In Europe, design is attracting significant interest in governments at regional, national, and European levels as a driver of innovation in both private and public sectors. In 2013, the European Commission published its “Action Plan for Design-driven Innovation,” and between 2012 and 2015, it has invested more than €26 million ($27.5 million) in design initiatives. One of these initiatives was the SEE Platform (Sharing European Experience on Design Innovation Policy). SEE was a network of 11 European partners operating from 2005 to 2015 with the aim to accelerate the uptake of design in innovation policies and programs. Led by PDR, the International Design and Research Centre at Cardiff Metropolitan University, between 2012 and 2015 the SEE network facilitated 112 workshops using design methods for more than 1,000 policy-makers across Europe.¹ As a result of workshops, research, and advocacy, the SEE partners integrated design into 18 policies and 48 programs. SEE is highlighted in the European Commission’s Design Action Plan as a successful initiative for advancing the strategic understanding of design in government. At a national level, countries like Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, and Latvia also have design action plans, but in addition, 15 of the 28 member states of the European Union (EU) have included design in their national innovation policies. In this article, we share the results of the SEE Platform and propose some emerging trends in design and government across the EU.

**Design and government at the European level**

In 2010, for the first time, design was highlighted in the European Commission’s Innovation Union (a policy initiative of the Europe 2020 strategy for growth) for its transformative power in business, the public sector, and society:

> Design is of particular importance and is recognised as a key discipline and activity to bring ideas to the market, transforming them into user-friendly and appealing products. Although some European countries are world leaders in design, others lack a robust design infrastructure and design capability in companies and engineering schools. This systemic gap has largely gone unnoticed but must now be tackled.²

Consequently, in 2013, the European Commission launched its Action Plan for Design-driven Innovation, stating that “a more systematic use of design as a tool for user-centred and market-driven innovation in all sectors of the economy, complementary to R&D, would improve European competitiveness.”³

---

¹ [http://www.seeplatform.eu](http://www.seeplatform.eu)
The journey to integrating design into EU policy was instigated by the Bureau of European Design Associations (BEDA), a network of design centers and associations, which since 1969 has grown to around 50 members. There has been a snowball effect at the European level, which can be tracked across the following initiatives:

- 2007 meeting between BEDA representatives and the European Commission President
- 2008 review of the EU’s Broad-based Innovation Strategy
- 2009 consultation and staff working document on “Design as a Driver of User-centred Innovation”
- 2010 European Council’s commitment to design and design’s inclusion in Innovation Union
- 2012-2015 European Design Innovation Initiative involving six projects, including the SEE Platform
- 2013 European Commission Action Plan for Design-driven Innovation
- 2014-2017 Design for Europe platform
- 2015 Innobarometer study on companies’ use of design and the Design for Enterprises project
- 2016 launch of the EU Design Lab

The significance of having a political vision for design in Europe, as well as a series of implementation mechanisms, should not be underestimated. There is an ongoing paradigm shift, as design moves from the periphery of the debate on innovation towards the core of government strategy across Europe. Through a growing number of initiatives, the European Commission has made an unprecedented investment in design of more than €26 million ($27.5 million). The EU Design Action Plan encourages all EU countries and regions to develop such plans. Although governments may recognize the need for policy actions in design, the route to building effective design capabilities within a country is not necessarily clear—that’s one of the reasons the European Commission funded the SEE Platform. There is still much further to go before we realize the European Commission’s ambition that by 2020 design should be a well-known element of innovation policy across Europe. This raises the fundamental question of how governments can integrate design into innovation policy.

Data on design in Europe

A significant stumbling block in communicating design to government is the lack of data on companies’ use of design. One instrument is the well-known Design Maturity Ladder, which has become the reference framework for categorizing design use. It categorizes organizations according to four stages: 1) no systemic use of design; 2) design as styling; 3) design as process; and 4) design as strategy. Through

---

4 European Design Innovation Initiative (€4.8m), Design for Europe (€3.8m), and Design for Enterprises project (€2m), design services for EU Policy Lab (€0.3m), Embedding User-centred Innovation through Design CO-CREATION call (€4m) and Design-based consumer goods COSME call (€11.2m).

an EU study on innovation trends, for the first time data is available comparing how companies in different EU countries consider the role of design within their operations:

