



Designing liveable cities a proposition for Public Interest Design





Executive Summary

We propose Public Interest Design (PID) as an overarching concept that can take inspiration from established and recent design approaches aiming at collective well-being. With this report we aim to discuss how design approaches can support cities to become more “liveable”. In the project **“Liveability - Designing public services for resilient neighbourhoods”**, six cities around the Baltic sea (Gdynia, Guldborgsund, Kiel, Kolding, Pori and Riga) strive to become more “liveable” (<https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/liveability/>) by implementing a capacity building programme for PID in municipal organisations and other stakeholders.

The notion of public interest, points at central issues of such design approaches: that the interests of actors potentially contradict each other, that consensus might not be possible at all times and even if it is, solutions are often temporary - PID like “Democracy” at large deals foremost with negotiating liveability. Unlike the traditional understanding of design as arranging something into a more desired way by working with the restrictions of malleable materials, “the social fabric” - that is people’s various relations and ties in societies - is far more complex: what has worked in one situation does not need to work in another. Yet at the same time, design including its approaches focusing on socio-ecological justice is often depicted as a step-by-step process that magically leads to public consensus. This can create wrong expectations and even counter-productive outcomes.

However, there are Design approaches and tools that do help both citizens and administrations to tackle problems and to build up muscles for transforming together, and these should be circulated. Therefore, the report aims to create a realistic understanding of the limits of design while at the same time making available tools that help to imagine and realise a better society. Some of the reoccurring ingredients we have identified are summarised as: (1) Imagining collective well-being. (2) Collaborating on public interests. (3) Working with failures and crises. (4) Increasing all citizen’s agency and trust. (5) Navigating and learning in uncertainty. Like in a recipe, each of these ingredients matters for PID, but cities can decide the amount of each of the ingredients according to their respective challenges and resources.

In the Liveability project we are developing, prototyping and disseminating a capacity building programme for PID, highlighting the need for cities and their administrations to create an enabling and learning environment. The according principles are outlined in the Liveability charter [Link to be inserted after completion].

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1.

Introduction

The purpose of the project is to create Liveable cities, so what does Liveability mean? Based on the discussion we had within the partner consortium we came to the conclusion that the notion of “Liveability” is strongly entwined with a sense of belonging to a place and a community. It is created through meaningful creation that again encompasses a sense of pride and empowerment - *We have a say in influencing our living environment for the better*. To support this process, we work with Public Interest Design, eventually leading towards a capacity building programme.

This capacity building programme consists of several parts: The *Use Case Guide* is the application of PID in a concrete public service or infrastructure planning process in each of the partner cities, referred to as *Testbed*. This guide will take the form of a template consisting of different toolkits and specific tools, guidance regarding their selection and implementation and highlighting possible challenges which civil servants need to consider. In addition, the *Training Programme* addresses relevant skills based on the results and learnings from the project. It will provide the participants an understanding of PID and its applicability for making cities more liveable.

As a first step towards this capacity building programme this report summarises our collective sense-making of what PID should entail. It starts by positioning it within the overall project plan, followed by a brief discussion on relevant design approaches and their critiques. We then present a first set of good practices from the partner cities, as well as existing toolkits. The report culminates in a list of five ingredients around which cities (and municipal administrations) should build capacities - making explicit reference to the critiques in the literature, good practices in cities and internationally used toolkits.

2.

Methods and findings

The eleven project partners (<https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/liveability/>) started working in January 2023. This report is the outcome of the project working group 1.1 and builds a synergy of the three deliverables, namely (1) a theoretical paper on relevant design approaches, (2) existing good practices within the five partner cities and (3) useful toolkits. Next to the bi-weekly meetings with the partners of 1.1 two onsite meetings of two days each with all project partners helped to build this report. The work especially benefited from a close exchange with the group working on 1.2 (Liveability Charter) and will act as a stepping stone for 1.3 (Use Case Guide), 1.4 (Training Programme) and 1.5 (Evaluation Framework).

