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Governing with Urban Labs

Serge Wachter

Within the European Union, Urban Labs now figure prominently in the urban governance toolbox. On the local stage, they are seen as auxiliaries that encourage citizen participation with a view to co-constructing policies designed to improve the quality of housing and the built environment. Their versatility is remarkable and they are used both to boost new approaches to planning, such as tactical urbanism, and to renew the regeneration policies of large social housing areas.

On the way to experimentation and innovation

The emergence of Urban Labs as constituent parts of a new model of governance has been stimulated by the combination of a series of factors creating an 'ecosystem' that has allowed them to flourish. In particular, the uncertainties and tensions linked to the risks generated by the ecological transition have prepared a solid ground for reorienting planning practices. This vision of risk has also opened up a space of opportunity by creating a new urban offering that Urban Labs have been able to infiltrate.

In this respect, Harriet Buckley believes that experimental methods in the field of local policy, in particular those aimed at fighting climate change, are booming¹. They especially target planning policies and lend themselves to approaches that put hypotheses to the test in a concrete sense and provide the means to apply the trial-and-error method and to adjust tools through successive approximations. In so doing, these approaches follow the principles of incrementalism and of the continuous adaptation of intervention modes. Such flexibility is a key asset or resource that facilitates the adjustment and management of development projects. It provides room for manoeuvre when dealing with the dilemmas, conflicts and contradictions found in housing and urban policies². In short, and to echo four experts, we must recognise that ecological and energy transition policies include ingredients that essentially revolve around the following key words: 'experimentation, learning, reflexivity and reversibility'³. These characteristics form the pillars of a new method for regulating local public action.

From this standpoint it is important to emphasise that both theoretical approaches and empirical studies carried out in different urban and organisational contexts show that Living Labs, or more precisely Urban Labs, are highly experimental tools. Their hybrid nature and their position on the fringes or at the intersection of various local public action "ecosystems" make it possible for them to encourage new institutional arrangements and innovative cooperation. This naturally supposes specific properties of conception or design and their operational implementation. Observing a cycle of experiments related to an Urban Living Lab set up in Greater Manchester, specialists carrying out "action research" concluded that this example of experimentation illustrates "how the practice of ULL may involve different forms and techniques for learning, shielding, nurturing, empowering and participating within ULL"⁴. Moreover, drawing on the lessons learned from the implementation of 40 Urban Living Labs in Europe, influential and no less eminent

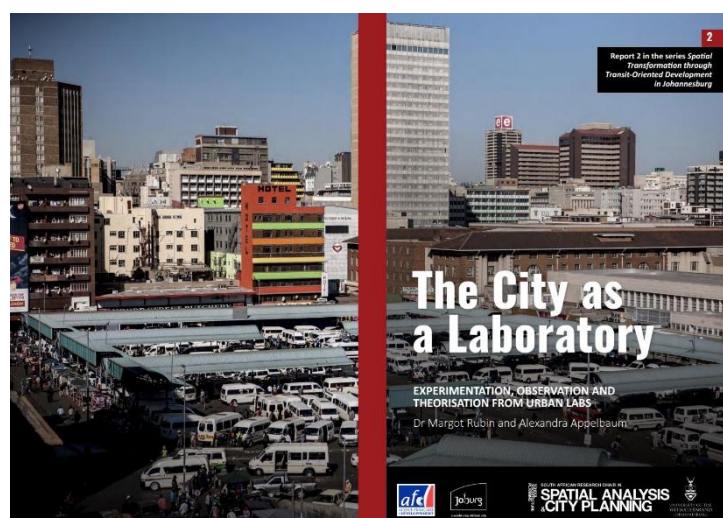
¹ H. Bulkeley, V. Castan Broto, A. Maasen (Eds): *"Governing urban low carbon transition"*, in H. Bulkeley, V. Castan Broto, M. Hodson, S. Marvin: *Cities and low carbon transition*, pp 29-41, Routledge, 2011, see also Simon Marvin, Harriet Bulkeley, Lindsay Mai, Kes McCormick, Yuliya Voytenko Palgan Eds, *Urban Living Labs, Experimenting with city futures*, ebook published 3 may 2018, Routledge, London.

² F. Severini, W. Salet, M. Markins, Amsterdam: regulation dilemma in Ijburg and Overamstel, Aprilab, Regulation dilemma report, 2015.

³ Timo von Wirth, Lea Fuenfschilling, Niki Frantzeskaki & Lars Coenen: "Impacts of urban living labs on sustainability transitions: mechanisms and strategies for systemic change through experimentation", *European Planning Studies*, 27:2, 229-257.

