Lab or No-Lab?
Exploring institutional trajectories of
public innovation-oriented teams

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the institutionalization process ‒ through a specific organizational setting ‒ of public policy design. Our analysis is based on the empirical study of three apparatuses of public innovation at three different administrative scales in France (National (State), Regional, Departmental). Beyond similar characteristics related to their emergence, we show that the anchoring, development and legitimacy of these IOTs (Innovation-Oriented Teams) largely depend on organizational tactics. Above all, their institutionalization relies on the "metabolization" of design methods, a process which is contingent to each IOT and that allows them to enrol key actors such as elected representatives and managers. We conclude by highlighting the pragmatic and cautious aspects of their strategy ‒ and their plastic approach to design ‒ that enables them to move towards a hybridization of public bureaucracies.

KEYWORDS: public innovation, design, laboratory, institutionalization

1. Introduction

The necessity of innovation and, for that matter, of collaborative innovation, in the public sector is currently one of the most prevalent ideas among practitioners of public policy and researchers focusing on this field (Sørensen and Torfing, 2012). They moreover join the stream of ideas that advocate a *"New Public Governance"* (Osborne, 2006), more fit for handling the current challenges faced by governments, by proposing a resolutely inter-organizational approach, directed more towards considering policy's impacts on citizens than towards efficiency, which is deemed too limited. For some time now, these streams have crossed paths with a movement, both practical and theoretical, that seeks to apply design methods to the conception of public services and even public policies (Bason, 2014; Scherer, 2015). In fact, over the last twenty years, after its industrial beginnings, design has experienced an "expansion of its scope, (...) both in the growth of practices and a dilation of the concept" (Vial, 2015). This has led certain actors (such as La 27e Région), in line with the work of service design and social design, to introduce a new way of conceiving of public services and public policy in governmental administrative bodies. They have justified their approach by noting that public issues are increasingly *"wicked problems"* that demand the implementation of co-design methods, in particular ones involving users, and that design is at home with the complexity and uncertainty that characterize today's contemporary context (Christiansen and Bunt, 2014).

Yet, even if we were to accept these few diagnostic elements[1] which seem to justify the development of collaborative innovation within the public sector through the use of design methods, the organizational form that must be given to these collaborative processes to render them fruitful, sustainable and legitimate, in short, to institute them, is not immediately apparent. In reality, change does not occur naturally in these organizations, or, at least, its determining factors are varied, as organizational theories have taught us[2]. One particular form[3] seems to have become well established, that of public innovation "labs". These structures are granted their own identity and have relative autonomy, while also being connected to public organizations located at various territorial levels, and being based on the use of methods partly inspired by design. Over the past ten years, we have seen the emergence of this type of organization throughout the world, and numerous studies of it involving mapping and typographies have already been conducted[4], including by the authors of this article. In France, too, entities devoted to public innovation – even if they do not necessarily take on the title "lab" – have also emerged within government administration services, at both national and local

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[1] For a more comprehensive approach, the reader is referred to: Bason, 2014; Tonurist *et al.* 2015.

[2] It is not our intention to develop theoretically this general assertion, which is supported by a significant amount of research in various social science disciplines. For a (subjective) sample, see: Alter, 2013; Battilana *et al.*, 2009; Moisdon, 1997; Brunsson and Olsen, 1997; Akrich *et al.*, 1988.

[3] Here we evoke a generic form, which occurs in numerous variations, with this variety being highlighted by the large majority of analysts (see Tonurist *et al.*, 2015).

[4] See in particular the census conducted by La 27e Région for the European Commission; in addition to the mapping carried out by Bloomberg and by Parsons Desis labs, or under the FIP Explo programme.

(departmental or regional) levels. These entities appear to be lasting, and even growing and acquiring legitimacy. However, there seems to be a substantial difference, even a contradiction, between their activities and practices, and the administrative culture of government services (Coblence and Pallez, 2015). Moreover, their definitive integration into those services and culture has not yet been attained, which gives rise to ambiguity, misunderstandings and occasionally conflict. In this article, we have named these entities "Innovation-Oriented Teams" (IOT).

Several recent studies by researchers and also by actors involved in these types of structures have set out to describe how they operate, their trajectories and the problems they come up against (Carstensen and Bason, 2012; Tonurist *et al*., 2015; Kieboom, 2014). These studies revealed a certain number of organizational characteristics that explain the positioning and trajectories of these business entities. Yet they rarely examine the connection between this organizational analysis and the conception of design and its uses, as conveyed by the actors involved in these initiatives. Either the methodology and the research questions do not adopt this perspective (as in the research of Tonurist *et al*., 2015), or the actors, unavoidably involved and bearing their own visions of design, are not able to adopt a more objective stance on the matter, such as that of social science researchers.

