Panel T08-P11 Session 1

Doing Policy Design Differently: What Do Designers Do For Policy-Making?

Building a Networked Repository of Public Sector Design in Latin America

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Introduction

Design practices are becoming more widely acknowledged as useful instruments for handling challenging issues in the public sector. Yet, their use in Latin American public sector innovation units –and public administration at large– is still sparsely documented, hindering scholarly analysis and government learning. This study looks at the state of the art and networks of design practices in Latin America intending to respond to the following query: how is design being used in Latin American public sector innovation units? Despite its potential to promote data-oriented, user-centric and/or participatory policymaking, our hypothesis suggests that the work of these innovation units is continuously at risk of being disregarded since their influence is frequently limited by electoral cycles and changing political agendas.

Our multi-step methodology focuses on shedding light on the unit's practical contributions, and improving documentation on their work. Through the creation of a public repository with data to scaffold further research,we look at promoting the understanding between real-world implementations and theoretical frameworks. To provide thorough coverage of the subject matter's research territory, a multilingual literature review examines academic and gray literature in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and French using a custom Python script, with the support of analysis tools such as ChatGPT AI. This streamlined process supports the analysis of the literature by increasing the volume of documents analyzed and enabling feasible multilingual analysis. Moreover, identifying and engaging relevant players in specific Latin American countries will come next to learn more about people, projects, and innovation units identified through the literature review. The summation of the literature review and interviews will feed the public data repository, which will include a visual network map.

By offering up-to-date perspectives on how design for policy approaches are implemented in Latin American policymaking processes, this work directly responds to the panel's inquiries. It draws attention to issues like inconsistent documentation and innovation units'

susceptibility to outside influences, such as international funding or political leadership changes. Additionally, it offers a set of practical suggestions for getting around some of these obstacles, such as encouraging closer cooperation between practice and academic research and safeguarding institutional memory through systematic documentation, supported by the repository. Our findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how design for policy practices have been contextualized and adapted to the Latin American context.

The Landscape of Design for Public Innovation

In the past three decades, technologies and products developed through a design thinking and human-centered design lens have aimed to reframe decision-making processes to create innovative products that respond to the needs of particular communities. The dissemination of design methodologies and methods has been an effective way for private businesses to reorient their products and services and respond to ever-growing, fast-paced markets. Design-informed innovation trends have gained traction in the public realm as extrapolations of methods developed for private business settings (Ramírez-Alujas, 2016), mainly in the management world with the adoption of the design thinking process (Hassi & Laakso, 2011). Most of these methodologies promise users a novel reading and a narrowed-down understanding of their interaction with digital platforms, products, and services. In recent years, the enhancement of individuals' experiences has been adopted by governments around the world. The design-informed innovation boom has arrived and has been picked up by public and social innovation (PSI) labs and innovation teams alike. This advent has been a turning point in how public policies, public services, and products are cultivated.

The formulation of policies has been framed under normative and informal actions that shape citizens' everyday lives. Governments have created siloed institutions to address the challenges of specific disciplinary topics. To do so, regulatory frameworks that follow a series of formal procedures respond to the relationship between public institutions and citizens. Some of these policies may respond to new laws and regulations, while others may respond to political agendas. In the second case, informal policies are developed, usually soft policies

that address the everyday operational procedures of ministries and public institutions. Within these areas, policies can become visible or invisible to citizens.

According to Rodríguez Álvarez and Chisnell, design methodologies and methods have become more prevalent in policymaking, moving "upstream in the policy process" (2021). Design is not utilized only for implementation and public service delivery or user experience and user interface (UX/UI) practices. It is also employed in framing issues and approaching complexity: "Rather than being brought in only at the implementation stage, designers and design practices have been active in rulemaking and in problem definition" (Rodriguez Alvarez & Chisnell, 2021). Junginger claims the design process has been used implicitly and tacitly downstream of the policy process; by elevating the position of design as an aid to frame problematic situations, it also brings to the table another disciplinary mindset that can generate little-explored possibilities or the rearrangement of existing assets. It can trigger innovation (Junginger, 2016, p. 137). For Junginger, "Policy implementation depends on the design of products and services. Policymaking, in its essence, constitutes a design activity" (2013, p. 2).

