

The Cabinet of Bureaucratic Wonders

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Introduction: Designing within institutions

The Cabinet of Bureaucratic Wonders (CBW) is an ongoing collection of artifacts found in public sector facilities across Brazil and the United States, in which we used a participatory approach to curating and prompting in-site conversations about sociomaterial cultures in institutional sites. In this paper, we will share motivations, methodological decisions, and results from an instantiation of the CBW in the Brazilian context of the National School of Public Administration / Escola Nacional de Administração Pública (Enap), alongside other institutions. We will navigate through the artifact files of the lapel pin, stamp and coffee carafe as entry points to the CBW experience and ongoing reflections. Our aim is to contribute a transdisciplinary and practical approach to research in the fields of design research and public administration, providing tentative insights into the investigation of what shapes institutions and how they shape us back, and engaging in broader conversations about the role of institutions in contemporary times.

At once an archive, an installation, and a temporary institution, the CBW is a design-led research project initiated by two MFA candidates and a doctoral researcher in design. Building on our experience

working with design for politics¹ in the public sector, our aim is to acknowledge political implications of design agents and their configurations² in a careful and generative critique towards our sites of practice. In that way, our intention is to complicate notions of bureaucracy and the state, enable new articulations between aesthetics and power relations, and challenge entrenched institutional structures. We acknowledge the legacy of oppression institutions often represent and their arguable inability to deal with contemporary challenges, such as climate change, technological pervasiveness, neoliberal hegemony, and forced mobilities. However, we are following Chantal Mouffe's call for an »engagement with institutions«, recognizing the potentialities of reclaiming institutions as sites for contestation and imagination from within.³ More specifically, in this work we observe contemporary realities using Enap as a case study, engaging critically with what the current situation affords us and recognizing the role of institutions in the mediation and configuration of our common life.

As design entry points to explore such large questions, we are taking a look at wonder and proximity at everyday structures that give form to the public

institutions of our practice. Drawing upon theories of sociomaterial institutional infrastructures, the CBW investigates the seemingly unnoticed agentic effects of mundane office artifacts in the steering of conducts in institutions. When we approach material agency through a lens of wonder, we deliberately bring forth dynamics of enchantment to commonly regarded as disenchanted materials and spaces of bureaucracy. George Ritzer describes Max Weber's alarm at what he saw as the Western world's move from a »deeply enchanted past« towards a »disenchanted future« in which there would be no tolerance for the convoluted, aimless, and experiential nature of enchanted worlds.⁴ In a re-enchantment of the bureaucratic site, we stimulate the capacity of public servants to be enchanted—which in Jane Bennett's definition means »to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday«⁵—through unexpected encounters with their work artifacts.

The focus on the material culture of bureaucracy is especially critical in this current moment, as digital transformation gains prominence among political agendas and the turn to remote work (accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic) renders the physical office increasingly obsolete. This shift to the digital realm is pushing physical artifacts to a liminal condition in which their existence is being questioned and their future remains uncertain. In this transition, we are interested in observing the friction between temporalities as these new digital artifacts arrive and exist alongside physical »relics«, opening-up novel possibilities for thinking and making with these materials.

Drawing from methods in design anthropology, the CBW consists of an incomplete inventory of artifacts—coat hanger, lapel pin, stamp, ID badge, coffee carafe etc.—recruited and further detailed through productive encounters between human and non-human agents of bureaucracy. It brings forth a way of being attentive about the effects of infrastructures in configuring behaviors, in addition to inviting participants to engage with their own institution's apparatus in de-automatized open-ended ways. Ultimately, we are interested in testing and expanding theories and formats (such as cabinets and archives) to expose the artificiality of institutions, as structures that can be contested, opened, and manipulated. In combination with this exposure,

the aim is to create spaces for articulating and enacting alternative possibilities for both those operating from within and external participants.

In this paper, we begin by bringing a selected collage of theoretical perspectives around institutions and their compositions. We follow by articulating how these concepts are enacted in our methodological approach, in its particular instantiation with Enap in Brazil. We then present the results of the process through describing the main folders and categories of the CBW, illustrated by three representative artifacts' files and stories collected. Lastly, we conclude with a discussion of emerging insights and implications for the dialogue between design and public institutions.

Theoretical framework: Institutional agents and compositions

When we think of institutions, there are many possible definitions and disciplinary access points. It is a massive topic, and one that is intrinsic to our condition of being engulfed in the age of the artificial.⁶ In general and in more simple terms, institutions are associated with formal organizations and the rules or conventions promoted by them. For the context of this research, far from being exhaustive, we selected fragmented and open-ended theoretical journeys from Social Sciences, Philosophy and Art to inform and be further interrogated by practical exercises with institutional components and compositions.

Institutions as bureaucratic apparatuses

The models of governance and domination mechanisms of institutions of modernity have their anchor in bureaucracy. Interestingly, the word bureaucracy comes from the French *bureaucratie*, which itself combines *bureau* (meaning desk) and *-cratie* (a kind of government). It then translates as *ruled by the desk* (the power of the desk) or a form of government that is practiced upon a desk. This etymology speaks to de-personalization, as classically articulated by Max Weber,

and accompanies other attributes of bureaucracy in its »purest form«, such as official competence and specialization of work, hierarchy, written documents, and, above all, the application of general rules.⁷

Bureaucracy appeared as a modernization technology in the 18th and 19th century, an attempt to replace existing modes of thought and action reflecting the mentality of rationalization, progress, and efficiency of the rise of modern states and capitalist societies. It was indeed an important mechanism to establish such nation-states, and also influence corporate management, which remains even now. As the anthropologist David Graeber noted, once created, it is almost impossible to get rid of bureaucracy, because the power grounded on professionally informed rational-legal attributes, which keeps its knowledge and intentions secret, makes itself indispensable to those who want to rule a state. Graeber further describes how the particular enchantment of bureaucracy lies in its function as a »poetic technology« that offers the promise of achieving humans' wildest ambitions: »to create cities out of nothing, scale the heavens, make the desert bloom.«⁸

In contrast with its initial intention, common ideas and shared experiences about bureaucracy are most often accompanied by complaints about paperwork and stories of frustrations when a service did not work as expected. These are so frequent that it is common to use the terms bureaucracy and bureaucratization interchangeably. Bureaucratization, following Fabrizio Bencini's definition and with a particularly pejorative connotation, refers to organizational dysfunctions or distortions of the bureaucratic model, stretching bureaucracy to a pathological extreme in which it starts to work in opposition to what it was meant to accomplish (i.e., relating to non-rationality, personalization of commands within bureaucratic systems), and many times leading to a sense of frustration and disempowerment.⁹

Institutions as infraordinary infrastructures

What makes many institutions so powerful is arguably their apparent solidification through everyday habitual uneventfulness. In fact, bureaucratic institutions make a good example of Susan Leigh Star's description of

infrastructures and their general attributes: they are embedded into other social arrangements and technologies; they do not have to be reinvented each time of use; they embody standards; and they can only be incrementally fixed. Also, the normally invisible quality of an infrastructure becomes visible when it breaks.¹⁰ In other words, we actually only notice it, and talk about it, when there is something wrong.