This article aims to understand the connection between organizational structuring and the modalities of adopting design practices. How do these teams emerge and continue to exist? What activities do they carry out? Does the conception of design that they shape help or impede their establishment and their development? In exploring these questions, we draw on three case studies in France, all set in government administration services located at different territorial levels, ultimately with the aim of understanding the conditions in which – beyond the obvious oxymoron – public innovation might become institutionalized. To begin, we endeavour to characterize the process leading to the emergence of the three IOTs. Our article then analyses the trajectories followed by these IOTs, by highlighting the differences observed in their establishment, growth and legitimization strategies. Lastly, in the final section, we report on their use of design and characterize its adoption as the "metabolization" of design doctrines by the administrative body itself.

2. Methodology and presentation of case studies

The research[5], conducted in line with a comprehensive methodology (Dumez, 2013), was based on the detailed analysis of three case studies. We have sought to retrace the emergence, the activities and the trajectories of Innovation-Oriented Teams (IOT) within administrative organizations which we have chosen to keep anonymous (even if, particularly for the national case study, this may seem a little formal). DépartementAlpha refers to a French Departmental Council, RégionBeta a Regional Council,

and EtatGamma a national government body responsible for the modernization of public policy. These IOTs were firstly chosen because they all employ processes proclaimed to be design-based. Secondly, another advantage was that their professional pathway has existed for several years, which satisfied our wish to study an institutionalization process taking place over a duration of time. Finally, we thought it interesting to situate our work across different territorial levels, and as the responsibilities of the three administrative host organizations are quite different, this should *a priori* impact upon the nature of the activities examined.

In our analysis we have made use of three different data sources: first, interviews conducted with IOT members, administrative executives involved in the creation of IOTs and their subsequent projects, and with external contributors collaborating with these teams; second, documents (internal or public) related to the creation of the IOTs, their doctrine, or to projects carried out; and finally, the observation of events that have punctuated the trajectories of these IOTs (preliminary seminars, communication actions, etc.). Moreover, in two of the three case studies, a detailed "monograph" was written and submitted to the actors interviewed, which allowed us to validate and enhance the information collected. So that the reader may grasp *a minima* the empirical material with which we have worked, we present a few factual elements below that characterize the creation, operation and trajectories of the three IOTs, before delving into the aforementioned cross-cutting analysis.

The IOT of DépartementAlpha

This first IOT, in its current form, was created in 2012 subsequent to a change in political leadership, and was jointly instigated by a local councillor (an academic) and a new Director-General of Services (DGS), both of whom were interested in *design thinking* processes and hoped to introduce them into the department council.

The team, comprised of six permanent members with various backgrounds (notably one designer), directly linked to the DGS and given their own offices, was created out of two former entities that had been responsible for research missions employing more classic methodologies. The team additionally called on external contributors, recruited in line with the terms of reference explicitly mentioning the use of "methodological building-blocks" originating from design practices (immersion, co-design, prototyping, etc.). Since 2012, six projects have been implemented in social services, health and cultural areas, though one of them, which was more atypical, was concerned with the internal reorganization of a department. The strategy of this IOT, which has now existed for four years, consists in diffusing its practices internally so as to acculturate the administration to its methods, in addition to consolidating and increasing external partnerships and communicating about its actions. Design is employed within its projects in a pragmatic way, depending upon the nature of the project, with the possibility that other techniques be adopted if the need arises (*nudge*, *big data*).

The IOT of RégionBeta

This team was constituted in 2014 on the impetus of a young, newly recruited DGS and followed on from several previous initiatives. These included the creation of an observatory (begun in 2010) focused on social and economic transformations and changes, the implementation of foresight approaches focused on the territory's future, several of which were managed by La 27e Région, and finally the setting up of an acculturation programme (named "Transfo") related to design processes and targeted at agents and elected representatives, again run by this same association.

Instead of constituting an *ad hoc* service with its own staff, the decision was made to enlist agents from different departments, as part of their regular working hours. Only one young designer on an apprenticeship contract works full time within the IOT, which is an informal structure, yet has a designated budget line initially controlled by an agent within the Foresight unit, and which is now (following changes to political leadership) attached to the General Secretariat.

The team ran several projects with various themes, in particular "the offices of the future" – relating to both the workplace and the organization of work – and the *Proxi* project based on the theme of RégionAlpha's proximity to its users.

Design was once again the subject of a doctrine that remains very unstable, which was a source of visible misunderstanding within the study of the Proxi project.

The IOT of EtatGamma

Within EtatGamma, a structure created in 2012 just after the presidential election, the idea of creating a "public innovation laboratory" developed progressively. In autumn 2013, with support from the Minister Marylise Lebranchu, a plan was finally devised with two purposes: developing projects in "laboratory" mode, and facilitating an ecosystem of public innovation actors.