⁴ Simon Marvin, Harriet Bulkeley, Lindsay Mai, Kes McCormick, Yuliya Voytenko Palgan (Eds), *Urban Living Labs, Experimenting with city futures*, conclusions, op cit.

experts in the academic arena declared *ex abrupto* that Urban Labs are excellent tools with which to steer experimental towns⁵. It is important to note that the term 'experimental city' is new and revealing. We believe it is rich in meaning in order to underline the growing importance of experimentation in the 'software' of local urban planning policies. Above all else, it introduces - dare we say it - an epistemological watershed that invites us to observe and analyse interventions in the field of planning from a fresh perspective. In the light of the new approaches shown in these case studies, it must therefore be admitted that urban policies deserve to be increasingly considered, studied - and implemented - through the prism of experimentation. Indeed, "the recent upsurge of interest in the experimental city as an arena within and through which urban sustainability is governed, marks not only the emergence of the proliferation of forms of experimentation – from novel governance arrangements to demonstration projects, transition management processes to grassroots innovations – but also an increasing sensibility amongst the research community that urban interventions can be regarded in experimental terms."⁶



The City as a Laboratory: Experimentation, Observation and Theorisation from Urban Labs

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In this light, authors who are familiar with the development of recommendations and roadmaps for Urban Labs clearly state that: "Urban Living Labs (ULL) are considered spaces to facilitate experimentation about sustainability solutions"⁷. Has experimentation become the "*ultima ratio*" of local policies and of planning policies in particular? There is no doubt that, according to this vision, Urban Labs stand out, if not as the key component of these experimental approaches, at least as precious auxiliaries seeking to integrate the citizens' voice into ecological transition programmes. It is undeniable that a little local democracy cannot harm planning programmes. In reality, experimentation is characterised not only by practical activities but also by a cognitive process that leads to the production of shared knowledge. The result is a common wealth of data, reflections and knowledge through which a dialogue can be initiated around a 'shared' project. Experimentation offers a support and a vehicle for the consideration of long-term visions and short-term measures in the form of concrete actions and practices. It relates to collective research and exploration, a maieutic in which "a broad suite of stakeholders like firms, universities and actors from government and civil

⁵ Cf. H. Buckley, S. Marvin, Y. Voytenko & al. "Urban Living Laboratories, Conducting the experimental city?" European Urban and Regional Studies, Volume 26 Issue 4, October 2019

⁶ Ibid, p 1

⁷ Timo von Wirth, Lea Fuenfschilling, Niki Frantzeskaki & Lars Coenen: "Impacts of urban living labs on sustainability transitions: mechanisms and strategies for systemic change through experimentation", op, cit p 227.

society are navigating, negotiating (and ideally) reducing uncertainty about new socio-technical innovations through real-world experiments, gaining knowledge and experience along the way in an iterative learning-by-doing and doing-by-learning process”⁸.

As we can see, experimentation represents both a conceptual turning point and a reference to empirical practices designed to offer shared operational solutions to the challenges of urban ecological transition. This makes it possible to introduce into these new methodologies, parameters that take into account the needs and practices of the inhabitants during collaborative planning sessions. These approaches are not limited to in vogue energy transition. By extension, they are spreading to all sectors of local public action and constitute a point of reference, a corpus of best practices that also inspire urban regeneration programmes. It should be noted that the latter are active in places and neighbourhoods where citizen participation is, if not very weak, at least leaves a lot to be desired.

Looking more closely, we should emphasise that Urban Labs are 'political beings' that are constantly undergoing evolution and transformation. In a way, they are going through a Darwinian selection process, the outcome of which might allow only the best to survive. In particular, they are continually changing the boundaries of their jurisdiction by integrating new partnerships and new actors with whom to explore new modes of action. This experimental nature leads to solutions and scenarios being tested by diversifying local collaborations within new partner networks. This makes it possible to find new ways to test hybrid programmes for urban sustainability. The result is governance 'puzzle', the components and operation of which are evolving and appear fragile, yet often prove to be surprisingly effective, resilient and long-lived. This is nothing new. But there is more: these political regimes, as Clarence Stone would say, of which Urban Labs are a part, offer the wherewithal to overcome the classic opposition between top-down and bottom-up approaches to urban planning. Indeed, Urban Labs' 'intelligent engineering' offers the means to develop a new type of 'lateral partnership' which reinvents collaborative planning approaches. This opens the way to new inter-sectoral cooperation that creates shared knowledge within a network of actors engaged in local climate policies.