The genealogy of public and social innovation labs (PSI labs), policy innovation labs (PILs), innovation labs (i-labs), and government innovation spaces is not clearly defined (Gofen & Golan, 2020; Wellstead et al., 2021). Innovation scholar Kyriaki Papageorgiou created a broad yearly genealogy for some emblematic labs (2017). The definition and implementation of the work that these spaces have facilitated is a current topic of investigation and interest by researchers in different latitudes of our globe: an Anglo-European perspective focusing on labs present in Europe and the United States (Gofen & Golan, 2020; Kimbell, 2015; Rodríguez, 2018; Whicher, 2021), the Asia-Pacific region (Lee & Ma, 2020; Lewis, 2021), Latin America (Ferreira & Botero, 2020; Werneck et al., 2020), and looking at PILs in more general terms (Fuglsang et al., 2021; Kieboom, 2014; Lember & Tõnurist, 2015; J. Lewis et al., 2019; Mcgann et al., 2018; Villa Alvarez et.al, 2022; Wellstead et al., 2021).

Public Value Creation Through Innovation

According to Cels, De Jong, and Nauta (2012), social innovation for public issues can arise at the intersection of cultural and infrastructural sustainment with clear outputs. The authors build on the work of Mark Moore, the author of Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government (1997), where he characterizes the sustainment of public innovation through three "interrelated challenges that face an innovative individual in the public sector" (Cels et al., 2012, p. 13). The first considers stakeholders as "authorizers" of the process and results. Without their buy-in or at least minimal tolerance to the changes proposed, the product or process will be considered illegitimate (2012, p. 14). Second, the capacity to support the proposed innovation in tangible and intangible infrastructure and maintenance is of utmost importance. Without this, it is impossible for innovation intrapreneurs—those working within the organization with an entrepreneurial mindset—to ground the proposal: "Part of their challenge, then, is to figure out how they can creatively obtain and combine resources" (2012, p. 15). In the book Agents of Change: Strategy and Tactics for Social Innovation, social innovation expert Sanderijn Cels and co-authors referred to that dynamic as a "Public Value Proposition" (2012, p. 15) based on the work of management scholar Mark Moore. Therefore, innovation involves developing some new proposition and the storytelling required to narrate a compelling story to key actors in order to gain their support.

The points mentioned above tap into creating social or public value, where economic or market benefits are not the primary goal but rather the achievement of individual and collective wellbeing (Mintrom & Luetjens, 2017; Moore, 2013). Public value becomes a space of contention as it can be interpreted or distorted in many ways, depending on power dynamics and relationships among authorizing stakeholders and authorizing environments. Moreover, Zurbriggen and González Lago determined that public value is connected to co-creation as a form of producing social networks and found three main characteristics: 1) ample stakeholder participation, 2) new forms of knowledge generation, and 3) alternative processes, which, depending on the case, may be design-driven (2015). How public and

social innovation is carried out becomes critical to determining its results. Cels and co-authors (2012) determined three spaces for innovation: frontline, governance, and process. Characteristic of these spaces is that design always has a pivotal role.

The stakes of these labs or innovation spaces are essential as they have become bastions of the "otherwise" in the New Public Governance framework. In these spaces, different stakeholders can be brought together through design-led processes. They are the spaces where the exploration of other possibilities for our public institutions is being piloted.

