GOVERNMENT

When Apple opened its first store in 2001, the company's attention to design and customer satisfaction permeated the whole experience. The interior was adorned in slick wood and wrapped in glass to lure in potential shoppers; the laptops, desktops, iPads and iPhones were not just on display but available for trying out; visitors got free tutorials on how to operate their new Macs; and the customer service desk was dubbed the Genius Bar.

The payoff was a windfall for the world's largest tech company. It still is. At a time when brick-and-mortar retail companies are struggling to survive and redefine themselves, Apple generates more money per square foot than any retailer in the United States.

Ariel Kennan worked for Apple in those early retail years, and she became a convert to what the company called "service design." "Apple Stores are incredibly designed experiences," she says, "the look, the feel and how people interact with customers. Apple thought through all of this."

Now Kennan is putting her Apple experience to work in a dramatically different context. She is in New York City, running the new Service Design Studio at the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity. She is convinced that what worked to sell computers can work to make municipal government better at responding to fundamental human needs. "Service design," Kennan says, "is the holistic view on how a service is delivered. It's a human-centered research approach to figure out how all the people and all the services fit together."

NEW YORK CITY
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LESSONS FROM
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THEIR SERVICES.
THE BET IS STARTING
TO PAY OFF.

BY J. BRIAN CHARLES

BY
DESIGN

More simply put, the service design concept reimagines customer relations for both business and government. It's not a quest for efficiency, or for constant repetition of time-honored practices. It's focused on the end user, and on enticing customers who have varying degrees of knowledge and experience to interact with a service and stay long enough to fully engage. And here's the secret: The customer is not really supposed to notice.

Service design makes use of emerging concepts in social science, especially data points and analytics, to come up with user-based service solutions. But it applies a healthy skepticism toward social science in its traditional form. "Social scientists research the way people interact with a thing," Kennan says, "but don't say how to improve the interactions between humans and those things."
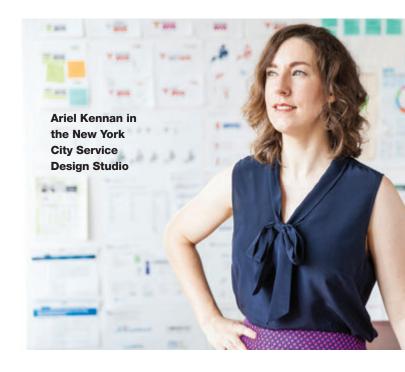
The service design effort in New York and elsewhere is getting major assistance from Citigroup, the financial giant, which is interested in finding the commonalities between delivering services in business and doing it in government. "When it comes to the way services are created and delivered," says Marshall Sitten, Citigroup's vice president of communications, policy and research, "they may have been created in a collaborative way, but over time, services became less adaptable and produced less value for the people who need them." Sitten is convinced that problem is solvable in a public as well as in a private realm. In his spare time, he teaches service design at New York University.

At the moment, bringing service design to government is mostly a New York City experiment. But that may not be true for long.

Oakland, Calif., launched an official service design program this past January. Its seven-person team, also assisted by Citigroup, has upgraded a website that allows renters to challenge rent increases they consider unlawful. It is working on programs to better connect young people with summer job opportunities and is partnering with Citigroup on a program of financial empowerment for low- to moderate-income mothers and their families, especially women and families of color. "The need to address the problems our residents are facing is mounting constantly, and the resources we have to deal with these problems are shrinking," Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf says, adding that "government was not designed to take risks and move quickly." She thinks service design might be a way to break out of that public culture of excessive caution and delay.

Back in New York City, Kennan is thinking along the same lines. She came to the service design project in New York from Code for America, the nonprofit that pairs software developers in the private sector with municipalities that need their skills in solving a problem. She helped launch open data projects in both Kansas City, Mo., and Kansas City, Kan.

In 2014, Kennan joined the administration of New York Mayor Bill de Blasio as director of design and product for the city's newly launched Office of Economic Opportunity. The creation of a formal service design lab was still three years away. But Kennan and her colleagues set out to use service design ideas to reengineer a few very specific city initiatives. For starters, they wanted to help low-income residents with

Ariel Kennan in the New York City Service Design Studio

tax preparation, and especially to make sure they received the earned income tax credits they were entitled to. The team also initiated an open data project for the city's health and human services agency, and started Growing Up NYC, an online resource for parents seeking assistance in monitoring their children's health.

Another early task was working to improve Access NYC, the existing portal that was meant to connect city residents to social services. Access NYC had some of the same goals that service design advocates sought, but the system was clumsy and those seeking services often gave up before they got connected to the assistance they wanted. "Access NYC needed an overhaul," Kennan says. "The site was hard to use, saw drop-off in usage and had material that users didn't understand."

In 2017, with the help of service design concepts, Access NYC relaunched. The directions on the site were made easier to interpret, content was presented in seven languages, the new website was made responsive for mobile users and a location finder was added to help residents connect to services close to their homes.

