

# Designing a New Civic Economy? On the Emergence and Contradictions of Participatory Experimental Urbanism

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**Abstract:** Can we remake local economies from scratch – not through political struggle but by design – to solve wicked problems and transform urban governance? Such questions are raised by an emergent trend within urban experimentation that emphasises participation and commoning in designing peer-to-peer provisioning systems through a platform logic. This article deconstructs the discourses animating what we term “participatory experimental urbanism” and reflects on what this might mean for local state restructuring in times of neoliberal austerity. By following its policies and prototypes as they move and mutate across the London Boroughs of Lambeth and Barking & Dagenham, we examine two exemplary initiatives, Open Works and Participatory City, tracing their beginnings in Lambeth’s “cooperative council” model and their ongoing assembling into novel public-common-philanthropic partnerships. Foregrounding the contradictions within this latest turn towards urban governance-beyond-the-state, we draw out the implications for the future of social innovation, design-thinking, and the experimental city.

**Keywords:** social innovation, design thinking, local state restructuring, commoning, urban experimentation, participation

## Introduction

If urban experimentation presents a new horizon in how cities are governed, participatory experimental urbanism represents its radical edge, activating participation and commoning through a peer-to-peer platform logic to redesign local economies. Designed to be flexible and adaptable in the face of complexity and crisis, to embrace uncertainty and contingency for creative problem-solving, while claiming to mobilise a scientific laboratory methodology for measurement, evaluation, and replication of results, all kinds of urban experiments—from smart city incubators to urban living laboratories—are being rolled out across cities around the world to contend with compounding global challenges as these coalesce at the urban scale (Barnett 2022). Yet, the growing field of urban living labs is

furrowed by creative tensions between *control* and *contingency*, between “strategic” and “organic” situated interventions (Bulkeley et al. 2019). While *strategic* labs tend to enact smart and sustainable urbanisms in controlled and concerted experiments, *organic* labs intervene within community development and citizen-led place-making through contingent practices that resemble grassroots organising. At their most ambitious, and contradictory, organic labs seek to cultivate cooperative and participatory relations of economic production and social reproduction, through highly-curated design-thinking—a phenomenon we tentatively term “participatory experimental urbanism”. This mobilises participation as both an experimental method, a governmentality for transforming subjectivities, and as a utopian vision of how society could be reorganised. This emerging trend, we suggest, has major implications for social justice, democracy, and local state restructuring in times of austerity.

Participatory experimental urbanism poses some provocative questions: What if the trend towards urban experimentation widened out to the reorganisation of production of goods and services and of social reproduction of lives and livelihoods? What if we were to apply experimental logics to incubate, and spatially concentrate, new commoning practices for an integrated ecosystem of peer-to-peer provisioning that could become a place-based prototype for prefiguring urban transformation? Instead of reactively following the crisis-responsive dynamics of social movements and grassroots organising in generating economic alternatives, what if we were to be more proactive, more ambitious, in building a radically new economy *by design* using the tools that praxis has sharpened but in a controlled laboratory-like setting?

Promoted by a growing cottage industry of participatory design studios, social practice partnerships, and civic innovation labs embedded within a “non-profit industrial complex” (INCITE! 2017) or “philanthropic complex” (Martin 2015) of foundations and think tanks, participatory experimental urbanism employs experimental methods in cooperative urban-economic design beyond-the-state—part of a wider trend towards “innovatory urban governance” (McGuirk et al. 2022). This embryonic ecosystem mobilises narratives around resilience and design (Cowley et al. 2018), co-production and participation (Bishop 2012), sharing, collaboration, and openness (Lorne 2019), urban laboratories (Bulkeley et al. 2019; Gieryn 2006), transformative social innovation (Thompson 2019), urban experimentation (Caprotti and Cowley 2017; Savini and Bertolini 2019; Torrens and von Wirth 2021), and the experimental city (Barnett 2022; Karvonen 2018). Rapid uptake within public policy—potentially reshaping the local state—demands we pay attention to where such ideas are coming from and what the social and political implications might be as they materialise in spatial projects.

As such, we trace the discursive development and spatial materialisation of a stream of participatory experimental urbanism that sprung from a source in the London Borough of Lambeth, through confluence with the “cooperative council” model, before flowing down the Thames and gaining momentum in Barking & Dagenham. We study how the participatory model mutated from the Open Works prototype in Lambeth to the Participatory City programme in Barking,

examining how the model was constructed and funded through novel “public-common-philanthropic partnerships”—partnerships between local authorities, commons developers, and philanthropic foundations (see Thompson 2023)—forged in the gap opened by austerity. In carving out an enlarged role for philanthropy and professional agencies in urban-economic development, such partnerships reveal how the local state and urban governance is reshaped according to the “derivative” logic of the third sector or “philanthropic complex” (Martin 2015), with stark implications for democratic accountability and representation.

In what follows, we explore the continuities, discontinuities, and progressions in this innovative approach to urban-economic transformation by, first, tracing the spatial and political mobilisation—“following the policies” (Peck and Theodore 2015)—of participatory experimental urbanism in and beyond the local state across and between localities within metropolitan London, in an intriguing process of *intra-urban* policy mobility. Inspired by a “conjunctural” approach to historicised *intra-urban* comparison (Leitner and Sheppard 2022), we pay attention to how various crises, policy trends, cultural discourses, and agents of change have overlapped and coalesced in a particular political moment. We do so by bringing together separate, yet entangled, strands of research conducted over different periods of intensifying austerity—one of us drawing on doctoral research on practising architecture beyond buildings in the mid-2010s, the other on more recent postdoctoral investigations into municipal entrepreneurialism, both employing qualitative mixed-methods centred on semi-structured interviews, observation, and documentary analysis. Ten interviews were conducted with stakeholders of both Open Works and Participatory City, triangulated with documentary analysis of primary materials. This is not an ethnographic exploration of these projects as experienced by participants, nor an evaluation of their local impact or purported benefits—the subject of substantial research reports (Civic Systems Lab 2015; Participatory City 2019, 2020). Rather, we deconstruct the discourses—the implicit logics and rationales—informing these place-based prototypes to reveal insights into how they may be developed, and researched, in more constructive ways.