Instead of looking at extraordinary events or paying attention to things when they break, Georges Perec makes a call to look at the real everyday life, the actual systems (institutional infrastructures, in the context of this research) that keep going when we are too busy paying attention to airplane crashes, political scandals, forest fires: »How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infraordinary, the background noise, the habitual?«¹¹

Quite naturally, the infraordinary makes a most suitable focus of study of ethnographies of bureaucracy,¹² and those interested in the self-proclaimed studies of boring things.¹³ The focus in the mundane allows for scholars to look beyond that which is overlooked and often dismissed as mere repetitive practices. Social scientists such as Tarlo, Hoyer and Campos, Hull, and Gupta have overtaken the studies of the everyday in government institutions for different objectives, including understanding the control of memory,¹⁴ and revealing material effects of documents and instruments.¹⁵

Taking this thought a little further, we can say that institutions are structures taken for granted and seen as finished products, an end in themselves. Pierre Bourdieu, in his lectures about the origins of the state, says that »[a] successful institution is forgotten, and makes people forget the fact of its having had a birth or a beginning.« Bourdieu is making an argument for a genetic thinking, or going back to the beginning or conception of such structures, as structures that were *designed*, in order to »de-banalize and overcome the amnesia of beginnings that is inherent to institutionalization«, and to return to a space of possibilities.¹⁶

Institutions as sociomaterial configurations

Public servants, or human institutional agents, have been the focus of extensive scholarship, particularly in studies of bureaucrats through different hierarchical and discretion tiers, either at the top, middle, screen, or street-levels.¹⁷ Their direct interaction with computers, paperwork, and guichets makes it clear that institutions are the result from encounters with its constituents, both human and non-human. Institutions actually exist in the world through massive sociomaterial apparatuses, ranging from all scales and levels of materiality. It is naturally an area of interest for design, particularly acknowledging the discipline's deep entanglement in power relations and political regimes. Following scholars that study design and its relationship with institutions, particularly in the public realm, design has been instrumental in giving form to institutional structures and visions.¹⁸

Formal choices represent how social contracts are established and what these material and immaterial configurations restrict or allow for. The design scholar Ramia Mazé builds on Michel Foucault's ideas of governmentality to reflect on how design operates in terms of regulation and steering of conduct in contexts of public institutions. As she describes, it can be quite explicit through architecture, such as in the classic example of the panopticon, a prison concept created by Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century in which all prisoners could be observed by a single security guard, without being able to tell whether they were being watched or not. It represented then by »a shift from top-down rule by a sovereign over territory through physical force to modern forms of control over social relations through a variety of mechanisms«, which included not only the hard architectural form itself, but also the surveillance and control conditions that it created, shaping people's perceptions and behaviors.¹⁹

Langdon Winner has also noticed how technical artifacts embody specific forms of power and authority. He elaborated on how the low height of bridges in Long Island, during Moses' administration in New York City (from the 1920s to 1970s), reflected social-class bias and racial prejudice by the city administration, as they prevented buses and their riders from passing underneath the bridges and accessing beaches and

parks.²⁰ Mahmoud Keshavarz has analyzed the politics of the passport as a nation-state materiality. He has interrogated its artifactual relations and practices in relation to the ways in which its mobilities and immobilities are organized, controlled, regulated, and shaped in the current political regime.²¹

These examples by Mazé, Winner, and Keshavarz are ways in which governmental institutions and their abstract values are made tangible and manifested into forms of control in everyday life through the embodied politics of each designed thing, be it a building, service, system, or artifact. We may call these things agents of government. The term agency makes explicit the latent dimension of power that such artifacts (broadly understood) embody. According to Amin and Cirolia, agents of government include »social allocations and cultural tracings of the material and aesthetic infrastructure«, which tend to be considered as inactive objects.²² They make precisely the claim that material infrastructures are deeply implicated and agentic in systems of governance. The idea of agents of government finds strong resonance with Bruno Latour's theories of institutions as associations of human and non-human agents, understanding things not as passive instruments, but rather as mediators that can potentially »transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry«.²³

From this brief theoretical exploration, we can apprehend that institutions are a matter of design, from their conception to material manifestations and everyday enactments. Going back to our research interests, in combination with our own practice trajectories, the concrete entry point for the practical exercises was the mundane sociomaterial infrastructures that make institutions, as a way to further discuss their interconnectedness to institutional habits and powers.

Methodological approach: Making an institution, an archive, and an intervention

In terms of methodological operations, we adopted a design anthropology approach as a means of exploring constraints in the present and situated emerging

possibilities with a heightened awareness of the ethics of interventions.²⁴ Design anthropology offers critical and creative methods—such as cultural probes, sensory ethnography, and expanded scenography²⁵—while allowing for knowledge construction to be done through collaborative processes that are respectful and sensitive to participants and their contexts. We are adopting this approach to look at highly situated lived experiences of an institution to draw larger systemic insights, not necessarily trying to resolve its conflicting and even paradoxical aspects,²⁶ but rather acknowledging what are the things, environments, and cultural categories that impact the space of the possible.²⁷ It is a practice *with* rather than *of* the people and things involved in the situations, in the sense that research artifacts are understood as invitations for participants to make sense of their lived experiences in their own terms, by engaging with prompts and activities that highlight the porosity of institutional sites.

More broadly, we draw upon a practice-based research tradition, in which a reflection-in-action²⁸ approach informs designerly modes of inquiry, with the aim of developing a capacity to participate in critical reflection about practice while being engaged in that practice.²⁹ In design-led research, making, or »construction«, is the primary mode by which knowledge is constructed.³⁰ Instead of limiting our investigation to the observation of sites or interrogation of actors, we used our skills in construction to materialize our inquiry in the form of designed artifacts and stages (e.g., signs, tags, catalogs, installations), even going so far as installing new handles on an old cabinet to give it a more enigmatic appearance. Since the CBW's conception in early 2021, we have engaged in three overall approaches to *making*, which correspond to research phases: *making an institution*, *making an archive*, and *making an intervention*. The first mode of making involves the initial scaffoldings of an institution as a gateway for reflection, and it involves outlining its contours, positioning it in a system, and convening stakeholders. We then engaged in making an archive of bureaucratic artifacts through workshops, cultural probes, and public share-outs. Lastly, we designed a physical intervention as a productive encounter between artifacts and public servants to allow for collective inquiry. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic,

we conducted the two first phases entirely through digital means, which not only represented a challenge to discuss the materiality of physical artifacts, but also in terms of broad engagement with participants, making us rely on existing networks of relationships from our practice and institutional partners.

Making an institution

We have created the outline of an imaginary institution, the CBW. That does not mean the creation of the entirety of an institution, but rather mimicking fragments that are helpful to put theories into motion for this research, e.g., collections of artifacts that are both part of a sociomaterial infrastructure but also agents in the organizational chart, and the enactment of institutional habits. As a collaborative research artifact, this institution embodies our questions and theoretical frameworks in a concrete and circumspect manner to further understand institutional granularities, attitudes, and compositions, while also creating conditions for possibilities to emerge. Creation here implies a fictive condition, bringing to the forefront its identity as artifice. Even though all institutions are artificial, the emphasis here is in their awareness and what it allows.