The team in charge was made up of three contracted project officers, situated within the service "Innovation and User Services", and six correspondents spread throughout the various service departments of EtatGamma. However, this team has none of the features of an autonomous structure (designated budget, permanent staff, autonomous communication system) and has to deal with competing bodies within EtatGamma and structural instability. It nonetheless runs various projects by enlisting skilled assistance externally (researchers, designers, consultants, etc.), as well as internal resources and eventually external ones. The projects, initially conducted within areas such as education, social services and health, are negotiated with the operators or ministries responsible for these areas and, even though they remain anchored locally, they have the authority to address national issues. Design is considered here from quite a pragmatic perspective (the term "design" is not for that matter used; instead, they refer to *immersion-prototyping*), and different techniques can be employed on the same project (for example *nudge*).

The trajectory of this IOT is therefore rather uncertain today, despite strategies focused on communication, animating communities, and financial support for training operations and project methodology "labelling".

3. The emergence process

3.1. The setting

Our analysis across our three research fields shows that the IOTs never appear *ex nihilo* within an administrative structure. Instead, their emergence is stems from a favourable organizational setting and the maturing of ideas.

The DépartementAlpha IOT, officially created in 2012, originated from the transformation of a pre-existing team: a Departmental Observatory, a service that was essentially in charge of studies and investigations on behalf of operations departments. While design methods were previously unknown to this team, the intervention approach did not seem to have radically evolved: "Without even knowing, we were already working from a position of *design thinking*. (...) We were known for being helpful, kind people, and were not at all seen as organizational auditors". The cross-cutting position of the team meant that it was accessible and acted as a support for other departments. Moreover, this local departmental authority had already realized the importance of an innovative strategy, which featured in its strategic project for 2012: "... the DépartementAlpha places innovation and experimentation at the centre of its strategy towards improving the quality of services available to the user (...) in view of the heightened distrust felt towards institutions. (...) It envisages giving the user a role as an actor in the co-design of services, and not just as a consumer. This is a matter of creating services both for and with the user". Alongside this, the teams from the Observatory had reported experiencing difficulties in getting their colleagues in the operations departments to act upon the analyses they had provided them with. They had been exploring any potential alternative leverage points to "help the departmental administration to evolve" and "move in the direction of greater user satisfaction".

This situation was the same for the IOT of EtatGamma. Our analysis highlights this programme's deep roots: an extensive history involving the maturing of ideas and the development of themes for public innovation, which were presented to the *Direction Générale de la Modernisation de l'Etat* (DGME) even before the creation of EtatGamma. The idea itself of a "laboratory" arose prior to the creation of the structure. At the end of 2011, some DGME actors were considering the creation of a "lab", in order to move beyond simply streamlining the system through administrative simplification and the improvement of public services. Inspired by Danish and British models, their ambition was therefore to move up to the level of re-designing public policy.

In RégionBeta, the IOT's establishment in 2014 followed reflection several years earlier within the context of a territorial foresight study. An observatory had existed since 2010, in addition to a plan "to figure out society's economic, social, technological and environmental transformations and to derive from these the outcomes for regional initiatives, in terms of adaptation or innovation at the very heart

of public policies". It was around this time that the first contact was made with La 27e Région, called upon at first to facilitate consultation meetings, and later to run the "Transfo" study programme in 2012, which would end two years later with the creation of the IOT. The emergence of this IOT was also made possible by the presence of an ecosystem that favoured design processes, more specifically due to the use of design by local neighbouring authorities and the enthusiasm originating from the local design school.

3.2. The initial impetus: mimicry and political backing

It was in this favourable organizational setting, in which ideas of change had already been maturing, that the IOTs were born and became entrenched. Their initial impetus was often linked to a change in executive power at the highest level of the public organization, and consequently to strong political support. Examples of "labs" – both European and French – played an equally important role in inspiring those initiating these processes and in legitimizing their initiatives. In all three cases the significant role of intermediation and the diffusion of practices by La 27e Région can be noted, while IDEO's *design thinking* model appears to be a standard reference for all the IOTs.

For example, agents from RégionBeta participated in research trips to San Francisco, as part of entrepreneur and local actor groups, to meet with innovative enterprises, including IDEO. Three years later, one of them commented on the impressions left by this trip: "it was very exciting, this idea of allowing freedom (...) of not closing these people off in a regular office with standard hours and a hierarchy system of management". Comparatively, our study underlines the significant impact that the change of the DGS had on triggering and supporting the process, by appointing a younger director more in tune with innovation and "new forms of management". The "Transfo" programme was explicitly intended to prepare for the creation of an innovation laboratory. Alongside this, the issue of public innovation was backed by the first Vice-President of the Region, and appeared to inform his political choices.

