

What Got Us Here, Won't Get Us There

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Five ingredients for Public Interest Design: A reflection and proposition for citizens and administrations

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Abstract: To make the growing landscape of design approaches for collective wellbeing practicable for citizens and city administrations, this paper proposes a set of issues to consider and a recipe with five ingredients around which to build capacities. After an overview of relevant approaches, we inquire about the social impact of design by discussing the complex ties between actors and the organisational forms that characterise contemporary societies. These reflections on the design literature took place in several meetings with 5 municipal stakeholders of an EU Interreg project that wants to employ design for more liveable cities in the Baltic region. Based on these meetings, we articulate the following ingredients to consider in Public Interest Design: (1) Circulating knowledge about how to imagine society otherwise and dealing with uncertainty. (2) Investing in public services and infrastructures in a cohesive manner. (3) Expanding municipal governance towards anticipation, civil society cooperation and positive failure culture. (4) Increasing citizen's ownership and trust. (5) Prioritising learning from the existing plurality of interests.

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1. Beyond the passive user

There is an increasing array of design approaches led by collective forces, and trying to develop interventions at the intersection of ethics, politics, economy, and ecology rather than adhering to private profit reasoning. In the past decade, the term Social Design has entered into more frequent use, following the emergence of new digital possibilities and divide, the rise of activist practices, new forms of public management, the promotion of entrepreneurship and inter-disciplinary epistemologies.

An important change is that social groups and communities themselves are often approached not as passive holders of information (users), but as capable of actively articulating their needs in an analytical manner. Hence, Social Design can contribute to understanding what design is, as well as to invent what the social can be. In this vein, Jesko Fezer (2020) applies Occam's razor to arrive at a straightforward proposition: Social Design is about the way we do things, reconsidering how different actors take part in design decisions, even if playing different roles or holding diverse forms of responsibility. In practical terms, it means experimenting with alternative forms of collaboration and knowledge-making. Therefore, social design tends to be critical with how power and resources are distributed.

Social design is a rather open practice and not clearly defined or fixed in its processes and outcomes, despite several attempts over the previous decades (see Margolin and Margolin 2002; Markussen 2013; Manzini 2015; Tromp and Vial 2023). It is frequently used to connote challenging political situations, such as poverty, mental illness, exclusion, and, overall, problematic conditions which pose the need for intervention outside already established modalities, channels and hierarchies. It is precisely in this acceptance that the term 'social' made its entrance into the design practice.

Conventional efforts to 'socialise' design mostly focus on the procedure, integrating non-expert actors into design processes through strategies of participation, however rarely in actual decision-making (see Arnstein 1969). In this logic, non-experts are still considered as 'users' and 'bystanders', reducing the social dimensions of design to an exercise of consultation, as if it were just the endpoint or the audience of what designers and public organisations do (Tonkiss 2017). Hence, there is the need to reconsider who is brought into design, for what purpose, and what version of the social is at play in these accounts. In this vein, Guy Julier (2018) has criticised the reduction of social design to a consultant role. As he explains, consultant social designers aim to develop services that are more 'user-centred' and are cheaper in the contexts of recent austerity politics in the UK. To champion a more thoughtful and societally relevant approach to the design of public services, Julier proposes to prioritise collective benefits, to negotiate public problems, and to provide a space to engage with core ethical values that cannot be reduced to profit and usefulness (see also Julier and Kimbell 2019).

To hone out a form of design that considers the above and is practicable for both citizens and city administrations alike, in this paper, we propose to practise it in the form of Public Interest Design (PID). As far as we know, PID features mostly in socio-ecological and participatory architecture in the US (Abendroth and Bell 2016) and design interventions in Germany (Rodatz and Smolarski 2018). PID came to our project twofold: Project funding like ours all too often hinges on coining innovative terms, while we think that the Permacrisis (Morin and Kern 1999) would rather require us to test and adapt. However, PID as an existing yet sparsely applied term offers us the chance to have a meta discussion on how similar, more specific design approaches tie into another to support collective wellbeing (see Tromp and Vial 2023) while being explicit about representation and power dynamics. Secondly, we can use these bundles of approaches as practicable *ingredients* for both citizens and city administrations. After all, transformation is required across the spectrum of all actors.

In the following section we provide a brief literature review of relevant approaches, followed by a reflection that summarises our discussion with the municipal stakeholders and further project partners in the liveability project. Before we conclude, we outline five ingredients that we will test with our partners and invite others to do so equally.