As Gofen and Golan have pointed out, for European labs "there is no clear criteria to determine which organizations are considered PILs" (2020, p. 2). Innovation and governance scholars Veiko Lember and Piret Tõnurist echo this, stating "there is almost no systematic academic overview of these organizations" (2015, p. 2). Anna Whicher confirms most recently that "There is no data on what proportion of these Labs use design methods or what proportion use design methods for policymaking" (2021, pp. 3–4). Some labs work at a higher regulatory level, while others operate downstream of policymaking in the implementation section. Looking at commonalities or differences in financing models or dependency on public institutions has also been explored but becomes specific and anecdotal rather than an encompassing variable. The classification of these spaces seems futile as they exist worldwide in the hundreds. In the future, once there exists a breadth of practice and, above all, observable results and life cycle patterns (Werneck et al., 2020), that endeavor will be useful to the research community.

A common characteristic that most labs and innovation spaces share is centering the user or citizen through open or collaborative processes (Lember & Tõnurist, 2015; Mulgan, 2014). Christian Bason (2013) argues the boundaries of these spaces do not rely on their commonalities but rather on how they address challenges: becoming "authorizing environments" by rooting themselves as legitimate spaces within the policy-creation and implementation infrastructure that can propose other forms of undertaking complex societal issues; "opening bureaucracy to co-production" by being citizen-centered and having a

value-oriented approach defined by a collaboration of different stakeholders; and "building and accessing capacity" by recruiting and retaining the correct profiles with design-informed capacities.

Labs in Latin America

In 2013 in Mexico City, LabCDMX considered itself as the first lab in Latin America, in a megalopolis, and in the Global South (LabCDMX, 2018). However, when and how to consider government innovation-oriented spaces, the "first ones" are historically relative through the contextualization of economic development, political agendas, and design programs in Latin America.

The work of design researchers María Ferreira and Andrea Botero (2020) has been pivotal in the delineation of the development of Latin American PSI labs, PILs, and innovation offices. According to their research, these labs and innovation spaces face a buy-in barrier where their pilots, proposals, or outcomes may be blocked by authorizing stakeholders. Another issue is the labs' regulatory capabilities, their legal attributions, budgetary constraints, lack of institutionalization, and alignment with political agendas (2020, pp. 8–10).

Therefore, it is crucial to consider Latin America a shifting space where adaptability and reconfiguration seem to be the main parameters for action. It is a territory where contextuality and groundedness are imperative parameters to understand the way terms such as "innovation," "design," and "design methods" are being understood, developed, or utilized. Thus, this literature review aims to comprehend policymaking and implementation from a design perspective as an opportunity to respond to a shifting public institutional landscape.

The Limits of Labs

Due to the non-embedded nature of the labs in Latin American governments and public institutions, generating long-term impact has become nearly impossible. The operation of

labs could be thought of as an acupuncture practice (Irwin & Kossoff, 2021) with a set of precise and distinct interventions in a larger system that can heal or improve it in the long term. For labs to enact projects as acupuncturists, they require the buy-in of authorizing stakeholders that will allow for the intervention to happen. PSI labs also need to become an authorizing environment, gaining legitimacy among the existing bureaucratic structure. A symbiosis between legitimate stakeholders and environments and the acupunctural practice, as a sort of micro-activism, is needed for labs to develop projects.

Beyond the operational parameters, their field of action has led them to what Marlieke Kieboom identifies as "four omissions" in their work, which can be linked to the velocity of work in the public realm, power dynamics, and the actual power of micro-activism. Kieboom recognizes: 1) the "solutionism trap," where technocratic solutions are the aim of the projects; 2) the "political blind spot," a depoliticization and self-described neutrality of their work; 3) the "dictatorship of scale," the belief that by prototyping small and scaling it afterward, systemic change will be achieved; and finally 4) the "human post-it celebration," the assumption that all stakeholders will want to happily cooperate in co-design exercises (2014, pp. 21–32).

The closure of some of the most emblematic labs in the past couple of years (Guay, 2019) reveals that a lack of political buy-in or an excess of buy-in from a particular political group may be euthanizing these spaces. Labs need to find the balance between propelling non-traditional methods in public administration and responding to the political agendas that have opened the space for them in the first place.