2.1

Literature Review: Learning from existing design approaches

The PID paper discussed applicable design approaches at large, including their benefits and critical reflections. The following themes highlight the most important critiques and are categorised in line with the initial framing of the project. This frame explicitly highlighted design as means for societal change towards more liveability, with city administrations and citizens being the most relevant actors that need to collaborate.



Figure 1: Exploring Public Interest Design. Illustration: Berte Sophie Petersen 2023

Imagining collective well-being:

Considering that design is about changing something into a preferred state (Herbert Simon 1969), it is apparent that anything can be subject of design. There is a long history of designers imagining solutions for societally relevant problems - most prominently Victor Papanek (1971). Soon after, design was framed as the solving of wicked, that is, complex, problems (Rittel and Weber 1973) and today the scope of design includes working with symbols, products, experiences, relations between people and also systems in which the above are linked together with the aim of making visible or mitigating issues that hinder collective wellbeing (Buchanan 2001).

Critique: Design is helpful in ideating and prototyping alternatives, but complex problems (e.g. climate crisis, biodiversity crisis, housing crisis) are not possible to be “solved for good” through any single approach, but rather solved temporarily, mitigated, or better controlled. Change is slow and requires moving beyond observable products or events, to the level of practices, structures and paradigms.

Collaborating on public services and infrastructures:

Collaboration-focused approaches include: Participatory Design originating from Scandinavian workplace negotiation (Karasti 2014), Co-Design describing formats to include actors and more general Co-Creation referring to methods that enable exchange of ideas between actors (see Mattelmäki and Visser 2011), User Centred Design, in which potential users are included in product development, or the delivery of services in Service Design. A reduced version of these approaches called Design Thinking, i.e. a step-by-step model (e.g. Double Diamond) with accompanying methods to solve problems, has received overly attention in design and entrepreneurship (see Elsbach and Stigiani 2018).

Critique: In Design Thinking the designers as sole agent of change, their empathy versus the passive users, or the clear-cut phases have drawn heavy criticism (e.g. Kimbell 2011). Instead, seemingly simple steps like caring through active listening and a systemic understanding of the connected issues should be foregrounded.

Working with failures and crises:

Good public services and infrastructures build the core of resilient municipalities, with restricted budgets and the emergence of socio-ecological crises only strengthening their demand. This has led to a number of Public Sector Design units (e.g. Inland Lab Immigration Service, UK Government Digital Service) and Public Innovation Labs (e.g. Mindlab, Experio lab, Helsinki Design Lab, Innotiim) (see Saad Sulonen et al. 2020). On a more strategic level, Design for Policy considers how policies could be iterated and how administration can plan in a more coherent, future-oriented manner (Kimbell & Vesnić-Alujević 2020, Pirinen et al. 2022) which requires internal cultural change supported through e.g. change agents (Kristof 2017).

Critique: Design often approaches the public as user or object rather than subject with its own rights. In order to test and implement a policy there must be some form of consent but in this process, the voices of actors are heard unevenly. Secondly, on a strategic level, there

is increasing understanding that cultural change in administrations is key for coherent and long term planning in the face of multiple crises (Hector, Jende and Walch 2023).

Increasing all citizens' agency and trust:

Design for Social Innovation aims at scaling up citizen interventions (see Manzini 2015); Socially Responsive Design has designers working closely with experts from the domains of e.g. health, crime or local government (Malpass 2017), while Design Activism creates DIY artefacts or experiences to raise political discussion on justice (see Markussen 2011) and Social Design is seen as supporting the agency of marginalised groups (Margolin and Margolin 2002) or as a unifying framework (Tromp and Vial 2023). Often described as bottom-up tactics in opposition to city authorities' strategic plans, these tactical approaches are increasingly also used by the authorities themselves. Aiming at a middle ground, the artistic interventions of Cultural Planning avoid a pre-drafted top-down planning approach and instead build on existing approaches and specificities on the ground (Crückeberg, Cederquist and Gad, 2023)

Critique: Citizen initiatives affect social relations and trust, but also the value of former waste land which might turn honorary work into privatised profits (Julier 2017). Therefore legal regulations and interests need to be considered - asking about "What" and "Whose interests are served or challenged" instead of "How" is a simple step forward (see Busch and Palmas 2023). Even in decision-making power granting citizen assemblies, so-called silent groups might not be reached. Generally, institutional culture needs to regard citizens' agency as beneficial instead of nice to have, annoying or even threatening. Hence, new approaches of incorporating citizens, who might not otherwise be engaging in city making, is crucial.

