

Editorial – Disciplinary maturity in legal design

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When we established this Journal in 2024, we did so with a clear and ambitious purpose: to create a dedicated platform for rigorous, high-quality legal design research and scholarship. If you are reading this you probably already know that legal design is no longer an emergent curiosity at the margins of law and design; it is becoming a discipline with its own conceptual foundations, methodological debates, and diverse communities of practice. Yet, as we discovered when we examined the research landscape in the early part of this decade, its outputs were scattered, ephemeral, or simplified for non-specialist audiences. Our aim was to build a scholarly venue where legal design could be interrogated critically and constructively, and where researchers, practitioners, educators and students could share work that advances the field's intellectual and practical horizons.

The “we” behind this vision was a developmental working group of legal design academics and practitioners, people who recognised the need for an independent and academically serious forum. Our editorial board reflects that same ethos of interdisciplinarity and openness. The Journal has received generous financial and technical support from Lancaster University, the NuLawLab at Northeastern University, *Astrid Kohlmeier / Legal Design*, and a community of individuals who believed in the value of this undertaking. Their contributions, together with the volunteer labour of the entire collective, have made it possible for the Journal to be *diamond open-access*. This point matters. Like so many scholarly journals, ours is powered by unpaid time and care carved out from already demanding professional lives. But unlike many, the benefits of this labour do not accrue to a commercial publisher’s bottom line. Every hour donated here goes directly into strengthening the legal design movement: increasing access to research, democratising knowledge, and supporting methodologies that are reshaping legal systems and services across the globe.

With the publication of our first two volumes, we can see that this vision is taking shape. The current issue gathers seven scholarly articles and four practice-oriented case studies curated by our Studio section. Together, they demonstrate the intellectual breadth, methodological maturity, and social purpose increasingly characteristic of legal design research. We extend our sincere thanks to every author who has chosen to publish with us. Contributing to a new journal requires a certain act of faith, particularly one that is at the start of a journey towards impact scores, citation rankings, and index listings. We are working diligently to secure those recognitions, and history suggests that such indicators can develop quickly. Many high-impact academic journals were founded within the last two decades. Even so, we do not take lightly the trust our contributors have placed in us, and we are committed to ensuring that this journal has a sustained and successful future.

A notable feature of this issue is the diversity of its contributors. We publish work co-authored by established professors of law and design, by legal design consultants collaborating with legal

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theorists, by practitioners from global law firms, by interdisciplinary research teams, and by postgraduate students working alongside senior academics. The authors come from a rich array of professional backgrounds, national contexts, and academic traditions. This diversity is not incidental. It is evidence of a field whose strength lies in the convergence of multiple forms of expertise. Legal design thrives when lawyers, designers, technologists, policy researchers, and community advocates work together. The contributions in this volume exemplify that collaborative ethic.

A Sign of Disciplinary Maturity

One of the most striking features of these articles is the methodological and conceptual maturity they display. In non-specialist publications, legal design authors often feel obliged to defend the very existence of the discipline: to explain what it is, why it matters, and how it differs from design thinking, plain-language drafting, or legal service innovation. Here, that work is no longer necessary. Our contributors debate the meaning, scope, and purpose of legal design not from a position of justification, but from a position of reflection and critique. That signals an important moment in the field's evolution.

Several of the articles draw explicitly on canonical and emerging strands of design research theory, bringing them into dialogue with jurisprudential concepts and legal system dynamics. This reinforces a key premise of this Journal: legal design is not simply a set of tools, but a practically applied research discipline grounded in theory, evidence, and design reasoning.

Common Themes

What unites the seven scholarly contributions in this volume? Three broad themes stand out: (1) the institutionalisation of legal design within public and legal systems; (2) the need for conceptual and evaluative frameworks that articulate legal design's place within legal theory and practice; and (3) the pedagogical transformation of legal education, professional formation, and public empowerment.

1. Institutional Innovation and Public Futures

Gianni Sinni's article, *Public Futures: Data, Rights, Design*, explores the integration of visual communication design into public-sector innovation. Through a teaching experiment involving Italian public administrations, Sinni illustrates how speculative design can function as a method for anticipatory governance using narrative and visualisation tools to explore the implications of policy decisions before they unfold. His contribution foregrounds an important institutional and methodological question: How do we prepare designers to work effectively within regulatory systems? The article proposes a replicable methodological model for educating public-sector designers and embedding speculative narratives into governance processes. This casts legal design not simply as service improvement, but as a mode of institutional foresight.

2. Building Theoretical Foundations and Evaluative Frameworks

Two articles address directly the conceptual core of legal design as a discipline.

In *Legal Design and Effectiveness: The Quest for a Theoretical Grounding for Legal Innovation*, Ana Sofia Roa-Chica and Juan Pablo Carbonell-Muñoz examine legal design's relationship to a foundational concept in jurisprudence: the effectiveness of law. Legal design, they contend, offers methodological resources (empirical, participatory, and iterative) that are relevant to assessing and enhancing the effectiveness of legal sources, from statutes to policies to institutional programs. They place legal design within a long tradition of legal theory, from legal realism through to modern

branches of this philosophical approach such as Empirical Legal Studies and New Legal Empiricism. There is a connection to the first theme of institutional innovation and governance in their application of legal design methods, seen as a form of new legal empiricism, to effectiveness evaluations of regulatory interventions on issues such as road safety.