2. Relevant Design Approaches for PID

In the following we provide a brief and by no means exhaustive literature review of design approaches that are relevant for our project and similar ones dealing with complex social issues in settlements. In the light of intensifying socio-ecological crises, a variety of similar design approaches have been discussed to underscore that design should not aim at private profits, including Planet-Centric-, Transition-, Regenerative- or Social Design to name a few. The below image adds another layer, by positioning approaches according to different underlying worldviews on a continuum from object-centred to people-centred to earth centred (Moegerlein 2019).

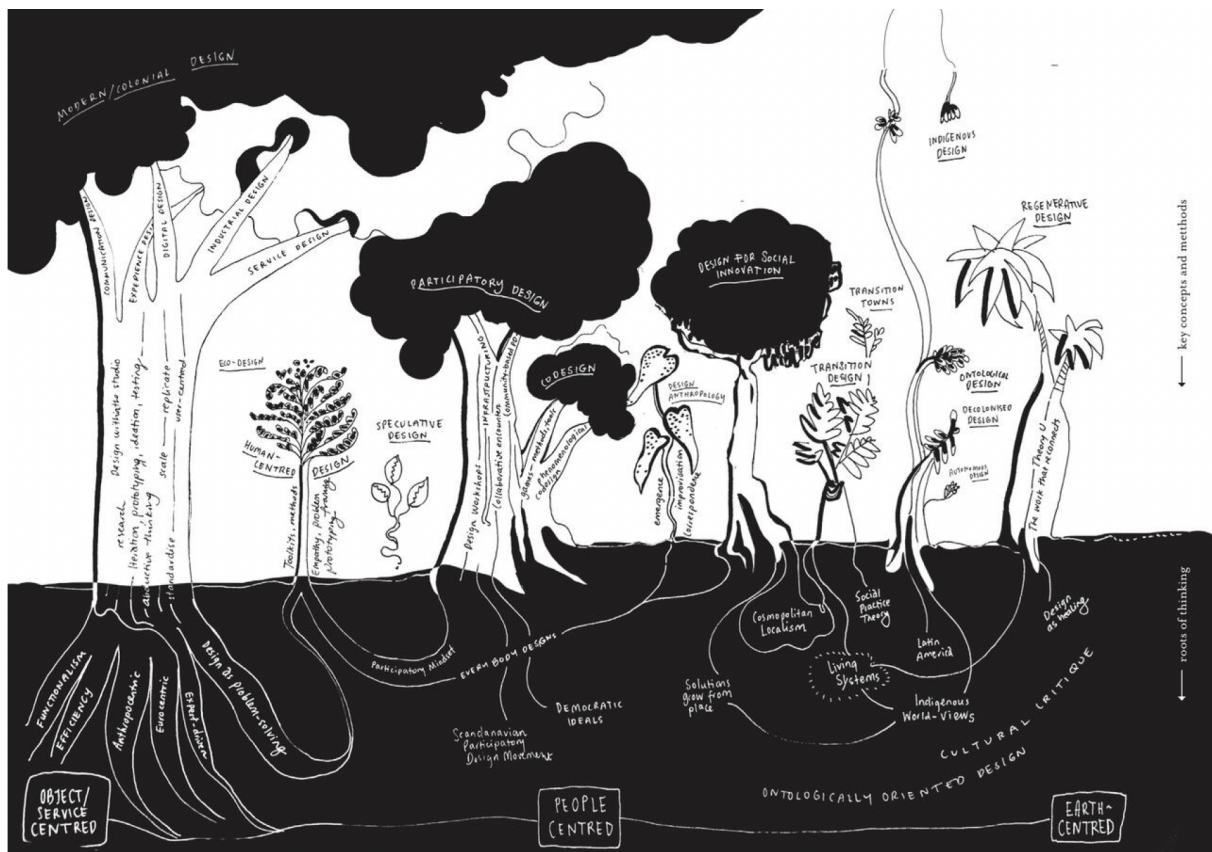


Figure 1. "Illustrated map of existing and emerging design disciplines" by Kirsten Moegerlein 2019

In the center, there are a number of established design approaches and disciplines that instead of focusing on profits have put people's perspectives in the foreground, albeit with mixed consequences in the long run. We can trace back the principles of Participatory Design to workplace negotiations between worker unions and management in Scandinavia in the

1970ies (Karasti 2014). More common, especially outside of academia, the term Co-Design (Collaborative design) has been used to describe formats and venues used by participatory designers to give voice to those otherwise excluded in the process. In comparison, Co-creation describes a mindset and set of methods within co-design processes that ease the exchange of experiences, ideas, and formal knowledge (see Mattelmäkki and Visser 2011).