Conclusion:

PID offered us the chance to have a meta discussion on how similar, more specific design approaches tie into one another to support collective wellbeing and still be realistic about limitations to this agenda. While collaboration and design that actually considers the reality of citizens' everyday lives is needed, user-centred design alone will not suffice. Public Interest Design also needs to foreground what constitutes public interest, who is involved in the change process, in which modes of collaboration and with which agency. The four themes of this section build the base for the following sections, in which we enriched this discussion with a fifth theme on learning, added good practices and toolkits which will be discussed in the following two sections.

2.2

Questionnaire & good practices: Understanding the partner cities context

As highlighted above, another aim of this synthesis report is to highlight transferable elements of the (public interest design) good practices from the partner cities and their network. A questionnaire was compiled which aimed to gather both factual and substantial data on different approaches, practices and projects that in the project partners' opinion were inherently examples of public interest design.

With the questionnaire we want to be able to understand how change is being initiated, promoted and hindered within a city or municipality. Hence, to identify the good practices that already exist and how they have come about, which will give us an overview of how good practices in the "Niches" have developed, and what it might take to change them into becoming dominant in the regime (to come) i.e. "Liveability" in cities.

Since the focus of this project is to find good practices to better tackle complex societal and spatial challenges, PID is in general seen as a collaborative practice. One approach to PID aims to engage citizens so that they feel a certain level of ownership of the idea directed towards modifying their surroundings. A second one provides necessary user-level input for creative solutions which in themselves aim at providing more fruitful and suitable results for the users and the society as a whole. It is important to stress that we did not seek only practices that were municipality-driven or -initiated, but also practices and approaches initiated and guided by NGOs or citizens.

Altogether we gathered data on a first set of 11 good practices from different cities in the Baltic Sea Region¹. The ultimate goal of the practices varied from tackling rather concrete issues like redesigning the use of public transportation, to creating more approachable administrative centres, or to providing various cultural activities for certain areas. The approaches were short-term, e.g. urban forums, as well as long-term, e.g. urban regeneration programmes, and still ongoing or annual ones, e.g. participatory budgeting.

We could differentiate **two trails of thought** regarding a good PID practice: (1) Generally, a good PID practice aims at bringing municipalities closer to the citizens - citizens can easily communicate their needs and expectations about their living environment (liveability) which in turn brings about a positive, respectful, engaging and fruitful action from the municipality. (2) In a more everyday sense, citizens get necessary information and services in an accessible, often creative, and easily understandable way, thus minimising the conflict of formal language in municipalities vs. the informal language of the citizens. The exchange between the municipality and the citizen therefore does not get lost in translation.

¹ The questionnaire is accessible here:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeLn2EkV_1W-HXSuCF67qQa1-CQjwWcjpUSSKqeLjRekgsMmw/view-form?usp=sf_link

We welcome you to add to our set of good practices.

Municipality-led approaches seek to solve:

- > issues pertaining to municipal functions, i.e. eliminating duplication of functions within institutions.
- > issues pertaining to citizen participation, i.e. how to get different interest groups engaged in participatory democracy/governance networks in a meaningful way.
- > Learning from and improving existing municipal services by taking into account the needs, expectations and suggestions of the users.

NGO- or citizen-initiated approaches are more often tied to cultural events, neighbourhood activism and empowerment or very specific and vulnerable interest groups. As such the third sector helps the municipalities to see shortcomings in services or potential future services and opportunities. Often the third sector stakeholders either elucidate the problem that needs public sector attention or, unable to realise an idea on their own, ask for support by officials. Regardless of the initiator, a good PID practice shows strong signs of third-sector incentive and lead. Thus, good PID practices are based on strong partnerships where the third sector provides the substantive content and the public sector - the legislative or technical framework and know-how, or even necessary funding.