The Role of Designers

As PSI labs have gained popularity, new openings and gaps have been created in the public workforce for designers to intervene in territories previously considered out of reach for the creative industries (Acevedo & Dassen, 2016; UNDP & FutureGov, 2017) and reserved for a disciplinary niche focused on administration, economics, and political science. In 2014, the UNDP's Global Center for Public Service Excellence (GCPSE), supported by the Government of

Singapore, published reports on using social innovation and design thinking as guides for public service excellence (Allio, 2014; Tucker, 2014). Furthermore, although the presence of designers in government settings is slowly growing, it is still rare for trained designers to play a significant role beyond developing a beautifying or communication component (Amatullo et al., 2017). Nevertheless, design has much to contribute to political discourse itself.

Many of the practicing designers interviewed for the LEAP Dialogues edited by design scholars and practitioners Mariana Amatullo, Bryan Boyer, Liz Danzico, and Andrew Shea (2017) distinguish that the role of designers in social innovation will evolve rapidly. Tony Fry, a contemporary design theorist and philosopher, identifies this trend too, yet he makes the political essence of this role a core component. As designers are makers and re-makers, he notes an area where they will, can, and must have an impact: the redesign of "political things (practices and material relations) that constitute the everyday" (Fry, 2010, p. 104). This will entail a critically conscious ongoing culture of learning (Freire, 2005; Fry, 2010), which allows for reinvention and a leap towards a more equitable and sustainable future: "Design as politics is not just another issue to add onto the existing political agenda; rather it is a politics in its own right with the potential to transform the nature of political action" (Fry, 2010, p. 101).

Innovation, Design-Informed Innovation, and Designing for Social Innovation

As innovation spaces within governments have integrated design-informed practices to create services, processes, or capabilities, it is relevant to describe the nuances between the terms innovation and design-led social innovation. The distinction between these three areas of practice is pertinent as they are often used interchangeably or conflated, although their distinct characteristics and territories shape their area of practice and their desired outputs. By delineating their meaning, we can draw a specific topography of the type of work developed within innovation offices and laboratories in government.

In all three areas, innovation is materialized and becomes tangible through design. In order to pinpoint the role designers may play or how they could contribute, Junginger notes that

"the design of services does not begin at the implementation stage. The design of services starts at the policymaking stage because policies effectively establish the criteria and the framework that make specific products and services possible. Policymaking and policy implementation, therefore, pose fundamental and connected design problems and are not disconnected design activities" (2013, pp. 4–5). There is an underlying systemic nature to the design process in the public sector (Drew et al., 2021, pp. 47–52), which is why the following categories should be understood as interconnected and nested.

Frontline Innovation / Design for Policy-Implementation

This situation is the most practice-driven of the three and is a space where interaction and service design may play an important role. This is where the public realm's everyday operations are approached, shifting the relationship between providers and users. This means the creation of novel or unconventional touchpoints for citizens and frontline workers alike.

Innovation in Governance / Design for Policy Accountability

Accountability to citizens in the public realm is important for a healthy democracy and the proper administration of public resources. There is the ethical imperative of how public finances are used and the facilitation of processes and organizational structures that will support everyday wellbeing, ensuring the fulfillment of basic needs and stewarding future impacts. A reimagination of current organizational and institutional structures at different scales seems pivotal for alternative governance schemes.

Innovation in Process / Design for Policy

Formal (regulatory) or informal (procedural) policies require a more extensive understanding of the impact and implications of their creation. A certain legitimacy from multiple key actors and the corresponding operational sustainment is required. Designers in this space, trained in a systemic understanding of complex social problems, can aid in creating the policy from a

human and non-human-centered perspective. A holistic approach to policymaking processes can be the starting point for transdisciplinary collaboration.

