

TAKING POSITIONS: INSTITUTIONS AND INDIVIDUALS IN PUBLIC SECTOR DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

If recent decades have witnessed an expanded notion of design, here we explore such trends through the changing roles of public innovation labs and individuals within them. Recognizing the work of design scholarship in seeking to understand this influential and fast-changing field, we focus not so much on institutional form as on individuals doing design-led work in the public sector, whether or not they think of their work in terms of design. The paper draws on initial findings from ongoing work involving interviews and engagements with such labs in Latin America. We suggest approaching urban innovation labs with more attention to individuals within them, could helpfully illuminate the wider purposes and social consequences of innovation labs themselves.

INTRODUCTION

In this short paper, we report on some aspects of innovation labs in Latin America. They provide an entry point for a wider possible exploration of the institutions associated with the ‘caring’ politics that have been identified as central to ‘design’s’ expansion into public life and its impact on changing understandings of politics (Criado & Rodriguez-Giralt 2017, Richter et al. 2017). We write against what we see as a background of ambivalence, political, moral and intellectual, which provokes researchers and practitioners alike to consider what is so good about the ‘new’ politics of design-informed participatory and/or self-organizing urban change (Taylor 2013, Kelty 2017, Kimbell & Bailey

2017). Critiques are also being voiced about design thinking (Kimbell 2011, Suchman 2011) and the assumptions of virtue in co-design or ideas of ‘the social’ into urban development (Tonkiss 2017). It is not just that literature on design’s social uses seems to be developing along sometimes conflicting if intersecting tracks of celebration and critique, the situation occasionally comes to a head in demands on researchers (possibly face-to-face) to judge the phenomenon one way or another.

‘Design’ in its extended sense is entering politics as a sociomaterial and economically significant feature of contemporary life, particularly in cities, which are slow-changing but still obviously artefactual. For instance, Adam Drazin writes of design as “a particular kind of synthesis of material, making, and knowledge which is manifest in the material world” (Drazin 2018), while Guy Julier views design as instantiating the economic interface that (still) joins government to citizens (2017). And although noting that the word ‘design’ itself appears more and more redundant, Alison Clarke uses it to encompass how all manner of stuff/matter is shaped across all aspects of social reality (2011). In our context, the term is useful if vague, whether or not the people in the labs we write about think of their work in terms of design.

Empirically, design in public life appears a mixed bag, different across geographical and political contexts, and open to a range of descriptions and evaluations. Focussing on design-informed public innovation and transformation initiatives often called labs, we suggest that the mix in the bag, like the ambivalence, is real and justified. We ask whether closer attention to the individuals that move through them might give a better analytical grasp of a fast-moving, widespread and politically consequential phenomenon.

Labs are often surrounded by hype about digital and ‘caring’ politics. Whether in Europe or Latin America, they are associated with glowing but vague words like ‘innovation’, which are presumed to follow from doing small experiments. Others involved want to improve their context towards a better governance or just public life (Richter et al. 2017). As they are hyped up, ‘labs’

(and ‘innovation’) bring together many different, possibly irreconcilable interests, creating but also managing tensions. To confuse things more, they are considered strange by many people in government institutions as well as by citizens.

In analyzing such emerging institutional forms across public life, the question easily revolves around the value of the agility offered by design-informed responses to crises that are now normalized aspects of urban requiring public response. No wonder, since entangled in this emerging institutional landscape, in the shadow of impossible-to-solve (wicked) global problems, are fundamental questions about the future of democratic politics and public life.

Many questions arise: what kind of political landscapes are emerging and how can people navigate them? As change making and urgency characterize public life, who has responsibility or the right to act? We also think it is important to ask: to what extent labs (still) operate contingently, dependent less on institutional form than on individuals.

These questions arise not just for a researcher, but for those involved as actors, because any project, institutional or individual working in the public sector with design tools is likely to be self-conscious about being caught up in structures that require improvement, care or some other kind of change. As ‘change makers’ they may pursue aims from an activist position as well as from a public service role. So, although critiques of an expanded and synthesised idea of design particularly in its guise as ‘design thinking’ have flourished (Kimbell 2011), public sector design has likely *opened* many doors for design.