Outlining an institution. Differently from the accounts of ethnographies in bureaucracies, we are adopting the appropriation of existing frames, languages, and structures to outline the contours of our temporary institution, as well as to sharpen our consciousness around what the elements are that we are reproducing and what are the ones that we are distorting or transforming. The concept of the CBW is based on the poetic appropriation of two institutional frames: the *Wunderkammern* and the Cabinet Office. This double-appropriation means bringing the sixteenth-century *Wunderkammern* to a contemporary context, at the same time celebrating the ambiguity of the word *cabinet* in the government space. Our aim is to juxtapose existing formats in an unfamiliar combination, expanding meanings and challenging problematic and unquestioned attributes.

Antecessors to contemporary museums, *Wunderkammern* or Cabinets of Wonders can be defined

as collections of the most disparate set of objects—mostly exceptional items, located in the margins of human knowledge³¹—organized in a way to represent their curator’s worldview, often being a symbol of socioeconomic status and erudition.³² Cabinets found their chaotic harmony in various systems of classification, normally distinguishing objects of the universe between those representative of god, *naturalia*, and those of man, *artificialia*. Situating the CBW in the public sector, we call attention to the wonder of mundane artifacts in bureaucratic environments, in addition to confronting personal systems of organization with the bureaucratic rationality of folders and categories. Moreover, by inviting public servants to curate and actively engage with the collection, we are challenging the *Wunderkammern* history of coloniality and elitism, in which ›exotic‹ objects from other cultures were often displayed without context and cabinets reflected the personal curiosities of their often affluent owners. In contrast, the CBW situates its objects within the narratives of those who interact and use them in their daily lives. Moreover, the collection itself is derived from a process of participatory curation involving public servants from multiple levels of government, across two cultural contexts.

A Cabinet Office is a specific genre of administrative bodies. With variations across regions and levels of government, it is a relatively autonomous unit attached to the central government, dedicated to supporting decision-making processes concerning strategic and critical areas of governance. It is a body of exceptional power that navigates between the political and the operational realms, legitimized by the trust from authorities and the technical capacity to coordinate agendas across different government organizations. In the appropriation of the Cabinet Office frame, we are playing with who are the agents that govern and define priorities in the public sector, highlighting the perhaps overlooked power of sociomaterial systems.

Positioning the institution. Institutions furnish space, both for physical congregation and collective discourse, and they do so most effectively by establishing partnerships with other institutions. Partnering and situating the CBW in relation to existing institutions was a crucial element of our work, because it enabled access to the resources and connections, but also set the



Figure 1: Appearance of the CBW in front of the National Museum in Brasília, Image: CBW

context for our research and established a participatory framework for action.

Our main partner that set the locus for our exercises is the National School of Public Administration / Escola Nacional de Administração Pública (Enap) in Brazil. Created in the re-democratization period as part of the executive branch of government, the school represents a movement towards the professionalization of public service and exists to train agents of the government in their bureaucratic duties. Through the diversity of services and areas—research, events, educational courses, and an innovation lab—the school’s mission is committed to the transformation of the culture and mental models of public agents.³³ From our lived experience and previous relationship with the site, the narratives of professionalization and modernization are strongly present in their strategic visions, discourse, and physical environments; however, examples of bureaucratic dysfunctions and complexities still coexist in everyday routines of the organization. The contradictions make it an especially interesting place to be examined through the lenses of sociomaterial culture.

This partnership enabled the participation of designers and public servants that either work at Enap or are involved in their educational activities, from different areas and various levels of experience, including people with trajectories through other governmental agencies. Besides Enap, the CBW partnered with other organizations from our networks of practice,

including the groups behind the Instagram accounts @publicsectoroffice and @esteticadaburocracia,³⁴ and government agencies such as São Paulo City Hall, which were activated in specific research phases.

Making an archive

Once an institutional outline was in place, the next step was to build a collection of artifacts to prompt reflection. Archives are institutional mechanisms to collect, maintain, and systematize all forms of information, from official birth records to images of asteroids. In a design anthropology reading of an archive, the CBW was created both as a tool for collective memory that seeks to conserve the spirit of the past,³⁵ as well as a project that intervenes in the world, offering tools for collective imagination at different scales.

Collecting specimens. We collaboratively curated an initial inventory of artifacts—coat hanger, lapel pin, stamp, ID badge, coffee carafe etc.—through conversations and workshops with groups of public servants we had closer relationships with. The intention was to draw on lived experiences from people working in bureaucratic spaces in Brazil (including ourselves) to recruit meaningful representative artifacts of public sector facilities. We saw the incompleteness of the inventory as a strength, recognizing its role as only an entry point, which invites new entries. We also leveraged this moment to revisit our lived experience in the government by proposing prompts for discussion and creating a set of images and questions to be shared via WhatsApp for participants that wished to contribute asynchronously. To be as concrete and possible and to start collecting stories and events that added thickness to the understanding of the artifacts, we asked participants to choose one artifact from the collection and tell us stories about their routine, emotions, attachments, and many times contradictory ways in which this object played a role in their everyday life in the office.

Cataloging specimens. Cataloging is what gives meaning to an archive, enabling viewers to browse and find elements with purpose and intention. In response to our initial conversations with public servants, we cataloged our archive into three categories, inspired by an existing system of folders used by the São Paulo state

government: Employee Records, Internal Corrections, and Ordinary Administrative Acts. We assigned them corresponding colors and cataloged the collection of objects according to their main functions or powers, whether that involved reinforcing identities, refereeing the flow of work, or making space for negotiation.

Inviting co-curation. To make the CBW archive a living system that is visited and browsed through, we invited people to make sense of, add, and revise its contents. We used the three categories of folders and selection of artifacts to prompt online conversations. In this phase, besides guided conversations, we presented the CBW more broadly in public forums and events, including participating in a series of talks hosted by Enap and being featured in a newsletter by an international network of practitioners, achieving spontaneous reactions from public servants and design practitioners in the field.

Making an intervention

Once we had a temporary institution designed with an inaugural archive, we created an intervention in the format of a meaningful encounter. We draw from Luke Cantarella and colleagues' *ethnography by design*, defined as »the use of imaginative and material practices to design ethnographically informed provocations in collaboration with publics who vet, co-design, experience.«³⁶ They engage in what they call *expanded scenography*, a practice derived from the tradition of theater and stage design that involves designing immersive environments and objects that lay the conditions for action, existing between expectations of the past and the emergence of futures. We had the opportunity to conduct this stage in person, as Covid-19 had a drastic reduction in cases and health specialists considered it safe to meet again following certain restrictions.