The same phenomenon occurred in DépartementAlpha in 2011 when, following a political change, a new executive team was set up with a new DGS. During a meeting with the observatory teams, after having taken up his new position, he held a book on design thinking by Tim Brown, the head of IDEO, and asked: "Do you all know about design thinking?" He had support from a councillor who, being a teacher at a business school, was familiar with and encouraged this approach. The DGS's proactive attitude evidently played a key role, and still does even today to boost changes within the IOT. Internally, it is frequently mentioned that "the DGS is committed to diffusing the culture of service design. (…) The immersion, the role of users, it is a strategic orientation".

Within EtatGamma, it was also a change in political power in 2012 that appears to have spurred on a change in stance, following a period of indecision. During this period EtatGamma was rethinking its organization and formulating a new set of principles to underpin its modernization policy and to

distance itself from a period symbolized by the RGPP (*Révision générale des Politiques Publiques* - General Revision of Public Policies). The construction of the IOT, the original idea of which had survived the political change, appeared to be based on models that had been available at the time, such as the TGVLab (run by the SNCF, France's national rail network) and in particular the Danish-run MindLab, which had acted as a reference point. Contact established between La 27e Région and the *Ministre de la Réforme de l'État, de la Décentralisation et de la Fonction publique* (French Minister for State Reform, Decentralization and Civil Services) eventually led to a visit to MindLab in February 2013. At the same time, a public announcement in the daily *Les Echos* detailed the government order: the Minister wished to create a "MindLab *à la française*". Our study thus shows that the prior professional trajectory of EtatGamma's IOT was largely initiated and determined by political backing – which was useful though at times a little uncontrollable and fluctuating. Moreover, several people (most of whom were already long-time acquaintances) who were positioned both internally and externally to EtatGamma, played a key-role in the creation of the programme, a fact that should be highlighted.

3.3. "Learning by doing": IOT structuring and initial projects

While the first initiative within EtatGamma, which consisted in creating a dedicated site and structure for the IOT, was "attractive" and "in line with a usual administrative reflex", it was rapidly jettisoned for a more experimental approach ("doing before creating the structure"), explicitly comparable with the principles of design processes. Ultimately, a team would be working in "laboratory mode", responsible for developing projects along experimental lines that would enable the concept to be demonstrated within six months. This was based on a limited number of projects, but would be more like a programme than a structure. It was moreover cross-cutting within EtatGamma because, as one of the executive staff members pointed out, it was necessary to ensure its inclusion. Following the official launch of the IOT, the priority was "get involved in real projects" already present in the service sectors. Four of these were eventually selected: a prototype for a local public services branch; the pedagogical use of digital systems within "connected schools"; simplifying the demand for social benefits; and a prototype for a future disabilities service centre (*Maison départementale des personnes handicapées* - MDPH). Alongside these projects, several policies were planned to "develop a favourable ecosystem for public innovation". These included facilitating a community of innovation practitioners, organizing a researcher-practitioner seminar on new public management, and supporting innovative approaches from government ministries.

The initial structuring was different within RégionBeta's IOT. It was more a cross-cutting structure, spread across services. The initiators of this IOT, aware that initially they would not be able to persuade the Region to recruit agents exclusively for "innovation" and "service design" missions, instead chose to create a less visible structure, enlisting agents from various departments, as part of

their regular working hours. It was therefore of great importance that the relevant department heads were convinced of the usefulness of the process. This required a period during which the IOT became familiar with methods discovered during the "Transfo" programme and endeavoured to test them. However, those in charge rapidly came up against the limitations of their organizational choices (part-time work, lack of internal methodological skills) which would lead to the recruitment of an apprentice designer and the externalization of studies (Proxi).

Within DépartementAlpha, the members of this IOT remember allowing themselves to be "happily carried away by this process" of *design thinking*, even if it was seen as possibly being just a "fad". Rapidly however, two subjects likely both to test the methodology and to grasp its effects were accepted. The first[6], in July 2011, was the conception of a new MDPH (*Maison départementale des Personnes Handicapées* - disabilities service centre), which became one of the emblematic projects of their term. For the IOT, it was notably a question of learning how to write terms of reference, identifying the skills needed, and recruiting skilled contributors, in order to then go on to build on these methods ("For us, it was a training ground on which to possibly internalize design skills and capitalize on them"). Behind this learning, the IOT had to rapidly demonstrate the concept in action if it was to secure its long-term presence within the administrative body.

4. Trajectories: organizational tactics

The common problem experienced by all three of these different IOTs, once they had emerged, was that of anchoring and implementing their policies. To this end, their initiators sought to take action on several levels: to preserve the structure in the long-term; to facilitate the acculturation of the administration in which each IOT was installed; to construct and develop a network of partners in order to communicate on their policy and to secure their legitimacy.