Our suggestion is to slow down and attend to how individuals and institutions shape each other – and cities’ change-making – through labs. This departs from but also complements literature that seeks to clarify the murky concepts around design in public life (Markussen 2017, Richter et al. 2017) or pin down what exactly a public innovation lab is supposed to do (McGann et al. 2018). By simply documenting, we hope to hold onto the innovative and organic aspects of labs whilst recognizing their possibly depoliticizing aspects.

Our intuition is that as new types of institutions taking care of shared issues continue to be supported by governments, their futures will depend largely on the individuals currently working in them. They are also establishing links or bridges between political power and citizen experience, or at least fighting for particular understandings of better futures and good citizens.

METHODS

The material is from ongoing research and has been generated through desk research, interviewing and participant observation with people from the labs, others that research them and design academics interested to understand the expanded idea of design. For this paper

we consider 4 semi-structured interviews conducted in Uruguay in December 2017 and 14 again in December 2018, with 3 skype interviews in June 2018. The interpretation of what is happening and how research can best engage with this field is also based on informal talks and skypes with members of Labs from Mexico, Brazil and Colombia. Further interviews and participant observation are being planned.

As the study of innovation labs is being progressed in multiple places by many kinds of actors, researchers and practitioners come together to learn from each other. We are interested in using similar, often experimental and embodied, methods to find out about labs as the labs are using to understand contemporary problems. This creates a certain recursion and it means that for the researcher ‘analysis’ and ‘data’ merge into each other. Author 1 has participated for instance in meetings for labs and discussions about the expanded idea of design, (Ibero American Lab meeting, Spain September 2018 and IX meeting of Public Policies and Design, Uruguay November 2018), which are excellent sites of learning but also of inventing and intervening. In fact, intuitive and ‘inventive’ methods being developed across design, policy and social research (e.g. Marres et al. 2018) that are crucial for this type of study. In that sense, to document and strive to put into words, is also a form of intervention that we hope this paper can become.

LABS RISE, SPREAD AND STUMBLE

Public innovation labs acting at local, regional or national levels (McGann et al. 2018), use design to foster experimentation and innovation, promote flexibilization of the public sector (Kimbell 2016) in varied projects, units and locations (inside or outside governmental agencies). While social transformation is part of the rhetoric, the core aspiration remains the relatively conservative task of enhancing participation and the transparency of political life particularly through digitalization. The phenomenon started in the early 2000s with Western Europe and North America at the forefront (Bason 2014). Leading examples include MindLab, in Denmark in 2002 to 2018 with a cross ministerial approach, Policy Lab in UK since 2014, and the Helsinki Design Lab, which looked at government systems from a strategic design perspective from 2009 to 2013.

In the last decade labs have been starting in Latin America (Acevedo & Dassen 2016) and the trend has expanded rapidly. The first was Laboratorio para la ciudad in Mexico, initiated in 2013 by the mayor of Mexico City to promote experimentation, civic innovation and urban creativity. After that, many others followed, e.g. Laboratorio de Gobierno which started in Chile in 2015 with a multi ministerial approach, and Uruguay’s governmental lab AGESIC to foster digitalization the same year.

Even though the rise of labs started some years ago, a clash remains noticeable across the public sector (cf.

Bason 2014), between what we see as design-led approaches and older public institutions. When problems arise, however, these do not just occur between institution but among the people working in them. Meanwhile many consider the work of these small groups of multidisciplinary people simply ‘alternative’ or playful, which contributes to their low visibility. Such scepticism can be strong and problematic for a lab.

Zooming out, in part these problems reflect shifts in professional roles and responsibilities, where design lacks validation (Kimbell 2016). In part it is about digitalization (a key focus of many labs) raising new questions about the impacts of online connectivity on democracy (Kelty 2017). Labs thus stumble on the question of what public sector innovation is and could be, and whether their work should be based on evidence-based or designerly approaches (McGann et al. 2018). The result is that public innovation is vague even for those involved in it, with many tensions and contradictions (ibid). To complicate things even more, the landscape is rapidly changing.

Our response to this here is to begin documenting, and to briefly consider the methodological options open to researchers in this area.

