Marzia Mortati, Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano, Italy
Stefano Maffei, Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano, Italy

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Researching Design Policy Ecosystems in Europe

Abstract Design is often a tacit component of policymaking, and so it is often difficult to pin down its role and contribution to innovation policy. As an area of policy and policy research, design suffers from misconceptions about what it is, and what it offers. We propose the Design Policy Ecosystem as an overarching model that works in two ways: it identifies and categorizes existing policy actions and instruments that are examples of design policy and maps the field of organizations working to support these policies in a given national context. After quantitative data gathering, framework development, and testing with policymakers, experts, and advocates from fourteen European countries, we translated the framework into an online evidence-based resource platform intended to raise awareness about the landscape of design policy across the EU. The framework locates and organizes design policy-related actions in ways that policymakers, intermediaries, innovators, and interested parties can better understand the strengths and weaknesses of their Design Policy Ecosystem, and reveals the most appropriate areas where design could be a lever for development.

1 A number of EU policy documents substantiate this vision. For more information, see https://ec.europa.eu/growth/industry/innovation/policy/design_en.

2 Commission of the European Communities, "Design as a Driver of User-Centred Innovation" (working paper, Brussels, Commission Staff Working Document, 2009), 9, accessed April 29, 2018, http://ec.europa.eu/DocsRoom/documents/2583/attachments/1/translations/en/renditions/native.

3 Ibid.

4 Michael Thomson and Tapio Koskinen, eds., *Design for Growth and Prosperity* (Brussels: Commission Staff Working Paper, 2012), 15, accessed April 15, 2018, http://europeandesigninnovation.eu/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Design_for_Growth_and_Prosperity_.pdf.

5 Gisele Raulik-Murphy, Gavin Cawood, and Alan Lewis, "Design Policy: An Introduction to What Matters," *Design Management Review* 21, no. 4 (2010): 52–59, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1948-7169.2010.00095.x.

6 Terence Love, "National Design Infrastructures: The Key to Design-Driven Socio-Economic Outcomes and Innovative Knowledge Economies," in *Proceedings of the International Association of Societies of Design Research (IASDR 2007): Emerging Trends in Design Research*, ed. Sharon Poggenpohl (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Polytechnic University Press, 2007), 1–26; Anna Whicher, Gavin Cawood, and Andrew Walters, "Research and Practice in Design and Innovation Policy in Europe," in *Leading Innovation through Design: Proceedings of the DMI 2012 International Research Conference*, ed. Erik Bohemia, Jeanne Liedtka, and Alison Rieple (Boston: Design Management Institute, 2012), 289–308; Raulik-Murphy et al., "Design Policy"; Peter Swann, *The Economic Rationale for a National Design Policy* (London: Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010), accessed April 29, 2018, http://www.dx.org/site/design_exchange/assets/pdf/Economic_Rationale_for_National_Design_Policy_UK.pdf.

7 An Innovation System is a "set of institutions that (jointly and individually) contribute to the development and diffusion of

Researching Design Policy

In this article, we ask, "What exactly is design policy?" And, more specifically, "What is the appropriate perspective and framework to adopt when researching this topic in the European context?" We will first explore how to identify the general nature and characteristics of design policy. Then we will look at the particular context of European design policy—a continent characterized by socioeconomic diversity—after which we will flesh out the notion of how to consider (and fund) design that takes place as part of broader innovation policies.

Design policy is acquiring new emphasis, due to the recent attention to design in the European Commission innovation strategy, which has led many EU nations to explore design as a driver of socio-economic growth on their own.[1] The European Commission recognizes design as an important lever for innovation, with one working paper describing it as

> "a multifaceted and broad concept with no commonly agreed definition. There is agreement that design can be both a verb and a noun—an activity (to design) and the result of this activity (a design)—but the understanding of what the activity of design actually entails varies."[2]

Design innovation has become a source of new meaning for products and services,[3] as well as a process of "people-centered innovation by which desirable and usable products and services are defined and delivered."[4]

Despite traces of evidence in policy documents, it is difficult to find a systematic research approach to design policy. Design policy is defined as "the process by which governments translate their political vision into programs and actions in order to develop national design resources and encourage their effective use in the country."[5] This description is linked to a range of design policy models[6] that look at why governments ought to support the design sector and how they should support design activities and processes. Their aim is, therefore, to identify the most relevant areas for investment to support design in a specific National Innovation System.[7] Many existing models focus on ways to prove design's contribution to economic growth, for example by proposing business cases that have used design as a critical success factor. Anna Whicher's Design Ecosystem[8] identifies design's role in the context of innovation according to nine key components—actors, designers, users, research, education, promotion, policy, funding, and support. Critiques[9] of this position have remarked that it defines design policy mainly in terms of how it serves the design profession, unlike other types of policy whose focus is on societal systems more broadly. Such criticism challenges the notion that design policy is relevant to academic research and institutional practice. However, more recently, this critical perspective has been complemented by scholars who consider design policy "not as a rational, problem-solving activity but as a socially based, collective activity for generating solutions to complex problems and challenges."[10] This position moves design policy far from the interests of a specific sector and proposes a novel research challenge: explore design not as an independent domain but as part of the broader sphere of innovation policy. Thus far, academics have under-researched this shift—references to approaches and tools capable of defining a design-driven logic that can support and inform innovation policy are few and far between. Further investigation is needed to understand the rationale and frameworks that will clarify a taxonomy of design policy as part of innovation policy and capture the characteristics of design policy in this domain.

In this article we propose a framework that researchers and policy designers can use to identify, classify, explore, and depict what we call a design policy ecosystem. We look into establishing a more cohesive policy framework for design, and report on how this presents several challenges, starting with the uncertainties