Setting the scene. We designed a physical installation of an office of the CBW in the building of Enap to allow for a more nuanced and embodied participation in which participants could actually look at and hold in their hands the artifacts being investigated. This process involved comprehensive support from the Enap team, and considerable background planning, from the

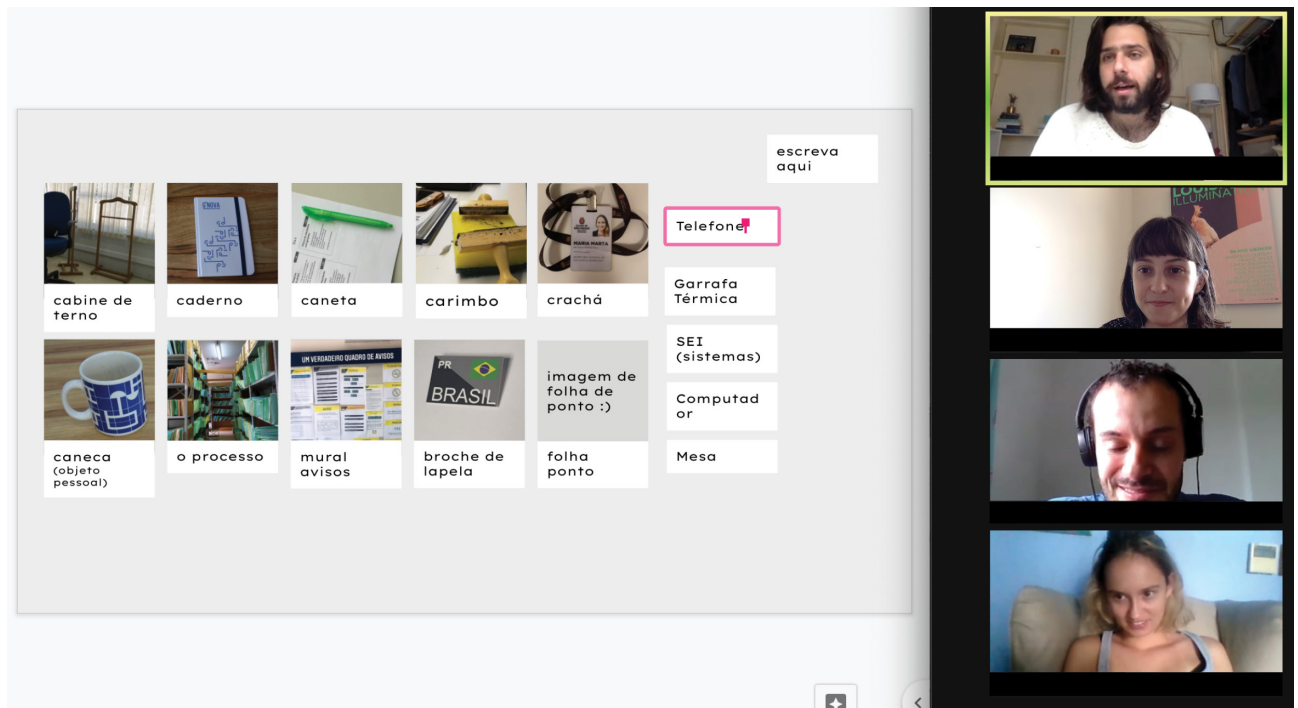


Figure 2: Participants in an online workshop, Image: CBW.

recruitment of objects to the suggestion of schedules and participants. Enap's servants contributed their vision about what a bureaucratic office (or cabinet) would look like by bringing non-anticipated objects to the scenario, such as acrylic name plaques, water cups with silver coasters, decorative plants from the garden, belt dividers, and a Brazilian flag. Beyond hosting scheduled conversations, which followed a similar structure to the online activities, the installation on the ground floor of the building also had the intention of attracting the curiosity of public servants on the way to their offices, including visits from the agency's high leadership.

Designing meaningful encounters. The CBW's installation was designed as a circuit of modular activities. As participants arrived at the Enap's foyer, they signed consent paperwork and got a visitor's badge. Their first activity was to choose one artifact to accompany them through the exercise, polling from a collection of objects neatly cataloged and displayed in a glass table. Once they chose an artifact, participants would then engage in a series of activities mediated by one of the researchers, exploring the duties of that object, its routine, and thinking of their relationship

with it. After that, the researcher would conduct a debrief session and invite the participant to stamp and archive their paperwork in an actual filing cabinet. The circuit would end with an informal chat around the coffee carafe, looking at some ad-hoc signage curated from public sector offices and taking a picture with their artifact. Participants expressed that this setting was welcoming and conversational and facilitated their engagement in a more reflexive way.

Prompting collective reflection. In addition to the conversations, we had a workshop with a group from the innovation lab at Enap, focusing on relations between artifacts, which were illustrated by an activity of collectively assembling an organizational chart of artifacts in the CBW, according to their hierarchical asymmetries. Similarly, we hosted a workshop with servants from São Paulo's Department of Innovation and Technology where participants would build on the content we previously cataloged, adding their perspective, reacting to stories, and proposing new objects to be included. Here, we particularly explored the relationships between artifacts themselves, prompting servants to reflect on unexpected encounters between



Figure 3: Installation of the CBW at Enap's foyer, Image: CBW

objects and organizing artifacts based on formality and hierarchy.

In summary, by articulating three modes of making—institutions, archives, and interventions—and by employing different methods informed by design anthropology, such as cultural probes, workshops, participation in events, and in-site installation, we conducted research about systems of materiality *through* material means,³⁷ which prompted new relations and collective inquiries between servants, researchers, and objects. In the next session, we will describe the CBW itself and elaborate on the files of three artifacts of the collection, sharing some of our findings produced at those meaningful encounters.

Results: The Cabinet of Bureaucratic Wonders

The Cabinet of Bureaucratic Wonders is an incomplete archive of non-human institutional agents and their orbiting powers and systems of relationalities. We have organized our records into three categories as a way to understand their peculiarities, but also to see how they relate to large bureaucratic systems. As mentioned, the artifacts are archived into color-coded folders, in an appropriation of existing bureaucratic categories of the Brazilian state bureaucracy: *Employee Records*, *Internal Corrections*, and *Ordinary Administrative Acts*. The current count of artifacts is twenty-four items, distributed in the three categories. Each artifact has

an individual file with descriptions of its material attributes, relationships, and duties, compiled after our interactions with public servants. These refer to the artifact's physical qualities, the agents it most frequently interacts with, and its intended and unintended uses, enabling us to notice the interconnected ways in which these artifacts perform intangible wonders (or powers). In other words, we were expanding the etymology of bureaucracy by not only interrogating the »power of the desk«, but also the powers of the coat hanger, telephone, stapler, and so on.

We will introduce each of the folders and illustrate them with an analysis of a representative artifact and its wonders. Rather than a definitive description of the three artifacts, the analysis is based on the situated conversations with public servants and brings different lenses that might complicate our understanding of the ways they operate and the wonders they enact.

Employee Records

Under the category of Employee Records, we observed that objects reinforce identities, positions, and hierarchies within the public sector, a representative case being the lapel pin. These artifacts often become relics that accumulate memory and labor and, in some cases, evoke the space of the office in times of remote work.