At its most generative, perhaps, participatory experimental urbanism *could*—under conducive conditions—mimic the autonomous design-thinking inspired by the prefigurative practices of Indigenous and postcolonial communities in the global South aiming to radically reimagine local economies beyond extractivist neo-colonial capitalism (Escobar 2018). Yet, when translated to polarised urban contexts in the global North—designed as solutions to neoliberal “austerity localism” (Penny 2017), becoming commodities in a congested marketplace of “fast policy” ideas (Peck and Theodore 2015)—any emancipatory potential is subverted by the contradictions of commodification and curation. To help find a way through, we surface these fundamental contradictions before concluding by asking critical questions about the future of social innovation, design-thinking, and the experimental city.

## Deconstructing Participatory Experimental Urbanism

To begin, our aim is to deconstruct the discourses of an emergent kind of *participatory* urban experimentation through a self-ascribed “prototype” project for reconfiguring urban provisioning around participatory ecosystems (Civic Systems Lab 2015)—a new vanguard in the urban policy trend towards “projectification” (Torrens and von Wirth 2021) and “experimentation” (Caprotti and Cowley 2017; Karvonen 2018; Savini and Bertolini 2019). Three discourses, or epistemologies, are explicitly drawn upon as inspiration by Civic Systems Lab (2015:36)—the agency behind Open Works and Participatory City—neatly articulating the three main sources of the emergent field for which they are a harbinger: (i) “wicked problems” whose multiple, complexly-interconnected root causes are imagined to require innovative, holistic, systemic solutions; (ii) a “lab approach”, designed to tackle wicked problems through design-thinking, prototyping, and iterative experimentation; and (iii) “open source cities”, translating open-source thinking in software production and coding for “building an ecology of activity” at the urban scale, based on shared rather than individual ownership of ideas for open replication and adaptation elsewhere.

First, wicked problems. Barnett (2022) identifies two divergent tendencies in the recent turn in urban policy towards the resolution of complex problems resistant to straightforward solution: (i) a technocratic solutionism aiming to “tame” their complexity and cognitive uncertainty through the enhanced computational and calculative powers of big data, algorithmic modelling, and systems-thinking; and (ii) a participatory alternative aiming to crowd-source solutions through democratic design-thinking and the communicative technologies of the city (assembly, encounter, creativity). Barnett (2022) depicts the latter as presenting a challenge to the former’s scientific presumptions that wicked problems can be tamed through expert knowledge; as harnessing instead messy deliberation and political dissensus, all the conflicts and incommensurabilities entailed by wickedness, to generate shared understandings and common solutions. Yet these apparent divergences are often contained as dialectical contradictions within the same project, as we discuss below. Indeed, although the participatory tendency appears opposed to the scientific logics of technocratic solutionism, it likewise tends to treat the urban as a laboratory amenable to programming a (social) scientific experiment.

Second, empirically demonstrating the theoretical touchstones highlighted in the growing literature on urban labs (Bulkeley et al. 2019; Gieryn 2006), the aptly-named Civic Systems Lab (2015:44) identifies four general methodologies of the urban lab logic: (i) a *systems-based* approach using “multiple methodologies” that considers the “whole architecture” of the problem before devising solutions; (ii) *collaboration* across diverse stakeholders for “multiple perspective” triangulation; (iii) working from a “specialised physical environment—similar to a scientific lab” but for inspiring creativity and collaboration rather than rigor or replicability of results; and (iv) experimentation through flexible, iterative prototyping and testing of ideas for accelerated *reflexive learning*. Centrally important, here, is *design-thinking*—holistic redesign of systems, of “imagining a better alternative” rather than “incremental improvement of the status quo” (ibid.). Such an

ambitious vision for full-system place-based transformation is laudable and potentially generative of “pluriversal” lifeworlds liberated from patriarchal, racist, ecocidal, colonial-capitalist domination (Escobar 2018). However, its potential to generate such alternatives is undermined by structural contradictions.

Karvonen (2018:202) points to three characteristics structuring the urban experimental field: “the embrace of uncertainty and contingency, the fostering of recursive learning processes, and the increasing spatial fragmentation of cities into experimental districts”. Spatial fragmentation is partly the result of what Torrens and von Wirth (2021) identify as “projectification”—a logic we dissect in the conclusion. A contradiction between contingency and replicability is implied by conceptualisations of urban living labs: that they “continually negotiate control and contingency”; designed for *learning* rather than merely “trying things out”, specifically to “improve” by way of “observing” change (Bulkeley et al. 2019:319–320). These tensions are captured by Gieryn (2006:10) as that between the messy, relational, open-ended, unpredictable, “found” nature of the anthropological “field-site” and the controlled, contained, measurable, constructed, or “made” conditions of the scientific “laboratory”; expressed differently as the dialectic between spontaneous, free-form *play* and curated, rule-bound *games* (Thompson 2019).

Bulkeley et al. (2019:322–323) conceptualise urban living labs across two dimensions pertaining to this central “control-contingency dynamic”. First, urban living labs can be “strategic” (driven by governmental and corporate interests for defined strategic ends, often smart and sustainable city agendas), “civic” (municipal and anchor institutional agendas to deliver particular urban policy priorities), or “organic” (arising most organically through grassroots groups, cooperatives, and non-profits to address highly contingent community needs). Second, urban living labs can adopt various “dispositions” towards experimentation ranging from the most controlled laboratory conditions to modes favouring the most contingency—from “trials” through “enclaves” and “demonstrations” to “platforms”. What distinguishes participatory experimental urbanism as novel within this field of praxis is: (i) its boundary-blurring traversing of “civic” and “organic” approaches, as a collaboration between public, civic, and philanthropic actors such that it constitutes an emergent form of “public-common-philanthropic partnership” (for more on this concept, see Thompson 2023); and (ii) its deployment of a platform logic, which Langley and Leyshon (2017:15, quoted in Bulkeley et al. 2019) define as “not simply in the business of intermediating *connections*, but of actively curating *connectivity*”. Participatory experimental urbanism creates a platform to mediate these relationships between state and civil society and to *curate connectivity* both between participants themselves and with institutional actors; an emergent form of mediation which, we argue, becomes self-serving.

