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# **Women Designing Design: Reflections on Practice, Methods, and Public Purpose**

***Andrea Siodmok***

## **Abstract**

From my early twenties design has been the lens through which I have explored complexity and human agency. This has led me to a career-long inquiry into how design can be applied in new contexts to cultivate an ethically grounded, systems-aware, inclusive design practice. This essay reflects on my design philosophy, career trajectory, key projects, advocacy, and leadership approach to designing the design discipline itself.

Over three decades, my practice has been defined by two simultaneous tracks, on the one hand a desire to demystify design and on the other, to expand its boundaries. Through this I have come to see design as a tool for understanding dynamic systems, improving human experience, and turning ideas into a practical reality – put simply, I define design as an act of ‘purposeful creativity’. Ultimately, for me, design is not just a process or output—it is a practice for imagining and enabling more equitable, evidence-informed, and resilient futures.

**Keywords:** *Design Futures, Policy Design, Strategic Design, Design Methods.*

## **Reflections on three decades of design**

**Reflecting on my work at the intersection of design and public-sector innovation, I am increasingly aware of how the discipline has been broadened by generations of practitioners—many of them unseen women—who have challenged conventional boundaries and introduced new ways of knowing. I have specifically mentioned some here, but many more have worked adjacently to my practice and have informed it greatly.**

**Fundamentally, my work has been guided by a design philosophy that integrates human experience into systemic change. This aligns closely with human-centred and participatory design approaches (Sanders & Stappers, 2014), as well as the broader emphasis in design studies on reflective practice (Schön, 1983) and action research (Lewin, 1944).**

**Early experiences, from my PhD training in industrial design and Masters in Public Policy to my leadership roles at the UK Design Council and Government, have instilled a rigorous understanding of research methods and processes. In parallel, as a design practitioner, I have sought to act as a field-builder, applying a designerly approach in new contexts from public services to government policy. These have been complementary epistemologies, applying rigorous research to ground practice-based reflection through over 200 projects across the private, public, and social sectors. As a result, I have developed a clear belief that design can bring clarity, creativity, and evidence to the systems of governance that shape our everyday lives.**

## **Designing conscientiously**

From my early training and teaching in industrial design, I advocated in *The Next Bauhaus: Redesigning Design Education* (Young, Blair and Cooper, 2001), that design must extend beyond objects and outputs to consider the systems, values, and societal impacts we shape. I argued for design to expand its focus from the 'design of details' to influence its wider context – to be more consequential in affecting both wider systems and in shaping the context itself (such as policy). In education and practice, I argued this meant cultivating designers who were more conscientious; who are materially adept, ethically grounded, systems-aware, and accountable for the consequences of their work. Over the next few decades, I was able to apply this theory across a range of projects that sought to design the systems and shape the context of design itself.

## **Defining Designing – forming 'best practice'**

At the UK Design Council, as their first Chief Design Officer, I focused on promoting design to different audiences. The Design Council's design knowledge team, who I led, created a network of over 35 experts to build a 'living repository' of design knowledge. The knowledge strategy suggested a tripartite approach of theory (definitions), practice (examples) and process (tools and methods) to de-mystify design and share best practice. This work was underpinned by a taxonomy of design to ontologically situate tacit design knowledge into a set of frameworks and classes.

The *Double Diamond* design process further articulated the need to determine the 'context' of designing (Discover) before proceeding to

define the 'solution' (Deliver) as a divergent and convergent process. Women in these teams included Anna Humpherson, Richelle Harun, Sonja Dahl, Anna Richelle, Jennie Winhall, Ellie Runcie and Gill Wildman. Whilst the *Double Diamond* has become widely applied in design practice and education it was never designed for designers. It was intended to demystify design for non-designers. By removing some of the 'black box' mystery of design practice, in turn we were better able to advocate for the value of design with politicians, scientists, public servants and business.

### **Challenging Design - through Design Challenges**

Working alongside Hilary Cottam, Jennie Winhall and Chris Vanstone in the RED unit at the Design Council in the mid 2000s provided a formative grounding in design for social innovation. Here I witnessed how design could act as a lever for systemic change. Women in these roles often navigate disciplinary intersections, bringing social insight, strategic thinking, and creativity to complex societal problems (Bason, 2014). My career has unfolded within this wider movement, which sees design as a mechanism for evidence-informed, participatory, and adaptive policy.

I continued this practice-based reflective approach, inspired by the work of Cottam et al, in other Design Council projects when I created the 'Design Challenges' team. I had long-viewed design as a means of interrogating complex, real-world conditions and revealing aspects of systems that traditional policy analysis can overlook. Understanding how people navigate public services, regulatory structures, and institutional constraints became essential to uncovering what truly functions—and what requires change. A key

insight from these projects was the notable lack of sophistication in design professionals to meet the standards of evidence necessary for government and the constant need to collapse design problems into neatly defined solutions. It was increasingly clear to me that designers and design practice would also need to change if collaboration on major policy issues was to be possible.