A lapel pin is usually a round, gold-looking metallic brooch, with the initials or seal of a government agency on it, and a pointy end for attachment to garments. Its aesthetics are intrinsically associated with a specific gender, through the seamless attachment to suits, a culturally gendered garment ubiquitous in the Brazilian public sector, particularly in higher hierarchies.

Associated with anger or irritation mostly by servants that do not identify as male, its material attributes risk damaging clothes with softer fabrics, like dresses and shirts, making people that identify as women in higher hierarchies many times not even wear the pin and renounce its »benefits« of hierarchy and status. The hierarchy and status powers are made evident by the material attributes—the metallic discrete piece symbolically resembles a military reminiscent of colonial times, in strong contrast with its counterparts

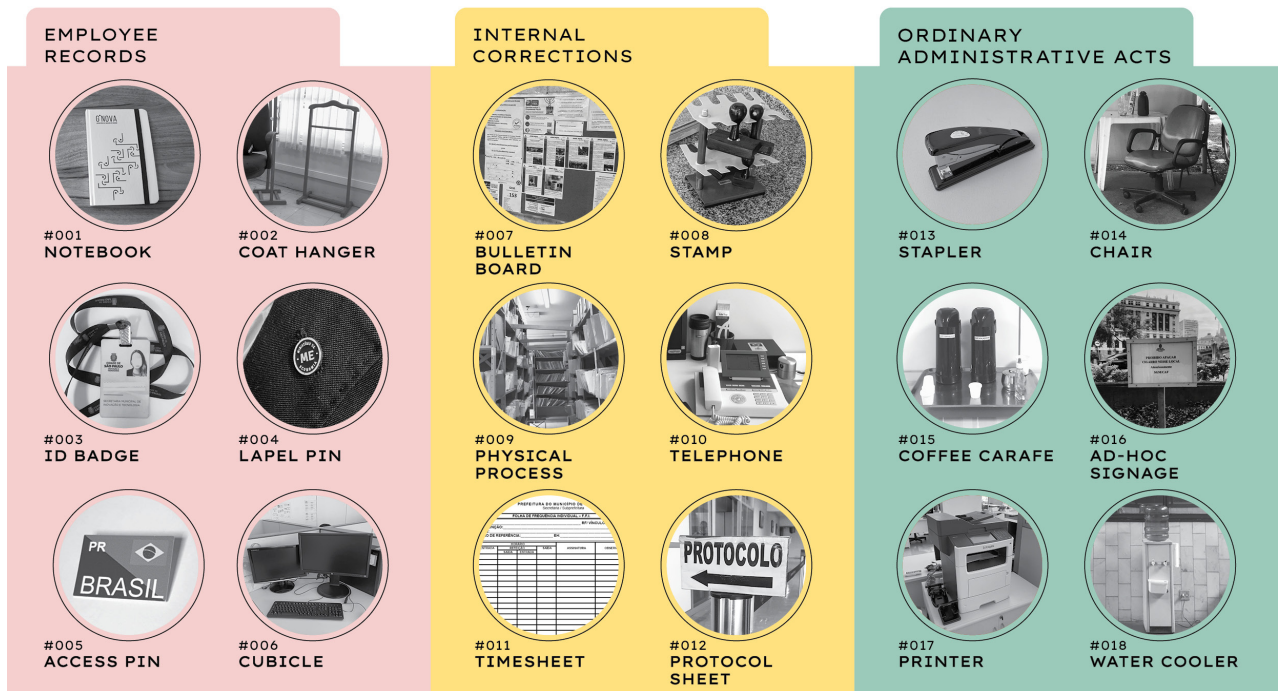


Figure 4: Collection of artifacts of the CBW distributed in corresponding color-coded folders, Image: CBW

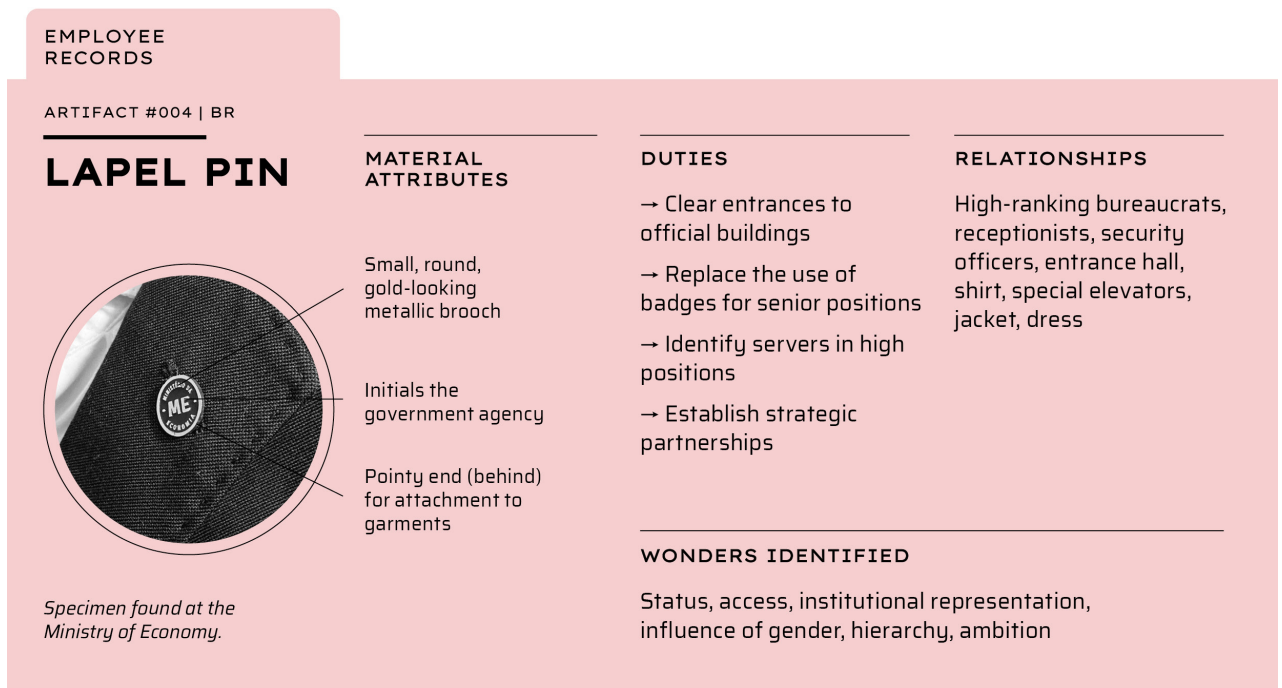


Figure 5: Lapel pin file within the Employee Records folder, Image: CBW

for lower hierarchies, e.g., ID badges in plastic cards—but more explicitly, by the relationships and association with other human and non-human agents.³⁸ Only civil servants in higher hierarchies are given one and are allowed to wear it, in this way it becomes a material attestation of people's levels of importance in the organizational structure.

As a side effect of this, it has also allowed for people with lapel pins to freely enter government buildings without being stopped at reception desks to identify themselves, affecting the ways in which it is normally *used*³⁹ and layering the powers of hierarchy and status with access and free circulation. In a tacit understanding of such possibilities, one public servant told us that it was a common practice for him to borrow a pin from his boss as a way to transfer its powers when he had to circulate in corridors of the congress, because the pin would help him establish conversations with politicians and advocate for the policies he needed approval. He said that without the pin those people would barely look at him.