Third, then, is an “open-source” urbanism promoting the transformative potential of social innovation and civic enterprise (Lorne 2019; Thompson 2019). Framed by narratives of openness, the city is reimagined as a platform or ecosystem whereby ideas and resources are shared openly—modelled on digital peer-to-peer platforms. Co-working spaces, incubators, and accelerators are archetypal spaces of the open city, tasked with curating spontaneous encounter, density, sharing, collaboration, and creativity through which innovation may help

transform urban everyday life, resolve wicked problems, or create new products or services for generating wealth (Madaleno et al. 2022). Open urbanism has thus been gaining traction within new urban policy worlds geared towards catalysing social entrepreneurship and innovation. Moreover, as Lorne (2019) emphasises, the promotion of “openness” has been tightly bound up with austerity, in facilitating state withdrawal, filled by new modes of urban entrepreneurialism. Yet open-source ideas are also adopted by movements working to emancipate urban everyday life from the relentless compulsion of capital accumulation. New municipalist movements, notably in Barcelona, are employing platform logics to reconfigure the production of space as a more democratic and open process, through for instance digital platforms for crowd-sourced decision-making (see McGuirk et al. 2022). The open city strand within urban experimentation therefore contains potential for both emancipatory and dominating tendencies.

Whilst these three trends are research fields in themselves, they tend to be studied in relative isolation from consideration of wider processes of capitalist-state restructuring. McGuirk et al. (2022) have recently sketched out a research agenda for analysing what they call the turn towards “innovatory urban governance” within this broader political-economic frame. Taking up this mantle, we explore a strand of innovatory urban governance in which the local state partners with an urban lab, backed by philanthropic funding, to deliver local economic development via a participatory platform. We are interested in the situated recombination of the three discourses reviewed above within an emergent assemblage of participatory experimentation in urban-economic development through novel public-common-philanthropic partnerships that prefigure, if rolled out more comprehensively, a restructuring of urban governance—towards a “city of permanent experiments” (Karvonen 2018).

We can identify an incursion of the experimental logic into the domain of regeneration conventionally occupied by state-led area-based initiatives prior to austerity. Participatory experimental urbanism draws upon familiar theories of social capital and the commons to posit “systems failures”—of state and market—in resolving wicked problems of urban deprivation, intersectional inequalities, socio-political exclusion, civic disengagement, and service delivery inefficiency, arguing for alternative systems based on participatory co-production. The potential for alternative systems to harness deep participation to resolve such problems is, however, conditioned by antagonisms and contradictions running through their design.

Many of these contradictions pertain to urban experimentation in general and have already been well articulated by Caprotti and Cowley (2017): (i) a normative scientism in seeing the city as a knowable set of variables that can be optimised as if a machine; (ii) the privileged role of crisis as an enabling factor in catalysing experimentation, a shock inspiring (re)action, underplaying the consciously constructed nature of experiments; (iii) the lack of attention given to experimental subjects, to *who* decides how an experiment is conducted; (iv) the spatial boundedness of experiments focusing energies on place-based initiatives, overlooking excluded, threshold, or liminal spaces; and (v) the insensitivity to history in



foregrounding novel, innovative, and future visioning, committing a constraining presentism while ignoring the dark history of utopia turned dystopia.

We build on these insights to posit a set of characteristics—some novel, some extending previous accounts—that capture the contradictions of actually-existing participatory experimental urbanism, which (inadvertently) acts to: (i) re-model urban development according to platform logics that attempt to circumvent the mediations of state and capital through immediate peer-to-peer production but which (re)produce intermediations anew; (ii) employ design-thinking to represent complex structural policy problems as amenable to resolution through spatial and system redesign, representing a depoliticising and anti-democratic methodological solutionism; (iii) promise “urban transformation” and “radical solutions” to wicked problems, packaged seductively through project branding and model marketing, thereby stoking the very market for such programmes to be sold as commodities; (iv) reorient policy interventions around speculative, untested, and performative projections about future outcomes and trajectories unmoored from historical path-dependencies, on which profitable bets are made, through appeal to an experimental living laboratory-situated scientific methodology; (v) deploy “participatory” practices and methods of citizen engagement that obfuscate unequal dynamics of class, race, gender, and other intersectional power relations and, when combined with professionally-managed platform mediation, potentially enact a new paternalism; (vi) accelerate a turn towards social entrepreneurship, civic voluntarism, and philanthrocapitalism in the absence of state resources under neoliberal austerity; and (vii) advance entrepreneurial “ventures”, collaborative “missions”, and projectified “experiments”, which concentrate public resources, over more spatially comprehensive or socially universalistic notions of democratic rights and resource redistribution, thereby reproducing uneven urban development. The remainder of the article explores how these contradictions play out socio-spatially through a high-profile case study presented by its designers and commissioners as an exemplar model.

## **Making a Model with a Cooperative Council**

The London Borough of Lambeth lost half its government funding in 2010–16 (Wills 2016:116). Following the militant years of municipal socialism in the 1980s, culminating in the rate-capping rebellion—32 Lambeth councillors surcharged for refusing to set a “legal” budget—Lambeth has adopted an increasingly “centrist and technocratic politics, couching its legitimacy in terms of the competent management of local finances” (Penny 2020:928). Anticipating austerity, in May 2010 Lambeth published its white paper on becoming a so-called “Cooperative Council”, articulated in the newly-established Cooperative Commission’s report as a “new settlement between citizens and state”—a “new paradigm for Lambeth”, as the then-Chief Executive put it (Wills 2016:117)—in which citizens were invited to more actively participate in the design, development, and delivery of public services, through putatively cooperative governance. The Cooperative Council model was fiercely demarcated from contemporaneous alternatives to public service provision hatched in response to austerity; Labour’s Steve Reed, Lambeth’s council

leader and leading proponent of the model, professing its distinction to the London Borough of Barnet's much more controversial, Conservative-led "easyCouncil" budget brand of privatised, outsourced, and pay-per-use services (Penny 2017:1362). Cooperation appeared the abiding value informing new forms of citizen participation in Lambeth's running of public services, from community-led commissioning (Wills 2016) to voluntary management of neighbourhood libraries, whose existence was otherwise threatened with closure and redevelopment for more profitable use (Penny 2020). This was more an inchoate notion of cooperation between councillors, civil servants, and residents for fixing local problems than anything substantively cooperative in terms of economic democracy or collective ownership. However, one understudied strand of the Cooperative Council approach seemed to initiate a more substantive cooperativism. While studies to date of Lambeth's Cooperative Council are notably critical of the destructive impacts of reworking existing services (Penny 2017, 2020), none have evaluated the constructive attempt of "starting from scratch" (Wills 2016:135) to build a novel system of local economic development; a task we take up here.