### **Grounding design - Bottom-up co-design practices in the field**

From the Design Council I was appointed to lead a regional partnership called 'Designs of the Time' (Dott) a biennial civic program of design entrepreneurship, that had previously delivered ten social change projects under John Thackara's leadership in the North East of England. At the Design Council I commissioned a PhD by Lauren Tan to review the emerging methods of service design practitioners including the work of Deborah Szebeko at Think Public and others at Livework and Engine.

Inspired by the potential impact of this work when Dott concluded I became the first Chief Designer for service design and innovation in a local authority in the UK, to embed the legacy of the program within organisational design. Reflections on this informed *Design Transitions* (Jefferies, Yee & Tan, 2013), including my interest in shaping policy by the people affected by it. This was the time I first met Christian Bason, leader of MindLab in Denmark, during our appointment for the European Commission on their Design Leadership Board where we co-wrote the public sector recommendations in *Design For Growth and Prosperity* following which he invited me to contribute to *Design for Policy* (2014).

## **Redefining design – developing ‘next practice’ by expanding design into policy and public innovation.**

**These formative experiences helped prepare me to establish the UK Policy Lab, where I collaborated closely with colleagues such as Beatrice Andrews, Cat Drew, Lucy Kimbell and Camilla Buchanan. Together, we worked to introduce human-centred design, futures methods, data visualisation, and speculative design into policymaking.**

**At the core of this work was acknowledging and shaping power and influence. The idea of ‘situated knowledges’ (Haraway, 1988) has been especially influential. It reminds us that evidence is always contextual and that lived experience often reveals systemic insights that quantitative modelling alone cannot produce. This conviction underpins why ethnographic and qualitative methods remain central to my work. It also connects my practice to a wider history in which women designers have advanced relational, empathetic, and inclusive methodologies (Tonkinwise & Latimer, 2020).**

**In parallel, futures and strategic foresight have been important in expanding my understanding of design’s potential. Futures methods help organisations think beyond linear planning and attend to alternative trajectories (Mulgan, 2019). In the public sector—where uncertainty is inherent—considering multiple futures is not speculative indulgence, but a necessity.**

Underpinning this, the Policy Lab research fellow, Lucy Kimbell introduced Dewey (1938) as a pragmatic approach to utilising abductive reasoning to generate design hypotheses in government policymaking (Kimbell, 2015). She also co-wrote the *Open-Policy-Making Toolkit* online, a compendium of methods for innovation in policy. These tools were captured in powerpoints and shared through workshops receiving over 100,000 views.

The Policy Lab delivered policy projects, but it also sought to democratise design and embed it as an organisational capability rather than a specialised function. I created numerous models and frameworks during my time as a Civil Servant. The most influential was probably *Government as a System which* describes the different powers of government, sometimes called levers, as a form of co-creative system stewardship.

### **Designing design - for human and planetary flourishing**

My journey in policy, education, and leadership reflects a broader movement to ensure design contributes meaningfully to public and societal flourishing, grounded in empathy, ethics, and human connection.

My personal trajectory has consistently explored the intersection of innovation, technology and society. Whether examining public services, policy systems, or societal challenges, I have focused on understanding how people navigate systems and how lived experience can illuminate unseen power dynamics. This is a form of creative leadership that continues today, where I see design



**leadership as a process of shaping the authorising environment to enable creativity, experimentation, and collaboration to flourish.**

**Underlying all of my work is a commitment to making design more inclusive, participatory, evidence-informed and future-focused. This is achieved by broadening what counts as evidence, embedding futures thinking, and integrating lived experience into decision-making, through which design can become a catalyst for democratic and adaptive governance (Cottam, 2018; Mulgan, 2019). Women designers have often led these efforts, reframing design as a tool for equity, resilience, and societal well-being. Reflecting on my career and the broader field, I see design as a discipline continuously redefined by women who have expanded its methods, epistemologies, and responsibilities. Whether through human-connected inquiry, systemic thinking, speculative design, or organisational leadership, my work demonstrates that design can shape not only outputs, but the very systems, institutions, and futures in which we live (Siodmok, 2020; Cooper, 2001).**

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## ***Ingrid van der Wacht***

### **Factor-I. Founder, concepthor , communicathor, and connecthor**

Since 2002, I have been immersed in the wondrous world of design, leaving behind a more commercial career to explore the immense potential of design for Good. I work as a freelance concepthor, communicathor, and connecthor within Eindhoven's vibrant design ecosystem — from Design Connection Eindhoven and the Municipality of Eindhoven to the Dutch Design Foundation and Dutch Design Week.