In this respect, it should be noted that “experimentation is distinguished as a new mode of governance”⁹. It encourages the use of innovative approaches that break away from the routines of "standard" planning policies that are implemented without risk and which lead to "guaranteed and secure" results. In this sense, experimental policies turn their backs on the modernist dream or illusion of total control of urban dynamics which had been the golden era of technocratic and centralised planning. It should be noted that they combine, in an innovative duo, experimentation and citizen participation in the principles and *modus operandi* of collaborative planning. *De facto*, researchers working with Living Labs underline the fact that these experimental practices open the way to new urban regulations that deserve to be analysed in the light of the concept of 'soft governance' or 'informal governance'¹⁰. These expressions are by no means insignificant; they relate to new practices for the coordination of collective action in the field of planning policy. Widespread urban experimentation is thus associated with a new, highly contemporary and 'very gentle' art of governing people and things. With this orientation, researchers understand Urban Labs 'as informal and temporary soft spaces of urban governance'¹¹. The latter make it possible to explore various scenarios and opportunities for the application and implementation of Soft Governance. It is worth noting that this new mode of regulation is constantly being challenged, revisited and evaluated in arenas of deliberation that bring together the various protagonists of a 'local political regime'. At the same time, searching for legitimacy, it explores all possible ways and platforms for citizen participation in local decision-making. This is undoubtedly both advantageous and a

⁸ Ibid, p 231

⁹ Christian Scholl and René Kemp, “City Labs as Vehicles for Innovation in Urban Planning Processes”, p 89, Urban Planning 2016, Volume 1, Issue 4

¹⁰ Cf C. Scholl, R. Kemp, J. de Krater: “City Labs as instruments to shape common ground on urban sustainability”, ICIS Maastricht University, 2016, see also “Experiments and innovation in soft urban planning: urban living labs”, Casual Policy Brief # 3, CASUAL, June 2016

¹¹ Lukas Smas, Peter Schmitt, Liisa Perjo, Moa Tunström, “Positioning Urban Labs – a New Form of Smart Governance?” REAL CORP 2016 Proceedings/Tagungsband, 22-24 June 2016, <http://www.corp.at>

break away from the top-down and 'legal-bureaucratic' visions, to use Max Weber's expression. In particular, City Labs turn their backs on these hierarchical visions. They aim to represent cutting-edge soft governance tools for experimenting with new approaches and practices in the field of 'collaborative planning'¹². Is this soft governance the expression of a new form of local power which also claims to co-construct the city with the inhabitants? Does it constitute a welcoming ground, a favourable ecosystem for the development of Urban Labs?

Living Labs and tactical urbanism

Spontaneously or as a result of interests or strategies, new approaches to planning are emerging and adapting to this new regime of budgetary austerity and managerial adjustment orchestrated by the State. The latter is exploring or, more accurately, experimenting with the ways and means of a Soft Governance that aims to incorporate 'inhabitants' opinions' into its guiding principles and *modus operandi*. This trend is of course having a knock-on effect on the ways of managing cities and other local public administrations. This is particularly true of the 'tactical' urban planning approaches that have been gaining ground in recent years. Soft Governance, the rise of experimental practices and the development of Urban Labs are, if not the pillars, then at least the backdrop to these new approaches.

The term tactical urbanism covers a variety of practices that have in common a collaborative base that generally brings together a range of actors with a view to developing alternative planning practices in order to offer goods and services outside the rationale of market rules. The most prominent of these actors are associations, architects' collectives and other representatives of civil society. There is a connection between these approaches and the various forms of production and management of common goods that are governed by a collaborative spirit and a direction that is guided more by an ethic of sharing than by the individual appropriation of resources. It is also important to note that temporary urbanism is characterised by the new activities and functions that are put in place in the spaces and buildings they occupy or in which they are involved, and identified by the term "third places". Living Labs, Fab Labs and co-working spaces are very often included in the programming and realisation of temporary urbanism operations and it is very common for these activities and services specific to 'third places' to be present on the premises and sites where these ephemeral operations are carried out. It is worth noting that some authors liken these various forms of temporary occupation to a specific category of Living Labs that can be set up more specifically in wastelands or disused spaces in order to develop them and 'co-design' goods and services intended to meet local demand.

