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Nurturing public value for community resilience. A tentative discussion around co-production of narratives through a civic design approach

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Abstract

Within a society characterised by growing complexity, communities attempt to address wicked problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973), which impact how people live together. The concept of community resilience has been discussed in public policy and social-ecological systems studies for communities to be prepared for emergencies. Recently, evolutionary resilience (Davoudi, 2012) has been proposed in the context of communities facing wicked problems evolving within uncertain worlds. Evolutionary resilience highlights the growing need for flexible adaptation towards more dynamic social change. We argue that nurturing public value could be a strategic approach for taming wicked problems beyond resource control and the capacity for communities to achieve resilience in a rapidly changing society. Indeed, the broad literature about public value already implies that it can be properly developed as an outcome of collaboration between public institutions and citizens. However, the processes nurturing public value are still under investigation, especially within design studies. We propose that the co-production of common narratives between public institutions and citizens fruitfully produces public value, by linking design narratives to the interpretive approach tightly associated with the concept of evolutionary resilience. Moreover, we suggest that the emerging realm of civic design could be a consistent approach for communities and public institutions to produce and reproduce these kinds of common narratives.

Keywords: Public value, Community resilience, Evolutionary resilience, Sustainability, Storytelling, Design narratives, Civic design

Complexity within liquid society

Society is changing, and it is changing rapidly due to the liquid nature of the relationships characterising it (Bauman, 2000). All human systems are exposed to unexpected risks and fragilities, which trigger hectic and multifaceted transitions that are increasingly more common, profound and dramatic. These transitions generate a growing complexity requiring creative solutions addressing a high degree of situatedness. Within this scenario, we argue that design narratives and civic design can effectively engage with this multi-level complexity, resulting in new resilient communities moving towards sustainability at an environmental, social and economic scale.

Towards community resilience by nurturing public value

Community resilience beyond conventional approaches

While conventional approaches to resilience have been adopted within emergency preparedness and planning, focusing primarily on resource control and capacity (Chubb et al., 2021), the resilience of communities has been discussed in public policy and social-ecological systems studies. Scholars in these areas of study commonly understand resilience as the capability of a system to absorb disturbance, experience change and preserve its fundamental functions, structure, and identity (Resilience Alliance, 2010).

Since communities are composed of people, community resilience hinges on, yet is not limited to, its people's relational structure (Sang Baek et al., 2015). Within communities, social bonds are not fixed and continuously evolve, led by diverse trajectories and dynamics of interaction, transformation and adaptation. Hence, within the context of communities, the notion of resilience is not conceived as a return to "normality": it is understood as the capacity of complex socio-ecological systems to transform and adapt with or without external catalysts. Davoudi (2012, as cited in Monna & Auricchio, 2020) refers to this conception of resilience as "evolutionary resilience". This concept shifts beyond conventional approaches to resilience because transformation may be triggered by

"...internal stresses with no proportional or linear relationship between the cause and the effects. This means that small-scale changes in systems can amplify and cascade into major shifts (reflecting Edward Lorenz's idea of "the butterfly effect") while large interventions may have little or no effects". (Davoudi, 2012).

This framework requires constant learning of an evolving and uncertain world, where communities moving towards sustainability need to deal with the indeterminacy of wicked problems.

Communities addressing complex issues

Although all the issues a community seeking resilience faces are contextual and ever evolving, many of them impact how people live together and how they experience and give shape to their spaces. Since these issues are complex and ill-structured, they acquire the nature of "wicked problems" (Rittel & Webber., 1973). Indeed, they are identified by the following qualities:

- there is no definitive formulation of the problem, since it is understood during the development of a possible solution. Each potential solution uncovers new facets of the problem, which require further investigation;
- positing that there is no definitive problem, and there is no conclusive neither right nor wrong solution;
- each solution is a "one-shot operation" and has no given alternative solutions;
- every wicked problem is unique and might be the symptom of another problem;
- around every wicked problem, there are conflicts about its values and objectives. Choosing to explain a wicked problem in a certain way determines the nature of the solution.

Communities engage with the explosive combination of centrifugal and centripetal forces surrounding these issues, seeking to redirect self-interest towards the common good and shared responsibility for "our joint world" (Landry, 2017). How do communities engage with these wicked problems? How do they determine what they deem as their common good?

Taming wicked problems beyond resource control and capacity

Traditionally, the complexity, dimension and scale of situated wicked problems are a prerogative of the polity, which addresses them through resource control and capacity, putting the accent on a deficit-based approach (Chubb & Jennings, 2021). However, "taming wicked problems requires crisis leadership that addresses challenges and issues [also] through relationships" (Chubb & Jennings, 2021). Indeed, only through relational structures can a community collectively shape and socially govern its commons (Basu et al., 2017; Ostrom, 1990), intended not only as a "utilitarian concept but [also as] the moral and political condition of human life" (Matei, 2011). In this perspective, "the common good is determined by

broadly inclusive dialogue and deliberative processes. Citizens are seen as co-creators actively engaged in creating what is good for the public” (Stenvall et al., 2022) or, in other words, “public value” (Moore, 1995).