In distancing the Cooperative Council model from its perceived genesis in reaction to cuts, highlighting its proactive turn towards more open local government (Penny 2020), the Lambeth leadership were especially receptive to ideas for extending an emergent "participatory culture" in a bid to address the local wicked problems of persistent spatially-concentrated multiple deprivation and the need for public-service innovation under austerity—ideas presented by Civic Systems Lab in 2013. Civic Systems Lab was a temporary collaboration between two organisations—Social Spaces and Project 00—around which coalesced a budding network of architects, social innovators, and systems design-thinkers concerned with reconfiguring the UK's civic infrastructure, notably including Dark Matter Labs and Civic Square. A partnership was struck between Lambeth Council and Civic Systems Lab for a new project called Open Works, established in an empty gallery space in West Norwood in 2014 (Wills 2016). Starting life in 2012 as a pop-up "pre-prototype" called The Work Shop, Open Works was one of many prototypes launched by Civic Systems Lab around the UK—including The Common Room (Norwich), Open Hub (Dudley), Open Book (Essex), and Open Shop (York)—designed to catalyse a new economy built around participation (Participatory City 2019). Open Works was the first to involve a dedicated action-research team tracking its local impact over its 12-month lifecycle; the resulting evaluation report (Civic Systems Lab 2015) provided the evidence base, theoretical rationale, and marketing material for further experimentation in the Participatory City project, and comprises the main source we analyse here for disclosing the underlying model.

Key early texts produced by some of the action-researchers behind Open Works cited as foundational to its development include *Handmade*, the *Community Lover's Guide*, *The Empathic City*, and the *Compendium for the Civic Economy*. The latter, published by Project 00, the Design Council and NESTA, has proven formative in showcasing 25 "trailblazers" of the new civic economy, intended to radicalise the Conservative government's small-state Big Society agenda and set the



bar for NESTA's 50 "New Radicals" annual award list. Such rigorously-researched and aesthetically-fashioned publications aimed to chronicle and promote the development of what Civic Systems Lab (2015:134) characterises as "a new community culture, citizen collectives, the civic commons, or community enterprise". This is woven from several strands: open-source design-thinking borrowed from the free software and coding movements; a creative, amateur DIY ethos from anarchism and the maker movement; the gift- and barter-based culture of commoning; and entrepreneurial, enterprising zeal from the digital tech industry, for a "civic entrepreneurialism" of "21<sup>st</sup> century start-ups" in which disruption, "rapid loop" innovation, and experimental prototyping are celebrated (Civic Systems Lab 2015:136). The analogy of the transition to Web 2.0 in digital culture is employed to capture a concomitant shift in societal organisation from the hierarchical, sectoral, mediated structures of state and market to more open, interactive, direct relations between citizens harnessing new practical tools for "peer-to-peer" co-production to create a "self-producing society" (Civic Systems Lab 2015:134). In this imagined "third system" beyond state and market, the traditional third sector and philanthropic model of charity and volunteering are superseded by a qualitatively distinct paradigm of participation and cooperation. This is one of the central contradictions in the model: "emphasis[ing] the continuum between such new participation culture and civic enterprise" (Civic Systems Lab 2015:135) against ideological tendencies to keep "the economy" separate from community and voluntary activities, yet simultaneously distancing participation culture from mere "volunteering" or charity, despite philanthropic foundations remaining the main source of finance, with Lankelly Chase Foundation funding the action-research report on Open Works.

Catalysing this boundary-blurring, binary-busting "participatory culture" are what are deemed "common denominator" activities such as growing, cooking, learning, making, mending—"experiences of co-producing something tangible as a group of equal peers" (Civic Systems Lab 2015). The concrete tangibility of material products and practices and their shared, ordinary quality undergird the inclusivity and popularity of participation. Diverse, otherwise-atomised individuals come together around their mutual dependence on these most basic common denominators of everyday life, feeding an alternative circuit of foundational provisioning rather than the monetary market economy. Ecologically-sustainable, self-sufficient livelihoods replace dependency on the state and market by enhancing the interdependency and circularity of making, mending, recycling, upcycling, pooling resources, and learning—"saving money through sharing", "bulk buying with friends", "repairing rather than buying items" (ibid.).

Open Works was designed to provide a supportive platform for launching a diverse range of citizen-led micro-projects geared towards cultivating participation in common denominator activities to produce community benefit and resolve local problems; to grow "a dense participation ecology at scale" capable of "re-organising our local systems for social, economic and environmental sustainability" (Civic Systems Lab 2015:21). Scaling up is key: to progress from a "first level" of building a "highly accessible and inclusive network of commons-based co-production activity built into everyday life" towards a "second level" of legally-

incorporated “community businesses, co-operatives and hybrid ventures through platform incubation programmes” (ibid.). The platform incubated around 20 micro-projects: from Bzz Garage (bee-friendly street planting in a bus garage) and Open Orchard (fruit-tree planting) to Library of Things (borrowing of unwanted items) and Department of Tinkerers (upcycling abandoned electrical equipment) to Potluck Suppers (food sharing and co-dining). The inchoate ethos of the Cooperative Council model thus took concrete shape in cooperative institutional forms; constituting a new model for “co-producing society” through “new methods of co-creating value, cost savings and mechanisms for collective investment” (ibid.).

Civic Systems Lab, as its website once suggested, was on a mission to “seed a local civic economy in the UK”—one which is “local, participatory and driven by people not systems” (quoted in Wills 2016:142). Key to its theory of change is “moving the centre of gravity to an entirely new, and mutual space”—a site centrally-located in the community, with a visible shopfront open to passers-by, beyond the institutional walls of local government. This is about opening up socio-economic innovation, physically relocated outside the bureaucratic confines of the state, in the realm of civil society, to “unleash” the power of commoning, to *open work*. Breaking down the boundaries between state, market, and civil society—for an “open city”—works in both directions: Lambeth Council considered setting up a co-working impact hub within Lambeth town hall, to invite social innovators into the heart of local government (Lorne 2019:759). Just as the public functions of the state were to be turned inside out, let loose from their departmental silos, the site of local government was to be reconfigured as an urban lab. Indeed, Civic Systems Lab co-founders Tessy Britton and Laura Billings were formally contracted as employees of the council in their collaboration with Lambeth; hybridising “civic” and “organic” forms of urban living lab (see Bulkeley et al. 2019).