These transitional urbanism practices have gained impetus over recent years. Some believe that they are open up new avenues for planning policies in which different notions of civic sense and citizenship can find means and channels to express themselves. They emerge and fit into the nooks and crannies of an urban planning and project-based urbanism that is considered to be lacking in innovation and in search of renewal or, even better, 'reinvention'. These 'non-standard' approaches are genetically related to Living Labs and in most cases incorporate their main ingredients: innovation, experimentation, learning-by-doing, participation of users and the various stakeholders. This trend is nurtured by approaches that promote urban sustainability in all its forms, ranging from shared gardens to short circuits and edible landscapes provided by urban agriculture, along with provisional or temporary installations and architecture in public spaces designed to house and accommodate various collaborative activities that generally follow the 'DIY' and 'grassroots initiative' philosophy. It surfs the fashionable and trendy approaches that advocate recycling and short circuits by blithely denouncing waste, the "socially irresponsible carbon footprint" of current development and construction activities and the absence of other efforts to protect the planet. In the same spirit, it promotes the values and practices of collaboration in the fields of uses and services ranging from carpooling and the pooling of resources to the sharing of local goods previously managed by the sacrosanct right of ownership. Its members or sympathisers are generally sensitive to the fashionable representations advocating a drive towards a 'frugal city' model - not to say a 'slow city' - applying at all levels, for individuals and local communities, the values and practices of sobriety - if not austerity. It should be added that in the rhetoric of presentation and other justifications for these experiments one often finds a moralistic slant that stigmatises the 'climatically incorrect'

¹² Cf C. Scholl and R. Kemp, "*City labs as vehicles for innovation in urban processes*", op cit, p 91

and environmentally insensitive approaches of 'standard' planning visions. These practices of the collaborative economy are of course widely encouraged and stimulated by digital platforms and social networks giving access to information on opportunities for exchange, sharing and access to local collective goods and services. This collaborative urbanism or even common goods urbanism, which, let us not forget, more often than not operates on the fringes of the dominant urban planning logics, was described in his time by H. Lefèvre as the expression of the "urbanism of men of good will".



With tactical urbanism, public space becomes a testing ground — Libération, 3 May 2020

Such visions are encouraged by urban coalitions which, willingly or not, stimulate and accompany these alternative practices that break away from 'standard' approaches to planning. These 'urbanism margins' are often incorporated into innovative approaches launched by towns wishing to offer real estate products and hybrid services that unite private developers and collectives or associations, if not from the 'social and solidarity sphere', then at least distancing themselves from profit and market rationales. We should add that they embody the practical aspect of an approach and methodology inspired by innovative experimental approaches that are user-centred and participatory and that are apt to receive the Living Lab label¹³.

Some observers have interpreted this trend as being a gradual shift from one-off or isolated approaches towards the consecration of a future 'mainstream' of urban policy¹⁴. This would seem excessive, even though many local authorities have incorporated this type of urbanism into their planning and political agendas. Are these emerging practices likely to take root in the metropolitan landscape? It is true that the 'collaborative urban factory' has found success with indulgent audiences. "Urban modernists" have indeed become infatuated with this type of experience, which combines informality, creativity and the festive culture that these approaches convey. In Western metropolises in particular, this preference expresses 'post-materialistic' aspirations carried by social circles and urban places going through a process of gentrification. It is clear that some local authorities are surfing this wave by capturing and winning the loyalty of sympathisers, followers or clients. Are we seeing the rise of a new model destined to become, if not dominant, then at least part of common, routine practices that are well-placed on the planning agenda? Yes, certainly, but at the scale of micro-projects located on the fringes of urban production that while ordinary, is nevertheless the most massively structuring, of housing, equipment and infrastructure operations. For this is the destiny of this alternative urbanism: to intervene on the fringes, in the loopholes and interstices of development policies. Geographically speaking, interstice is the right word, because the elective sites of tactical urbanism are essentially abandoned zones, wastelands, unoccupied land waiting to be used. Popular and high-profile, it nevertheless only very moderately affects the essential internal workings of the production and functioning of urban fabrics.

In fact, the visibility and media coverage of these operations are inversely proportional to their real capacity to have significant effects on the urban layout. These projects also struggle to stand the test of time:

¹³ Cf L. Canapero, F. Benavero, "*Neighbourhood regeneration at the grassroots participation: incubator co-creative process and system*", International journal of architectural research, Vol 10, Issue 2 – July 2016, pp 204-218

¹⁴ Voir N. Douay et M. Prévot, « *Circulation d'un modèle urbain alternatif ? Le cas de l'urbanisme tactique et de sa réception à Paris*, Echo Géo 36, Avril-Juin 2016

their nature obeys the temporal cycles of the event and of temporary installations. Either way, this is neither dramatic nor deplorable, as the intent or ambition of temporary urbanism is not to change the architecture of the city! It is important to note that, in the most favourable contexts, these approaches convey values and 'positive feelings' which will spread through imitation and which open up promising avenues and new principles for planning policies. Last but not least, temporary urban planning approaches rely on collective intelligence, the production of common goods and cooperation; for better or for worse they disseminate values of sharing and solidarity. In other words, their message is benevolent and offers a glimpse of avenues and possibilities for the creation of planning projects away from the hazards of real estate development. In this respect, they should be congratulated; they deserve to be encouraged, evaluated and channelled¹⁵. The rising number of such experiments nevertheless raises one question: is this collaborative model not the prerogative of metropolitanism - even more so in gentrified neighbourhoods with no real power to disseminate into disadvantaged areas, be they social housing neighbourhoods or low-density rural areas? In other words, just like temporary urban planning, Living Labs are still far from having won over the sensitive areas prioritised by city policy¹⁶!

