

Design thinking to rise in the public sector

By [Erica Elk](#)

15 Jan 2020

In the face of increasingly tough systemic and complex challenges, there is an emerging global trend in the public sector towards using a design thinking approach to unlock new and innovative solutions.



Erica Elk, founding executive director of the Craft & Design Institute

What is design thinking?

The design thinking approach has been used in the private sector for decades to create better, more user-focused products and services for competitive advantage; but has only recently emerged as an effective approach used by governments to address some systemic challenges.

At its heart, design thinking is a human-centred approach to solving problems in creative and innovative ways. It brings together people with diverse skills and experiences and creates a process environment which seeks to understand the user, challenge assumptions, and redefine problems in an attempt to identify alternative solutions that were not immediately apparent with an initial level of understanding.

Principally, the design thinking approach puts the user at the centre and, through iterative and rapid prototyping tests, a variety of possible solutions.

Why are governments seeking higher levels of innovation?

Because, fundamentally, the challenges of our time require innovative solutions.

If we look at South Africa, we see these challenges in every aspect of our society, from healthcare to education, and in urbanisation and housing, for example. And we cannot afford to continue to do things the same way, where traditional public sector processes involve years of planning – most often in silo line-function departments, with long compliance-driven procurement processes – so that by the time the ‘solution’ gets implemented, the conditions have changed.

And it’s increasingly being picked up as an area of study globally. Numerous papers, case studies and reports are emerging which dive deeper into the benefits of a design approach to complex challenges.

“It is no fad: design thinking has become a proven approach to complex service or organisational issues in the private sector. But it is often at odds with traditional approaches, policies and the typically risk adverse culture found in the public sector. However, the approach is starting to take hold in some governments and is being endorsed by the likes of the European Commission, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank as a way to deliver public service outcomes.” – Re-designing government innovation, Accenture

“It leads to solutions that are progressively refined through an iterative process of providing voice to end-users and engaging them in shaping decisions (professional empathy and co-creation); of considering multiple causes of and diversified perspectives to the problems at hand (scaling); and experimenting initial ideas (prototyping and testing). As such, it is most promising when innovation rather than adaptation is needed.” – Design Thinking for Public Service Excellence, UNDP

Measuring the impact is key

It is not realistic to expect the public sector to make whole-scale changes to embrace design and design-thinking methodology in policy formation and practical implementation across all spheres and tiers of government. And besides, the PFMA and MFMA don’t exactly make allowances for creative and iterative approaches.

What we are seeing emerge is an incremental approach, with testing of the methodology and measurement of the impact, sometimes on a small project scale. This can in part be attributed to the risk adverse culture cited in the public sector globally.

What it does require though is a willingness to support innovative solutions from leadership. For example, at a city level, we can see this in the cases of UNESCO’s Cities of Design, a UN designation which recognises cities that are leading the way in terms of design, innovation and creativity. Cape Town is the only city in Africa to receive this status to date.

An emerging exploration locally

Each context has its own unique challenges and opportunities for design thinking to be applied.

The CDI has worked closely with the Western Cape Government and City of Cape Town to explore avenues for the piloting of a design thinking approach over the past few years.

One such project in healthcare, funded by the Dutch Government, had a CDI design team working with three City of Cape Town clinics over 18 months. The project aimed to improve the patient service experience at city health care facilities. Clinic staff were taken through a process to identify and actively work together to co-create solutions to the complex issues faced by staff and patients on a daily basis.

Another long-standing project of the CDI, in its second phase, is the Better Living Challenge, which began with the question informed by changing policy in the human settlement environment: How might we enable the incremental upgrading of

informal settlements - improving the comfort and quality of life of over 850,000 people that live in them in the Western Cape?

Funded by the Western Cape Department of Human Settlements (DOHS), and supported by the Western Cape Department of Economic Development and Tourism (DEDAT), the project has been using a design thinking process to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of end users' needs, co-creating solutions, and bringing together people from diverse disciplines to find new ways of improving the structures people live in.

The project process included substantial needs analysis research; a mapping of the entire value-chain in the informal housing sector, including the building waste eco-system; the development of toolkits to help small-scale builders build better structures; and a pilot skills development incubator for builders in informal communities. The project pulled together a vast array of people in the construction, development and building sector, and it was recently nominated for the international Human City Design Award.

Evidence-based results will lead to next phase of public sector uptake

There is a desire to change and explore new ways of solving challenges that exist in many areas of government. In South Africa, as in many other countries, citizens are increasingly vocal in the face of injustices and a lack of solutions. South Africa has seen substantial large-scale mobilisations over the past few years alone on challenges such as corruption, lack of service delivery and gender-based violence.

Add to these growing inequalities, stagnant economies, climate change pressures, an energy crisis, water scarcity, and healthcare and education systems under pressure, there will undoubtedly be further onus on governments to work for the improvement of lives and this will necessitate a degree of innovation.

With a growing body of evidence as to the viability of design thinking-based approaches to systemic challenges, and its role in deepening an understanding of citizens as end users, we can expect to see a greater attention on design thinking as a tool to surface innovative solutions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erica Elk is the founding executive director of the Craft & Design Institute (CDI), which was established in November 2001 as the Cape Craft & Design Institute. In the last 18 years she has been the instrumental strategist, programme designer and innovator of the CDI's enterprise development interventions which have seen the mushrooming of the craft and design sector, particularly in Cape Town and the Western Cape where the CDI has been based and focused most of its work.

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