Still in terms of its relationships, the lapel pin replaces the ID badge for higher hierarchies, in its »duties« to provide identification and access. Even though both of them identify the civil servant with the corresponding institution (granting empowerment to act within and on behalf of the public system), the ID badge expresses a stronger sense of belonging. We heard stories of how the ID badge is seen as a celebratory gadget that connects newcomers to an established community, from a specific institutional site and public sector in general. A younger civil servant that was recently promoted to a lapel-pin position was surprisingly frustrated with the replacement of his ID badge. He would rather have the ID badge as a visual manifestation of »proudly« being part of an institution and would often be embarrassed of going to meetings with a pin, which felt as a showing-off of power.

In contrast to the ID badge that enables a representation of the self as a member of the government, the lapel pin is a representation of the whole institution, enabling its bearer to embody it, by representing it, making decisions for it, and speaking on behalf of it.⁴⁰ The lapel pin is a scarce artifact that is property of an agency and cannot be held as a souvenir or a token of gratitude. One servant told us that when he lost his

lapel pin, he was requested to file a police report stating government property was lost and a lapel pin was alone and on the run. More than a sense of belonging, the lapel pin denotes a sense of not-belonging, making clear who has the leverage power to make decisions on the behalf of an agency, and who needs to be halted.

Internal Corrections

Within Internal Corrections, we observed that objects referee the flow of work. These artifacts create an official ethos that evokes protection and rigor, but also fear. They control and set the cadence of actions within the bureaucratic system. They create touch points for interaction between servants and other objects, orchestrate operations, and formalize actions. Here we find many emblematic objects of bureaucracy, or rather of bureaucratization, in its dysfunctional image,⁴¹ such as the stamp.

A stamp is an object with the identification of a body of government or a specific civil servant— usually the full name and the corresponding institutional position within a public organization—carved in rubber and glued to a wooden body. The choice of font and layout of the written text varies widely from agency to agency and even within servants from the same organization. It has a handle to facilitate the process of pressing the rubber face of the stamp against an ink pad and then against pages of paper, avoiding direct contact between the hand and the ink.

The act of making marks on a paper is a stamp's primary duty, as it is precisely how it performs its main power of formalization. The mark left from a stamp, usually accompanied by the stamp's holder signature, formalizes and validates documents by making them official. In that way, it both identifies it as a public document, automatically adding weight and importance to it, but also gives the details of the civil servant responsible for that act of officialdom—putting the person in an ambiguous position of protection and vulnerability in the face of public scrutiny. As this identification mechanism, the stamp is a tool that embeds power to someone to embody public faith. One civil servant told us that the wooden stamp she received with her name and position to sign documents did not

INTERNAL
CORRECTIONS

ARTIFACT #008 | BR

STAMP

MATERIAL
ATTRIBUTES

Suspended by a special support, to avoid touching objects with the ink surface

Wooden handle to facilitate mobility

Identification of name and position of a public servant carved on rubber

Specimen found at the National School of Public Administration.

DUTIES

- Validate processes
- Connect agents
- Recognize who signs
- Perform mechanical work
- Represent the public service

RELATIONSHIPS

Bureaucrats of all levels and from different areas, physical process, ink pads, documents, table, stamp supports, drawers, protocol sheet, automatic stamps

WONDERS IDENTIFIED

Repetition, formality, formalization, obsolescence

Figure 6: Stamp file within the Internal Corrections folder, Image: CBW

have her specific title, but rather the name of the whole department. Because she felt uncomfortable signing papers on what seemed to be on behalf of the whole department, she cut-off the department's name out of the rubber part of the stamp with an exacto-knife.

The stamp used to be a pervasive artifact within Brazilian public organizations like Enap, interacting with bureaucrats from all levels of hierarchy. However, they might differ in the ways their material attributes are manifested, as well as where they are stored, according to the positions of their corresponding public servants. Some people in leadership positions would hold automatic self-inking stamps—the ones that contain an ink pad within their bodies and make a satisfying click when in action—in a visual and sound distinction from the common rubber stamp described above. They would also be stored in a drawer or in a stamp holder, an artifact designed exclusively for keeping stamps organized and preventing the remaining ink to touch other objects, under the care of a secretary or assistant. This person, a role often occupied by women, would keep the stamps safely stored and at hand when important documents needed to be signed. The assistant, alongside the protocol

official, usually masters the etiquette around stamping official documents. Assembling official paperwork requires a specific choreography that demands time, labor, and connections. Collecting the correct stamps and signatures to move with a process would enable encounters between public servants and the circulation of strategic information between areas. At the same time, it enacts a serious ethos of the institutions in which communications and decisions of all sorts should be recorded and given in *officialese*, making servants become extremely careful about when to issue stamped paperwork or just give a call to a colleague. One servant shared that he abhors misassembled paperwork with the wrong stamping and formatting, as well as misusing an official document that could have been an email.

We are using the past tense to describe many of the stamp's duties and contexts of use, because this is one of the most prominent liminal artifacts of our collection, one that currently lives in a transitory space between existence and imminent extinction—or between efficiency and obsolescence. These antinomic qualities reflect the often association of the stamp as an embodiment or a metonym of bureaucracy as a whole.

As a technological form of administration and power in the narratives of modernity,⁴² the stamp meant a more impersonal ritual that enacted the mechanical performativity of state processes. However, as bureaucratic models were implemented and distorted in response to different local contexts, stamps became many times the symbol for bureaucratic dysfunctions, such as excessive formalism and ritualization of mundane tasks. A servant shared when he, extraordinarily, occupied a cabinet-level position, his work was jeopardized because the new stamp did not arrive on time, preventing him from signing official orders with celerity. Particularly at times of digital transformation, the stamp stands out as a contrasting object with an overall negative connotation. An engaged civil servant told us that he was proud to have contributed to the retirement of the stamp in the Brazilian government, by helping implement an internal electronic system. In his words, »The end of the stamp means a possibility, a proposition of changing this distorted image of public administration as something slow, something formal, something that delivers nothing, that is incapable of being agile and of self-transformation.«⁴³

Ordinary Administrative Acts

In the last category, Ordinary Administrative Acts, we observed that objects furnish space for negotiating the commons. In a heavily regulated and risk-averse context such as the state, objects mediate and generate tensions between public vs. private, surplus vs. scarcity, and official vs. unofficial. An exemplary specimen of this category is the coffee carafe.