For all of the above-mentioned reasons, at a minimal - one might say cosmetic - level, and in many respects, ephemeral urbanism is on the road to institutionalisation. Indeed, we can see that many institutions in charge of planning have appropriated the language and codes of this transitory urbanism. The latter now seems to have been incorporated, or even digested, into/by urban strategies for the production of the so-called 'creative' neo-liberal city. All in all, one has to admit that "tactical urbanism is an essential new element of contemporary urban policy in metropolises that are caught up in the logic of competition to attract investment, creators and tourists".¹⁷

Governing with Urban Labs

When broadening the picture, one is forced to admit that the political and institutional forces behind this new urban offer - and the instruments that accompany it, such as the Urban Labs - are subject to a new system of relationships between the State and local actors. This model is also influencing social behaviour and the values that drive it by amplifying and intensifying the individualisation of society. In France, since the introduction of decentralisation, many functions and responsibilities have been transferred to local authorities. This slimming down process has accelerated over recent years and the State has continued and extended this transfer of important areas of public affairs management outside its sovereign perimeter. As H. Regnier points out, the transfer of full responsibility for the implementation and coherence of a growing number of state programmes to local authorities and their territorial partners was achieved in return for new forms of framing and control of their action through financial supervision, competition for access to national resources, the setting of standards and the awarding of labels, and the promotion of good practice¹⁸. *De facto*, such changes are implemented by using new instruments of state intervention in its territories that are less prescriptive and which open up a range of choices and opportunities for innovation to local actors: the definition of reference systems and guidelines, benchmarking, calls for projects and, last but not least, recourse to mediation and participation mechanisms with inhabitants/users such as Living Labs or Urban Labs.

Such developments have as their backdrop the rise of remote government, a new form of regulation granting additional management capabilities and initiatives to the private sector and local authorities. The state is withdrawing from its territories, outsourcing functions by redistributing tasks and responsibilities and regulating local public action from afar. At the same time, this trend goes hand in hand with the consolidation and weight of a moral and cultural climate conducive to the dissemination of values and norms that accentuate

¹⁵ Some observers consider the experience of the occupation of the ZAD Notre Dames des Landes site by squatters to be emblematic of tactical urbanism. See "Notre Dame des Landes" the website of the Laboratoire d'Urbanisme Insurrectionnel

¹⁶ Cf Emmanuel Roux, Quentin Marron, "*Les Living Labs, de nouveaux dispositifs d'action publique pour penser les métropoles et les territoires*", Canadian Journal of Regional Science, Canadian Regional Science Association, 2017, *Living Labs*, innovation sociale et territoire, 40 (1), pp.33-41.

¹⁷ N. Douay et M. Prévot, op, cit p 18

¹⁸ Hélène Reigner: *Sous les pavés de la qualité urbaine. Gouvernement des territoires, gouvernement des conduites et formes renouvelées de la domination dans la ville néohygiéniste*. Science politique. Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, 2013. tel-00842287

and accelerate the transformation of the social body into a society of individuals. These trends amplify and strengthen the entrepreneurial watershed that has been at work in western urban societies since the 1990s.

By extending R. Epstein's argument, it is possible to view this process as a form of vigorous empowerment of local and urban political systems, a hypermodern *modus operandi* of power and of technologies of governmentality.¹⁹ To simplify, we can say that in this schema, local actors, and more broadly individuals and civil society, are invited - obliged? - to show initiative in finding solutions to the problems and difficulties they face. In truth, empowerment - and one of its vectors and supports objectified by the Living Labs - is not only a citizen mobilisation but also a form of power that releases energies, innovation and capacities for action. We can see that when they exist or are available, it is a question of bringing out, exploiting and valorising local skills and resources. But we need to understand that this process simultaneously leads to domination, coercion and submission to a new standard, thus placing individuals and the groups they form under a duty to take initiative, be autonomous and take charge of improving their quality of life. Through the Living Labs, the new spirit of capitalism also infuses local public management and approaches to planning²⁰. In the final analysis, do these empowerment practices not reflect the fundamental values and principles of liberal regimes founded on the love of human and citizen rights, with the ultimate aim of achieving freedom and individual emancipation?

It is worth noting that government at a distance is coupled with government by instruments. The latter is illustrated by the implementation of policies for activation, the allocation of duties and responsibilities to inhabitants and users and to their groups on the one hand, and to local actors on the other, cities in particular. In this context, the appearance and rise of Living Labs in urban regulation is one of the instrumental facets of, and an illustration of, the rise of this form of government.