When implementing good practices the survey highlighted **two main obstacles**: a) resources (money and time) and b) public authorities' lack of interest to participate or to engage with the citizens in a meaningful way. The officials tend to only do as little as is needed and are reluctant to take extra steps, as there is no reward and often there is even risk of punishment for doing so. This means that the citizens often need to build the bridges between different agents, when the responsibility for this lies with city officials. Most helpful are project leaders who are interested in meaningful outcomes such as third-sector representatives or city officials. The key is a certain interest and willingness to "connect" the necessary dots - a cultural change within the administrations. Very often people with urban professional backgrounds like architects or urbanists play a key role here.

For future endeavours the respondents suggest thinking outside the box when it comes to mapping and including stakeholders. On top of stakeholders like officials, developers, elderly people with hearing aids, there might be a specific group such as children with hearing aids. Also, even though you have project-based and invited stakeholders, there still should be open calls for any interested parties. Everybody should feel welcome and able to participate in the creation of collective well-being.

Toolkits & workshops: Making it practicable

Extensive desk research led to the selection of toolkits which we defined by: (1) Creative approaches focusing on the public good (2) Instructional methods, sets of questions, or skill development (can be part of reports). (3) Having been tested and being available on-line in English.

Aiming to build both a better common ground between the partners, and a bridge towards the 1.3 Use Case Guide and 1.4 Training Programme, our working group organised two on-line workshops in which we wanted to find out the respective challenges of the cities, and what skills they deem necessary for overcoming these. In a first workshop with all partners we used the iceberg model to underline that hindering elements are often invisible and can be categorised according to the Leverage Points Model, i.e., practices, structures and paradigms (see Meadows 1999). Having defined hindering principles from these as well as possible enabling principles, we used one of the toolkits, the [UNDP Portfolio Competency Framework](#) to discuss which skills are relevant for administrations. In a follow-up workshop with the PID change agents we focused on how they can find traction and allies within their organisations. This work was concluded by an onsite workshop focusing primarily on the design spaces, i.e., what is currently (im)possible in the respective cities.

Considering the four themes from the literature review and reflecting our online and onsite workshops, we added a fifth theme that highlights learning in complex environments. This is due to the fact that we want to evaluate our learnings, but want to avoid the widespread pitfalls of predefined Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) or Objectives and Key Results (OKR). Oftentimes they end up creating extra work and hindering change because project teams regard them as a magic route to follow for success rather than what they really are: an initial planning and orientation tool. For each of these now five themes we have listed several toolkits, which are briefly described in the following.

1. Imagining collective well-being

Toolkit: [Making Sense of the Future](#)

- Aims to promote transdisciplinary and creative future thinking
- Focused on the issues of digitalization, its impact on our society and the paradigm of uncertainty that constitutes the future of digital societies
- Consists of 6 independent exercises: show your stance towards a digital future; develop a realistic future; deconstruct and reconstruct language metaphors and interpretation regarding the future; Set actions for the future; find signs and identify change processes; writing about possible futures.

Toolkit: [Post Capitalist Design Guidelines](#)

- Tool of questions to guide work on transforming projects, practices and disciplines
- Four strategy layers (social power, community economies, degrowth, postcapitalist subjectivities) that can be paired with project, practice or discipline to lead to questions a designer should pose to themselves when designing for different contexts
- A website that allows you to choose your context to get provided questions as impulses for your design work

2. Collaborating on public services and infrastructures

Toolkit: [Designing for public Services](#)

- Collection of tools that enable you to use design principles in public service
- Six areas: Setting up for success, getting inspired, developing insights and ideas, testing ideas through prototyping, preparing for implementation, overcoming challenges
- Guidelines and templates to build up a team and follow the steps of projects as well as a text based guide book for self-learning

Toolkit: [Emancipatory](#) [Boundary Critique](#)

