

From ‘if only’ to ‘what if’: An ethnographic study into design thinking and organizational change



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We aim to understand how public sector organizations practise ‘design thinking’ to respond to changing demands and develop alternative courses of action. The literature on design thinking is largely prescriptive; few studies analyse how change is actually brought about through situated design practices. Design scholars have therefore argued that such practices themselves should take centre stage as objects of analysis. We take an ethnographic approach to studying the design thinking journey of the Dutch Health Inspectorate, using participatory observations and interviews to collect our data. Drawing on the anthropological concept of ritualization, we identify two important mechanisms through which design thinking helped the Inspectorate disrupt existing organizational strategies and engage with stakeholders in a fundamentally new way.

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support of creative designers. Today's meeting is an initial exploration of the Inspectorate's organizational problem. '*If only we could do away with those inspection reports,*' the department head says half-jokingly ...

21 October 2017 — After several intensive design thinking sessions, the design group moves from exploration into the design phase. They need to produce a creative, implementable solution to the Inspectorate's organizational problem. However, both the problem and possible solutions have been hard to define. '*But what if you just stop delivering inspection reports?*' the creative designer suggests. The Inspectorate's representatives look at one another and nod. An excellent idea. Not long after, they start discussing where, when and how to omit inspection reports.

(Reconstructed from fieldnotes, 2017)

Organizational problems today are increasingly complex, involving numerous stakeholders with different, sometimes conflicting interests (Wrigley et al., 2020). In the public sector, top-down, supply-driven, and professionally-controlled service provision is therefore steadily giving way to more integrated, client-centred approaches (Howlett, 2014), where responsibility is shared and new interdependencies are created between clients, policymakers and Inspectorates (Van de Bovenkamp et al., 2014). In this context, healthcare organizations realize they must rethink their organizational roles, boundaries and responsibilities to adapt to changing demands and greater interdependencies (Epstein & Street, 2011; Howlett, 2020; Lewis et al., 2020; Wrigley et al., 2020).

Some healthcare organizations have turned to design — and specifically design thinking — as a strategy for facilitating such change processes (Wrigley et al., 2020). Here, design is approached as a practice (something people *do*) that enables organizations to respond to complex problems iteratively and non-linearly. It does so by combining empathy, creativity and rationality in rethinking organizational strategies and subjecting them to continuous and creative scrutiny (Wrigley et al., 2020, 2021). Design *thinking*, in turn, is defined as a specific set of ideas and methods that assist public sector organizations in rethinking how they tackle increasingly complex challenges in their organizational environment (Howlett, 2020; Lewis et al., 2020; Wrigley et al., 2021). It is typically described as an apolitical and human-centred approach that starts with the end-users in mind, values collaboration between practitioners, designers, clients and researchers, emphasizes situated and creative thinking, and stresses the importance of approaching the organizational environment holistically, reconceptualizing wicked societal problems into organizational opportunities (Brown, 2008; Martin, 2009). The promise of design thinking as a method is that organizations will generate innovative ideas by following prescribed steps (Buchanan, 1992; Brown, 2009).

Some researchers have attempted to define how public sector organizations practise design thinking to break open traditional approaches to planning, problem-solving and alternative courses of action. They have focused in particular on identifying the conditions under which ‘design as practice’ can be fostered and made integral to organizational practice (Nusem et al., 2019; Wrigley et al., 2020, 2021). Nevertheless, much of the relevant literature is prescriptive. Particularly scarce are detailed accounts of the situated and iterative practices and mechanisms through which designers and participants engage and successfully use design thinking to a) break open conventional organizational strategies, b) learn to approach their organizational environments in fundamentally new ways; and c) integrate new ways of engagement into their core business (Nusem et al., 2019; Wrigley et al., 2020; 2021; Howlett, 2020; Lewis et al., 2020). McGann et al. (2018) have therefore called for more ethnographically-informed insights into design thinking practices.

In this paper, we respond to this call by analysing a design thinking experiment ethnographically, borrowing insights from anthropological literature on strategy workshops and ritualization (cf. Johnson et al., 2010). This literature – which we unpack in the next section – gives us a set of categories for observing, analysing and describing how disruptive alternative organizational strategies emerge through the historically situated practices of those involved (Bourque & Johnson, 2008; cf. Vaara & Whittington, 2012). We take a particular design thinking experiment at the Dutch Health and Youth Care Inspectorate (henceforth: the Inspectorate) as our case study. The central challenge of this experiment was to rethink how the Inspectorate engaged with the public and private healthcare providers it supervises to improve healthcare services. We ask the following research question: *how was the design thinking experiment practised, did these practices lead to organizational change, and if so, how?*

As the experiment unfolded, we (the authors) acted as ‘observing participants’ by taking detailed fieldnotes and photographs. We furthermore conducted interviews with all organizational representatives during and after the experiment. Drawing on this data and the anthropological literature on strategy workshops and ritualization, we argue that design thinking became relevant to the Inspectorate in an unexpected way. Before discussing our case and analysis, we introduce the theoretical lens through which we examined the Inspectorate’s design thinking journey.

1 Design and the ritualization of organizational change

Design as practice is associated with the conception and realization of new things (Cross, 1982; Wrigley et al., 2020). It involves collecting and incorporating knowledge and experiences uncovered in collaborative networks of stakeholders and combining them to develop new organizational strategies (Wrigley et al., 2020). Its goals can be to solve problems, improve situations,

create novel courses of action and respond to specific challenges in increasingly complex organizational contexts (Nusem et al., 2019; Wrigley et al., 2020, 2021). Design is deemed to help organizations gain a better understanding of their environment and the challenges and problems they face, with some authors emphasizing its ability to produce solutions that disrupt conventional organizational strategies and responses (Hoolohan & Browne, 2020; Wrigley et al., 2021).