But there is more: according to eminent researchers who have theoretically and empirically investigated the *raison d'être* and *modus operandi* of many Urban Living Labs in Europe, in different urban contexts, they can be considered as supports for two main strengths on which urban governance is based. They are the expression of a new way of solving urban problems, one that calls for innovation, experimentation and citizen participation in situations marked by uncertainty or contingencies, and where a multitude of actors are led to deliberate and negotiate in order to reach compromises. This is now well-known and we can agree that Urban Labs have emerged as possible means of providing solutions or desirable improvements to situations that pose problems and call for new tools or new ways of trying to solve them²¹. Urban Labs are thus functional auxiliaries at the service of urban governance and are particularly called upon to solve problems of a practical nature. As K. Polanyi would say, they are 'embedded' in power relationships and games and are subject to political strategies. This is not really new and follows a pragmatist approach to public action in the tradition of John Dewey. It is true that Living Labs produce shared and reflexive knowledge to nourish academic research, but they are first and foremost tools that aim to offer concrete solutions to problems or contradictions perceived and experienced by actors or stakeholders on a local or urban stage. In this respect, and as we have seen, Living Labs or Urban Labs stand out as instruments that participate in the implementation of a "soft governance" that favours the regulation of conflictual and cooperative relationships between local actors.

Yet in addition to this, there is a second main thrust that Urban Labs follow. Their instrumental role goes hand in hand with a moral and symbolic component designed to influence and shape the behaviour of social agents. *De facto*, this reflects ambitions to improve the 'urban condition' of the inhabitants through the use of appropriate socio-economic manipulations that aim to bring about new social behaviour²². This second purpose highlighted by researchers, whose critical approach is to be commended, is not trivial. It is in line with the idea that Urban Labs are also instruments of power which aim to spread values and habitus that encourage inhabitants and users, if not to commit themselves, at least to accept and comply with the social processes of transitions or changes to achieve greater urban sustainability. In fact, the Urban Labs are the vectors and disseminators of ideas and representations that conform to the ecological correctness of precautionary or even 'frugal' behaviour with regard to the environment. In this respect, a Marxist movement resurrected from the

¹⁹ Cf, R.Epstein: "Gouverner à distance: Quand l'Etat se retire des territoires". Editions Esprit, 2006, pp.96-111.

²⁰ Cf, L. Boltanski, E. Chiapello, Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme, Gallimard 1999.

²¹ H. Buckley, S. Marvin, Y. Voytenko & al. "Urban Living Laboratories, Conducting the experimental city?", op, cit; p 319.

²² Ibid, p 321.

limbo of the past might describe them as "ideological apparatuses" at the service of a power that aims to coerce, subjugate and educate. Of course, it goes without saying that Urban Labs are not disciplinary institutions operating under the influence of injunction or command. Their *modus operandi* is more incentivising than coercive. In line with more recent work, such normalisation has been analysed as the rise of a neohygienic and neo-liberal governmentalisation of behaviour²³.

A two-pronged movement is at the origin of this new form of domination. First of all, "sustainable and inclusive urban development" appears as "a post-Fordist avatar of environmental protection at the service of an overarching agenda: that of ensuring an urban climate for business and commerce". This regime prioritises pro-active supply policies to attract post-industrial economy capital and strategic metropolitan jobs. The regime tolerates or even encourages innovative approaches located on the fringes of mainstream planning practices, such as tactical urbanism. In so doing, it uses tools designed to reveal the preferences of inhabitants with the intention of involving them in the design of programmes for the rehabilitation of their housing or their built environment. These programmes happily combine urban sustainability objectives with those of social compensation, by mixing the two together in a confusing fashion. They straddle social justice and environmental justice. Along the same lines and even more radically, updating the Marxist critique inspired by the fetishism of the commodity, E Swyngedouw asserts that "sustainable urban development is the new opium of the people, a democratic anaesthetic that locks up the spaces of dispute for the expression of contradictions and oppositions"²⁴. This may seem somewhat borderline, but it contains an element of truth. There is no question that the mainstream rhetoric on the frugal, inclusive and resilient city plays a powerful role in depoliticising the issues at stake on the urban stage.