The local and European projects I have led or contributed to have addressed diverse challenges towards a more flourishing world that works for all — from applying design innovation in business, NGOs, and government, to co-designing with communities around healthy food systems, circular and bio-based building, and social regeneration.

My hope is that designers continue to set an example for everyone — as thoughtful, generous, and empathetic creators who work in freedom and with fair remuneration for a better world.

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# Design Moves People Forward

*Ingrid van der Wacht*

## Abstract

Of course, design must have a purpose. It is part of our primeval skillset — a knowledge base that evolved alongside our brains. Since the beginning of humanity, we have designed our way through life: crafting tools to hunt and cook, creating shelter and symbols, shaping stories and systems to help us survive and make meaning.

Over time, this ability to design became our greatest power — and our greatest temptation. We designed for desire and mass consumption. We have become masters of reshaping the planet, engineering comfort and control at enormous cost. Entire ecosystems have been transformed; countless species, including our own communities, were and are pushed to the edge. Design has moved us forward — but often without asking *toward what and why?*

**Keywords:** *Global connection, Love, Design for Good, Nature*

## No Design, No Shame

The No Design Manifesto – *design beyond shame*, initiated by *Mieke Gerritzen* and others and launched during Dutch Design Week 2025, envisions a future where designers are free to imagine without restraint. As Peter Lunenfeld writes within it:

*“The future only exists in our imaginations, so any design ethics must include taking on the future as a client. As designers are those rare humans who can make their dreams manifest as images,*

***objects and systems they must hallucinate a world they actually want to live in.”***

**This call to creative courage resonates deeply with many leaders in the design field today — especially women who design not from scarcity or guilt, but from care, abundance, and the conviction that imagination itself is a form of resistance. Resistance against a world ruled by money and metrics, by the relentless logic of profit that erodes what is most precious: our connection to each other and to a flourishing world. It is through this act of imagining otherwise that design becomes not just a profession, but a movement working on a quiet revolution of care.**

## **A New Ethics of Making**

**A new generation of young designers is rethinking what design is for. They are guided not only by creativity, but by ethics, empathy, and imagination. They ask: *What should we design? What should we refuse to design?***

**Like the design of weapons that in a clean way kill people and destroy environment. Despite the violence, weapons spread, the weapon industry does not stop developing and designing new and more efficient arms. Whereas imitation arms are still sold as toys for little kids. This paradox inspired designer Hannah van Luttervelt to create a striking graduation project: soft, life-sized replicas of weapons of mass destruction. Her series *Playing with Weapons* turns instruments of power into uncomfortable cuddly toys — including a 1:1 scale version of “Little Boy,” the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. At Dutch Design Week, people were shocked to see this symbol of**

devastation rendered tender. Her work invites reflection on the absurdity of how easily violence is normalised, and how urgently we need to redesign our values.

## **Designing for Connection and Care**

Design of these days is increasingly about connection — with people, with communities, with nature. Many young designers no longer aspire to create “stuff” but to co-create systems and stories that heal. They work within communities to uncover real needs, rather than invented ones by people in control.

Others design *for* scientists and activists, helping to translate research into emotion and action. Within the *Collaborations for Future* program by *Foundation We Are*, designers and researchers teamed up to find new ways to move people — literally and emotionally — toward climate awareness. Designer Merel Witteman, working with climatologist Roderik van de Wal, developed *Sea-Level Ice Cream*: a playful but urgent campaign showing how rising seas will affect our daily lives. The melting ice becomes both metaphor and messenger.

Their collaboration is a reminder that data alone does not move people — but design can. Design touches the senses, and through that, the heart.

## **Designing Democracy**

It is no coincidence that *Designing Democracy* became a new focal point for *Foundation We Are*. During Dutch Design Week 2025, this interactive exhibition drew thousands of visitors eager to engage in



**open, co-created conversations about the future of governance. The enthusiasm reflects a broader cultural need: to reimagine democracy as a living design process — one built on participation, transparency, and trust.**

**For 25 years, Dutch Design Week has been a stage where designers, technologists, and thinkers showcase new directions for living together. The Dutch Design Foundation, its organiser, now collaborates with public partners on coalitions around urgent themes — from food and water to circular building. This intersection between design and policy shows how creative thinking can seed systemic change.**

## **Design Is Love**

**Design is about movement — emotional, social, ecological. It asks us to look seven generations back and seven forward. To design is to care. To design is to love.**

**We cannot all be professional designers creating systems, artworks, or scalable solutions. But as human beings, we can all design the way we live — with more consciousness, connection, and compassion.**

**Let's move, as the No Design Manifesto urges, from surviving scarcity to thriving in abundance.**

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