Design thinking refers to a set of cognitive processes and methods within the broader spectrum of design. It specifically aims to identify and address stakeholder needs and solve complex problems, informed by specific principles and steps. Design thinking is considered a future-oriented, exploratory and problem-solving approach that follows specific research and development cycles (Brown, 2008; Kimbell, 2011). It typically starts with the end-users in mind rather than an organization's conventional scope of operations (Dorst, 2011; Lewis et al., 2020) and moves from problem definition and idea generation via prototyping to testing and implementation (Martin, 2009). Each step materializes into brainstorming, observations, presentation and listening exercises and involves sketching and moulding practices to iteratively probe and gauge responses, empathize with others and define, ideate, prototype and test (Wrigley et al., 2020). Of key importance in design thinking is the designer's ability to consider the relationship between human needs, technical feasibility and business viability (Nusem et al., 2019; Wrigley et al., 2020; Kimbell, 2011).

Some scholars have conceptualized design thinking as depoliticized, fragmented and episodic, with a clear beginning and end, detached from everyday organizational routines (Howlett, 2020; Lewis et al., 2020). Others have questioned episodic ways of working, arguing that such interventions 'typically take the form of "design sprints" or intensive workshops, resulting in fleeting engagements that offer limited longterm impact' (Wrigley et al., 2020, p. 125). These scholars have sought to integrate design into an organization's scope of operations and to better understand the relevant conditions (see also Nusem et al., 2019). They propose that the role of a design catalyst is particularly important during design integration. In the words of Wrigley et al. (2020, p. 127): 'A catalyst is a designer that leads design thinking interventions with the aim of increasing the implementation of design and ultimately integrating design within an organization.' And, as emphasized by Nusem et al. (2019, p. 37) 'The catalyst does so by continuously instigating, challenging, and provoking innovation within the organization, while also maintaining a link to the strategy of the organization.'

Detailed accounts of the situated and iterative practices through which designers and participants engage with one another, utilize design and follow design thinking principles remain scarce and the social mechanisms through which conventional organizational strategies are successfully challenged and

altered are largely auspicious. McGann et al. (2018) have therefore stressed the need for ethnographic accounts of how alternative organizational strategies come into being in design thinking sessions and are subsequently embedded into organizational routines and bureaucratic structures to disrupt existing modes of operation and affect organizational change (see also Wrigley et al., 2020).

An interesting precursor to such accounts is Johnson et al. (2010), who studied strategy workshops empirically to understand whether and how they produce organizational change. In keeping with the more episodic strand of design thinking literature (Kimbell, 2011) – as well as our case study, which can also be considered a more episodic design thinking event – Johnson et al. (2010) highlight the scripted nature of strategy workshops and propose approaching them as more or less *ritualized*, stressing that this allows the use of analytical categories from the anthropological literature. This, in turn, makes it possible to observe, describe and analyse such workshops and identify how alternative organizational strategies emerge through specific mechanisms and the practices of those involved (Bourque & Johnson, 2008; Vaara & Whittington, 2012).

Johnson et al. (2010) propose using five analytical categories. The first three – removal, liturgy and ritual specialist – describe the strategy workshop itself. *Removal* is the extent to which the workshop is detached from everyday organizational routines. It can be achieved spatially, but also by doing something differently or levelling or inverting social hierarchies. Removal has clear beginnings and endings, contributing to the episodic nature of the workshops. *Liturgy* refers to the script that participants follow in this alternative time-space. The script can be more or less formal yet should underwrite the alternative rules of conduct. Lastly, the *ritual specialist* imparts the liturgy to participants and ensures that they stick to the script.

Johnson et al. (2010) argue that the above characteristics create a social limbo in the strategy workshop that encourages behaviour different from the everyday (see also Johnson et al., 2006). The fourth and fifth analytical categories, *communitas* and *antistructure*, concern the group that participates in a strategy workshop to capture such behavioural changes. *Communitas* refers to the group's potentiality, such as their emotional energy, confidence, enthusiasm and willingness to embrace the situation and take action. *Antistructure* refers to the actual suspension of participants' normal social status. Even though suspension might be part of the liturgy, the extent to which social hierarchies dissolve or are inverted differs from group to group.

Johnson et al. (2010) use these five categories to analyse under which conditions strategy workshops can create the *communitas* and *antistructure* needed to embrace alternative strategies. However, they also argue that the

extraordinary circumstances under which such alternative strategies are developed – in workshops far removed from everyday organizational routines – make it hard to implement them under normal organizational circumstances and turn them into everyday procedures and routines (Schmidt, 2008, 2010). Similar observations have been made in the design thinking literature, even where designers specifically sought to integrate design into an organization's everyday mode of operations. Design scholars have shown how the organization-wide integration of design thinking often proved difficult, even when the organizations became more aware of the strategic value of design, had their interest in design piqued and wanted to integrate design into their mode of operations (Nusem et al., 2019; Wrigley et al., 2020; 2021; particularly their use of the AIDA model).

Johnson et al. (2010) are mainly interested in whether participants experience the strategy workshops as valuable and legitimate, and in what way. They do not, however, scrutinize a) the nature of the alternative strategies emerging in such workshops and through the practices of those involved or b) the ways in which these alternatives actually change organizational roles and processes (cf. Kimbell, 2012; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). To understand the emergence of alternative designs and the associated organizational changes ethnographically, we use the characteristics defined by Johnson et al. (2010) to analyse design thinking sessions whilst simultaneously shifting attention away from the legitimization of these sessions towards the development and legitimization of the alternative organizational strategies to which they give rise (Kimbell, 2012; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). To do this, we also consider the articulation of and deliberations concerning problems and solutions and the work of embedding solutions into organizational routines (see also Nusem et al., 2019; Wrigley et al., 2020, 2021).

In attempting to grasp how design thinking helps generate alternative organizational strategies, we have been sensitized by the above-mentioned theoretical reflections to a) map the design thinking experiment, b) trace how participants reconfigured organizational problems into alternative organizational strategies during the sessions, and c) gather participants' reflections on how the setup of the sessions helped generate these alternative strategies. In the next section, we discuss our data-gathering methods.