Figure 1: Innobarometer 2015
Innovation Trends in EU Enterprises

- More than six out of ten EU companies use design in some way, and 13 percent consider design to be a central element of their strategy.
- EU (13 percent) and US (14 percent) firms consider design to be a central element of business strategy. However, US companies are more likely to say design is not used (49 percent vs. 38 percent).
- Enterprises in the UK (22 percent) are among the most likely to say that design is central to business strategy. Slovenia (4 percent) and Latvia (5 percent) fall at the other end of the scale.
- Austrian (22 percent), Slovakian (17 percent), Portuguese (16 percent), and Italian (16 percent) firms are most likely to say that design is used as a finishing touch for styling.
- Overall, one quarter of companies say they do not use design at all; the highest rates in this category are in Estonia (66 percent), Italy (51 percent), Poland (46 percent), and Slovenia and Bulgaria (both 45 percent).
- The profile of a company that is most likely to invest in design is that of a manufacturing company with at least 50 employees and a turnover of above €2 million.
A correlation exists between the use of design and the age of the company. The older it is, the less likely it is to use design as a strategy or a process, and the more likely not to use it at all.6

These results support some long-held hypotheses by design stakeholders. The real value in these types of surveys, however, is in conducting regular data collection exercises to investigate changes over time. Given the increasing number of governments integrating design into policy, it will be intriguing to see if company attitudes towards design change over the next several years.

**Design and government at national and regional levels**

To examine the extent of design’s prevalence in policy across Europe, the SEE Platform developed the Design Policy Monitor. Its findings revealed that at the national level, not only do countries like Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France and Latvia have design action plans but in addition, 15 of the 28 European member states include design in their national policies. Take, for example, one of the most ambitious examples—the Irish government’s Action Plan for Jobs, which is targeted to:

- Create 1,800 new jobs in the design sector from 2015-2019
- Establish 200 new design companies
- Generate €10 million in design-related exports
- Support 300 companies to attend international trade missions7

When policy-makers develop innovation policy, it is based on an analysis of the innovation ecosystem. An innovation ecosystem is a theoretical construct used by government and academics to examine the interplay among actors in a network. A number of researchers have proposed developing design policy based on an analysis of the design ecosystem.8 Finland was the first country to adopt the concept of innovation systems to inform innovation policy, and it was also the first country to adopt the concept of design ecosystems to inform their design policy.9 In a series of workshops, SEE encouraged governments to analyze their design innovation ecosystems according to nine components:

---

Design can be an abstract concept for policy-makers to grasp, but by involving policy-making in hands-on workshops using design methods, they gained a tangible understanding of the added value of a design approach. As a result of SEE workshops, research and advocacy design features in national-level policies in Denmark, Estonia, Finland, and Greece, as well as at regional levels in Wales (UK), South Bohemia (Czech Republic), Greater Copenhagen (Denmark), Central Finland, Central Macedonia (Greece), Ljubljana Urban Region (Slovenia), and Malopolskie and Silesia (Poland). In addition to influencing 18 policies, SEE has been an impetus for the implementation of 48 new design programs providing mentoring and financing for design. Some examples include the SME Wallet (Flanders), Design Bulldozer (Estonia), Service Design Factory (Central Finland), Design for Dementia (Ireland), Design At Your Service (Silesia), and Design for Independent Living (Wales). For a Welsh Government policy-maker, “From SEE, the Welsh Government has recognised the economic importance of design and is financing a number of new programmes to enable companies to use design effectively.” For a representative of the Silesian Government, “Participation in SEE has changed our mind-set within the Silesian Government and we now put the citizens at the heart of new policy and programme development. We were also one of the first regional governments to employ designers as an approach to public service re-development.”

---

Emerging trends in design and government in Europe

Based on the experiences of the SEE Platform, we have identified a number of emerging trends in Europe for each component of the design innovation ecosystem:

**More companies than ever before will use design.** Since 2010, 27 companies that were co-founded by designers have been acquired by companies like Google, Facebook, Adobe, and Yahoo. Governments are recognizing these trends and seeking to stimulate increased use of design as a driver of innovation in products, processes, services, and systems. In 2015, 15 of the 28 EU countries explicitly highlighted design as a priority for innovation in enterprises.11

**More governments will develop specialized design support programs.** Design support programs are a policy instrument for improving the use of design through mentoring to mitigate the risk of companies using design for the first time. In 2015, 12 EU countries had a design support program in operation. However, the models are changing and becoming more specialized, focusing on specific sectors or a specific company profile (i.e., start-ups, high-tech, or high-export companies).