- Set of questions to help non-experts to reflect and challenge suggested solutions by experts (especially regarding its social and ecological implication)
- Aims to elevate discussions about probable solutions to problems
- A list of questions non-experts can pose to experts to reflect their proposed solutions

Toolkit: [Give and Take Matrix](#)

- Research based tool to identify which knowledge has to be shared between subgroups/parts of a project
- Makes projects more integrative and improves intergroup interactions, strengthens mutual understanding, helps to identify potential for collaborations
- Workshop of at least three hours that helps to produce a give and take matrix for all subgroups

Toolkit: [Soft System Methodology](#)

- Helps to find a shared understanding of challenges and conflict situations
- Structures problems
- Helps working out improvements and means of implementing them
- Developed for the use in heterogeneous groups, helps to deal with different thought styles
- Process is taught within a workshop

3. Working with failures and crises

Toolkit: [Systemic Design Toolkit](#)

- Helps to co-create interventions for challenges we face
- Toolkit offers many [templates](#) to use Systemic design in practice and for group works
- Is structured in seven Steps: Framing the System, Listening to the System, Understanding the System, Defining the desired future, Exploring the possibility space, planning the change process, Fostering the transition

Toolkit: [UNDP Portfolio Competency Framework](#)

- Offers a competency frame and portfolios approaches for teams
- Framework structured in three parts: “Seeing the system, Building collective will to transform, Generating new possibilities – each defining necessary changes in mindsets, skills and attitudes.
- Offers instructions to design a spiral for implementing interventions with a guide to which roles each team member has to fulfil and self-learning through a guidebook

4. Increasing all citizens’ agency and trust

Toolkit: [Citizen Assembly Standards](#)

- Guideline on how to run a citizen assembly
- Structured in 10 criteria that define citizens assemblies and what is essential and what is desirable for each criteria

Toolkit: [Patterns of Decentralized Organizing](#)

- Training guide on how to unlearn hierarchical patterns and flatten hierarchies in organisations to open up development opportunities for individual members
- Offers solutions to patterns and challenges that might arise when hierarchy is reduced
- The patterns discussed are: Intentionally produced counter-culture, Systematically distribute care labour, Make explicit norms and boundaries, Keep talking about power, Agree how you’re using your tech, make decisions asynchronously, Use rhythm to balance flexibility and focus, Generate new patterns together

5. Navigating and learning in uncertainty

Toolkit: [Data Storytelling in the Public Sector](#)

- Goal: enhance communication about public sector accounting and financial reporting frameworks
- Guide with QR codes that incorporate technical visualisation
- Framework of Data driven storytelling (Elements: Data, Narrative, Language, Visualisation)

Toolkit: [Storytelling for System Change](#)

- Guidebook to storytelling as a way to foster system change
- Lines out what stories can achieve for system change
- Offers introduction on how to tell stories about change

Toolkit: [Learning Pods](#)

- Offers methods and tools for learning within local governments
- Methods: Learning Pods (internal measurement method), Values and principles check-In (systematic reflective practice for teams), Storytelling evaluation (helps residents to identify which outcomes of a project matter to them), Life journey maps (identifying key moments and perceptions of residents)
- Presented as guidebook

Toolkit: [Relationship Navigator](#)

- Helps government to govern more centred on the relationship to their citizens
- Four step guide to assess how relationship centred a government is and where it could improve its relationships to the citizens and how

3.

Synthesis: Ingredients of PID

The above introduced (so far) five themes build the backbone of this synergy section and are referred to as ingredients. 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. For each ingredient we have listed existing design approaches, and the toolkits that we hope makes working more practicable.

- **Imagining collective well-being.**
- **Collaborating on public interests.**
- **Working with failures and crises.**
- **Increasing all citizens' agency and trust.**
- **Navigating and learning in uncertainty.**

1. Imagining collective well-being

This is about utilising existing knowledge on transformation and recognizing the anxieties associated with the topic. We have consistently observed that the ability to imagine collective well-being in the longer term and engage with uncertainty is crucial during times of multiple, overlapping crises. To this end, practices and skills from Futures Thinking along with Design Activism, DIY Urbanism or Citizen Science are helpful. Next to these valuable approaches for prototyping alternatives to the status quo, this ingredient underlines that niches can function as infrastructures that introduce skills and values into the existing system.