These approaches found their way into the co-design of technologies, as part of the User-Centred Design in the 1980ies and 1990ies. Here, designers and ethnographers engage with potential users in prototyping as part of product development (Ehn 2008). Meanwhile, increasingly service-based economies have led to the emergence of service design and the accompanying importance of user journeys that consist of several touchpoints including products, applications and spaces that ought to be designed as part of Service Design .

Supported by the ideas of a creative class and creative cities (see Florida 2004), the constant need of businesses to innovate, and an increasing awareness of the complexity of societal problems, the 2010s saw a rapid interest in Design Thinking. This approach, highly influenced by the above-mentioned interest in the user, suggests that people without formal design expertise can apply design methods and a step-by-step model to solve complex problems (e.g. Elsbach and Stigliani 2018). Influential for its strong expansion especially in the entrepreneurship circles has been the so-called Double diamond model consisting of four phases “Discover, Define, Develop and Deliver” (Design Council 2005) but other adapted models include a range of 4-6 phases (e.g. IxDF). However, an increasing number of design researchers have criticised e.g. the position of the designer as sole agent of change, the clear cut phases of the model and the promise to solve complex problems as hybris (Kimbell 2011).

While the traditions behind Co-Design help those formats to forego some of the above shortcomings, Busch and Palmås (2023) have rightfully formulated a strong critique, that vested interests and power are often not considered. Therefore they suggest to ask more about the *What*, and especially the *Who* instead of *How* which focuses on best practices and solutions within the dominant settings.

The last decade has seen a variety of further approaches that highlight the social in Design. Design for Social Innovation co-develops responses in a process with citizens oriented towards scaling up the interventions (Shove 2012; Manzini 2015). Socially Responsive Design is less programmatic in its methods and has designers working closely with experts from the domains of health, crime or local government (Malpass 2017). Design Activism is more explicit in its political intentions, as it creates artefacts and experiences associated with political discussion and protest (Markussen 2015). Often linked with Pop-up or DIY approaches it aims to raise political consciousness. It sits outside commercial or governmental structures and works through settings such as grassroots activities, community action or pressure groups (Julier 2013).

At the same time, design has become increasingly appropriated in the public sector. This is little suprising when we consider that digital platforms build the main interface between

citizens and service providers and austerity programs require those services to be more efficient. Above all the Permacrisis looms and positions urban settings as a major leverage point. The need for improving public services has led to several in-house design units in governmental organisations (e.g. Inland lab within the Finnish Immigration Service or UK Cabinet Office / Government Digital Service) and Public Innovation Labs in different countries (e.g. work of UK's Design Council, Mindlab in Denmark, Experio lab in Sweden, La 27eme Région in France, Helsinki Design Lab in Finland) (Saad Sulonen et al. 2020).

Design for Policy considers how to potentially deepen and widen the use of design within public organisations, especially its iterative and experimental perspective by which policies could be piloted and improved (Hyysalo et al 2022; Kimbell et al. 2022). Most often, human-centred and participatory design methods are used for designing service solutions within public organisations. Still, they are often characterised by approaching *the social as an object* (not a subject); *the social as process*; *the social as a wicked problem* (a political type of issue to be mitigated).

Carl DiSalvo (2012) has also contributed to this discussion by distinguishing between 'design for politics' and 'political design', one supporting political organisations and described as affirmative, and the latter challenging them and expressing dissent. Political design requires engaging with the conditions that influence how both design and our societies are organised, and eventually, to play a role in the construction of better conditions. In this vein, Thomas Markusen (2017), states that social design aspires to improve the well-being and inclusion of disadvantaged societal groups. However, others have argued that design can only ever be responsive to social situations, rather than having responsibility for changing them, and should aim to produce "good enough" design outcomes (Thorpe and Gamman 2011).