4.1. Political support and a strategy of invisibility

From the outset these IOTs benefited from high-level support from the administrative body and/or political support. This also signified, as a counterpoint, their potential fragility if this support was to disappear due to changes in political power or staff. In our three case studies, either an elected representative or a minister had supported the emergence of the entity, but support also came from senior executives within the administration who personally believed (or had believed) in the advantages of these new processes. Their longevity therefore relied *a priori* on maintaining this support notwithstanding any changes within the organization. It has nevertheless been found that

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[6] The second involved preventative policies related to the health of young people.

despite the disappearance of initial political support (in two out of three cases), the entity remained in place, in a possibly modified form.

The reason is probably that support for an entity is not only limited to discourse, but also translates, in an organization, into the making available of various resources, whether material or symbolic, which once attributed cannot instantly disappear, such as staff members, budgets, allocated sites, insertion within an organizational chart, logos, etc. These means can be attributed partially or on a more or less ongoing basis. This is how the DépartementAlpha structure, identified and directly attached to the DGS, has benefited for several years from permanent staff (tenured), premises and a budget, while in RégionBeta or EtatGamma the available resources appear to be more limited and less stabilized (contractual staff or part-time staff not attached to the entity; lack of an allocated site or budget; unstable organizational incorporation, etc.). In the case of the national structure, some tactics seek furthermore to get around the absence of allocated human and financial resources, by relying on external public resources.

In any case, once these resources have been allocated, their withdrawal is never immediate, which could perhaps explain the persistence of the IOTs following the departure of their mentor. We can also assume that this persistence was paradoxically a consequence of their semi-invisibility, which would tend to limit the urgency and implications of their withdrawal.

4.2. Acculturation of administrations: two action plans

Organizational anchoring also involves the process of acculturation carried out by these various IOT entities within the host administration. The idea of those promoting these approaches, in addition to their efforts of persuasion by rapidly revealing results, is that all levels of the administration must adopt these processes in order to reverse a referral process that is still very often *top-down*. Spreading these forms of innovation involves enrolling actors (Akrich *et al*., 1988) which, as we will see later in this article, causes the place reserved for design to be limited. This is why DépartementAlpha set up an internal School of Management which, in the context of basic training in management techniques, offered an initiation into design processes, with the goal being to subsequently form "ambassadors" for these processes. Another more targeted measure, again in DépartementAlpha, was aimed at relying on the projects themselves to produce this acculturation. As such, it organized the transition between the team of external contributors (comprised mainly of designers) and the administrative bodies taking on the projects and submitting them for evaluation, to occur in a more classical format. The idea was in some way to make innovation a routine process, so that it would fit permanently into the administrative operations and managerial policy modes.

In the other IOTs, notably at regional level, a different choice had been made, as it was the IOT's organizational insertion mode itself that was expected to enable the spread of new practices in the

administration, with team members spread across different services, acting under the guise of correspondents, and who had not for that matter given up their initial responsibilities.

We note therefore, at this level, a strategic difference between DépartementAlpha which implemented a specific number of measures, via an IOT comprised of permanent staff members, in order to train and enlist actors from the administrative body, and the other two IOTs which were themselves constituted to be the means for this diffusion.

4.3. Becoming a network leader to construct legitimacy

Finally, one important aspect of these anchoring strategies lies in the communication and expansion activities taking place outside the host administration, which can be thought of as the formation of a partners-allies network. Communications activity was developed, both at the national and departmental levels, through events or publications that also made it possible to capitalize on the experiences. Through the action of setting-up and facilitating a community, the IOT was positioned as a network node, a source of expertise and a resource platform for some partners. This created an environment in which methodological choices and practices were discussed and refined, and where innovators isolated in their administrative body could find support. This positioning of the public actor as a "platform" that generates trust, is relevant to current research that seeks to theorize this role (Blanc, 2016, Manzini, 2015).

In the case of the national IOT, such positioning was in any case imposed by the institutional stance of the structure responsible for promoting administrative reform, which had only a formal influence at the State administration level and no direct ability to influence local territorial authorities. Moreover, even at the State administration level, it could only steer initiatives in the direction of ministries and their operators, having no hierarchical leverage over them. In addition, even if this IOT maintained certain advantages (proximity to policy-makers, inter-ministerial approach), it also had to accept the disadvantages of having a national position, in other words, the scope of its activity could not remain limited to local experiences. Hence the thorny issue of "scaling out" (Kieboom, 2014), as the effectiveness of its action can only be judged according to the yardstick of a national roll-out. We can see here the potential contradiction between this national positioning and the principles upheld by designers, who insist upon the situational and contextualized nature of the actions they carry out. EtatGamma is therefore positioned as a guarantor and a producer of expertise that is transferable to various sectors of the administrative body, rather than as a producer of replicable solutions, a community facilitator or a methodological support for initiatives launched on a national scale, even though it consists of territorially-based projects.

This analysis of organizational anchoring and external expansion strategies shows a classic process that can be interpreted as the implementation of "organizational engineering" (through structural choices, training procedures or project implementation), and as the construction of interessment in

order to consolidate a network of internal and external allies, by mobilizing conceptions of design and its use that enable such interessment.