Green.LAB

Project Location Entwicklungsgebiet "Smart City Graz", Link to Project Website
www.graz.at/cms/beitrag/10328798/8119940/Gruenes_Labor_fuer_Graz.html

Secondly, this domination operates a social selection and hierarchisation of urban populations by valorising the presence of some professional groups to the detriment of others. A categorisation of uses and users therefore takes place. This differentiated management of urban space and of the social groups therein is justified through reference to the notion of the trickle-down effect, according to which this concentration of public investment in strategic areas produces benefits for all concerned. According to the same principle, "ecologically correct" habitus and behaviours are similarly destined to spread from one place to the next, from gentrified neighbourhoods to working-class neighbourhoods, where social housing stocks are the dominant feature. In fact, it is a case of progressively sanitising and disciplining certain types of use and user of the city in

²³ Hélène Reigner: Une gouvernementalisation néohygiéniste et néolibérale des conduites. Jérôme Bois-sonade. La ville durable controversée. Les dynamiques urbaines dans le mouvement critique, Pétra, pp.171-195, 2015, Pragmatismes, 9782847430974. hal-01630625

²⁴ E. SwynGedouw, "Les Contradictions de la ville post-politique. À la recherche d'une politique démocratique de production environnementale", in V. Béal, M. Gauthier, G. Pinson, Le Développement durable changera-t-il la ville? Le regard des sciences sociales, Saint-Étienne, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2011, pp. 129-158.

the urban space, of aligning behaviour with standards that are generally recognised as legitimate and which guarantee well-being, the integrity of the living environment and supposedly better access to the city's resources. These standards are generally those best shared by members of the creative class and those belonging to educated and privileged milieus²⁵. It is a known fact that it is the representatives of the upper middle classes who express social demands in terms of quality of life. In other words, these "social circles" are tremendous assets for attractiveness policies. The effect of this process relates to one of the fundamental drivers of cultural domination as described and analysed by Pierre Bourdieu. It should be noted that such strategic objectives set down by cities and other local authorities - either individually or in partnership - are generally displayed under a banner and rhetoric which reflect consensual intentions based on the "attractiveness, sustainability and social cohesion" triptych. At the risk of repeating ourselves, let us say that "low-carbon and inclusive" urban development has, over recent years, become a must on the policy agendas led by cities in France and in Europe. It has to be said that it is also one of the ideological and practical pillars of the European Union's urban development programmes.

The quest for a good business climate and for neighbourhoods seeking a low-carbon trajectory is thus accompanied by the implementation of mechanisms for the social control of the space and of the populations therein. While this objective of becoming cleaner can be direct and explicit, it can also be more insidious and diffuse through the promotion of "good individual behaviour" inspired by guidelines, "good practice" catalogues and benchmarking approaches which are produced and propagated via the Urban Labs' current activities. It is important to remember that the latter constitute the building blocks of a soft governance system that aims to include the uses and requests of residents in an urban offering which combines the objectives of economic growth, social justice and ecological transition. Additionally, they aim to make it easier to take into account the needs and requests of inhabitants in order to co-construct programmes and improve local democracy. Faced with the scale and universal nature of this project one can only bow one's head, as dissenting voices have difficulty in making themselves heard.

Gramsci and the Urban Labs

We should stress that Urban Labs and other instruments of empowerment and participatory activism also have a moral dimension and a cultural impact on individual awareness. They represent a brick or a constitutive part of a hegemonic regime in the sense of A. Gramsci: they legitimise a model of urbanity made up of good users and good uses and establish the domination of certain social groups and urban coalitions according to renewed, diffuse and subtle mechanisms. Directly or indirectly, this vision of hegemony follows Pierre Bourdieu's approach to cultural domination as a key element of social reproduction²⁶.

In the current context, Urban Labs are vectors for the transmission of new responsibilities and obligations towards Mother Nature and Planet Earth! When we look at the aims of many of the Urban Labs that have been created in recent years with the help of national or European subsidies and which are managed by actors, academic or not, we find that they are imbued with a "superego" where world views and practices in favour of the environment and the fight against climate change generally dominate. They aim to disseminate an ecological ethos among groups of users or residents. At the same time, they also blithely dream of an inclusive society and the social integration of populations suffering from marginalisation. This initially concerns gentrified neighbourhoods whose residents find themselves being awarded prizes for excellence in urban sustainability, but this sobriety and the moral pressure which accompanies it also tend to spread to working-class neighbourhoods. Urban regeneration policies do not escape this rising tide of standardisation on the road to the ecological conquest of the zones prioritised by city policy. In these neighbourhoods, where they exist, social Urban Labs generally operate on two levels, blithely mixing the goals of social justice and environmental justice. They adapt social compensation actions to the ecological sauce, so to speak! Today, one cannot imagine an inclusive city that does not simultaneously stand to attention as a sign of respect to 'its' Majesty the environment. In this regard, experimental approaches are suitable test beds for trying out new incentives designed to spread 'low-carbon' or ecologically virtuous behaviour. From this perspective, Urban Labs play a

²⁵ Cf Max Rousseau, "Bringing politics back in: La gentrification comme politique de développement urbain?" *Espaces et sociétés*, 2008/1, n° 132-133, pp 75-90