2 *Methods*

The purpose of our ethnographic study was to better understand the mechanisms through which designers and participants engaged during design thinking sessions. We were not *a priori* interested in studying which design principles were implemented and whether this was done correctly (in line with the more prescriptive literature), but instead focused on design thinking as practised and the specific mechanisms of mutual engagement leading to

organizational change. We therefore focused on a specific case – the Inspectorate’s design thinking journey – whilst combining participatory observations and semi-structured interviews. Participatory observation is a critical research methodology in anthropology and sociology (Clark et al., 2009) in which researchers actively participate in the environment under study to gain an intimate familiarity with, in our case, the design thinking experiment and its participants. Participatory observation enables researchers to focus on the participants’ concrete actions whilst capturing the content of conversations and the use of language (Mortelmans, 2013). Below, we introduce our case and the choices we made in gathering and analysing the data.

2.1 The case

This paper zooms in on the design thinking journey of the Dutch Health and Youth Care Inspectorate, a public organization that supervises healthcare providers’ services and ensures that they comply with relevant professional, legal and regulatory standards. The Inspectorate also promotes healthcare quality and safety and encourages providers to work on prevention, cooperation and access (Dutch Health and Youth Care Inspectorate, 2021). It reflects continuously and critically on its role in improving healthcare quality (Rutz et al., 2017) and aims to ensure that vulnerable citizens receive suitable, effective and integrated healthcare. It traditionally does so by engaging in various forms of supervision, ranging from investigations into incidents and calamities to identifying specific risk themes (e.g. new providers or the establishment of healthcare networks) and studying how these manifest themselves in everyday service provision. In its thematic supervision activities, the Inspectorate wanted to move away from a summative designation of the quality of care towards more constructive support for healthcare organizations and policymakers in improving and integrating the organization and provision of healthcare services, for instance establishing integrated elderly care at municipal level.

To rethink how the Inspectorate engaged with healthcare organizations and policymakers, three of its representatives joined the design thinking experiment that is our case study. Funding came from the European Union and the experiment was initiated and organized by a group of designers in close collaboration with a Dutch university and a number of researchers and students affiliated with that university. The experiment itself consisted of different research and design cycles exploring and defining problems and formulating solutions that were turned into prototypes, one of which was to be integrated into the organization. Although other healthcare organizations participated in the design thinking workshop, we chose to zoom in on the Inspectorate’s journey, as it was here that an alternative organizational strategy emerged most clearly and became embedded into broader organizational processes.

We refer to these other organizations only where they mattered for the Inspectorate's design thinking journey.

2.2 The study design

To study the design thinking experiment, we introduced ourselves as researchers and informed the key participants about our project. Each of the first three authors then joined one of the participating healthcare organizations, rotating halfway through the workshop. During the sessions, we actively supported the participating organizations in their design thinking process by helping them frame problems and find suitable solutions or by facilitating deliberation through notetaking and summarizing. We simultaneously took detailed fieldnotes about the experimental setup and the content and form of the discussions. It was important to capture who said what in response to whom or to which element of the experiment. Because ideas were primarily articulated using keywords on Post-its and posters, we supplemented our fieldnotes with photos of these texts. Each author used their fieldnotes and photos to write detailed observation reports. The last author observed the overall process and supported the two designers who organized and facilitated the workshop, sometimes joining discussions within the smaller groups.

In addition to participatory observation, we conducted semi-structured interviews with key participants (N = 14; two participating students did not respond to our request for an interview). We structured the topic lists around three themes: (a) reasons for participating; (b) the design thinking experiment and how it was experienced (setup and process); (c) changes in the organization after the experiment (articulation of problem and implementation of solution); d) reflections on how the experimental setup contributed to such changes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim.

During the analysis, all authors revisited the observation reports (consisting of photographs and fieldnotes) and transcribed interviews. We iterated between analytical themes and our theoretical framework and it was during this process that we became aware of the literature on strategy workshops (see further [Timmermans & Tavory, 2012](#)). Our theoretically informed analysis focused on a) mapping the experiment, b) identifying specific mechanisms through which participants engaged during the experiments, c) tracing the emergence of alternative organizational strategies, d) reflecting on how the experimental setup contributed to change. A general overview of the data gathering and analysis process is provided in [Tables 1 and 2](#).

We ensured the quality of the study by taking the following steps. Firstly, we combined different data sources (observation reports and interviews) to enhance the study's internal validity. The interviews helped validate and enrich insights from the observation reports. Secondly, we worked with a team of

Table 1 Overview of the study design

<i>Analytical steps</i>	<i>Methods used</i>	<i>Data gathered</i>
Mapping the design thinking experiment	Field observations	- Researcher diaries (n = 3) - Researcher maps (n = 3) - Photos (n = 55)
Identifying specific mechanisms through which participants engaged as the experiment unfolded	Field observations Interviews	- Researcher diaries (n = 3) - Researcher maps (n = 3) - Photos (n = 55) - Facilitators (N = 2) - Designers (N = 4) - Organizational participants (N = 7) - Student (N = 1)
Tracing the generation of alternative organizational strategies	Field observations Interviews	- Researcher diaries (n = 3) - Researcher maps (n = 3) - Photos (n = 55) - Facilitators (N = 2) - Designers (N = 4) - Organizational participants (N = 7) - Student (N = 1)
Participant reflections on how the experimental setup contributed to such changes	Interviews	- Organizational participants (N = 7) *

Table 2 Summary of coding process

<i>First order codes (examples)</i>	<i>Second order concepts</i>	<i>Themes</i>
Amsterdam city centre... Springhouse building... Banners gracing walls... Gathering of intimaes... Abolishing hierarchies... Extensive design portfolio's... Thinking creativity... End-user minded... Radical change and revolution... Divergence and convergence... Wicked problems and creative solutions... Rough start defining end users viz a viz ideas of designers... Dance confirms ideas of inspectors... No more report... Experiment with mystery guests... Professionals reporting themselves...	Removal Antistructure and communitas Designers as ritual specialist Design thinking ethos (liturgy)	Mapping the experimental setup Participant engagement
Stop producing inspection reports...	Recursive ideation	Alternative strategies

four researchers who rotated between organizations halfway during the experiment and who reflected together on the research steps and analysed one another's material. Lastly, we member-checked the final version of this paper before submission. During the member-check, we were updated on the latest

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developments and learned that the Inspectorate had been nominated for an innovation prize for a ‘mystery guest’ experiment that had championed an idea discussed during its design thinking journey (see results section below).