Within this participatory turn of governments and public organisations, a prominent area of intervention have been urban settings; new forms of urban planning have been developed trying to include local residents in the different planning and design procedures taking place in their cities. To what extent and how they rely on or make participation possible is however questionable or not always self-evident (Boonstra and Boelens 2011), especially when participation much like design is often seen as an end in itself – a box to tick.

Instead of earlier mobilisation approaches including whole neighbourhoods, we can observe a change or participatory culture towards the consultation of individuals (Kelty 2017). A seminal paper in urban planning suggested the "Ladder of Participation" to differentiate between non-participation, symbolic participation (e.g. informing or consulting), and actual citizen power (e.g. partnership, delegated control or citizen power) (Arnstein 1969). While most participatory efforts today still are symbolic participation, there is hope: citizen assemblies, appearing as a response to the multiple crises affecting contemporary societies (e.g. Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat; Stadtgremium Gemeinsam Digital Berlin). Inspecting these examples, we can understand that some, so-called silent groups, are not even aware of possibilities to participate, while others do not want to participate. Design

that wants to have social impact must consider this and need to work on cultural change within institutions (Huybrechts et al. 2017).

Complementing these institutional approaches to participation, various initiatives have applied DIY (Do-it-Yourself) techniques as part of Tactical Urbanism and even Citizen Science to participate in their cities. Relevant examples are events such as the Cleaning Day and Restaurant Day in Helsinki (Berglund 2013; Bogers and Chiappini 2019). Oftentimes administration officials and engaged citizens are referred to as Top-Down versus Bottom-Up. This suggests that some have strategic planning power and others must make do within the remaining unplanned niches, but often both sides are dependent on each other (see Hector and Botero 2021). Projects that started out as temporary experiments in vacant building sites like Somppa Sauna in Helsinki end up positively influencing the image of the city. However, the last decade has seen many cases in which the creativity and honorary work dedicated to temporary use projects ended up turning waste land into increased value for developers (Julier 2017).

To conclude, positioning PID requires to consider city administrations and their legal frameworks and equally to develop techniques for intervention that are sensitive to the different and maybe opposing interests of actors. In this respect, PID can also contribute to understanding the political and societal landscapes reached by our designs and planning practices. Equally, it will help us to reflect on how PID can potentially have an impact on politics and the way we conceive alternatives, which might be a prerequisite to advance the role of socially impactful design within our societies.

3. Discussing existing approaches and challenges

Our insights are based on two onsite meetings with all eleven Interreg project partners and bi-weekly virtual meetings held with some of these partners. These include five partner cities, consisting of at least one PID change agent and PID implementer per city, as well as several research and cultural institutions (<https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/liveability/>). During the meetings, we discussed how design approaches can support cities around the Baltic Sea to become more “liveable”, including an ongoing discussion of what we mean by liveable beyond existing definitions like the 11 categories of the OECD Better Life Index.

While the aim of the project is to identify common and differing limitations and good practices, what we found is that making disagreements among partners liveable was also part of the frame of ‘livability’ and Public Interest Design. As part of our project brief a first version of this paper was written by the authors, presented in a two-day, face-to-face meeting at the end of February 2023 and commented by the working partners. We repeated the procedure after another meeting mid June 2023. In these meetings, our working group partners participated in a total of 3 workshops lasting between 1 and 2 hours each, by which we collected further feedback. The questions posed included: Which design approaches are

most relevant with regard to Liveability? Which interventions are (not) possible in your organisations? What skills do we need to design for Public Interest?

We started working with these three assumptions:

- (1) everyone can (and those who want, should) be involved in design practices;
- (2) there is a need to reflect on the power of the designer as a social agent, increasingly addressing wider political issues;
- (3) design is more than simply a response to a set of predefined needs, and part of the design work is to define its subject and implications.

Furthermore, PID should encompass a broad set of modes of doing towards social ends, which go from the appreciation of the relational aspects of the design process, to the ethical awareness of the impact of our work, to the embeddedness of our practice in a variety of environments. It should adopt a proactive role to materialising collective wellbeing: transformations are sought by creating a significant reorganisation of the existing relations, practices, structures and narratives (Beddoe et al. 2009).

On our way to articulate a PID proposition, questions of how to define seemingly self-evident terms arose several times. A first question that arose is who is being represented and what version of the public is at play in our approach. We have relied on Dewey's connotation of publics as the coming together of those that are affected by an issue but do not possess the means to intervene (Dewey 1927). Dewey's notion serves us because it underscores that several publics can exist and that people have agency, yet this agency exists mostly in limited ways.