Toolkits:

[Post Capitalist Design Guidelines](#)
[Making Sense of the Future](#)

2. Collaborating on public services and infrastructures

This starts from Public Sector innovation and Policy Design which underscore that public services and infrastructures at the intersection between state and society benefit from an iterative design process that puts biophysical realities and the perspectives of different, collaborating actors at the centre. Secondly, it highlights that these should be thought of as parts of a coherent system. Services on e.g. digital literacy are likely to benefit from physical nodes such as "[Tiny Town Halls](#)", libraries, or neighbourhood centres that serve human interaction. Our project partners apply e.g. cross-sector collaboration practices and up to one year of testing, as well as the implementation of neighbourhood centres as a unified but direct way of service creation and provision.

Toolkits:

[Designing for Public Services](#)

[Emancipatory Boundary Critique](#)

[Give And Take Matrix](#)

[Soft Systems Methodology](#)

3. Working with failures and crises

This ingredient highlights that bureaucracies are not well prepared to react to crises let alone anticipate them. They need to maintain a certain level of accountability which rightfully slows down processes and limits a positive perspective on failures. Furthermore, administrations are often operating at maximum capacity which means that staff rightfully experience the need to train in design, participation or systems-thinking as an added burden. To mitigate cultural change and highlight that such training creates an immense return on investment, our project employs Change Agents. These are, however, dependent on limiting settings, actors pursuing alternatives, and supportive promoters. Mapping limitations and promoters helps to find alliances and motivate staff to move forward, but equally important is the motivation of leadership. Finally, organising singular change projects delivers budgetary control, but comes at the expense of synergies between single projects – this has recently been addressed by the portfolio approach.

Toolkits:

[Systemic Design Toolkit](#)

[UNDP Portfolio Competency Framework](#)

4. Increasing all citizens' agency and trust

Feeling agency and trust entails exploring different modes of 'public engagement'. There can be several publics, being affected by a specific issue each but unable to solve it due to missing power. Social Design's focus on marginalised groups helps us to move from traditional planning and design formats to be used passively by citizens towards engaging them actively in its production and adaptation, e.g. through Cultural Planning. Generally, the access to tools of self-organising is important to extend the transformative relations beyond the time of a project. 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. Secondly, an involvement in actual decision-making processes through e.g. Citizen Assemblies instead of mere consulting is key. Finally, Realdesign provides relevant questions to keep in mind: What interests do actors have? What are the institutional frameworks around this action? How is power and the "social" redistributed? Currently our project partners apply e.g. Participatory Budgeting, or preservation of public buildings.

Toolkits:

[Citizen Assembly Standards](#)

[Patterns of Decentralised Organising](#)

5. Navigating and learning in uncertainty

The fifth ingredient highlights this project's aim to reflect on the impacts of PID. 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. Unfortunately, most administrations and businesses still rely on KPIs that quantify an impact goal, when far too little knowledge is available, rather than considering benefits and challenges that aggregate over time to enable or hinder learning (e.g. range of skills available, missing cross-departmental communication, short funding cycle) (see Bellinson et al. 2023). However, there is currently an increasing understanding and interest that these traditional KPIs create extra work by forcing staff to prove that earlier-set goals have been reached, thereby taking away resources required for actual learning to take place.

Toolkits:

[Data Storytelling in the Public Sector](#)

[Storytelling for Systems Change](#)

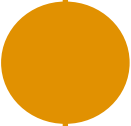
[Learning Pods](#)

[Relationships Navigator](#)

4.

Conclusion

Instead of the out-dated modernist design's principles of individual heroes generating new "solutions", these five PID 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 perspective that governs many design practices towards a one that treats all actors as active voices and aims to work with the complex environments they are part of. We are currently developing the Use Case Guide and the Training Program and will share these in a follow-up report. Meanwhile we are very interested in feedback from other cities on this part of our proposal and welcome you to join and co-develop the network further.



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