Our results section is divided into two parts. We first reconstruct how the case study unfolded, informed by the categories of [Johnson et al. \(2010\)](#) and simultaneously highlighting how alternative strategies emerged ([Schmidt, 2010](#)). We then foreground two noticeable mechanisms that explain how design thinking helped the Inspectorate disrupt existing organizational strategies and engage with their constituency in a fundamentally new way.

3 An ethnographic account of the design journey

Our case study did not have an official title. Most called it ‘the experiment’, although some referred to it as ‘the design thinking sessions’, and others as a ‘summer school’ (fieldnotes, 2017). Funding was provided by the European Union and EIT Health, a programme aimed at encouraging innovation amongst ‘healthcare students from all walks of life’, from bachelor students to healthcare professionals, managers and policymakers ([EIT Health, 2018](#)).

3.1 Preparation phase

The first time representatives of the Inspectorate and the designers, researchers and students met was during a meeting 21 August 2017 to prepare for the design thinking sessions (see epigraph). The goal was to formulate the problem that the group would address during the sessions. The Inspectorate’s representatives wanted to focus specifically on how they engaged with healthcare organizations. It still used summative inspection reports to articulate potential problems in integrated care and to place issues on the agendas of professionals and policymakers. It produced these reports because a) ‘it’s just how we do things’ (interview with inspector, 2018), and b) other Inspectorates in the fields of healthcare and welfare expected it to do so. The Inspectorate had noted that summative reports were counterproductive to its aim of building networks and facilitating the integration of care at the municipal level. One of its inspectors had studied the organization’s impact in her PhD thesis and found that by delivering summative inspection reports, the Inspectorate in fact distanced itself from the same networks it was building to gain insight into municipal-level care and support. Moreover, professionals and policymakers did not gain ownership of the problems identified by the Inspectorate, meaning that the recommendations presented in the inspection reports – although often accurate and useful – had no lasting impact on their practices ([Rutz et al., 2013, 2017](#)).

In response, the Inspectorate looked into alternative strategies to create continuity in improving the quality and integration of healthcare and welfare services at the municipal level. As one inspector asked during the exploratory meeting with designers and researchers: ‘How can we write reports that aren’t

just a collection of pluses and minuses but instead motivate local healthcare actors to act?’ (paraphrase from fieldnotes, 2017). As described in the epigraph, the head of one of the Inspectorate’s departments took this one step further and advocated skipping the inspection report and taking a different approach (reconstructed from fieldnotes, 2017).

3.2 *The design thinking experiment*

The two-day experiment was staged on the top floor of Spring House, a bright red building close to Amsterdam central railway station. Spring House has a restaurant and flexible workspaces and promotes itself as ‘the home for radical innovators’ and as ‘a network, workspace and lab ... functioning as a catalyst for positive change’ (Spring House, 2019). The heart of the experiment was a central meeting area surrounded by several ‘satellite’ rooms separated from the ‘centre’ by movable glass doors (for a map, see appendix 1). This setup allowed participants to work in smaller teams and come together and share ideas collectively. It featured a spiral staircase, tables and chairs, plants, sofas and a balcony overlooking a busy Amsterdam waterway (fieldnotes, 2017). Banners bearing texts like ‘Don’t forget about the needs and desires of people’ graced the bare walls (fieldnotes, 2017). The scene breathed creativity and purpose (a summons, even): to better meet people’s needs. The time-space in which the design thinking sessions took place was far *removed* from the participating organizations’ everyday routines.

Three Inspectorate representatives joined two other healthcare organizations (an insurer and an elderly home care organization) in coming up with an alternative organizational strategy, supported by six designers, four researchers, three students and many field experts and practitioners. Together, over two days (29–30 September 2017), they participated in the carefully planned and scripted design thinking experiment. Established hierarchies were immediately dismantled. The facilitators wanted students, researchers, organizational participants and field experts to feel they had the same opportunities to contribute to the experimental process and encouraged such *antistructure* in two ways. Firstly, they emphasized this from the beginning and repeated it regularly, making it into an important ‘shared’ rule in the experimental time-space (resonating with the idea of *removal*) (fieldnotes, 2017). Secondly, they stressed the personal relationships between all the participants. It was an experiment for *intimae* and meant to be a safe yet challenging environment. The hierarchies were ‘articulately’ dissolved as such. Meanwhile, the designers acted as *ritual specialists* by controlling the experimental process and content. Two of the designers introduced themselves as the experiment’s facilitators. Each of the three other designers navigated one of the teams through the different stages of the design thinking process. Each one had a portfolio testifying to their ability to a) think creatively, b) reason from the perspective of end-users, and c) connect organizational problems, societal developments and different forms

of knowledge as well as people's needs and desires (interview with facilitators, 2018).

Besides emphasizing the importance of antistructure and introducing the teams' designers, the facilitators firmly nested the experiment itself into a design thinking ethos. Firstly, they used a potent mixture of everyday yet powerful and promising words, such as *radical change* and *revolution*, and design-technical jargon, such as *divergence* and *convergence* (fieldnotes, 2017). Secondly, the facilitators gave the participants two tasks: a) to focus on wicked problems and come up with new problem definitions and creative solutions; b) to think from the end-users' perspective. Thirdly, the experiment itself was divided into four stages, echoing the double diamond model. The facilitators referred to this model explicitly to show how the prescribed steps aligned with this design thinking ethos (British Design Council, 2005; see Figure 1). The research phase involved exploring the organizational problem in detail through 'divergent thinking' and defining it in 'convergent thinking'. This was followed by the design phase, in which different solutions were proposed and developed by 'divergent thinking', with one of the solutions being chosen and implemented through 'convergent thinking'. Each stage encompassed events that stimulated participants in their divergent/convergent thinking.