Design and innovation are overlapping epistemic territories that have built the ground on which innovation laboratories are developed within governments worldwide. The nuances and distinctions between innovation, design-informed innovation, and design for social innovation create practice and conceptual boundaries.

Table 01: Conceptual boundaries of innovation, design-informed innovation and design for social innovation.

Term	Focus	Role of Designers	Example Role	Transformative Level
Innovation *Novel improvement*	Operational/Service	Optional/Minimal	Tech upgrade in government services	**Operational** – changes delivery, but not structure.
Design-Informed Innovation *Innovation using design thinking*	Experience/System	Supporting role	Prototyping a new permit system	**Tactical/Systemic** – starts affecting structures and relationships, but usually still within institutional constraints.
Designing for Social Innovation *Design for societal transformation*	Structural/Systematic	Central role	Co-designing policies with communities	**Strategic/Structural** – transformative of both institutional logics and political relationships.

As different geographic regions are challenged by their contextual complexities and problems, modern PSI labs, first developed within North American and European environments, have been replicated in other world regions. Labs have been imported/exported to Latin America with an ever more intrinsically connected world. However, the particularities in the policy development process of the region pose barriers to spaces that require a particular aperture and bridge-building between public institutions.

Methodology

Research Approach

This research employs a multilingual systematic literature review to document and analyze design practices in Latin American public sector innovation units. By leveraging computational tools to process a larger volume of documents across multiple languages, we provide a comprehensive analysis of both academic and gray literature. This methodological approach addresses the central research question: How is design being used in Latin American public sector innovation units?

Literature Review Process

Our methodology comprises four structured phases that systematically identify, filter, and analyze relevant literature:

Phase 1: Multilingual Keyword Definition

The objective of the first phase was to identify keywords that relate to public sector innovation units in Latin America. A comprehensive keyword framework spanning four languages (English, Spanish, Portuguese, and French) was developed to capture the full spectrum of literature on public sector innovation in Latin America. The keywords include variations of terms such as "innovation labs," "policy labs," and "public sector innovation units" across all target languages. To ensure conceptual and contextual relevance, these terms underwent validation by native-speaking design practitioners actively working in Latin American contexts. The final list, shown in table 02, contained 7 terms in English, 11 in Spanish and Portuguese each and 6 in French, for a total of 35 keywords.

Table 02: List of keywords used per language

	English	Spanish	French	Portuguese
1	innovation labs	laboratorios de innovación	labs d'innovation	laboratórios de inovação
2	public sector innovation labs	laboratorios de innovación en el sector público	laboratoires d'innovation	laboratórios de inovação do setor público
3	policy labs	laboratorios de innovación pública	laboratoires d'innovation publique	laboratórios de inovação pública
4	public innovation labs	laboratorios de innovación gubernamental	laboratoires d'innovation du secteur public	laboratórios de inovação em governo
5	government innovation labs	unidades de innovación	labs publics	laboratórios de inovação governamental
6	innovation teams	unidades de innovación en el sector público	équipes d'innovation	laboratórios de políticas públicas
7	public sector innovation units	unidades de innovación pública		equipes de inovação
8		unidades de innovación gubernamental		unidades de inovação do setor público
9		laboratorios de políticas públicas		unidades de inovação governamental
10		equipos de innovación pública		núcleos de inovação pública
11		laboratorios de gobierno		escritórios de inovação

Phase 2: Data Collection and Selection Process

The second phase employed a systematic approach using the 35 multilingual keywords to conduct automated searches in Google Scholar. A Python script was configured to access language-specific URLs, ensuring a comprehensive coverage across linguistic domains. A three-stage filtering and selection process was implemented as follows:

1. Initial Collection: Automated extraction of the first 20 search results per keyword from Google Scholar across all four languages, yielding 700 potential documents.

2. Automated Filtering: Computational screening of documents for relevance based on the presence of both "public sector" terminology and references to Latin American countries, reducing the corpus to 224 documents (32% of initial pool).
3. Manual Validation: Review of remaining documents to verify substantive content relevance rather than marginal mentions (i.e. , resulting in a final selection of 106 documents (15% of initial pool) for in-depth analysis.