This hybrid organic-civic lab’s platform approach was to incubate participatory micro-projects by sharing resources, providing professional and technical advice centrally, and offering essential infrastructure including physical space required for prototyping ideas. Participants need not open a bank account, form a legal entity, or apply for grants individually—all such bureaucratic burdens were to be handled by the platform. This is a vision of collective stewardship over interconnected ideas rather than competing individually-owned entities; of the platform taking on a central intermediary role, to become *the* coordinating agency for the commissioning of council projects for strategic outcomes. The linear relationship between council commissioner and commissioned contractor is reimagined as mediated by a third party—the platform—multiplying and redistributing responsibilities for delivering public policy solutions through its network of micro-projects and incubation programmes: “The platform and resulting participatory ecology becomes the vehicle for producing outcomes” (Civic Systems Lab 2015:86). Wicked problems are resolved through the innovation gains that only such a dense participatory ecosystem can achieve. As one participant put it: “It’s almost like creating your own little Silicon Valley. The Open Works is an ecosystem, like a biosphere of ideas” (Civic Systems Lab 2015:91).

Yet the chain of causality underpinning this transformational logic is hedged on a speculative bet, on an unproven “potential to connect a neighbourhood on a scale where the multiplier effects could transform the lives of everyone living there” (Civic Systems Lab 2015:23). The project’s genius resides in its performative power to convince policymakers it is a wager worth making. However, such isomorphic pressures to convince funders and commissioners of the project’s worth encourage mission-drift. Initial project funding resulted from Lankelly Chase Foundation identifying its “potential to help people experiencing severe and multiple disadvantage” (Civic Systems Lab 2015:25). Mechanisms designed to tackle disadvantage centred on building *resilience*, by leveraging “resources used to cope in challenging circumstances” (Civic Systems Lab 2015:24). Resilience is a major conceptual framing running through the research—mentioned on 30 pages of the report (*ibid.*)—alongside “social capital” and “social contagion” theory. Resilience discourse has been critiqued as a conservative, acquiescent, and reactive approach to political decisions over economic investment (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013; for its intersection with design-thinking, see Cowley et al. 2018). Indeed, the emphasis in Open Works was on reactively coping with, recovering or bouncing back from external stress, shock or crisis, rather than collectively contesting or transforming such circumstances.

The material bases of multiple disadvantage—polarised, poorly-functioning housing and labour markets; state and market failure to provide essential goods and services—were to be resolved through alternative, co-produced provision of free resources, from food to equipment, through cooperative activities that can cultivate new skills, boost confidence, and save money, such as bulk cooking and pooled childcare, while also creating networks of mutual aid and solidarity. Some micro-projects provided spaces for learning how to make essentials—baby food, toys, clothing—more cheaply than purchasing on the market. The psychosocial and psychosomatic symptoms of material deprivation were to be treated by “boosting ‘protective factors’ in a place ... [to] support people recovering from crisis, and help people sustain their wellbeing long term” (Civic Systems Lab 2015:25), through engagement in peer-to-peer networks and cooperative activities. This is welfare based on “social self-prescribing” (Civic Systems Lab 2015:31) aiming to “support people self-regulating and co-regulating their wellbeing” (Civic Systems Lab 2015:33). Other micro-projects involved more traditional skills training and start-up incubation programmes that “might help you cultivate new interests or livelihoods ... and could lead to self-employment” (Civic Systems Lab 2015:26). In this approach, the “pathways of progression from micro levels of participation through to employment” are personally-tailored, diverse, incremental, and ultimately “self-directed”, with people choosing their own route and rate of what is negatively-inflected as “recovery” (Civic Systems Lab 2015:31). Infrastructural provision is oriented around removing “as many barriers as possible”(ibid.) as opposed to providing as many opportunities as possible. Opportunities are to be created by citizens themselves, through cooperative endeavour and enterprising creativity, not through direct provision by the state or any other coordinated organisation—emphasising individual entrepreneurship, self-reliance, and resilience.

“If participation is to be part of a new ecosystem of outcomes, funded at least in part by public funds”, speculates Civic Systems Lab (2015:94), “then there is an obligation to ‘design in’ inclusivity for ethical reasons”. Here, inclusivity is justified through a rather vague appeal to ethics—as opposed to democratic politics or notions of universality—reproducing a charitable, paternalistic notion of duty. What universality and inclusivity mean in practice is a shift away from targeting public resources at citizens most in need through a commissioning model that “relied upon a delivery agent, commonly a service or programme, largely delivered by paid professionals” (Civic Systems Lab 2015:104) and instead towards a distributed model of citizen-led welfare through co-production: “a new emerging taxonomy of the way in which outcomes can be achieved through other means, namely, through activities and hybrid ventures” (ibid.).

The density and intensity of participatory culture is key to the success of place-based system change; multiple micro-projects must be closely located and connected through mutually-interdependent high-frequency participation—not scattered or isolated—to generate multiplier effects and economies of scale. Civic Systems Lab (2015:125–127) speculated that its participatory ecology prototype would take a minimum of three years to build; beneficial outcomes achievable only once a “threshold” of regular participation was reached, estimated to be at least 10–15% of the local population. The theory of change is thus based on “networked effects”, “network density”, and “compound outcomes” that cross-pollinate, accumulate, and multiply through dynamic connectivity and collocation. “Positive spillovers” and “multiplier effects” are understood to percolate through the dense participatory ecology to benefit those most in need—not unlike the proximity benefits of the agglomeration logic attributed to tech clusters (Madaleno et al. 2022) in effecting open innovation (Lorne 2019). Just like tech accelerators or enterprise incubators, proximity through density is pivotal. Despite methodological contentiousness in urban studies, “neighbourhood effects” are cited alongside the “thick networks” of successful innovation ecosystems like Silicon Valley—what economic geographers call “institutional thickness”—as causal mechanisms; “agglomeration effects” seen to drive “mutually reinforcing participatory projects and ventures for [leveraging] large scale social benefit” (Civic Systems Lab 2015:165).

For the purported outcomes of these mechanisms to materialise, the Open Works prototype needed to achieve the critical mass, economies of scale, and participation thresholds that only a larger-scale programme could provide. Open Works was targeted at a single neighbourhood, West Norwood; the next step for Civic Systems Lab was to scale up the prototype to the size of an entire borough and extend its programme from one to at least five years. The estimated annual cost of building and maintaining the platform for 50,000 residents was just £300,000–£400,000, around 2% of Lambeth’s council tax, or 0.1% of local area public spending (Civic Systems Lab 2015:21). The estimated cost of scaling up Open Works was £7,200,000 (Participatory City 2019)—a considerable sum at a time of austerity. This was the next challenge: to find a local authority partner and raise some £7m from funders.

