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The civil servant systemic designer: An emerging context for systemic design practice

Veale, Jonathan

A rich picture of the civil servant systemic designer: an emerging context

By Jonathan Veale M.E.S., M.Des., RPP, MCIP

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Introduction

Government decisions manifest within the landscape and can greatly affect change within their jurisdiction and beyond. A perfect example would be decisions about regional energy policy. A government's views about the production, transportation and consumption of energy within their geography notably impacts land development, resource extraction, economic investment, urban design, transportation, climate change, economic competitiveness and the social mix of a region[1]. Energy policy decisions are foundational to complex predicaments, including energy insecurity, poverty, food and water security and social strife. Notable examples abound but this complexity manifests at the human scale towards whole systems and the spaces in-between.

Until relatively recently, government policy development, insofar as it was systemic, relied upon hard systems methodology which began with a knowable problem and converged on a solution[2]. This linear and monistic approach brought depth but lacked context of the wider societal, technological, economic, ecological and political system. In simpler times, and in the absence of complex systems methodologies, this approach was the best option for policy development. Consistent with this view, governments organized themselves around discrete policy silos, each bringing an expert depth to their thematic responsibility. This is opportune where increasing specialization leads to new knowledge, but challenged where context is needed to avoid unintended

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[1] This is not an exhaustive list.
[2] Reductionist thinking was the best option available.

consequences[3]. Complexity as it is now, calls upon government to navigate policy predicaments with a new architecture – one that brings both depth and context for rigorous policy.

This paper examines the emerging context of the civil servant – one entrusted with the public interest by duty and responsibility – who practices within the architecture of government, deploying systemic design methodologies towards the complex predicaments that societies faces. Governments are responding to complexity in policy decisions – design consultants are retained; government staff are trained in designerly ways; and, experienced-designers are employed on in-house consulting teams. These models have the effect of increasing the profile of design practice within government. The model of the Department of Energy in Alberta, Canada is examined with a view towards articulating this emerging context for systemic design practice. The case of a trans-ministry design team applying systemic design methodology around a shared strategic concern is presented. The case explores key questions about the Civil Servant Systemic Designer:

- What is the cultural challenge of systemic design for government?

- What is the role of the designer in this challenge?

- What is the relationship of the designer within the business model?

- Which professional qualities must the designer possess?

- What are the implications for systemic design practice?

This paper is fundamentally about how systemic designers who live within the architecture of the government can best deliver value to the public they serve.

A Shared Stewardship Agenda

Conventional civil service, not unlike systemic design practice, centres on stewardship but the two disciplines advance the concept differently. This paper advances that the civil servant designer synthesises both. In the case of civil service, stewardship is an end state that aligns with the public interest[4]. It is the 'place' where we take decisions to with an idealized objective to balance competing interests and offer advice in the best interest of society. Design nuances the scale of decisions by extending into human- or citizen centricity in

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[3] The paper will argue that unintended consequences are deleterious to the credibility and trust that citizen's place in government by consuming scarce energy and resources on solving misplaced problems.

[4] See Code of Conduct and Ethics for the Public Service of Alberta < http://www.assembly.ab.ca/lao/library/egovdocs/2005/alpe/158311.pdf>

decision-making[5]. While systemic design has added that stewardship is active and about bridging the value chain – the careful and dutiful execution of modes of behaviour from problem conception to value delivery and necessary feedbacks[6]. In this respect, systemic design brings an advanced and innovation focused agenda of stewardship to the governance space where 'delivered value' equates with credibility and social approval[7]. For civil service, human centricity and the stewardship of ideas to fruition appears novel. From this vantage, practicing *within* the architecture of government might be the best place for some systemic designers, especially those particularly concerned about advancing stewardship as a mode of behaviour and gaining a civil servant's eye for the public interest.

Reconciling the Cultural Tension

The civil servant systemic designer lives and breathes the culture of government; therefore, this experience might signal possible futures for this emerging context. The case study shows that the ultimate challenge for the civil servant systemic designer is cultural. The natural tension between the positivist and reductionist community, which dominates government, and the emerging context of constructivist and systemic design is explored. This paper argues that the way the systemic designer reconciles this tension is critical to the survival of the practice. With systemic design bringing urgently needed "rich picture" context to decisions[8], reconciliation enables a requisite depth of specialist knowledge to be deployed against defined problems. The civil servant systemic designer must avoid both the pathology of excessive depth[9] and the pathology of contextual overabundance[10].