Where fixing Access NYC relied heavily on data analytics, the service design group's next challenge required shoe leather. The city's homeless population was growing. New York, one of the few U.S. cities required by court order to house the homeless, was sheltering more than 60,000 people. Still, despite its vast network of shelters, the city had several thousand homeless men, women and children living on the street. The issue was connecting them to services.

De Blasio dispatched Kennan and members of her team to figure out and then fix the problem. They rode subway lines to the far reaches of the city to contact homeless men and women. They conducted interviews and tracked each homeless client's progress through the system.

From the interviews and the data collected, the service design team created a "journey map," which tracked the experiences of those contacted by field workers. To the novice, a journey map is a series of dots and arrows. In this case, dots for the homeless clients, arrows for the social workers. The arrows indicate movement from one portion of the system to the next. Where two dots meet there is an interaction. Service designers look at those journey maps and try to find the best way to move clients through the system as efficiently as possible. "You start from the angle of problem identification and as you do your discovery," Sitten says, "you start identifying weak signals, patterns and then you have to synthesize that with the people you are working with."

The process can seem mechanical, but it's far from smooth. Running a service design project in public policy space usually means overcoming old civic and political habits. The clients frequently don't interact in the way all the modeling suggests. As Sitten puts it, "People are messy. They do irrational things."

The Service Design Team's rubric for measuring user experience is labeled as the 5 E's: Entice, Enter, Engage, Exit and Extend. The first E, "Entice," measures how people come to learn about the service and what gets them interested. "Enter" examines the experience upon first entering a place—in the case of homeless services, that might mean a conversation, but in other cases it could be a website or an app. "Engage" looks at the steps necessary to interact with the service and asks designers to think about how to keep users engaged. "Exit" measures how users feel when they leave the experience and whether it is clear to them that they are finished. And "Extend" probes ways the user might talk about the experience to others afterward.

The team found that the crucial problem in delivering homeless services wasn't the one most observers expected. "The outreach workers were blamed for the homelessness issues in New York," Kennan says, "but they were not the issue. There were just not enough of them."

When the analysis was done, Kennan's group offered recommendations that the city has adopted. It more than doubled the number of outreach workers; shortened the time clients needed to be on the street before they qualified for assistance; stationed homeless outreach services inside libraries and hospitals; and intensified canvassing efforts across the city.

In late 2016, the service design team next tackled a project aimed at delivering wireless internet service to the nation's largest public housing complex. Queensbridge Houses is home to nearly 7,000 residents in 26 buildings spread over 50 acres near the East River in Queens. The low- to moderate-income residents in Queensbridge were paying exorbitant internet bills, in some cases more than $200 per month for bare bones access. Many relied on their cellphones to connect to the internet, or weren't online at all. But installing Wi-Fi would only be the first obstacle. Teaching digital literacy to the scores of residents who were computer neophytes would be a bigger challenge.

The service design team started with classes in digital literacy and quickly realized there was a unique opportunity before them. The digital newcomers were going to be logging on to the web for the first time, and that initial experience could shape their view of how useful the tool might be. Kennan reached out to the Queensbridge Tenants Association and worked with its members to create Queensbridge Connected, a web portal dedicated to news and information about life in the housing project.

The design process was decidedly low tech. Residents were given blank pieces of paper and asked to illustrate what the website might look like, where the photos would go and how the navigation would work. A few weeks later, the design team came back with a touch screen display of a mocked-up website based on what the community had suggested and asked for feedback. "There is a difference," Sitten says, "when you invite a group into a room and there is the notion of participation and involvement and engagement."

After a few changes, Queensbridge Connected was launched. The website lists events, connects residents with job training and classes at the local library, and provides mundane but important information about parking restrictions on a given day.

By 2017, with several successful projects under its belt, it was time for service design to grow. The practice had shown to many in city government that it had the potential to transform service delivery across a metropolis of more than 8 million residents.

But to do that, service design needed scale, which meant it needed money.

That's where Citigroup came in. One of the company's philanthropic arms, Citi Community Development, backs projects that promote financial inclusion and economic empowerment. Last October, with funding from the group and support from the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City, the Service Design Studio officially came into existence.

So far, the design team is small and its office simply decorated. Five people occupy a conference room in Brooklyn. One table and a 10-foot-tall cork board constitute the furnishings. But the goals are ambitious: to persuade the city to think more broadly about how to design a wide array of services it must provide. The Service Design Studio website is a public-facing toolkit that offers every city employee and any interested resident some of the keys to service design—reviewing evidence, talking to the people most impacted by a given service, connecting the dots between what's needed and what's working, followed by experimentation and then more discussion.

"When you apply service design with great intention," says Sitten, "you get a service that not only reflects the needs of the people who are using the services. You change the culture." **G**

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