Complementing this, Glen Byrne's article, *An Evaluative Framework for Legal Design Outcomes*, develops a structured evaluative framework for legal design outcomes. Byrne distinguishes between methodological understandings of legal design (the processes we use) and evaluative understandings (the outcomes we produce). This shift in perspective is significant. Much legal design scholarship focuses on methods (user research, prototyping, iteration) yet under-theorises systematic approaches to evaluating whether the resulting outputs are truly 'human-centred' within legal contexts. Byrne's framework dissects the definitional elements of legal design (design as problem-solving, human-centredness, and legal application) to develop a tool for assessing legal design outputs. There is potential for this model to offer clarity to a field that often struggles to articulate standards of quality and legitimacy.

3. Transforming Legal Education and Empowering Legal Subjects

A third thematic cluster concerns pedagogy, curriculum design, and user empowerment within legal systems.

David Orlando Niño Muñoz offers a provocative critique of the widespread rise of 'Legal Design' courses in law schools in *Why Are We Even Teaching 'Legal Design Courses'*? *A Critique of the Pedagogical Simplification of Legal Design*. His argument is not that such courses are without value; rather, he contends that standalone electives risk reducing legal design to a simplified, commodified set of techniques. If law schools hope to cultivate genuine design-inflected competencies, such as iterative problem-solving to create accessible and equitable legal responses to pressing issues, they must embed these capabilities across curricula, not confine them to isolated modules. The article outlines a range of concrete ways of moving away from the *course-as-container* approach, such as lightweight toolkits for non-specialists, micro-workshops and student fellows. He calls for structural changes in assessment, interdisciplinary collaboration, and curricular architecture, inviting legal education to practice the very design principles it seeks to teach.

The article, *Teaching Legal Design: Lessons from Five Years of Student-Led Innovation in Tech4Justice*, by Danielle Moon, Heike Fabig, George Newhouse, and Daniel Ghezelbash extends this discussion through a five-year case study of Macquarie University's Tech4Justice Lab working in collaboration with the National Justice Project. They outline how student-led, design-informed innovation, here through the creation of no-code discrimination-complaint chatbots, can produce meaningful legal impact while simultaneously cultivating important employability competencies. In particular they highlight distinctive aspects of their approach: a sustained focus on a single problem, a mixed teaching model, and student leadership. Their integrated pedagogical framework proposes the knowledge and skills that legal designers require, offering both practical guidance for legal design educators and some broader implications for the redesign of legal education.

Two further contributions shift the focus from pedagogy to public empowerment.

In *Legal Design, Criminal Law and Social Empowerment*, Barbara Pasa and Luciano Perondi address the communication challenges surrounding 'mafia association' prosecutions in Italy, using design-based approaches to make criminal law more intelligible to a broader public audience and to support citizen empowerment. They outline a case study of the work of the Communication and Graphic Design Laboratory at the Università Iuav di Venezia. Their work demonstrates how

visualisation and communication design can clarify complex legal processes, strengthen institutional legitimacy, and enhance public engagement with criminal justice systems. In a context marked by social harm, intimidation, and systemic opacity, such tools can empower individuals to adopt a more proactive and preventive stance.

Finally, Sofie-Amalie Torp Dideriksen, Dave Murray-Rust, Froukje Sleeswijk Visser, and Pieter Jan Stappers present a victim-centred mapping of the Dutch criminal justice process for sexual assault victims in *En route without a steering wheel – a victim-centred mapping of power in the criminal justice system*. Using journey mapping and a feminist theory of power, they expose the structural and interpersonal dynamics that strip victims of agency once a case is filed. Their analysis shifts attention from individual interactions to systemic patterns of disempowerment, arguing for structural reforms grounded in a richer understanding of how power operates within legal processes. This is legal design at its most socially engaged - revealing invisible harms, reframing legal actors' responsibilities, and offering design-driven insights for institutional change.

Looking Forward

Read together, the articles in this volume show a field in full, dynamic evolution. They interrogate core theoretical questions, propose evaluative frameworks, experiment with pedagogical redesign, and illuminate new paths for public empowerment and institutional reform. They reveal legal design not as a monolith, but as a rich network of approaches grounded in human experience, design reasoning, and legal process.

As Editor-in-Chief, I am immensely proud of the work presented here and grateful to the authors who entrusted us with their scholarship, and to our reviewers who engaged with the submissions in rigorous, kind and constructive ways. Our hope is that this Journal continues to be a space where legal design research can flourish—openly, critically, and collaboratively. The future of legal design will be shaped by those willing to experiment, challenge assumptions, and build bridges across disciplines. We are honoured to contribute to that future.