

Experimenting the city: between incremental projectification and urban transformation

Gernot Grabher | HafenCity University Hamburg

Lars Coenen | Western Norway University of Applied Sciences

The dispositif of urgency in current urban future-making debates is mobilized by a dual challenge: a new class of problems reveals the inadequacy of an old class of solutions. More specifically, the new class of challenges is framed in terms of the unsettling language of ‘wicked problems’, non-linearity and endemic uncertainty. There is, of course, nothing innocent about such metaphors; they rather ‘do political work’ (Sismondo 2010) as they insinuate state-failure and de-legitimize traditional planning and long-term political self-commitment. ‘Thinking outside the box’ is the new chief imperative, and the experiment is the key arena for such disruptive deliberation.

Experiments in the urban context, however, presuppose a suspension of those conditions that lend experiments in the scientific laboratory their epistemological power: disciplined observation, mechanical objectivity and spatial seclusion (Knorr Cetina 1999; Callon et al. 2009). When transferring from the pristine scientific laboratory to the contaminated urban mess, the experiment moves from the ‘truth spot’ of the laboratory to the ‘truth spot’ of the field (Gieryn 2006). Instead of isolation, the experiment in the field strives for immersion, rather than seeking objectivity it foregrounds contingency, and instead of replicability, it aims at situative learning (Karvonen 2018).

Experiments in the urban context afford an ‘imaginative infrastructure’ (Kohler 2002) that can be deployed in various ways (Evans et al. 2021). In terms of innovation, experiments can afford the arena for prototyping novel solutions; and the involvement of citizens as co-creators yields both locally more appropriate solutions and the procedural legitimacy of open innovation (Mello Rose et al. 2020). However, they also can be conceptually impoverished by reducing the urban arena to a commercial demonstration site aimed at accelerating the scaling of standardized ‘best practice’-fixes. In terms of governance, experimentalism may render urban innovation more political and contested (Coenen and Morgan 2020); simultaneously, the experiment has become integral to a ubiquitous and potentially post-political turn to mission policies. In its rush to chase global sustainable development goals, local experiments on the ground are impaired by projectification tendencies that induce short-termism and unambitious incrementalism (Torrens and von Wirth 2021).

Potential topics might include, but are not be limited to:

- The laboratory and the field as ‘truth spots’
- Field-experiments and urban living labs
- Learning from experiments: from isolated trials to new governance mode
- Lab-Urbanism as ‘anti-planning’: projectification versus long-term commitment
- Experiments as corporate demonstration sites
- Participation in experiments: citizen, user or data-point?

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