Further difficulties that we have encountered while discussing PID include: longer time needed to intervene, reflect and see changes; different languages spoken amongst collaborators complicating the research for common or differing challenges and good practices; non-cooperative or strict hierarchies and institutional structures; limited resources and overworked staff in administrations; dispersed and temporary change projects; conflictual interests among actors; difficulty to translate collective wellbeing into accountable but sensible data.

Following the above limitations, we identified the following set of challenges that we will work with: (1) PID, as shared approaches, has to be translocatable, while being context sensitive: tools and strategies must be malleable to local circumstances and traditions; (2) The outputs have to be both easily understandable and framed in a way that creates legitimacy for those that apply them in their organisations (3) It has to enable cultural change in institutions, and increase actual participation – also in terms of decision making; (4) We are mostly working with municipal officials, but our aim is to get equally close to residents' realities and support their self-organising; (5) We aim to have a positive, collective impact, but we cannot expect to accomplish a systemic, structural transformation that reshapes the existing power relations within the project duration; (6) There is a need to identify sensible forms of evaluating learning.

4. Five ingredients for PID

We are not aiming at a uniform school of thought but rather try to bring together a recipe with different and potentially evolving ingredients - a first draft of what PID should do, for whom and how, considering the actually existing limitations in our project. We had discussed following a logic of increasing maturity (e.g. Design Ladder by Danish Design Center 2003) or increasing complexity (e.g. DfS evolutionary framework by Ceschin and Gaziulusoy 2016). However, since the parts are equally relevant, constitute a larger whole, yet still follow a specific order we refer to them as ingredients (taking inspiration from Boyer, Cook and Steinberg 2011). Much like Tromp and Vial (2023) in their recent, unifying framework of Social Design, for each ingredient we have listed existing design approaches. Furthermore, we have added a first set of toolboxes that we hope makes working more practicable.

1. Circulating knowledge about how to imagine society otherwise and dealing with uncertainty.
2. Investing in public services and infrastructures in a cohesive manner.
3. Expanding municipal governance towards positive culture of failure, civil society cooperation and anticipation.
4. Increasing citizen's ownership and trust.
5. Prioritising learning from the existing plurality of interests.

1. Circulating knowledge about how to imagine society otherwise and dealing with uncertainty

This is about being resourceful with the existing knowledge on transformation and being aware of the anxieties that the topic creates. We have found time and again that the ability to imagine and to endure uncertainty is rare, yet it is of utmost importance in a time of polycrisis. Here, being literate in *Systems Thinking* and *Futures Thinking* is of importance, but also *Design Activism*, *DIY Urbanism*, and *Citizen Science* pose relevant ways of materialising different ideas of our society. Furthermore, we speak of circulating with reference to Foucault's notion of circulatory power, which Schlosberg and Coles (2016) use to highlight that niches can act as infrastructures that introduce their own information, skills and values into the existing system.

Toolboxes :

[Post Capitalist Design Guidelines](#)

[Making Sense of the Future](#)

2. Investing in public services and infrastructures in a cohesive manner

This ingredient starts from *Public Sector innovation* and *Policy Design* which underscore that public services and infrastructures require an iterative design process that puts the realities of different actors at the centre. However, it also foregrounds that these should be thought of

as parts of a coherent system. Services on e.g. digital literacy are likely to benefit from physical infrastructures such as a “Tiny Town Hall” (<https://tinyrathaus.de/>), libraries, neighborhood centers or community gardens that serve as a physical node, and create human interaction. What is more, the increasing projectification as modality to effect change delivers budgetary control, but comes at the expense of a missing long-term strategy and synergies between projects (Torrens and von Wirth 2021) – both aspects have recently been addressed by the portfolio approach.