**Design promotion will be treated as a strategic investment.** Governments are making multimillion-euro investments in design promotion. The Finnish government, for instance, invested €18 million ($19 million) in Helsinki World Design Capital 2012, attracting 2.5 million visitors.14 The Irish government made a significant investment in the Year of Irish Design 2015 initiative, which reached an audience of 3 million people.15

**Design stakeholders will act as the link between the sector and government.** In Europe, 18 of the 28 EU countries have a national design center funded by government. Some countries also have multiple regional design centers. Many of these are members of the Bureau of European Design Associations (BEDA), which has created an ongoing dialogue between the design sector and EU government institutions.

**Design will be used by civil servants and politicians for policy development.** Design is gaining traction as an approach to public-service renewal, but design as a method for policy development is still nascent. However, there are opportunities for design to reinstate the legitimacy of public policy-making by involving citizens in jointly exploring political and legislative issues with politicians and civil servants. A major trend around the world is the rise of design labs in governments using design methods for service and policy development (for instance, the UK Policy Lab, the New York City Policy Lab, and Denmark’s

---

14 www.wdhelsinki2012.fi
15 www.irishdesign2015.ie
MindLab). It is estimated that there are more than 100 such labs around the world. The recently launched first project of the EU Policy Lab focuses on the future of industry.

Design will be integrated into mainstream innovation financing mechanisms. Funding is one of the prime policy instruments for government to incentivize companies’ use of design. Design is increasingly being integrated into mainstream innovation programs, such as subsidy, grant, voucher, and tax-credit schemes. On average, governments in Denmark, Estonia, Finland, and the UK spend 500 times more on supporting traditional research and development (R&D) than on design. However, between 2012 and 2014 in these four countries, government expenditure on design has increased by 34 percent, whereas public expenditure on R&D has only increased by 8 percent. It would seem that design is gaining increasing recognition as a driver of innovation.

Design skills will be included in job specifications for government officials. Creative problem-solving in collaboration with users is the core of design, and increasingly policy-makers are being required to have these skills. In 2015, the UK Government issued a contract to train civil servants in design methods. The concepts of design and policy are very closely intertwined; both are concerned with problem-solving and, ideally, involving users in solving those problems. An increasing number of designers are being employed in government, and increasingly government officials are being trained in design methods. The SEE Platform involved more than 1,000 policy-makers in 112 hands-on workshops using design methods.

Design research will intensify efforts to evidence the value of design. A growing number of EU governments are commissioning research to understand the impact of design in their country. In 2015, PDR worked with the Irish and Latvian governments to understand how companies use design. In Ireland, 70 percent of innovative firms used design within the last two years to develop new products and services. The UK Design Council conducted research that valued the “design economy” at £71.7 billion ($108.4 billion). This research is a vital part of the evidence base for government to justify design policy intervention.

Designers will become policy-makers, and policy-makers will become designers. With the rise of policy labs using design, there is an opportunity for government labs to sell design expertise to other governments. For example, if the UK Government Digital Service were ever to spin out as a private entity, with 200 staff, it would be the largest design consultancy in the world. However, with this new spotlight on design, there is a question as to whether the professional design sector is up to the challenge of dealing with complex public-sector challenges.

---

17 www.nesta.org.uk/event/labworks-2015-global-lab-gathering-london
18 https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/communities/community/eu-policy-lab-future-industry
Conclusion

Design is gaining traction at multiple levels of governance across Europe as a driver of innovation in enterprises, the public sector, and society. Since design’s inclusion in the Innovation Union in 2010, the landscape for design in Europe has changed dramatically. With the increased interest in design at multiple levels of governance across the EU, there is an opportunity to strengthen the performance of the design innovation ecosystem for the whole of Europe.

The SEE Platform has identified a number of emerging trends that indicate that by 2020, we could indeed see more widespread use of design within the public sector as well as in policy and businesses. At all levels across Europe, governments are not only making stronger provisions for design in policies, but also establishing multidisciplinary innovation teams such as policy labs using design methods to increase citizen participation in policy processes. Large companies in all sectors are recognizing the value of design as a tool that helps them work better and therefore are building up their design capabilities. Design support programs targeted at SMEs are addressing systemic failures that can hamper their greater investment in design. The Innobarometer survey revealed that although 13 percent of EU companies consider design as integral to company strategy, 55 percent still do not use design at all.

Dynamic changes in the design policy field pose a number of challenges for the professional design sector as well as for design education and research. More needs to be done to capture the economic and social value of design, as the data is still limited and fragmented. There is a major opportunity for academic research to drive policy practice, both in terms of integrating design into policy and in using design for policy-making. As more countries and companies recognize the contribution of design to innovation, it can be surmised that the expenditures on design will increase. As such, design education and the design sector must be ready to meet the new demand.

We will continue to monitor design policy developments in Europe, and to support governments in building design capabilities.