## Taking the Model to Market: Gaining Momentum?

Following the completion of the Open Works prototype in 2015—and with continued support of Lankelly Chase Foundation, providing a development grant for feasibility scoping—the founding director of Civic Systems Lab, Tessy Britton, embarked on an exploratory mission over 18 months, pitching the proposal for a scaled-up, borough-wide prototype to funders. During this period, in 2017, “there seemed to be a switch” in thinking amongst funders, recounted a participant-observer:

It was a strange thing that a lot of funders started having these little workshops and roundtables around place-based funding ... So it wasn't about grants, it was actually about putting the infrastructure in place. (Interview, 2021)

Capturing this conjunctural “switch” was a report published by the local authority membership-based think tank New Local Government Network (NLGN; now New Local), which recommended deeper dialogue between councils and funders to develop the “funding ecology of the borough”; for funders to sponsor “genuine processes of co-production”; and for councils to “take on the role of enablers to develop their local civil society infrastructure” (Gilbert 2017:7–8). This was the “philanthropic complex” (Martin 2015) reshaping the local state; it signalled local government's turn towards place-based experimental solutions to socio-spatial problems through closer collaboration with philanthropy in response to deepening austerity.

The first funders to buy into Britton's vision were the Big Lottery Fund and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, promising financial support once a partner council was found. So began the search for a host borough. Britton engaged in 700–800 meetings with councils, funders, and think tanks and eventually sat down with Chris Naylor, then-Chief Executive of the London Borough of Barking & Dagenham (LBBDD). Like Lambeth, LBBDD was receptive to new participatory policies. Senior LBBDD officers, notably Monica Needs, had been involved in the research conversations informing the NLGN report (Gilbert 2017:4). LBBDD's 2016 Independent Growth Commission report, *No-One Left Behind*, recommended that the “traditional role of the Council as the provider” should pivot towards a “facilitatory” and “catalytic role” in enhancing “institutional and policy environments in which the voluntary sector functions” (Independent Growth Commission 2016:16, 44). The subsequent *Ambition 2020* programme committed LBBDD to transforming its approach from a paternalistic to catalytic role for delivering services through cooperation with citizens and partnership with third-sector organisations. LBBDD threw open its doors to creative ideas for civic innovation—a call to address the borough's wicked problems of low civic and political participation rates, rising racial tensions, persistent spatially-concentrated multiple deprivation, and, much like Lambeth, decreasing public budgets to solve them.

In parallel emerged a distinctive municipal policy agenda dubbed “civic socialism”—hatched by LBBDD council leader Darren Rodwell, working-class Barking born-and-bred turned Labour politician, and local Labour MP Jon Cruddas, linked to conservative-communitarian “Blue Labour” (Cruddas and Rodwell 2019). Civic socialism was influenced by a partnership with action-researchers and policy

entrepreneurs associated with the progressive think tank Compass, the journal *Soundings*, and its wider Gramscian intellectual ecosystem. A friend of Rodwell's was Ken Spours, a UCL academic working with Compass director Neal Lawson on developing Compass' neo-Gramscian thinking around the "common platform", "progressive alliance", and "45 degree change"—neither fully *vertically* directed by party politics nor *horizontally* networked by social movements (see Nunes 2021). As Compass' website puts it, it involves "people setting aside silos and egos to co-operate, to experiment, to overcome" ideological divides; "showing, not telling, the way to a better society—and learning a lot along the way" (Lawson 2018)—an ethos resonating strongly with participatory experimental urbanism. Through novel collaboration between LBBd, Compass, and UCL, Rodwell and Cruddas' civic socialism was to, as one participant-observer put it, "cook up an alternative to Corbynism that's more sensible and less divisive", a new vision for participatory social democracy: "Fabianism 3.0" (Interview, 2021). Rodwell commissioned an action-research programme for Compass and UCL to provide R&D support for an emerging participatory ecosystem in LBBd and help create a new kind of local state, in the direction already gestured at by the 2016 Independent Growth Commission. Research ran from 2017 to 2018; the final report, written in 2019, was never published, deemed too critical by the council.

What was to become the Participatory City programme closely matched LBBd's ambitions for developing civic socialism. Through discussion between Britton and senior officers, the Council's "Every One Every Day" initiative was developed, through an equal partnership rather than conventional commissioning approach, as the background policy for establishing Participatory City—a partnership created through a 200-page project agreement, backed by a 250-page bid to funders (Interview, 2021). The first £3.95m was raised with £450,000 from City Bridge Trust (one of the main funders of the NLGN report), £1m each from the Big Lottery Fund and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and £1.5m of public money from LBBd. A further £850,000 was raised through the Local Government Association's Good Growth Fund for the platform's warehouse hub—the full £7.2m, and then some, since secured. Participatory City Foundation, a charitable trust, was formed to receive these funds and began recruiting staff in July 2017. In March 2018, LBBd was named Council of the Year at the Local Government Chronicle Awards, largely down to its innovative partnership with Participatory City.

Participatory City reimagines and reworks Open Works on a grander scale—built to create, as Chris Naylor suggests, the "core architecture for a functioning place" (quoted in Britton 2020). Coordinated from the central hub, a co-working and makerspace called the Warehouse, Participatory City operates across the entire borough, with five "high street shops" strategically sited in deprived neighbourhoods to create comprehensive catchment areas for reaching the "hardest-to-reach". These physical sites, and equipment and staff they host, together form the platform infrastructure for supporting micro-projects. Participatory City is conceptualised as comprising two interconnected systems: the *support platform* "for growing projects"; and the *participatory ecosystem* "for growing participation" (Participatory City 2020:22). Whilst the underlying logic and structure is



essentially the same as Open Works, the ambition and scope are greatly expanded—and the platform looms larger.

Participatory City has been designed as the central support platform—human, physical, digital—for building new holistic urban systems of production, consumption, distribution, and exchange. The platform provides the “central architecture and design capacity for co-creating new systems with citizens, alongside existing systems”—what Britton (2020) calls “universal basic infrastructure” supporting the peer-to-peer provisioning of “universal basic essentials”. A set of design principles are deeply encoded into this platform infrastructure. First, an emphasis on “universality”—not in terms of liberal democratic citizenship, but rather the idea that every participant has the same set of basic needs, bound up with everydayness as expressed in the LBBB policy “Every One Every Day”. Second, this idea of everyday, foundational, and overlooked economies, grounded in mundane interactions of neighbourhood life rather than global mobility. Third, then, a stress on “localisation” and decentralisation of supply chains; local autonomy and control over circuits of value. Fourth, the idea of “circularity” is prominent, through the circular economics of reuse, recycling, upcycling, pooling resources, and the sustainability and simplicity of products—on living within planetary limits. Fifth, communality and cooperation are intrinsically valuable but also for making circularity possible. Sixth, openness and sharing over private proprietorship—translating into more power for the platform. These principles are, ironically enough, not open to adaptation or contestation; built into the very structure of a model resistant to deconstruction and foreclosed to dissensus.