Toolboxes:

[Designing for Public Services](#)

[Government as a System](#)

[UNDP Portfolio Competency Framework](#)

3. Expanding municipal governance towards a positive culture of failure, cooperation with civil society and anticipation

This ingredient highlights that bureaucracies are not well prepared to react to crises let alone anticipate them (Hector, Jende, and Walch 2023). They need to maintain a certain level of accountability which rightfully slows down processes and limits a positive perspective on failures. On top, following new management logics, administrations are often operating at maximum capacity which means that workers experience the need to train in design, sustainability, participation or futures literacy as an added burden - again rightfully so. To mitigate cultural change and highlight that the above training creates an immense return on investment, our project employs *Change Agents*. While this might suggest magical power, really they are part of interdependent relations between the dominant and often limiting settings, actors that try out alternatives, and promoters that want to support them (Kristof 2017). Mapping limitations and promoters can help to find alliances and motivate administrative staff to move forward. This might be a prerequisite to nudge leadership levels towards working with *Futures Thinking* and *Strategic Design* to aid decision making in the present. Public administrations require such preparedness to achieve their goals while acting in uncertainty, and change what we see as government (Kimbell & Vesnić-Alujević 2020).

Toolboxes:

[System Mapping Toolkit](#)

[Systemic Design Toolkit](#)

[Co-producing Knowledge](#)

4. Increasing citizen’s ownership and trust

Feeling ownership and trust entails exploring different modes of ‘public engagement’. As we stated we can understand Publics as the coming together of those affected by issues but missing the access to power (Dewey 1927). The initial understanding of *Social Design* that focuses on marginalised groups helps us to re-configure the one-way and linear formats in which planning and design knowledge has been traditionally produced and provided for citizens to use rather passively instead of engaging actively in its production and adaptation.

In this regard, both an involvement in decision making that reaches beyond superficial consulting such as *Citizen Assemblies* and an access to tools of self-organising are highly important to extend the transformative relations beyond the time of a project and therefore increase its impact. *Infrastructuring* as it is being discussed in *Participatory Design* highlights how each project, be it citizen or administration run, needs to assure that personal knowledge is accessible beyond the departure of skilled individuals. *Realdesign* (Busch and Palmås 2023) helps to avoid some of the traps of *Co-design* by asking: what interests do actors have? What are the institutional frameworks around this action? How is power and the “social” redistributed?

Toolboxes:

[Citizen Assembly Standards](#)

[Patterns of Decentralised Organising](#)

[Skillz Bazaar Handbook](#)

5. Prioritising learning from the existing plurality of interests

The fifth ingredient highlights this paper's aim to reflect on the impacts of design. It will be inevitable for us to collectively craft a set of context based learning indicators. We hope this supports our difficult undertaking to develop something that is both generic enough to be widely used, but equally adaptable enough to fit to situated issues within the rather different cities that we partner with. The usually employed KPIs are collecting data that portrays a specific moment in time, when little knowledge was available (e.g. a predefined output number) rather than helping to see inputs and challenges that aggregate over time and create or hinder learning (e.g. range of skills that are available, missing communication between departments, too short funding cycle)(Bellinson et al. 2023).

Toolboxes: In a next iteration we aim to share how our partner cities have worked with the above and what respective learning evaluation they have created.

Instead of obsolete, heroic modernist design's principles of generating new “solutions”, these ingredients improve understanding of problems and uncertainties, supporting discussion on the ways forward – towards collective well-being and public interest. Together we hope they also help in adapting the underlying object-centred perspective that governs many design practices towards a more systemic and earth centred one.

5. Conclusion

In times where design deals with increasingly complex issues that span the technological, spatial and social, context matters even more and neither simple step-by-step procedures promising silver bullet solutions, nor single hero agents are effective. We explicitly refer to them as shortcomings of the hype around modernist Design, and point out the need to complement the above, spur change within the internal culture of public organisations and work with a more nuanced understanding of what the social can be. These undertakings are

limited by their existing norms, hierarchies, bureaucratic protocols, available time and resources, competing interests and traditions.

This means that while we try to adapt existing design approaches, we face the difficulty that some of the actors involved not only require frameworks to be able to engage in learning on top of their day-to-day work but require supposedly legitimate ones such as Design Thinking. Meanwhile it remains difficult to create a general, translocatable frame and yet, at the same time, provide tools that are adaptive and flexible enough as to meet local sensitivities. The latter must neither be blind to the situated challenges of specific neighbourhoods or cases, nor suffocate local public interest designers (administration workers, citizens, entrepreneurs) with tight requirements. The general approach, however, needs cohesion and recognizability to foster visibility and legitimacy. Therefore, we propose five ingredients that each are valuable in itself, but also interlinked with one another. They build upon each other but can be used in different intensities according to the respective municipal contexts. The fifth ingredient aims at finding sensible ways to evaluate collective learning and underscores that this recipe and its ingredients is meant as an invitation to prototype together.

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