Table 03: Summary of number of articles after each step of the selection process

		English	Spanish	Portuguese	French	Total
	Number of keywords	7	11	11	6	35
Step	Process					
01	Google Scholar Automatic Search & PDF collection	140	220	220	120	700
02	Automatic PDF Filtering	60	82	64	18	224
03	Manual Validation & Final Selection	11	49	44	2	106

The distribution of relevant literature varied significantly by language: Spanish (49 documents) and Portuguese (44 documents) yielded the most relevant results, followed by English (11 documents) and French (2 documents). This pattern highlights the importance of including main Latin American languages in research on Latin American.

Phase 3: AI-Enhanced Content Analysis

Selected documents underwent analysis using Large Language Model tools (ChatGPT), enabling efficient processing of multilingual texts at a scale that would be impractical through conventional methods. Our analysis employed structured prompts focused on four key dimensions:

- Identification of design projects and initiatives
- Organizational structures and collaborations

- Predominant themes and methodological approaches
- Country-specific contexts and applications

This technique allowed for systematic extraction of comparable data points across diverse linguistic and regional contexts. The following prompts were used to extract and scan information from the documents in the corresponding language:

Prompt English:

Hello! Please act as an academic researcher and conduct a literature review of the X files provided. Please respond in English and present the information in a table with the following contents:

- Source – Reference in APA format
- Title of the article
- Research objective
- Research method
- Participants or subjects of the research
- Countries of the participants
- Main conclusions

Prompt Spanish:

Hola! Por favor actúa como investigador/a académico/a y realiza una revisión de literatura de los 5 archivos que se le proporcionan. Por favor responda en ESPAÑOL y describa la información en una tabla con los siguientes contenidos:

- Fuente - Referencia en formato APA
- Título del artículo
- Objetivo de la investigación
- Método de la investigación
- Países de los participantes
- Principales conclusiones

Prompt Portuguese:

Olá! Por favor, desempenhe um papel de um pesquisador acadêmico e conduza uma revisão da literatura dos arquivos X fornecidos. Por favor, responda em português e apresente as informações em uma tabela com o seguinte conteúdo:

- Fonte – Referência em formato APA
- Título do artigo
- Objetivo da pesquisa
- Método de pesquisa
- Participantes ou sujeitos da pesquisa
- Países dos participantes
- Principais conclusões

Prompt French:

Bonjour ! Veuillez agir en tant que chercheur académique et réaliser une revue de littérature des X fichiers fournis. Veuillez répondre en français et présenter les informations dans un tableau avec les contenus suivants :

- Source – Référence au format APA
- Titre de l'article
- Objectif de la recherche
- Méthode de recherche
- Participants ou sujets de la recherche
- Pays des participants
- Principales conclusions

Phase 4: Typological Classification and Network Mapping

Based on the analyzed literature, we developed a three-tiered taxonomy to systematically categorize:

1. Institutional Level: Formal organizational structures, governance models, and institutional relationships

2. Project Level: Specific design interventions, methodologies, and collaborative initiatives
3. Individual Level: Key practitioners, champions, and design professionals operating as influential nodes

This typological structure enables visualization of the networked relationships between actors, organizations, and projects across Latin American public sector design practice.

This technology-enhanced approach enables us to overcome traditional barriers of language and access to diverse literature sources, providing unprecedented insights into how design practices have been contextualized and adapted within Latin American public administration.

Discussion of Preliminary Findings

While English-language literature tends to provide comparative overviews of innovation labs across countries, Spanish-language sources are more likely to focus on specific case studies, offering richer contextual details. However, across all languages, the literature remains primarily anchored at the institutional level, offering limited insight into project-level dynamics or the roles of individual actors.