Inspectorate representatives got off to a rough start as they grappled with two initial problems. Firstly, as outlined above, the designers emphasized reasoning from the end-users' perspective. To them, this meant focusing on patients, but in fact the Inspectorate did not deliver services directly to such end-users, although it used care recipients to collect information on the care and support provided. Instead, the Inspectorate's audits and inspection reports addressed professionals and policymakers (fieldnotes, 2017) as its end-users. Secondly, Inspectorate representatives needed to convince other participants (especially the other healthcare organizations) that they differed from the Inspectorate these others had in mind. Instead of judging healthcare quality and safety, these representatives wanted to facilitate the improvement and integration of healthcare services (fieldnotes, 2017). Interestingly, both problems reinforced the inspectors' conviction that they needed to present themselves differently. Their main challenge was framed as follows: 'How do we make sure that professionals use our findings to improve the quality and safety of care?' (fieldnotes, 2017).

As part of the day's schedule, the liturgy had several distinct features. For example, a researcher presented a collection of colourful and inspiring trends and innovations. Experts joined the design thinking groups at one point, and organizational representatives presented their preliminary solutions to guests (healthcare professionals, policymakers, researchers and marketing experts) during a 'market'.

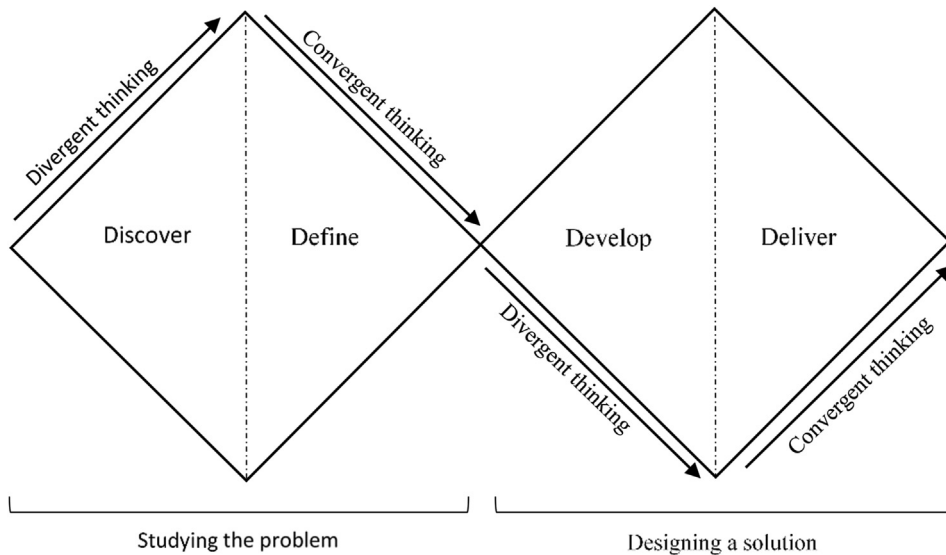


Figure 1 Double diamond and its stages (British Design Council, 2005)

One such element stood out, according to the Inspectorate’s representatives (interviews, 2018). During the exploration phase, a professional tango dancer asked one representative per organization about the problem definition they were tackling (see Fig. 2). He then started dancing, led (as he himself said) by ‘whatever he sensed was the right move to make’ (paraphrase from field-notes, 2017). The dance was interrupted several times to reflect on how it represented the organization’s problems. It was meant to give participants a mirror image of their organizations through a medium other than words (field-notes, 2017), helping to narrow down or broaden how they thought about their organizational problems. The dancer portrayed the Inspectorate as a group that wanted to collaborate but was avoided by others. In this light, one could interpret the dance as an embodied translation of their articulated problem.

Nevertheless, something important happened during the dance. In the words of one inspector, ‘The most important lesson we learned is that we did not realize that we are so threatening to others ... that nobody really wants to work with us ...’ (interview, 2018). The dancer thus confronted these representatives with an uncomfortable image of their organization. Strangely enough, this interpretation reinforced their conviction that their organization was on the right track (they thought of their organization as being different from the one performed in the dance, i.e. not threatening at all but helpful). The dance urged organizational representatives to explain to others what their ‘true’ organizational nature was. In the words of an inspector: ‘the dance is not actually who we are’ (interview, 2018).

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Figure 2 *The dance* (photo: Stuart Acker Holt)

Following the dance, the facilitators allowed organizational representatives to articulate a desired future and ideas about how to get there. It created a time-space for organizational representatives to contemplate. In the words of an inspector, ‘Now we had the chance to really share ideas with one another ... Normally and under pressure of time, we don’t really take our ideas further ...’ (interview, 2018). In the sessions that followed, the Inspectorate explored different solutions. Those that resonated within the design thinking group were: ‘Let local parties choose the inspection themes’; ‘Let municipalities inspect one another’; and ‘Let professionals write the recommendations’ (documented materials during the sessions, 2017). A solution supported by most of the Inspectorate representatives was: ‘Never again produce an inspection report’ (documented materials during the sessions, 2017). To combine the latter with other proposals, the inspectors framed the following solution as the outcome of their design thinking challenge: ‘To not produce an inspection report and let professionals themselves write recommendations’ (documented materials during the sessions, 2017). They thus stayed very close to the suggestions already articulated in the preparatory meeting (see epigraph).