Moore (1995) proposed the concept of public value as the counterpart of shareholder value within public management. Initially, this notion advocated for public officials to value public services’ benefits and costs not only according to money “but also in terms of how government actions affect important civic and democratic principles such as equity, liberty, responsiveness, transparency, participation, and citizenship” (Kavanagh, 2014). Despite this, today, the term is not limited to the public sector, but it broadly relates to the contribution to the common good by any kind of organisation (Meynhardt, 2009).

Moore (1995) suggests considering the entire chain of value production, starting from the inputs, moving to the processes and finally focusing on the impact on stakeholders, which eventually spurs the intended social outcome (Kavanagh, 2014). Moore (1995) explains the entire chain of public value production through what he refers to as the “strategic triangle” (Figure 1). “The model consists of three concepts, public value, legitimising environment, and operational capacity” (Salemans & Budding, 2021). It illustrates that public value is produced when a strategic action is both given democratic legitimacy, (i.e. it has been supported by the involved community) and is endorsed by an authorising environment, such as a governing board and when an institution has the operational capacity to implement the strategic action adequately.

Moreover, Moore (1995) shows a relation of interdependency among the three elements of the strategic triangle: the more public value is created, the more citizens gain trust in the government, the easier it is for elected officials to obtain resources, and, finally, the simpler it becomes for a governing board to endorse new strategic actions, restarting the feedback loop. In a few words, public value is “about delivering a service that is sustainably valuable” (Salemans & Budding, 2021).

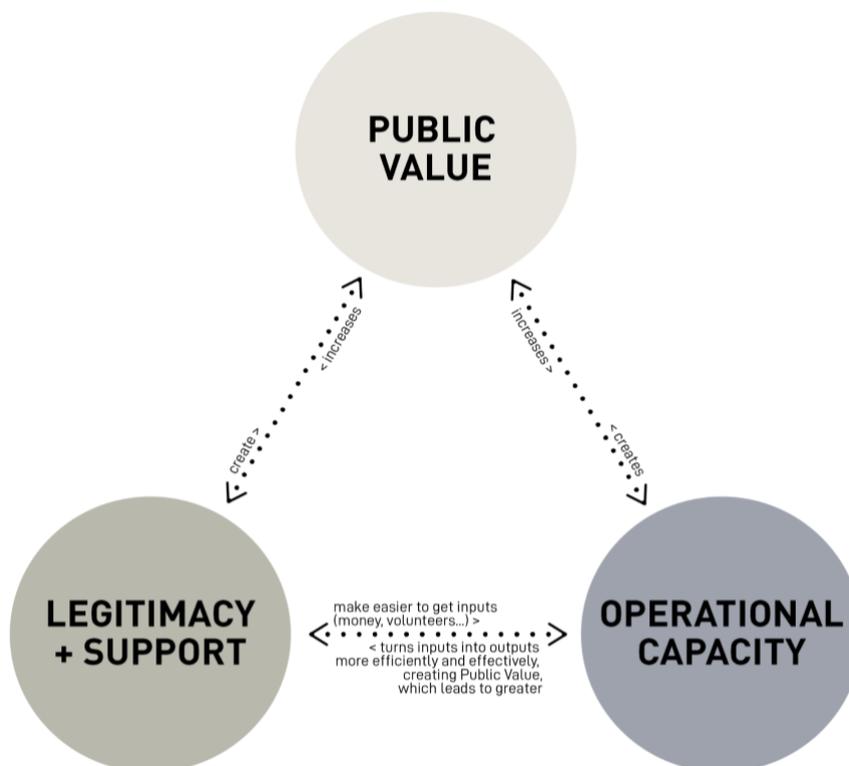


Figure 1: Public Value Strategic Triangle. Adapted from Moore, 1995.

When a governing board takes decisions concerning wicked problems, its choices “reflect local public values” (Stenvall et al., 2022). This means that a community’s resilience is highly influenced by its public values and is considerably grounded in situated relationships. Hence, how can public value be nurtured?

Power of narratives to nurture public value for community resilience

To nurture public value, we propose that narratives can be powerful drivers to facilitate and coordinate two components of Moore’s strategic triangle (1995), namely “legitimacy and support” and “operational capacity”. Through promoting collaborative interactions among public institutions and communities consisting of citizens and diverse types of stakeholders, narratives can generate dynamics and trajectories encompassing shared values. Hence, public values generated by common narratives between public institutions and communities function as a solid foundation of a resilient community, since the processes and outcomes are negotiated and shared by potentially all the stakeholders.