Such an elegantly packaged and tightly constructed set of principles has helped garner Participatory City a local reputation as something of an uncollaborative closed system, an abstract proof-of-concept model largely disconnected from the locality in which it has landed. This is indeed a *model* designed to work anywhere, with greater incentives invested in proving its efficacy to attract further funding and replicate elsewhere than in working with local residents, or with existing contextual conditions, to co-produce a bespoke intervention attuned to people and place. A large part of the local disquiet is reserved for the model’s shortcomings in empowering the people it claims to benefit. One interviewee raised a “valid question” over “bringing that money and that fresh thinking into the borough in a way that more directly builds up local wealth of all kinds” (Interview, 2020). Another suggested that Participatory City’s centralised platform logic tends to become self-serving, reinforcing its own power and capacities to attract, generate, and retain resources, rather than empowering citizens or generating community wealth:

Even the money is not shared with the participants: they have to ask permission for it ... So, in a way, it’s almost become its own worst enemy because the idea was to enable people to do what they want. But it’s quite paternalistic ... because it doesn’t entrust people with the resources themselves. So, they are allocated time from a graphic designer to help them design the brand, they’re allocated a work pack to organise their events and a very small amount of funding, but I think pretty much always through a project designer to deliver their things. But it doesn’t necessarily build their capacity to grow from there to an enterprise, or not in a way that’s been

significant enough to actually show that it's really bringing people into creating jobs and new businesses or co-operatives.

The deep irony of Participatory City, then, seems to hinge around this central contradiction between claims to democratic empowerment and a palpable lack of resource redistribution or power relation transformation. Some stakeholders describe the model as the “new paternalism”, replacing an old patriarchal, racist welfare state with something patently more participatory but which nonetheless reproduces hierarchies, exclusions, and dependencies, not least along race and class lines. While participants are drawn from the borough's highly-diverse working-class population, Participatory City is run by professionals who mostly commute in from gentrified areas of London, such as Hackney—described by some as “Hackneyfication” (Interview, 2021). Whilst Participatory City aspires to circumvent the mediations of the (local) state and the market—even of property and money—to create an autonomous peer-to-peer ecosystem of collective self-provisioning, the platform forms a new mediating role within these abstract social forms of capital, which have not been circumvented so much as sublated and reproduced anew.

If no one participant or incubated organisation can “own” their ideas or innovations—“automatically open source, meaning that they can be replicated and adapted by anyone in the borough or anyone across the world” (Britton 2020)—then intellectual property rights reside with the collective, as a commons whose constituent power is constituted in the platform which mediates all access to this commons. The Participatory City team has been working with participants on developing “collaborative brands” that articulate in commodified form the idea of “circular, simple, universal”. Brands include Slab (“simple, beautiful ceramics”), Bowled (“fresh, delicious, healthy food in bowls”), Sauced (“no nonsense sauces, natural ingredients, awesome flavours”), and Capsule Clothing (“beautiful shapes, natural fabrics, simple wardrobes, planet friendly”). This last image encapsulates Participatory City's elegant aesthetic: a prefabricated, modular, holistic design for life, stripped of consumerist fripperies down to the bare threads of sustainable, communal, and circular provisioning. Responding to post-pandemic desires to live more local, essential lives, the Participatory City team hoped to establish a platform cooperative that specialises in making essential stuff such as the collaborative brands (Interviews, 2021). This platform co-op—unlike the platform lab that incubated it—would be co-designed and co-produced by participant-members to meet their needs, yet likewise contain design principles built-in from the start, including circular economy, ecological sustainability, and cooperative sharing of ideas, commodities, and tools. Can these two divergent tendencies—open-ended, grounded, citizen-led democratic design versus holistically pre-programmed design principles for communality within ecological limits—be reconciled?

At their most critical, participant-observers we interviewed suggested Participatory City was “a combination of IKEA and KidZania”—focused on a Scandi-styled design aesthetic and branding strategy that beautifies place and reshapes subjectivities to produce civic entrepreneurs and resilient citizens, just as KidZania functions as a babysitting service for parents going shopping at the nearby Bluewater

out-of-town mall moulding children into neoliberal subjects. Participatory City, we were told by its dissenters, was less about open, democratic co-production than a pre-designed system for circular, sustainable co-living all worked out in advance, “telling us how to live right down to the last detail”; “Soviet in its prescriptions” (Interviews, 2021). These critics attribute this to origins in the design-thinking and architectural worlds—contrasting with projects arising from community development or even grassroots politics.

Such tensions, we suggest, were baked-in from the outset. Open Works’ “unpolished aesthetic” of plywood tops on trestles and wood clamps “was intended to show visually that the project was a ‘work in progress’ and was open to other people’s contributions and ideas” (Civic Systems Lab 2015:220). As the project evolved, the aesthetic changed to reflect participants’ inputs with a more “lived-in feel”. These highly curated spaces were intentionally designed to appear spontaneously found, amenable to change, open to reconfiguration—*curated* to appear *un-curated*. This goes to the heart of the contradiction in the model between programmed curation and open participation. “Design is only the first part of the welcome process” (ibid.)—a programmed process in which residents are invited to participate but not design. Is Britton’s (2020) acknowledgement that “[w]e started with a set of principles designed to make the programmes as inclusive as possible and *to reduce risk as much as possible*” (emphasis added) an unconscious recognition of the risk that the programme would be bent out of shape, or steered off course, by messy, conflictual democratic dissensus?

## On the Contradictions of Participatory Experimental Urbanism

Responding to calls to spatialise, historicise, and politicise the experimental-urban field (Caprotti and Cowley 2017; Savini and Bertolini 2019), in this discussion section we dig deeper into the contradictions of participatory experimental urbanism; an exercise intended to get a clearer view of the barriers and challenges standing in the way of emancipatory urban transformation-by-design and whose closer interrogation may arm praxis with critical tools for honing further experimentation.