²⁶ Riccardo Ciavolella, « Les deux Gramsci de l'anthropologie politique », *Condition humaine / Conditions politiques* [Online], 1 | 2020, URL : <http://revues.mshparisnord.fr/chcp/index.php?id=109>

normative role that encourages the empowerment of actors so that they integrate habitus if not of minimisation, at least moderation of their environmental impact or carbon footprint. This process reflects a slogan addressed to city dwellers which often appears on the guideline leaflets, booklets of recommendations or best conduct “bibles” created and disseminated by the social and ecological entrepreneurs of cities in transition. Such catalogues challenge the city dweller as a subject and, on occasion, dictate rules of conduct in a *vademecum* intended to shape the reference image of "a responsible citizen of the sustainable and inclusive city".



The Colombes urban farm forced to take off
Mona Prud'homme, 20 February 2017, Enlarge your Paris

It is worth noting that empowerment is an activator of individual responsibility for taking one's fate into one's own hands, for becoming an entrepreneur of one's own life, as well as being a psycho-social process of integrating values designed to 'green' social behaviour. The scholarly doxa of the Anthropocene and the rising influence of 'fashionable' ideas are a sure sign: it is necessary to internalise the rules of a discipline leading, if not to cherish Nature, at least to spare and respect - to revere? – his Majesty the environment! Is this not a supreme path, staked out by what we might call 'bio-Urban-Labs', leading to 'ecological empowerment' and the acquisition of an environmental conscience? This is somewhat hazardous, but it might be effective if prototypes, good practices or other suitable references are 'shaped' (ecological design) with a healthy pedagogical capacity to spread the ecological word. We have to accept that today, citizens or consumers must know how to - and learn to - cultivate their shared gardens and monitor their carbon footprints. In this atmosphere and this historical moment, the roads of bio-power analysed and denounced by Michel Foucault are not far away... Similarly, they echo a slippery slope that heralds a possible ecological dirigisme, a new moral order and a road to servitude restricting the field of individual liberties²⁷. This arbitrariness generated by an all-powerful force, radicalised in its expressions and modes of operation, has found a striking and tragic illustration in the health policies that were pursued, particularly in France, in 2020 and which continue at the time of writing.

Why make things more complicated than they need to be? A carbon tax, a price signal, would be infinitely more transparent and effective for encouraging respect for the environment. Here again, the market can provide free choice solutions that do not require mechanisms that moralise social life. In other words, can we count on the neutrality of prices and the market and stay away from the programmes of social and bureaucratic entrepreneurs who want to reform society by pretending to improve it? As we know, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Is it possible to shelter from the 'scourge of the good' formulated with hand on heart in a sermon by those who right the wrongs of a world they consider imperfect and unequal and which

²⁷ Cf F.A Hayek, *La route de la servitude*, PUF, Quadrige 2013

they intend to reform? No, because in the current circumstances the ideological power of political correctness and fashionable ideas excels in creating tools to serve ideals (the sustainable and inclusive city) that are supposed to guarantee the achievement of the common good. This represents a rising force that flattens and levels awareness by contributing to new forms of 'bio-empowerment'. The urban ecological order and that of the inclusive city is thus deployed by consent, through consensual alignment with the dominant and diffuse representations that impose behavioural norms by transforming individuals into 'good city-dwellers'.

In this spirit, there are different levers for achieving this and Urban Labs are able to apply a maieutic and an art of persuasion that financial incentives do not possess. Through these instruments, social entrepreneurs of all kinds, academic or not, are at work to help moralise and normalise social behaviour. In so doing, like it or not, they contribute to a form of depoliticisation of the issues on the urban scene and agenda. Thus, in the experimental city (a testing ground for 'soft governance') Urban Labs are instruments and levers to support the fight against climate change. They stand out as new tools of persuasion - of domination? - and social control that aim to encourage the ecological empowerment of inhabitants. At the same time, they extol the virtues of the inclusive city and of the fight against exclusion, along with other forms of marginalisation of fragile populations under the universal banner of social justice. *De facto*, Urban Labs offer full-scale tests, demonstrators and experimental prototypes to disseminate "good practices with low environmental impact" and "ecologically correct" beliefs in the uses and behaviour of inhabitants. Yet nowadays social solidarity has also - and perhaps above all - become ecological and environmental - and vice versa. It is mixed up with the various vulgates and common places of the resilient and sustainable city. This is why, when they exist, the Urban Labs located in the neighbourhoods of large social housing complexes participate in this cultural hegemony, this levelling of awareness and this standardisation of behaviour and representations in the name of the neo-liberal credo that the 'inclusive and sustainable city' represents.