Narratives by design as nurturers of public value

Narratives have increasingly been addressed in design fields due to their essential properties, which comprise both a human cognitive process (Polkinghorne, 1988) and a mode of communication (Fisher, 1985, 1987). Narrative — a plot of sequential and interconnected events with a beginning, a conclusion and a basic structure — allows humans to use it as a sensemaking currency (Fisher, 1985; Boje, 1991). Its essential properties of being a human cognitive process and a mode of communication (Bruner, 1986) allow the conceptual use of narratives in many disciplinary contexts, such as sociology, history, psychology, communication, anthropology, philosophy, business management and design studies (Rhodes & Brown., 2005).

In the field of design study, narratives and storytelling have been studied in creative practice (Lloyd & Oak, 2018) and from broad dimensional aspects, such as “narratives as competency”, “narratives as process”, and “narratives as artefacts” (Hayama et al., 2021). Especially in the context of communication design, narratives have been underlined as enablers for the inclusion of people in the social innovation process (Ciancia et al., 2014). Narratives and stories unlock people’s potential and relationships in participatory design processes by collecting stories, expectations and wishes from the community as tiny tales from everyday life (Ciancia et al., 2014). In this sense, narratives and stories can play a significant role in developing a common language and building empathy with people in a specific community context.

Regarding public value, narratives are considered to develop clear goals and legitimisation by stakeholders (Salemans & Budding, 2021). Salemans and Budding (2021) argue that using narratives is a fruitful way to communicate ambitions and results in terms of public value. However, they also warn about the potential risk of influencing management and inducing bias, given the capacity of narratives to convince people (Brennan & Merkl-Davies, 2013; Beattie, 2014).

In these lines of argument, we suggest that narratives can be potential enablers to generate public values, facilitating the co-creation of social commons among public institutions and communities. A designerly approach can perform effectively as a powerful facilitator to generate common narratives among citizens and different social actors through active engagement, a common language and empathy building. Any story consists of three essential elements: “a narrative subject in search of an object, a destinator (an extratextual force, the source of the subjects’ ideology) and a set of forces that either help or hinder the subject in acquiring the desired object” (Fiol, 1989). Following this pattern, community stories might be structured accordingly: the narrative subject as the citizens or the community; the ultimate object or goal

of the narrative as sustainable community development and maintenance; and the destinator as the community and societal environment in which the narrative subject operates. In this context, a designerly approach can facilitate collaboration with communities and peers to set a common ground for discussion, engagement and moving people together. Performing the double roles of “storylisteners” and “storytellers” (Ciancia et al., 2014), designers can collect potential fragmented stories from community members and organise information in a structured manner. As Ahmad and Thompson (2009) state, “storytelling as a means to sharing knowledge, building trust, and cultivating identity” could allow communities and public institutions to collect shared knowledge, build trust in each other and develop an intersubjective identity through a participatory approach. Consequently, a solid basement of trust and an identity shaped by narratives enable a fruitful ground for democratic legitimacy, a fundamental part of public value.

Not only do narratives facilitate the generation of democratic legitimacy, but public managers can also use narratives’ benefits to build up another important basement of public value creation, which is the support of an authorising environment. Indeed, once a specific public matter is democratically legitimised, public managers can easily align their mission with values articulated by citizens. Strongly supported by citizen-driven legitimacy, public managers can contextualise their mission on the common narratives and position themselves in democratic political discourses. In other words, by relying on common narratives, public managers can easily involve essential stakeholders, such as formal authorities (e.g., the governing board), impacted citizens, especially citizens whose voices are commonly unheard, the media and the broader citizenry, as well as influential individuals outside of formal organisations.

From the perspective of Moore’s strategic triangle, once democratic legitimacy has been built up, it triggers the community to get easier access to the essential support of public authorities (Moore, 1995; Kavanagh, 2014). Then, the managers of the public institutions who have collaborated with the community can easily access inputs (e.g., money, volunteers). Hence, a loop of public value production and amplification would be triggered, since the public institutions and citizens would collaboratively achieve two pillars of the strategic triangle of public value: legitimacy and support and operational capacity.

Focusing on democratic legitimacy building at the beginning of a shared project would enable public institutions and communities to make the most out of the narratives and storytelling produced to generate public value in an interdependent way, activating a feedback loop. A designerly approach to storytelling and narrative creation could potentially trigger public value generation by achieving a firm foundation of democratic legitimacy towards a specific public issue through collaboration, which unlocks the potential of people and the relationship among all the stakeholders of a community.