5. The metabolization of design processes in organizations

These three IOTs have attracted our attention because each one, in one way or another, has introduced design methods and practices into an organization or public institution. However, creating space in an organization to make room for design does not foresee the use that will be made of it. Each entity's interpretation differs as regards what is relevant in design, its forms of integration and its implementation. Our three case studies have led us to assume that there is more than just an integration or institutionalization of design occurring, and that instead these structures "metabolize" design in public policy. In other words, if we take this biological metaphor further, that the organizations absorb, transform and digest design (in various ways). At this stage, this term is used more widely as a metaphor rather than as a concept, but we could compare it to Levi-Strauss' concept of "*bricolage*" (1962), in the sense that what occurs is a reconfiguration using the techniques and knowledge available, in order to produce directly operational solutions that respond to a given problem. Nevertheless, the term metabolization has the advantage of evoking, in addition to the decomposition-recomposition process, the absorption of these methods by the organization.

5.1. The impregnation and absorption of design methods

In all three structures the interest in design stemmed from a personal initiative by an executive and/or policy-maker, relayed by several people within the IOT who progressively forged a doctrine and thus transformed themselves into real "methods entrepreneurs" (Arab *et al*., 2016). Various means were implemented to explain, train and convince agents and/or councillors to involve themselves in these processes. The principles of *design thinking* were discovered through the literature or trips to California. Meetings were organized with other structures that either advocate for design in public policy, or experimented themselves with design,. In EtatGamma and RégionBeta, the familiarization with design processes through impregnation took place in collaboration with La 27e Région, via training sessions and the organization of events and methodological experiments. These initial tests were furthermore often experienced as a "culture shock" between the civil servants and designers, without for that matter being entirely convincing. Criticisms were expressed regarding the facilitation methods, and doubts were voiced concerning "basic contributions".

It is worth noting that, in all cases, the introduction of these processes was not grounded on internally-based design skills. Designers were initially met by teams for training measures or were tested during the procurement of services. It was only later on that some designers would possibly be recruited.

These recruitments were motivated by expectations concerning the specific skills of the designer and because the agents felt that they alone did not have the knowledge to implement such methods.

In RégionBeta, the agents participating in the process were chosen above all for their curiosity, their appetite for work processes highlighted as innovative, the diversity of their profiles, their position in the organization, and their career potential within the administrative body, and not because of their knowledge or their mastery of design principles. Only one young designer on an internship contract, who had no noteworthy professional experience, was recruited after the IOT had been set up. Within EtatGamma, reflection on design methods was launched in the context of collaboration with La 27e Région. Following on from an initial project with this association, which aroused interest while also raising a number of questions, it was decided to test the internalization of design skills by recruiting, for several months, a young designer who had participated in this project. The slight trial-and-error experience in fact allowed for a reciprocal acculturation. Tempted in the beginning to entrust the designer with ergonomic research or graphic design, the IOT had come to better understand and formalize what the designer's actual role could be. For the designer, this experience held educational value: understanding the inner workings of government administration. However, in the eyes of some IOT members, internalizing these kinds of skills appeared to be "complicated"[7]. In DépartementAlpha, a deliberate practice of design acculturation was observed through an initial project (the MDPH), which was carried out with the help of external service providers, in order to better understand the specific skills of the designer. This initial experience played a founding role in the constitution of the IOT. By following the service provider, the IOT discovered the design profession, in addition to the designer's capacity to produce and represent complex ideas in visual forms. More than just the work methods or the content of deliverables, it was their form that would constitute the added value of design. This acknowledgement reassured the team that it was a good idea to recruit a designer internally, which it did at the end of 2012. Since then, other positions have been created (a specialist in management processes for example), indicating that the DGS's doctrine seeks to hybridize methods. Behind these various ways of internalizing design skills, lie the equally diverse conceptions of design.

5.2. Towards the metabolization of design by the organization

What follows is what we call the metabolization of design methods, which translates as the customized use of these processes by each structure. In all three cases service design is, however, primarily viewed as a technique – among others – for transforming public services, without questioning *a priori* the political significance of this transformation.

In DépartementAlpha, in terms of its aims, the public services design was based on object design, as the goal was to make public services more accessible, understandable and useful, and less costly. This

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[7] In fact, a designer was finally hired in 2016.

pragmatic, even utilitarian, view of design led to a fragmented use of the methods. Some "building blocks" taken from service design methods were included in the project's terms of reference, such as immersion, co-design, prototyping, testing and experimentation. However, neither their agencing nor the meaning attributed to these concepts was strictly defined. In EtatGamma the same process is observed and yet different approaches co-exist; thus, a single project can call upon both design and *nudge* methods. In the communication documents, the methods presented are a somewhat motley list: immersion, residence, rapid prototyping, co-design, *nudge*, listening to users, ethnography. There appears to be a great deal of plasticity here in the conception of design. Furthermore, the term is not used, as only certain design practices have been taken on, such as immersion-prototyping.