Reductionist culture creates the structures and patterns found in government institutions. For example, while government staff are organised by *modes of knowing*, or disciplinary themes, these well observed silos do not fully capture the degree of segregation. This paper argues that three distinct, culturally-created and interconnected silos persist within Canadian public institutions, each of which uniquely tasks the systemic designer. By naming and visualising these silos, strategies may be applied by the systemic designer to mitigate the disadvantages of each. While silos prove problematic from a systemic and innovation vantage, large scale alternative models for systemic government do not yet exist. While there are many ways to institutionally structure these silos, for the purposes of

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[5] McMullin, Jess (2011). *TEDxPennQuarter 2011: Reinventing Government*. 2011. Video. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCbC2MzqFKUWeb. 12 May 2013.
[6] Boyer B., Cook J.W., Steinberg Marco (2011) *Recipes of Systemic Change*.
[7] MindLab (2011). *How Public Design?*
[8] Sevaldson's Giga-mapping and Rich Research Space bring needed systemic context.
[9] As is well articulated by Boyer et al critique of reductionist thinking.
[10] Jones from OCAD University recently related pathology with an overabundance of context in the systemic design space. In this paper, I will add that contextual overabundance in public sector design becomes pathological where the systemic designer loses perspective of the scale for possible change.

this paper, the underlying mindsets will be presented as typologies. The list is not exhaustive – at least, three observable silos of Canadian public institutions are presented:

- <u>Modes of knowing</u> – disciplinary assemblages, typically professionals (i.e. economists, engineers, planners, architects, doctors, etc.), centred around shared discourse, language and practice about knowing and interpreting the world.

- <u>Modes of behaviour</u> – problem solving assemblages centred around ways of responding to systemic change (i.e., thinkers, planners, doers).

- <u>Modes of decision-making</u> – hierarchies centred around decision-making about shared institutional or public concerns. Including, titles, classifications, ranks and other forms of legitimacy (i.e. Ministers, Deputies, Assistant Deputies, Executives, Managers, Officers, etc.)

These modes reveal obvious interconnections and may manifest simultaneously within individuals and teams. For the systemic designer, identifying where these modes become pathological, and they are not always pathological, is essential. Moreover, where pathologies persist, amelioration strategies may be applied (see Lessons for Systemic Design Practice) such as visualization, narrative, network and integration, anticipate, cultivate, transparency, integrity, and leadership. These strategies will be presented as they relate to the case.

Case Study: Rich Picture of Systemic Design in the Government of Alberta

Beginning in early 2012, the Government of Alberta, led by the Department of Energy identified the need for innovation using systemic design methodology. The need for systemic context and integration within the Natural Resources and Environment cluster of ministries was observed. Newly retained systemic design and strategic foresight staff convened from across government to design a context-gaining approach to both pilot systemic design and strategic foresight methodologies and ameliorate some of the challenges of present-day natural resources development. The project is ongoing, with the first phase now complete. This case study examines the first phase of the project with a view towards describing the approach, methodology, and implications for systemic design practice. The scale of the project is noteworthy, with an internal team implementing a program that crossed nine departments and impacted +100 participants.

Lessons for Systemic Design Practice

Broad lessons for systemic design practice are discussed:

1. **Visualize**. Visualization as practiced by designers is both a powerful integrative tool and cognitive shortcut to inform executive decision-makers.

Visualization should strive to translate between traditional public sector language and the citizens we serve.

2. **Narrative.** The civil servant systemic designer must develop fluency in articulating the platitudes and nuances of complex policy. In this respect, framing must strive for context as well as depth.

3. **Network and Integration.** The civil servant systemic designer must seamlessly network and integrate across the public and private spheres. This includes finding the people closest to complex problems. Networking is one pathway to integration.

4. **Anticipate.** Systemic design and systemic futures studies are complementary methodologies. Both concern the anticipation and co-creation of the future. Both are concerned with robustness, resilience and adaptivity in designing solutions.

5. **Cultivate.** Systemic designers, as part of the minority culture within government, must cultivate and service the needs of executive champions. Champions articulate the story to outsiders and interpret cultural differences. They give the designer an inside perspective to the institution, while the designer helps the champion to see the institution from an outsider's view.

6. **Transparency**. The civil servant systemic designer must be honest and open about cultural differences and how these impact the delivery of work. This reduces unproductive conflict and supports productive collaboration.

7. **Integrity.** The moment of shared understanding coincides with improved literacy and awareness of complexity. Systemic methodologies are tools for building integrity and cohesion around shared concerns.

8. **Lead.** Systemic designers are humble leaders, who cultivate innovation, transform the idea of value away from just efficiency, reframe risk in context to opportunity, reconnect stewardship with decision-making and build trusted citizen experiences at many scales.

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