In the time-space outside the confines of their organizational routines, pieces were falling into place for the organizational representatives. In the case of the Inspectorate: a) skipping the report would make the Inspectorate seem less scary (in response to the dance); b) letting professionals formulate their own points for improvement would allow them to own the problems that

needed to be solved (in response to their challenge to create more impact and continuity). Moreover, c) one of the inspectors was participating in a mystery guest experiment examining how clients with a minor intellectual disability received and perceived social services. The Inspectorate representatives considered this an excellent opportunity to test-run the idea of omitting the inspection report (fieldnotes, 2017).

3.3 *Aftermath*

The first Monday after the design thinking sessions ended, one of the participating inspectors contacted the council of collaborating Inspectorates.

I told them that we wanted to mobilize professionals and policymakers to make changes and that having to deliver a report stood in our way ... That we wanted to skip the inspection report ... They told me this was possible provided that the results would be evaluated ... (interview, 2018)

The council's response allowed the inspectors to embed omitting the inspection report in the mystery guest experiment already underway. Specifically, it meant that this experiment would attempt to include alternatives to the inspection report.

We organized a meeting with professionals and managers and instead of writing up a report ourselves, we had them tell us what they thought was important ... What went well and what needed improving ... We asked them what they needed to change things. (interview with inspector, 2018)

Even though the experiment's results still required evaluation, it was interesting to see the design thinking session's effect. The session succeeded in transforming existing ideas about alternative courses of action (omitting the inspection report) into an alternative organizational strategy that gained enough legitimacy to be implemented on an experimental basis (being embedded in another experiment). In November 2018, the mystery guest experiment received the Dutch innovation prize. In the words of the jury: 'It takes courage to use this target group as a mystery guest and to appeal to the intrinsic motivation of municipalities instead of pointing the finger as a supervisor' (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2018), the latter hinting at the omission of the summative inspection report.

4 *Understanding design thinking as a change strategy*

Based on our reconstruction, we conclude that what happened during the design thinking experiment was not, for the most part, *revolutionary* (to borrow a word from the design thinking ethos), at least not idea-wise. The Inspectorate used the experiment to solidify insights already floating amongst

its representatives and articulated previously in a PhD thesis. How did it take only two design thinking sessions to go from theoretical suggestions made at the end of an inspector's six-year PhD programme to an implementable solution? To understand the impact of the design thinking experiment, we discussed our results with participating Inspectorate representatives. We present some of their responses below and identify two ways in which the experiment helped generate a new organizational strategy.

4.1 *'Removal' as catalyst*

In Spring House, far away from their daily tasks and routines, participants had a chance to *talk* to one another: 'We could collect, connect, and substantiate ideas that had never been properly attended to' (interview with inspector, 2018). Johnson et al. (2010) typically associate such productivity of this kind with the idea of *removal*. The experiment did indeed involve removal because it took place far away from the Dutch Health and Youth Care Inspectorate's headquarters, in a building and setting very different from the inspectors' customary surroundings.

However, the design thinking sessions were more than a gathering of representatives outside their organizational confines. Specific events took place in this faraway space, such as the dance, and the representatives were exposed to a new liturgy, a blend of revolutionary language and design methodologies. Indeed, as another inspector reflected, 'It was one surprise after another. I still don't fully comprehend what we've experienced' (interview, 2018). Some of these experiences were dissonant, frustrating and incomprehensible: 'That constant emphasis on end-users, I didn't fully understand it and it didn't seem to fit our cause' (interview, 2018). Others had more resonance: 'We invited some local general practitioners, immediately understood one another and said "Let's do this"' (interview with home-care organization director, 2018).

This *removal* and *liturgy* boosted the *communitas* amongst the experiment's participants. For the participating inspectors, such *communitas* developed in three iterative ways. Firstly, they experienced that 'organizational others' had talked about and interpreted their Inspectorate wrongly (dance). This triggered them to (re)present their organization actively and explain who they (the Inspectorate) really were and what their organizational problem actually was (fieldnotes, 2017). Secondly, in response to the dissonance they experienced, inspectors teamed up and forged a bond, sticking together even when the experimental setup asked them to disband, invoking small rebellious acts during the experiment (fieldnotes, 2017; cf. Wallenburg et al., 2019). They needed one another to make sense of – and control – what was happening around them and the problems and solutions they had articulated (interview with inspector, 2018). Thirdly, the sheer magnitude of the experiences to which

participating inspectors were exposed forced them to differentiate between what was and was not helpful in solving *their* organizational problem. During the first phase in which they explored the problem, the inspectors rebelled against a designer who pushed them to focus on end-users (people with an intellectual disability) in their solution. Instead, they wanted to concentrate on professionals and municipalities providing services to people with an intellectual disability (fieldnotes, 2017).

These observations reflect the argument that interaction is an essential medium through which new organizational frames emerge and are substantiated (Schmidt, 2010). Indeed, the facilitators of the design thinking experiment invested heavily in fostering interactions both amongst organizational representatives and between them and organizational others. However, we also noticed that the inspectors responded to this interactive experimental setup by a) sticking together and claiming more ownership of the problem and solution, b) differentiating between what did and did not fit *their* problem, and c) drawing on their own knowledge and experience to find a solution to the problem as defined. This meant connecting one inspector's own experiment (the mystery guest experiment) to another's research findings (problematizing the effects of summative inspection reports).

Removal, liturgy, and communitas thus gave organizational representatives the opportunity and need to rearticulate and substantiate ideas floated within their organization (Johnson et al., 2010). As the experiment unfolded, however, the Inspectorate's representatives also carefully excluded dissonant perspectives and information from the organizational problem they were articulating and from the alternative organizational strategy they were designing. The experiment and its design thinking methodology thus typically functioned as a catalyst. Instead of building on the designer's creativity as a source of inspiration and change (cf. Julier, 2008; Kimbell, 2011), the experiment boosted ideas already brewing amongst the inspectors and allowed them to craft these ideas into an implementable solution (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). It did so by continuously instigating, challenging and provoking organizational participants while they themselves actively tried to maintain a link to the organization's strategy (see also Nusem et al., 2019; Wrigley et al., 2020 and the discussion section).