This creates notable gaps in understanding the dynamic networks that support and sustain innovation labs. The lack of documentation on key actors, collaborations, and specific design practices limits knowledge transfer and hinders the development of shared learning ecosystems. As a result, much of the learning in this field is informal and anecdotal, circulating primarily among peer communities rather than being captured in systematic or replicable ways. Furthermore, despite the diversity of innovation efforts across Latin America, documentation remains uneven, and successful practices are seldom scaled or sustained. Using Werneck and colleagues' lifecycle of labs (2020) to frame what we know about them, we observe the scarcity of literature on the full lifecycle of labs (founding, maturity, and closure), but especially on the maturity and closure, thereby limiting longitudinal analysis and institutional learning. The founding and initial projects of labs are the most reported on. Additionally, the literature often emphasizes formal structures and

efforts to establish legitimacy, such as alignment with political agendas or bureaucratic frameworks, over concrete outcomes, self- determined metrics of success or resident impact. Institutional memory remains fragile, frequently disrupted by political turnover and shifts in funding, further complicating the assessment of long-term impact and sustainability.

This pattern is especially evident when comparing documentation practices in Portuguese-language sources. The Brazilian literature presents a relatively cohesive vocabulary and internal coherence, for example in how it refers to labs, using terms such as *Laboratórios de Inovação Governamental* (LIGs) and *Laboratórios de Inovação Social* (SI-Labs) (Emmendoerfer, 2019; Olavo, 2022). These categories, although broad, enable an internally consistent body of literature that is often reinforced through recurring case studies such as 011Lab and Gnova, mostly. These labs are frequently documented with mention of organizational structure, staffing (for example reporting on typically having 6–10 people, occasionally including contract positions), and dissemination strategies such as books, mentorship programs, and open conversations and public events (Olavo, 2022, pp. 100–102). In this regard, researchers writing in Portuguese are exemplary in cultivating an internal documentation culture that helps make sense of the public innovation ecosystem and existence of Brazilian labs.

Institutional Level

At the institutional level, innovation units or labs in Latin America are usually positioned as organizational spaces that aim to challenge traditional bureaucratic norms while navigating complex constraints. They tend to emerge within or alongside state agencies, courts, or city governments, often with a semi-autonomous status. Institutions hosting these labs use them to test more agile, collaborate in different approaches to governance, strategic planning, and capacity-building. For example, iJuspLab, the innovation lab of the Federal Court of São Paulo in Brazil typifies how innovation units can operate within highly formalized public institutions like the judiciary. iJuspLab was intentionally created within a rigid judicial system to foster user-centered approaches, co-creation, and prototyping methods, providing an alternative from traditional top-down judicial management styles.

A common trend is the alignment of lab activities with broader public sector reforms, digital strategies, or modernization agendas. Several labs serve as intermediaries that translate user needs into actionable policies, often bridging gaps between sectors or departments. Moreover, institutional dynamics such as leadership turnover, political support, and access to funding heavily influence lab sustainability.

Project Level

We observe that the main focus remains on high-level institutional features, with minimal attention to the project-level dynamics or the nuanced, day-to-day work of designing for policy. However, from the accounts we found in the literature common themes include digital transformation of public services, health system improvements, citizen engagement, new forms of governance, urban inclusion, and transparency. Many projects focus on streamlining bureaucratic processes, such as online procedures or call center optimization, while others foster civic participation through co-creation, participatory budgeting, and open government initiatives. These literature reports labs often use approaches and methods like design thinking, design ethnography, agile prototyping, behavioral insights, and co-creation workshops to develop and test solutions in iterative cycles. A growing number are aligning their work with broader goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Design is employed not just as a method but as a strategic approach to reframing public policy problems, helping public institutions become more adaptive and inclusive. While the literature tends to flatten design practice into a list of methods without providing insight into how these methods are deployed, adapted, or contested in context. Facilitation, often cited as a core lab activity, is likewise treated as a procedural function rather than a political act that shapes the design space and mediates between stakeholders.