A coffee carafe is an insulating storage vessel designed to keep liquids warm for a longer period of time. In Brazilian bureaucracies, it can be found in corridors, waiting areas and kitchenettes, and it offers coffee to civil servants during their work time at no additional cost. It usually comes in pairs, un- and sweetened coffee, identified by often handwritten labels attached by a clear tape to the plastic body of the artifact. The carafes are surrounded by supporting artifacts: silver tray, sugar-dispenser, Stevia bottles, plastic cups, and plastic sticks. They might also be accompanied by objects that add a touch of care, such as white

embroidered towels, flower vases, informal signs like »take a moment to pause and appreciate a good coffee«. In Enap, specific people are placed in charge of the maintaining the coffee carafe—a role called »copeira« in Portuguese. The »copeiras« usually master the etiquette and institutional choreography around coffee—where to place the carafe, when to replace it, how to serve it, who is entitled to a china cup vs. plastic cup—at the same time adding levels of coziness to the experience. That role adds to the everydayness associated with the carafe, in an ambiguity between public and private spheres in the Brazilian context—offering a cup of coffee for someone visiting your office regardless of the purpose is as natural as brewing coffee for a guest in your home, as noted by a servant. Despite the level of maintenance around the coffee carafe, the coffee itself is of questionable quality. The institution buys it at scale through procurement processes which, according to one civil servant, only describe »the minimum requirements for a liquid to be considered coffee.«⁴⁴ For this person, the coffee is associated with bitterness—»that's why people exaggerate in sugar«⁴⁵—and a lack of care of who will drink it, which is the reason why many departments buy their own coffee machine and split the costs among themselves.

This apparently simple and mundane artifact has many meanings and contexts of use. No matter the quality, the collective coffee carafe is still an important marker of work routines in the civil service. It often marks the beginning of work shifts as someone gets a coffee when passing the carafe to »wake them up« before getting to their workstation, both in the morning and after lunch. Associated with the small cups of coffee in Brazilian culture (»cafezinho«), people drink only small portions of coffee every time, strategically using those moments. That is because the most important non-prescriptive everyday use of the carafe is as an informal meeting spot, which can help accelerate decision making moments through seemingly casual encounters. Civil servants often invite each other to a coffee both to have a pause from the workday, but also to leave the office for a moment and make informal comments with more discretion. People also make visits to the carafe in other floors in the hope of meeting civil servants from different teams, many times as a way of acquiring information through non-official

ORDINARY
ADMINISTRATIVE ACTS

ARTIFACT #010 | BR

COFFEE
CARAFEMATERIAL
ATTRIBUTES

Black plastic insulated carafe with coffee with handle to carry

Pair of labels identifying un- and sweetened coffee

Supporting items, such as silver tray, plastic cups and sugar holder

DUTIES

→ Inaugurate meetings and a workday

→ Offer a break from work

→ Create space for information exchange

→ Stimulate conversations between meetings

→ Hear through the grapevine

RELATIONSHIPS

Street- and mid-level bureaucrats, coffee, kitchenware, mugs, tray, plastic cups, sugar holder, coffee machines

WONDERS IDENTIFIED

Integration, gossip, productivity, care, bitterness, articulation

Specimen found at the National School of Public Administration.

Figure 7: Coffee carafe file within the Ordinary Administrative Acts folder, Image: CBW

means. The coffee carafe also witnesses contentious moments between servants, bringing to the surface challenges around office etiquette and mediating the commons through ad-hoc signage and improvised solutions for problems that affect the daily life of the office—cleanliness, shared provisions, celebrations, maintenance, and procurement of supplies. More than that, those gatherings and norms around the coffee carafe show a deep understanding of the »rules of the game«, mostly offering the power of articulation and integration, and helping decide when to begin a process through official means. Skilled servants know exactly what kind of coffee to push forward depending on the context and desired outcome, whether it be a quick chat in the pantry, a visit to a carafe on a different floor, a conversation starter before a meeting, or a more reserved space outside of the agency.

The multiplicity of the coffee carafe and the way it orchestrates everyday arrangements make it a dear companion of the public routine, an agent of government in its own right.⁴⁶ In contrast with the negative connotations of the stamp, civil servants make positive associations with the carafe—it was one of the most

missed artifacts from the office during pandemic times, when people stayed at home and missed both the space for camaraderie and for extra-official communication. Similarly, when there was a reduction in costs in the Federal Government, and Enap responded by cutting the offerings of coffee in the corridors, there was a surprising commotion among a group of civil servants, who made the argument that coffee was fundamental for their productivity. One of them argued that that alone was enough reason to call a strike.

Discussion: Categories, wonders, porosities

In a designerly and participatory manner, we came to learn ways in which mundane artifacts perform agency in bureaucratic offices, and what some of the most prominent powers expressed by artifacts in our research site were. In this paper, we illustrated our learnings through a brief description of three specimens of our collection—the lapel pin, a symbolic colonial relic strongly associated with hierarchy and access; the

stamp, often seen as a metonym of the civil service and in the imminence of extinction; and the coffee carafe, in its outstanding powers of conviviality and articulation. Our intention was not only to illustrate each of our categories, but also to provide an entry point to the multiplicity of wonders that coexist in this space, giving a fragmented overview of the CBW.

In this section, we bring a few questions and discussions that emerged throughout the process of the CBW, both from its conception and the interactions with civil servants. We will start with reflections about designing categories and what they have enabled us to learn, followed by articulations of the learnings themselves, connecting back to our interrogation about institutions in contemporary times.

Categories to think with and act with

In the process of making both an imaginary institution and a temporary archive, adopting and designing categories was helpful to promote ongoing reflection, itself representing an appropriation of curatorial and bureaucratic procedures and being attuned to languages used to name and archive things.⁴⁷ The categories helped us to facilitate conversations not only about singular artifacts, but also the relationships between files, including when categories felt insufficient to address the complexities and multiplicities of artifacts. Artifacts like the telephone, which lives under Internal Corrections, could also be placed both in the Employee Records given its relationship to specific individuals and material attributes that distinguish levels of hierarchy, or in the Ordinary Administrative Acts, when they are shared between more than one civil servant and allow for conversations to be overheard by others in the room. We chose to place it in the yellow folders to highlight the most prominent powers of controlling the pace and priorities of actions, as described by our participants.

During our conversations and analysis, the categories to describe each artifact in its individual file—material attributes, relationships and duties—offered granular guiding lenses to understand ways in which agency is performed; whereas the macro-categories of folders—Employee Records, Internal Corrections and Ordinary Administrative Acts—helped us give names to which

agency or power is being enacted, unpacking the wonder qualities identified in the process. We can observe how these categories work together in the dynamic enactment of powers in institutional landscapes like Enap, configuring institutional compositions and their affordances.

As the examples show, many times the stories about civil servants hacking artifacts very effectively reveal virtual powers and how they were embodied, be it in their form, meshwork of relations, or actions performed. Those hacking moments might be just ways to acknowledge and reaffirm the power in place, as well as renounce or undermine it by cutting-off the rubber stamp to not sign a document on behalf of the whole department, or softly contest who gets to enjoy the power by borrowing the lapel pin from someone in a higher position.⁴⁸

Wonders of sociomaterial infrastructures

The interactions revealed the usual and therefore apparently invisible ways that institutions and their dynamics are shaped by such sociomaterial entanglements and the powers they enact—of hierarchy and influence of gender in the case of the pin, of the ambiguous efficiency and obsolescence of the stamp, of integration and political articulation of the carafe. At the same time, these powers shape back the fields of action. In other words, they play a role in systems of governance, if we go back to Mazé's analysis of Foucauldian governmentality as structuring fields of action in institutions.⁴⁹ That means fields of action (and institutions themselves) are structured not only by formal rules of conduct, but also the interplay of infrastructures in terms of their material attributes, sets of relationships and social contracts, as well as contexts of use.