4.2 *Design as legitimator*

Yet another impact of the design thinking experiment was not described in so many words by the Inspectorate's representatives, but we observed it almost continuously, albeit in differing forms. For instance, during the design thinking sessions, *liturgy* and *ritual specialists* played a key role in dispelling an air of complexity and sophistication (fieldnotes, 2017). Design thinking was introduced as a specific methodology, with reference being made to

various authors and models. This made it appear analytical, even absolute in nature. The facilitators moreover took great care to introduce themselves and the other designers and their impressive portfolios (field observations, 2018). They stressed that the University also participated, and the European Union funded the experiment (fieldnotes, 2017). Ample time was devoted to making these things explicit.

Not only did all this foster a somewhat exclusive and lively environment (based on our own impressions as noted down in our fieldnotes, 2017), but it also influenced the ideas of the organizational representatives. On the one hand, as noted by the director of the home care organization participating in the experiment: ‘The sessions strengthened our conviction that we were on the right track’ (interview, 2017). On the other hand, organizational representatives could use this information to convince their organizational peers that they had something valuable to share. ‘Because the university was involved, certain people were suddenly impressed by what we were doing’ (interview with insurer, 2018).

Running their ideas through the design thinking experiment helped organizational representatives legitimize their ideas to organizational peers. Participants went home with an alternative organizational strategy substantiated in an experiment funded by the European Union and facilitated by renowned designers in collaboration with a well-known university. In the Inspectorate’s case, the solution that the participating inspectors pieced together gained enough status to become embedded into an existing mystery guest experiment meant to monitor the care and services delivered to people with a minor intellectual disability.

5 Discussion

We took a particular design thinking experiment involving the Dutch Health and Youth Care Inspectorate as our case study. We examined how design thinking helped the Inspectorate to work towards an alternative organizational strategy and to improve the impact of its supervision by rethinking its engagement with key stakeholders in the organization of healthcare. Our examination was informed by [Johnson et al. \(2010\)](#), who used the anthropological literature on *ritualization* to identify the characteristics that make a strategy workshop an activity experienced by participants as legitimate. We took their line of analysis further and studied how the design thinking sessions – as more or less ritualized episodes – led to a legitimate alternative organizational strategy through the practices of those involved ([Vaara & Whittington, 2012](#); [Wrigley et al., 2020](#)). Our analysis has four implications for the design literature. The first concerns the way in which the nature and role of the designer as catalyst is conceptualized, the second concerns the role of liturgy and narrative in design, the third addresses the tension between

episodic and more integrated design practices, and the fourth is about coming to terms with the organizational changes observed. We discuss these points in turn.

Firstly, the design thinking sessions challenged and provoked the participating inspectors, prompting them to stick together and to play with and perpetuate ideas already brewing within their organization (Buijs, 2007; Berkun, 2010). To make space for these ideas, they carefully excluded dissonant perspectives contributed by designers and other participants. The inspectors thus navigated between the specialized design thinking liturgy, suggestions by other participants and their own preconceived notions of alternative courses of action. Instead of a specific designer acting as a catalyst within an organization and offering provocations whilst maintaining links to current organizational strategies and modes of operation (the current description of the design catalyst), it was the broader design thinking experiment that provoked participating inspectors and catalysed organizational change, while the inspectors themselves did much of the translation work and maintained the links to current organizational modes of operation (cf. Nusem et al., 2019; Price et al., 2021; Wrigley et al., 2020).

Although the difference between these two readings of catalyst seems trivial at first sight, it has some important implications. For example, it adds nuance to claims in the design literature about the central role that designers play in ideation processes (Julier, 2008; Crilly, 2015; Kimbell, 2011; Price et al., 2021). Although designers played an important role as ritual specialists (Johnson et al., 2006), in our case study the participating inspectors themselves took charge of ideation whilst also displaying ample organizational and historical reflexivity. In other words, the inspectors reconsidered the relationship of the Inspectorate with healthcare providers, taking into account a plethora of elements, including the inspection reports. They also showed a fundamental understanding of the implications of omitting these reports, as doing so would challenge a key component of the Inspectorate's modus operandi (Wrigley et al., 2021; cf. Price et al., 2021). This made them think very carefully about how, when and where to embed their solution into existing organizational structures, and they eventually incorporated their idea into a high-profile mystery guest experiment that was already underway.

Secondly, the design literature often refers to the importance of narrative (Björklund et al., 2020; Clausen, 1993; Turner & Turner, 2003), something we observed in two ways. For one thing, there was the narrative about design itself. Designers took great care to foster the participants' design literacy by explaining common terminology and the different stages and cycles of design thinking practice (see specifically Johnson et al., 2006 on the importance of liturgy in strategy workshops). This narrative was important to positioning design as a sophisticated, legitimate and useful practice for developing

alternative organizational strategies (Johnson et al., 2006, 2010), taking participants from attentive to very much engaged (Nusem et al., 2019). The fact that the design thinking sessions were EU-funded and university-supported furthermore helped to convince others beyond the direct participants of the legitimacy of the design approach (see also Wrigley et al., 2020). In fact, after examining their ideas in the design thinking sessions, the idea of skipping the inspection report, which had previously been rejected, suddenly gained enough credence within the Inspectorate to be incorporated into an existing high-profile mystery guest experiment.

For another, narrative played an important role during the design process itself, particularly in assigning words to describe the organizational environment ('complex'), the organizational problems encountered ('wicked'), the important role of end-users ('sources of knowledge' and 'points of orientation') and solutions ('disruptive'). In particular, the emphasis on end-users – one of the provocations we referred to above – prompted participating inspectors to better define who their end-users actually were (patients or providers?). In shifting the focus from patients to providers, they soon learned how the participating healthcare providers actually perceived the Inspectorate, i.e. as threatening. User-centred narratives therefore gave the inspectors a better understanding of the environment in which they operated and the challenges and problems there, and created an important context for validating and improving the fit of the solution they already had in mind (Dorst, 2011; bib_hekkert_and_van_dijk_2011Hekkert & Van Dijk, 2011; Lewis et al., 2020; Wrigley et al., 2020).

