic and transitional design approaches can be valuable and improve their ability to 'translate' between design practices and the policy context.

Third, in communication between professionals from a design and a policy background the framework can function as a tool for dialogue and understanding. It does so by providing a shared language and overview on different ways to understand a design process. By mapping current activities and projected outcomes on the different lenses to better understand which demands dominate or are overlooked. This improves collective awareness of how different perspectives are at play in a policy context.

Fourth, in future research the framework may be of use in two ways. First, this framework offers design scholars a structured way to examine design in policy contexts through multiple analytical lenses. By doing so, it supports the development of targeted methodologies that address the unique challenges of driving systemic change in institutions and organizations. These methodologies can be tailored to the specific demands arising from different interpretations of the policy context. To strengthen this approach, deeper engagement with existing work on design methods in the policy domain, for instance the design approaches developed by Kimbell (2015) Blomkamp (2022). Second, the framework extends Bekkers' analytical lenses by demonstrating their prescriptive potential in policy design processes. This shift encourages policy science to adopt more abductive strategies for addressing complex problems (Ramesh & Howlett, 2025). Together, these contributions highlight the framework's value in bridging the scientific fields of design and public administration. We strongly encourage this convergence.

7. References

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