Wonder was a suitable expression here, evoking a liminal quality that encapsulates complex powers and the coexistence of opposites. The sense of potential and enchantment has allowed us to see each artifact as an exception, avoiding generalizations and helping us understand in more detail the conditions that smaller dynamic components might create underneath, and at the same time beyond, general institutional structures.

We came to learn that these are spaces beyond binaries where there are no fixed meanings and antinomic powers might be revealed. They can constrain behavior—a pin may not be worn by women who fear its damage to their garments—while they can also offer conditions for unexpected action—a pin is a small mobile artifact that someone can borrow from their boss for special occasions. In the sociomaterial mediation of such fields of action that emerge from compositions of infrastructures, we are learning how intangible systems of powers might be reproduced, reinforced, renounced, subverted. In that sense, the wonders we identified in the CBW reveal bureaucracy as a contested space, one that might perpetuate systems of oppression while also offering opportunities for adaptation and critique from within entrenched structures.

Institutions as porous spaces

All things considered, the CBW might be a way to demonstrate that the politics and governance capacities in institutional spaces like Enap rely on the deep understanding of the formal and informal rules of the sociomaterial infrastructure that shape the institutional apparatus. Through the CBW, we learned ways in which civil servants manipulate everyday artifacts for different reasons and with different levels of consciousness. That requires a specific expertise in the tacit perception and apprehension of both tangible and intangible languages and patterns, as well as in the imaginative responses through actions that appropriate local conditions. Curiously, the research site, Enap, is not only an institution that positions itself within agendas of modernization and digital transformation, but it is also set out to professionalize civil service, formally training people to perform their duties and responsibilities. Learning about ways that civil servants manipulate their institution as part of their daily routines opens up new questions of what professionalism might entail in this context. The specificities of Enap also reinforces that institutions are not monoliths, but dynamic and contingent sites.⁵⁰

Additionally, to some extent, the CBW was an opportunity for civil servants to encounter their institution under new terms, through defamiliarization

activities that gave visibility to how sociomaterial infrastructures are deeply entangled in systems of governance and mediate dynamics of power. We experienced moments of frustration or anger, when civil servants noticed the power imbalance evidenced by how the association of agents and their relationalities not only reflected existing disbalanced structures, but also contributed to increasing the hierarchical differentiation between civil servants. The influence of gender, particularly through the lapel pin and coat hanger, was described with irritation and irony by civil servants. At the same time, these same people offered possibilities of re-appropriation or subversion of such effects, by for example using them for other purposes, e.g., positioning the coat hanger, usually reserved for private offices, in shared spaces of the department, or placing the lapel pin in a bag alongside pins from events and social causes.

The design anthropology approach enacted through productive encounters allowed for a critical and dynamic interaction with our research artifacts and were not trying to bring solutions in a more traditional design approach, but were rather attempting to reveal paradoxes that influence the space of possibilities of this institutional site. From the activation of such understanding by civil servants, which in some cases was already perceived and, in others, a surprising realization, the aim was to provide a space for critical engagement with an expanded perception of their own institutional work and agency, as well as ways they might be reproducing systems of oppression, renouncing possibilities of power, or subverting familiar rituals of use.

That brings us back to our own positionality, acknowledging the previous attachment of two of the researchers to Enap, and attending to our own professional and personal commitments. In that way, the research was not only situated in a site that was familiar, but also actively involved the support in the production and in the participation in interactions of members of our communities of practice. Thus, we attempted to create careful and generative spaces for critical reflection, promoting meaningful engagements with participants that are part of the institution. We find resonances and inspirations with calls for situatedness of practice and partial knowledge, questioning

hegemonies of science and what counts as rational knowledge,⁵¹ and acknowledging our experiential understanding of contextual nuances and sensitivities as deeply entangled in the research process.

Finally, the participatory lens of the practice heightens the sensibility towards an approach to institutional critique that brings forward the realization that institutionalization is not only an ongoing process, but also a collective one that requires deep understanding of the porosities of structures that one is embedded in.

Closing remarks

In every enumeration, there are two contradictory temptations. The first is to list everything, the second is to forget something. The first would like to close off the question once and for all, the second to leave it open. (Georges Perec)⁵²

The Cabinet of Bureaucratic Wonders is a practice-based design research project that investigated existing power dynamics and conditions of contingency in institutions through productive encounters between human and non-human public agents. In this paper, we focused on the instantiation of the CBW in relation to Enap, with a few exceptions of interactions with civil servants from other public organizations in Brazil, from March 2021 to May 2022.

The research was situated within the Covid-19 pandemic, which limited the quantity and quality of interactions with participants, and conditioned digital only materializations of the project for the first months. We then experienced a transition to physical installations, following a window of Covid-19 attenuation, and curiously performing an inverse version of the digital transformation movement in the Brazilian government. In response to the locations and institutional attachments of the researchers, the project also involved research phases and installations in the United States, including an interactive exhibition held on April 7–9 2022 in the Kellen Gallery space at Parsons School of Design, in New York City, among others.⁵³

Selected portions of the archive, both from the Brazilian and American contexts, can be accessed through a bilingual publication in the format of a zine.⁵⁴ The provisional format of the zine reflects the conceptual choices of the CBW as an incomplete and open archive, and was created with the aim of providing an experiential and partial entry point to the archive for practitioners working in intersections of design and administration.

Our expected contributions of this paper include offering a practice lens to engaging from within institutions, as dynamic and porous systems of sociomaterial infrastructures that can be contested and re-configured. We believe that the design-led methodological approach of creating a temporary institution to defamiliarize existing structures allowed civil servants to encounter their own institution in new terms, revealing agentic effects of sociomaterial infrastructures and using the ambiguity of the word wonder to complicate dialectics of disenchantment and re-enchantment of bureaucracies through aesthetic attunement. Instead of an exhaustive archive, we hope that the CBW remains as a thought experiment and an invitation for continuous critical engagement with institutional sites in their multiplicity of components and compositions.

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Abstract

The »Cabinet of Bureaucratic Wonders« (CBW) is a collection of mundane, yet wondrous artifacts found in public sector facilities and co-curated by public servants in Brazil and in the United States. At once an institution, an archive, and an intervention, the CBW draws from design anthropology methods to invite participants to productive encounters with bureaucratic artifacts through interviews, cultural probes, workshops, and site-specific installations. This paper focuses on the CBW instantiation with the Brazilian National School of Public Administration to discuss broader contributions in revealing the agency of sociomaterial infrastructures and engaging with public institutions as porous sites of transformation.

About the Authors

The »Cabinet of Bureaucratic Wonders« is a collaboration between Lucas Vaqueiro, Judy Park Lee, and Isabella Brandalise, and was developed as part of their master's and doctoral research projects, with the support of the 2022 Visiting Researchers Fellowship program at the Brazilian National School of Public Administration.

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