Across the literature, few accounts delve into how facilitation roles are formalized, how design teams navigate bureaucratic or political resistance, or how project outcomes evolve post-workshop. The invisibilization of practitioners, as individuals and as collectives, means that we lose sight of the epistemic labor involved in making design "fit" within the

institutional logics of Latin American public administration. This is particularly problematic in contexts where labs must continually negotiate their legitimacy, often with limited resources and under precarious governance conditions.

Individual Level

As mentioned before, specifics on what practitioners do within innovation units is under-reported. However, the literature gives us insight on the sort of profiles that operate in innovation labs. Framed as multidisciplinary individuals, the profiles documented reveal a strong presence of design practitioners, career public servants, and institutional innovators with backgrounds in technology and urban development. These actors often operate in hybrid roles, contributing both as authors of publications and as hands-on implementers. Their work reflects a growing recognition of the importance of intra-entrepreneurship, institutional learning, and design-based experimentation. The labs are described not only as places to develop new solutions, but also as sites for shaping mindsets and cultures of transformation, often emphasizing co-creation, public value, and user-centered perspectives as central to the ethos of the labs. Interviews and case studies in the literature underscore how individual motivations, like frustration with bureaucracy or commitment to social change, often drive the work of individuals in these labs.

Prevalent Gaps

While innovation labs proliferate across Latin America and continue to attract attention from governments, donors, and academia alike, their capacity for sustained transformation is hampered by these persistent documentation gaps. Without visibility into their internal operations and their embodied practices of negotiation, care, and improvisation, labs remain susceptible to being tokenized, used as symbols of progress without the supporting infrastructure to deliver on their transformative promise.

To address these gaps, the development of a public data repository emerges as a necessary intervention. The findings from our literature review form the foundation for a resource that enables:

- Cross-country comparisons of design approaches and methodologies
- Identification of knowledge gaps in current documentation
- Visualization of relationships between actors, institutions, and projects

The repository is structured to evolve alongside the field: it is designed to accommodate future data integration from planned stakeholder interviews, surveys, and collaborative contributions. By documenting at multiple levels, 1) the institutional, 2) project, and 3) individual, the repository invites a shift from occasional case studies to a living system of memory, reflexivity, and shared practice in the Latin American public sector and innovation landscape.

Limitations

We acknowledge several methodological limitations, particularly the uneven documentation practices across countries that may lead to disproportionate representation in our review. Some innovation spaces with significant practical impact may be underrepresented due to limited digital presence, language constraints, or informal knowledge circulation.

The dataset and review does not claim to be exhaustive but rather iterative and transparent in its development. Our methodology emphasizes clarity in sourcing, analytic methods, and the role of computational tools, including AI-assisted analysis, in managing large multilingual datasets. Ethical considerations also include sensitivity to how data on individuals and institutions is presented and the importance of safeguarding narratives that may be politically or institutionally vulnerable.

Conclusion

Design-led innovation in the public sector is no longer an emergent phenomenon but a widely circulated paradigm. Yet, in Latin America, its implementation remains fragmented, under-documented, and overly dependent on shifting political climates. This study responds

to the urgent need to record, contextualize, and connect design practices across innovation labs, institutional arrangements, and national borders.

By assembling a multilingual and typological structured repository, we seek not only to represent the work being done but to make visible the actors, methods, and informal infrastructures that sustain it. The repository is not an end but a starting point, an invitation to build a shared memory system for public design in Latin America. In doing so, it champions maintenance over novelty, care over disruption, and connection over fragmentation. Moreover, it highlights the importance of archival documentation.

In regions where innovation is often seen as a luxury and maintenance as survival, fostering networks of design-informed public work is both a pragmatic and political act. As we look forward, it is essential not just to celebrate the rise of innovation labs, but to ensure they are remembered, studied, and supported as sites of experimentation and as collective instruments of durable public transformation.

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