THE MIX IN ACTION: URUGUAY

Studies about labs in Latin America emphasize the particularity of open government in the region (Acevedo & Dassen 2016). As elsewhere, the aim is to enhance political transparency by digital means, such as sharing governmental documents openly with citizens. A preoccupation with participation in political life has long history in Latin America. Actions are being taken to address the weakness of trust towards government, like participatory budgeting (Goldfrank 2011). Currently, there are more experimental and digital ‘complements’ being developed, like the participatory online platform ‘Montevideo decide’ and ‘Montevideo del Mañana’, project looking into the city’s future. However, there is no connection between them more than some ‘tabs’ online. Even though many ‘participatory’ actions are taking place, as several interviewees noted, there are still doubts if such technological or institutional developments are promoting social change or just change for some (those with access who actually participate).

This said, the work of labs has appeal for authorities in much of Latin America to follow the ‘hype’, including in Uruguay, the main site of field research. There are two established public innovation labs, a governmental lab focussing on digitalization (AGESIC Lab) and a Municipal Lab in the capital city (MvdLab) and a behavioural unit starting up in the Planning and Budget office (OPP Lab). All have been initiated in governmental institutions, and in some way follow models from elsewhere.

Their relations with the foreign experiences go beyond following a model: some of them receive training, others training and financial support from international institutions, and all belong in some way or another to labs networks. AGESIC Lab received training from MindLab, GovLab and Nesta (among others), and it was started with support from the InterAmerican Development Bank (IDB). MvdLab was started following an initiative of SEGIB (Iberoamerican secretariat) in collaboration with MediaLab Prado (a high-profile innovation lab in Madrid).

While public sector labs are generally seen as a good thing by decision makers and funding agencies, the potentials opened up by labs’ experimentation are poorly understood, which often leaves them relegated to the margins of public sector work. As some of the respondents pointed out, they are seen as edgy places, projects end up there that do not fit the usual government apparatus. Thus the labs need to constantly explain their projects and approaches, to try to ‘validate’ with authorities their new ways of working.

Also, whether in the labs only just establishing themselves or in conventional state and other administrations, even without detailed organizational ethnography (e.g. Harper 2003) it is clear that individuals are crucial to their fortunes.

Lab staff are thus bridges between agencies, groups of residents and all manner or stakeholders and actors on the urban political stage. For instance, MvdLab works with a variety of projects and actors: from engaging with children in a neighbourhood that is going through radical change, to working with municipal civil servants developing projects on topics such as sexual harassment in public spaces.

DISCUSSION

As an institutional form, a lab is at the edge or border between government and citizens. It is also a place where the contradictions of a global political economy are explicitly negotiated.

Further, interviews suggest that individuals are relatively free of institutional constraints, and also that they are constantly engaged in trying to understand what they are doing and how it is different and valuable, and thus taking positions individually as to their work.

As people move through the urban change-making landscape, their individual networks and qualities become particularly significant for how they achieve impacts. Working in labs, some people (and projects) with origins in government develop a willingness to talk, move and discuss across political and social divides, and to bridge the worlds of experts and ‘ordinary people’. Even as bureaucrats, they can operate in recognizably ‘activist’ ways though they would probably avoid both the words design and activist. It is indeed imperative to “study and discuss self-proclaimed ‘social’ projects” (Richter et al. 2017: 776), but it is also

worth considering the possibility that they do support efforts that strengthen core democratic and collective practices.

The labs and open government initiatives like participation platforms, etc. have thus emerged as government projects following global trends. Yet, picking up on fleeting sparks of radical thought in the interviews, we think interesting things (can) happen when concerned people strive to develop political relationships and modes of citizenship and community that question the impulses and even the governments that initiated them. As institutional forms, perhaps labs even push practice towards mismatching discourses. This openness is possible since design remains associated with things that are quirky (even shallow). Further, there may be an affinity between design's malleability and the problems that citizens really do face worth exploring further.

In fieldwork it became clear that often the drive to change things is stronger than belonging to a particular institution or having a formal contract. Regarding work that engages citizens directly, many engage passionately because in the end it will help to construct something worthwhile. The idea of the 'lab' also promotes interaction and exchange across different countries. One question to pursue then, is how such influences inform and shape the form and even agenda a lab can take in a city. Perhaps some of these labs are not just 'in between' governments and citizens, but also between cultures and countries.

Importantly, our concerns as researchers are also ones that come from the field, they are preoccupations expressed by the practitioners. There is a need to develop and practice new vocabulary to talk about these new experimental forms. They will likely have a significant role in shaping political landscapes, not just because they promote care and self-proclaimed virtues, but because they cannot help but allocate shared as well as individual rights and responsibilities.

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