Thirdly, like many strategy workshops, the design thinking experiment we studied was episodic in nature and removed from everyday organizational practice (see Johnson et al., 2006, 2010; Lewis et al., 2020). This 'removal' should theoretically get participants thinking 'outside the box' and allow creativity and ideation to trump their usual organizational embeddedness and organization-centred approaches to problem-solving (Johnson et al., 2006, 2010; Kimbell, 2011; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Nevertheless, we did not observe such 'outside the box' thinking. More specifically, while the participating inspectors appreciated removal, they did so because it gave them a time-space to rearticulate and substantiate preconceived ideas. Wrigley et al. (2020) have recently questioned episodic approaches, arguing that they tend to result in fleeting engagement with design and have only limited impact on organizations (Wrigley et al., 2020). Our case sheds light on this discussion. On the one hand, we show how preconceived organizational ideas are actually imported into strategy workshops even under conditions of removal (Johnson et al., 2006), partly refuting the claim that the episodic workshop is disconnected from the everyday organization. Such claims can, for instance, be found in the work of policy scholars who argue that design thinking is often organized in the margins of existing policy processes and bureaucratic structures

(Howlett, 2020) and that design therefore easily falls prey to producing popular ideas feeding unfeasible alternative organizational strategies (Howlett, 2020; Lewis et al., 2020). Based on the reflexivity that we observed and with which we ended our previous point, we argue that this does not have to be the case.

Lastly, both episodic and more integrated approaches prompt organizations to work towards higher-order change in terms of organizational roles, goals and procedures. Higher-order change refers here to the distinction made by Hall (1993) between first-, second- and third-order change. First-order change refers to routine adjustments to existing organizational operations. Second-order change concerns changes in the strategies used to achieve organizational goals. Third-order change implies shifts in the goals themselves and are usually considered to be more disruptive (Wrigley et al., 2021). In considering design thinking's potential to prompt higher-order organizational change, it is difficult to situate our observation that it acted as catalyst and legitimator at a specific level. On the one hand, the idea of skipping the inspection report could be considered a higher-order change, as it targeted inspection procedures and potentially changed the roles and relationships of inspectors, healthcare organizations and municipalities (see also Hall, 1993). On the other hand, the solution (re)articulated in the design thinking sessions (omitting the inspection report) was only incorporated into another experimental setting. Although this experiment was a high-profile one, the solution did not (as yet) become standard organizational procedure.

6 Conclusion

The design thinking sessions with the Dutch Health and Youth Care Inspectorate catalyzed previously rejected ideas into a legitimate alternative organizational strategy. In particular, the sessions enabled Inspectorate representatives to combine these ideas, situate them in a context of new organizational challenges, and embed them into broader organizational developments, although their status remained experimental. By showing the social mechanisms through which design thinking helped participating inspectors make that happen, our ethnographic study contributes to a design literature that aims to capture and better understand when and how design thinking supports public sector organizations in engaging with stakeholders in fundamentally new ways and in taking the first steps towards integrating new strategies into their core operations.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

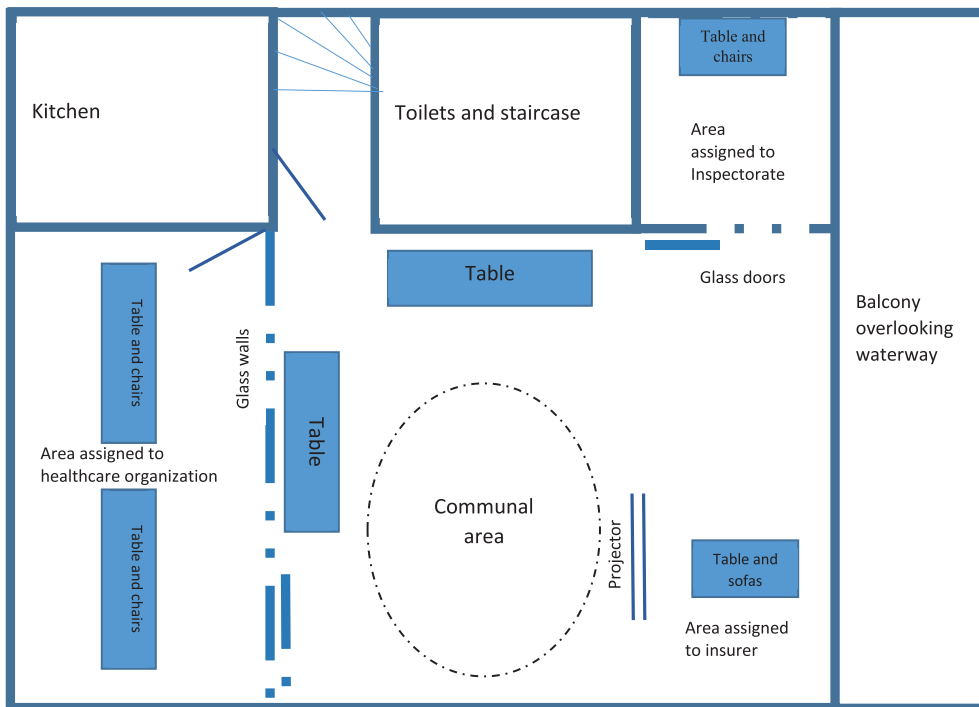
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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors other than the fact that the authors have been involved in the design-thinking experiment as part of their fieldwork and their role as observing participants (see methods section).

APPENDIX.



Map of design thinking experimental setup (based on fieldnotes, 2017).

Notes

1. The second and third author made equivalent contributions to the project, participating in the experiment, gathering and analysing data and writing of this paper.

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