Within RégionBeta, the processes encouraged by La 27e Région and IDEO structure the conception of design and its use. Because of the modes of design acculturation experienced by agents and their professional trajectories, they were cautious about other conceptions of design and the *bricolage* methodologies that the Proxi service providers proposed to them. They appeared to have clear expectations in terms of the deliverables, while at the same time expressing these expectations in a way that on the whole was deemed quite unclear. The absorption of design in this case did not appear to lead to its metabolization, in the sense that the administration had trouble adopting the design processes and making them its own, and, concerned with doing a good job, established a doctrine on the practices it had received training in. This unsuccessful metabolization, a source of ambiguity, misunderstanding and disappointment would reveal its limitations during the Proxi project, the first study for which RégionBeta used an external service provider. Two controversial subjects become apparent, revealing recurring confusion about design. The first concerned the status of designer attributed to this service provider. We had identified him during the initial phase of our research aimed at mapping out organizational structures that proposed "design" services to public actors. In our view, the approach taken by this person seems to come under a design-based application, anchored as it was in the social and human sciences, the *bricolage* of tools and intermediary objects, and in direct connection with specific artistic worlds. Yet the stakeholders at Proxi (whether they were contracting authorities or members of the service providers group) did not identify the contributor as being a designer. This confusion went on to fuel the disagreement between the parties involved, concerning the expectations and the proposed deliverables, as well as the methods employed.

A second subject of misunderstanding concerned the notion of a prototype. When it came to drafting the terms of reference, the RégionBeta agent had no previous experience on which to base his work. He expressed the expectations with terms like "prototypes presented in narrative form" which proved to be a source of confusion. As for the service provider, confronted with a demand that was just as unclear in terms of the content ("the issue of proximity"), as it was on the deliverables, he believed that his job consisted in reformulating and clarifying the demand. He saw the prototype as an intermediary object (Vinck, 1999) that enabled the translation between the various opposing points of view. Conversely, for the contracting authority, the prototype was a tangible object that could be

tested or narrated in detail in order to describe its use and the conditions of its implementation. The same ambiguities can be observed in other contexts and the notion of "prototype" appears to be an issue of debate. Our intention is not to enter into this debate but rather, in the case of RégionBeta, to highlight the difficulties that, in our understanding, resulted from this unsuccessful metabolization of the conceptions of design.

5.3. Enrolling actors

The metabolization of design carried out by the three structures can be seen as a tactic for enrolling actors (Akrich *et al.*, 1988) around new methodologies in public policy. The order to innovate, which is rarely defined, produces an unclear image that allows various actors, elected representatives and especially managers to project their own expectations and objectives onto the process.
Presented as seeking efficiency in public services, by placing the user at the centre, these processes are met by the adherence of elected representatives confronted with the expression of new democratic and citizen-oriented expectations. Rethinking public services by placing users at the centre is a point of convergence with service design, as Alain Findeli has also noted. According to him, while the cultures of the design world and the administrative world differ substantially, these worlds do come together on one issue: a concern for the well-being of those targeted by their policy and for the general well-being of the public (Findeli, 2013). In illustrating this tropism towards the user, we note that the themes of the projects run by the three IOTs were not chosen by accident. Of course, the various projects tested fell within the scope of the skills maintained by the various departmental, regional and national structures. We are therefore not surprised that the projects of DépartementAlpha are notably based on issues related to sanitation and social policy. However, it is also evident that in the majority of the projects, notably those carried out at the beginning of the IOT's existence, the problem put forward was related to the reception of users, in other words the administration's user relations. This aspect is however not quite so simple for all the territorial levels, as the case study of RégionBeta illustrates. The Proxi study, initiated through a political order launched by the first vice-president of RégionBeta, thus set out to clarify their users' expectations, needs and practices in relation to the Region's services. Expressed in terms of proximity, the issue may appear obscure at first, because the policies of the Region are more often than not implemented by other operators (in terms of transport, education, etc.). But it is actually vital for the Region, which seeks in particular to increase the clarity of its action for its citizens. The expected outcomes of the Proxi study appeared to be unclear. Was it a matter of proposing outlines for new services or interfaces between the Region and users? Or was it a question of reconsidering the existing relations between the local authorities and citizens and, in doing so, also reviewing the institution's identity? The author of the terms of reference himself testified to the difficulty he experienced in understanding the political order, explaining how it was necessary to send numerous revisions back and forth in order to end up with a version approved by all: himself, the

DGS and the public procurement service. For the service providers, the timely coincidence of the study with the electoral calendar suggested that their mission was in fact intended to inform the reflection of the vice-president and future candidate.