Potential roles of narratives towards community resilience

Public institutions could use the potential roles of narratives to nurture public value and, thus, develop community resilience. As mentioned above, the capability for a community to tackle complex, wicked problems flexibly, in other words, nurturing evolutionary resilience, is becoming increasingly crucial. Since evolutionary resilience emphasises “fluidity, reflexivity, contingency, connectivity, multiplicity and polyvocality” (Davoudi & Strange, 2008), Davoudi (2012) proposes that the “interpretive approach” has good parallels with it. Indeed, contrasting with the naturalist-positivist approach, the interpretive approach “considers knowledge to be a matter of understanding rather than an explanation” (Davoudi, 2012). Certainly, social phenomena diverge from natural ones because they hinge on people’s meaningful and intentional actions. Hence, instead of explaining the causes of behaviours, social sciences seek the meaning of action, making sense of them individually and on a social scale.

Within this perspective, narrative as a mode of communication and a mode of knowing is endorsed as an original scientific approach based on “narrative rationality” (Bruner, 1986; Czarniawska, 2004; Fisher, 1987). As narratives are intrinsically “interpretative flexible” (Pinch & Bijker, 1984), they can be shared with diverse audiences, stimulating multiple ways of thinking and enabling individuals to draw inspiration from concepts, ideas and events concerning their understanding and contexts. In this sense, narratives are considered a boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989). Indeed, they are both coherent enough to bring together individuals' expression of different facets of communities and pliable enough to let them draw inferences that fit their unique contexts. According to Fisher's (1987) “narrative paradigm”, human beings are storytelling animals that make sense of their world and their own lives through narrative understanding, as their interpretations of the world.

Consequently, as a solid interpretative artefact, narrative can have strong potential to develop evolutionary resilience within a community through an interpretive approach. Then, how can citizens and public institutions generate common narratives which can function as enablers of nurturing public value towards an evolutionary resilient community? We argue that Civic Design might be the preferable approach.

Civic Design fostering common narratives

Even if the notion of Civic Design is yet to be theoretically clarified within design studies, we agree that Civic Design “is an approach for inclusive and productive conversations” (We Who Engage MIT, 2020), contributing to “new forms of living together” (DiSalvo & Le Dantec, 2017). This means that there is the need to consider new modes of encounter — new ways of working with communities, with government and non-government agencies, with all manner of civil society and even (perhaps especially) with those who work beyond the normal conceptions of what is appropriate of civil action (DiSalvo & Le Dantec, 2017). This last point is critical when talking about co-producing narratives that actively involve all the impacted stakeholders, which is crucial for the successful creation of public value. Indeed, Civic Design aims to create a space where, even if unanimity is hardly present if treated as a place in common, diverse voices can be heard, enabling a process resulting in negotiated resilience (Harris et al., 2017). This space would allow stakeholders to discuss both the symbols and the structures on which society is based, opening the opportunity to create new common narratives around problems, sparking new publics into being (Dewey, 1927; Marres, 2005). Common narratives could challenge and rethink established ideas that citizens have of themselves. This would transform the situated community's public value which, potentially, could activate the community towards the open-ended remaking of its governance structures.

Discussion

Although the literature about public value has been long-standing, it has barely crossed the field of design studies. We propose an original yet quite raw view on how public value might be nurtured through designerly approaches and processes. Specifically, we have bridged the concepts and practices of Design Narratives and Civic Design with significant debates around public value management and evolutionary resilience concerning communities. Our reflection emphasises that a designerly approach to public value generation is meaningful in terms of legitimisation. Indeed, both Design Narratives and Civic Design generate inclusiveness through engagement, participation and collaborative actions. These actions contribute to the production of public values resulting in a resilient community hinged on inclusiveness.

A limitation of the presented contribution is that it does not clarify how Civic Design builds common narratives. Indeed, the operational framework of Civic Design is yet to be defined, and it is the subject of ongoing PhD research.

Moreover, we consider an empirical study essential. Here we propose a reflection to open a discussion about the designerly opportunities nurturing public value, which are yet to be investigated by design scholars. However, we suggest proceeding with an empirical study grounded in real projects within the Design Narrative and Civic Design realms.

Furthermore, we suggest several research avenues regarding public values and community resilience through a design study point of view. For example, among the many, investigating the broader roles and contribution of design to strategic management in governments (Moore, 1995), such as Design Narrative for strategic sensemaking in governments.

Conclusion

Within design studies, the processes enabling the production of public value are yet to be clearly described and framed. The presented reflection brings the approaches and processes of Design Narratives and Civic Design into public value management and community resilience debates. This reflection critically considers complex relations between community and state, exploring common narratives nurturing public value as a fundamental agenda for democratic governance.

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