This example illustrates a secondary enrolment, that of the directors. Placing the user at the centre obscures one of the issues (or is it an effect) of these new methods, which concerns the organization itself. Design (or as it is displayed) seemed to be a way of involving staff members in processes that, without any prior assertion, resulted in reviewing, even restructuring, of the services' organization. This can be viewed as a method for "driving change", in consultancy jargon, which is of interest to the various managers whom we met. In this respect, the interest shown by the DGS of RégionBeta in design processes was hardly a mere curiosity. Upon his arrival, he had initiated his managerial project around an investigation into the office of the future, exploring both the notion of a workplace and the organization of work, for which he enlisted the IOT. As the bearer of a vision deemed unusual in public policy, during an initial meeting with the service providers he presented the Proxi study and the issue of proximity in terms of "client relations", which took the service providers by surprise, especially since they were not used to hearing this type of vocabulary within the realm of public authorities. Since the political leadership change, there was moreover a shift in the IOT's place within the organization of RégionBeta, which seems to support our managerial interpretation. Previously positioned under the direction of regional foresight studies, the IOT now appears under the aegis of the Secretariat General who is also responsible for HR, finances, internal auditing and procurement.

The same interpretation is found at DépartementAlpha, where several directors consider the design approach to be a management method that fosters adherence among agents and mobilizes their energy. For an executive, the advantage of these processes is "to show that by beginning with a series of small shifts, we can make things happen". Furthermore, these processes have the capacity to connect various actors together across a network, beyond institutional boundaries, and to allow translation between these actors, thus becoming leverage for inter-institutional coordination. Other clues tend to confirm that behind the design of *service* lies the design of *services* (administrative ones). Hence, one of the IOT's projects originated from a managerial issue pointing towards certain agents demonstrating a major sense of discomfort (work-related suffering). *In fine*, through these few empirical elements, we can see emerging the role played by design metabolization as carried out by the various IOTs in the interessment of different kinds of actors – elected representatives and administrative executives..

6. Conclusion

This article has afforded insight into the conditions in which public innovation can be institutionalized through design. We have endeavoured to show, in our three case studies, the modalities through which a design "stream", with ill-defined contours, was "metabolized" within administrative organizations

through the specific guise of Innovation-Oriented Teams. These three IOTs present differentiated institutional and organizational trajectories. Yet, more importantly, we have uncovered certain similarities, particularly related to the conditions of their emergence within the administration. The study of these three IOTs reveals a very plastic and instrumental conception of design. This plasticity enables these entities to respond to a variety of demands on behalf of various administrative divisions and elected representatives, to propose multi-disciplinary terms of reference, and to use only the elements of those methodologies considered to be most useful by actors. As a result, design is hereby shaped and enlisted in context, in such a way that it interests (Akrich *et al.*, 1988) the actors of the host organization and recruits a community of external allies, who go on to contribute towards legitimizing the IOT. On the subject at hand, we note that the process is visibly less advanced for RégionBeta, which is the most recently created IOT. It is at the cost of their plasticity that the three IOTs studied survive, become established and are able to pursue their project activities; with this going hand-in-hand with a certain organizational invisibility and a blurring of boundaries and missions. At this level, there seems to be an important difference between our three IOTs, all of which were semi-dissolved into the administrative body, and other more visible, autonomous, and circumscribed "labs" that have been the subject of previous academic research (Tonurist *et al.*, 2015). Are the IOTs that we analysed, which have only existed for a few years, a "primitive" form of these "labs"? Or will they instead be a long-term organizational form, hence an alternative to "labs", despite their common features?

That these three IOTs do not officially or explicitly take on the name "lab" may be a symptom leaning more towards the second option. In which case, it is our opinion that both these forms concretize a different positioning compared to the "inside-outside" alternative that is often put forward (Mulgan, 2014), aimed at questioning the "correct" level of exteriority that a structure responsible for public innovation should have in relation to administrations. For some, the idea of a "lab", along with its scientific connotations, conjures up the notion of experimentation that is disconnected from administrative practices and occasionally is largely indifferent towards concrete application, which can be a cause for concern. On the other hand, a "lab" can also be seen as vulnerable because it is too visible or too identifiable. The IOTs that we studied chose to dissolve their structure, to varying degrees, into the administrative organization in order to better diffuse the outcomes of the innovative principles that they yielded, and which they constructed and adapted "in action". This interpretation may be compared to the theses of some researchers who consider the adoption of innovation as an issue that is neglected in favour of its conception, and who maintain that: "an idea becomes great only by distorting itself when brought into contact with practice" (Alter, 2013). From that point of view, IOTs contribute more towards the hybridization of bureaucracies than towards their replacement (Gélédan, 2015). Like certain technical innovations, such as the diffusion of Edison's inventions (Hargadon and Douglas, 2001), this strategy allows them to enhance the legitimacy of a form of innovation that may well shift the institutional frameworks of public policy.

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