First, reflecting Barnett’s (2022) formulation of the field, the self-conscious foregrounding of people over systems appears in deep tension with the design-thinking methodologies driving participatory experimental urbanism, pulled in opposing directions: one grounded in participatory citizen-led design; the other free-floating as a definitive model constructed from above with pre-determined design principles. This contradiction contains some curious incongruities: curating space to appear spontaneously un-curated; carefully programming a closed environment for open-ended interaction; a DIY amateur-maker ethos of creative, anarchic experimentation, channelled and contained within a professionally-designed social-scientific system for living ecologically and cooperatively according to theoretically-ordained ethical principles. This reflects comparable critiques of the contradictions of artistic curation, and the dialectic between participation and spectacle, in participatory art or “social practice” (Bishop 2012). Conceptual

parallels between participatory experimental urbanism and socially-engaged art are made manifest in Participatory City's recent collaboration with the Victoria and Albert Museum in central London called Re:Works—a curated maker programme for re-using exhibition waste.

Tensions between programmed curation and spontaneous creativity express a deeper contradiction between design and democracy. For participatory mechanisms to be substantive and productive of genuinely democratic decision-making—not merely tokenistic consultation or post-political consensus-building within pre-determined parameters—they must (at least attempt to) facilitate, channel, and mediate divergent political and aesthetic perspectives and conflicting class interests: to deal with radical *dissensus*. Yet, *dissensus* runs counter to the foreclosed utopian visioning of a sustainable future based on circularity, cooperation, and simplicity, however hopeful and desirable that vision may be. Here, our analysis extends Bianchi's (2022) critique of a comparable "post-political" commoning experiment in Bologna.

Second, the contradiction between promises of radical systemic transformation and a politically conservative resilience discourse (see MacKinnon and Derickson 2013) presents an acquiescence towards neoliberal austerity, framed as an exogenous shock or crisis against which people can only be protected and made resilient through cooperative self-help. This is set within an approach towards delivering basic goods and services—welfare—foregrounding creative self-provisioning, entrepreneurial commoning, and civic voluntarism over universal state provision. Outlandishly, Civic Systems Lab (2015:39) claims this participatory model is based on the *unmediated* time and energy of citizens who "produce" and "invest" directly through peer-to-peer co-production, and represents a radical break with conventional approaches that are all mediated by some secondary relation—whether it be the so-called "consumer" model (citizens "buying" from corporations), the "challenge" model ("petitioning", "protesting", "donating", and "lobbying"), the "charity" model ("donating" and "volunteering"), or even "associational" cultures ("member" mediation and "support"). A rejection of the passive, paternalistic charity model in favour of active, direct participation is to be bankrolled, ironically, by philanthropic foundations and charitable trusts and mediated, paradoxically, by the platform and its operatives, effecting a new kind of paternalism with dependency shifted from the state or charity to the urban lab. Participatory experimental urbanism is therefore mediated by its platform infrastructure, mediated in turn by state regulation and monetary markets within which it must necessarily operate for access to space, staff, and resources. Moreover, the platform seeks to become the new intermediary coordinator of local state commissioning of solutions to public policy problems as it simultaneously attempts to construct an alternative system of provisioning in, against and beyond the state.

Third, then, is the contradiction between centralised platform mediation (coupled with proprietary control) and decentralised open-source values. Citizen-led ideas for innovative peer-to-peer provisioning are generated and incubated as cooperative enterprises and then made automatically open-source by the platform for replication and adaptation by anyone else anywhere—yet the platform

ultimately coordinates and owns all the tools, resources, and infrastructure for developing and replicating such ideas. Too little control over these material inputs and outputs is devolved to those involved in the incubation process, with capabilities for empowerment remaining the proprietary domain of the platform. The platform is, after all, selling a commodity on the policy market; that commodity is the infrastructure for empowerment. Residents thus lack the ownership of the means of producing their own solutions to local wicked problems outside the mediation of the platform.

Fourth, following Torrens and von Wirth (2021), participatory urban experiments “projectify” urban governance. Projectification tends to be presented as a problem of *time*, of time-limited and temporary forms of public-sector organising around wicked problem resolution through a “project” logic that organises activities and achieves goals through temporal targets, managerial practices, and performance evaluation, thereby impinging on the promised spontaneous creativity of exploratory, open-ended experimentation. Yet there is another, overlooked temporal aspect of projectification that requires deeper investigation: the way in which participatory experimental urbanism *projects* a vision into the future through speculative claims about its efficacy. Public authorities and philanthropic funders buy into captivating visions and compelling theories of change that nonetheless remain conceptually contentious and empirically unproven. How exactly the concentration of participatory ecologies produces sufficient multiplier effects of lasting material benefit to transform lives and places profoundly shaped by uneven development and the injustices of capitalist land and labour markets remains to be demonstrated. In some sense, then, participatory experimental urbanism embodies the “derivative” logic that Martin (2015) sees as permeating late-capitalism; based on speculative bets about projected economic outcomes and managing social risks that creates a futures market for new policy products mimicking financial derivatives.

Finally, projectification also implies *spatial* problems, polarising what was once more comprehensive urban-economic development into privileged sites of experimentation and neglected spaces of disinvestment. If experimentation becomes a new mode of governance to replace conventional urban planning and policy (Bulkeley et al. 2019), for a city of “permanent experiments” (Karvonen 2018), projectification poses problems for spatial justice, undermining prospects for countering the uneven development of capitalist relations. Participatory experiments produce a deeply polarised and fragmented socio-spatial landscape, precariously dependent on political and philanthropic patronage. The systems-building approach advocated by Civic Systems Lab is for resources to be coordinated systematically and sustainably to encourage creative collaboration in fully-equipped holistic place-based experiments combining all essential ingredients for system change—rather than working by sectoral or regional coverage. Comprehensive coverage and (re)distributional spatial justice are sacrificed at the altar of selectively intensive experimentation. A certain threshold of economies and densities of scale in any one place-based system is claimed to make the model effective, to prove the concept. Civic Systems Lab (2015:40) recommends concentrating “resources to build new systems—rather than sprinkling resources fairly but

ineffectively”; yet also building “systems that encourage collaboration—rather than fostering fragmentation and competition.” Fragmentation and competition are an inevitable outcome of concentrating resources spatially, particularly when public resources are scarce under austerity. This creates a reliance on patchy and competitive philanthropic funding, often with paternalistic or ideological conditionalities attached—as illustrated by critical research on the US non-profit industrial complex (INCITE! 2017)—and runs the risk of further fragmenting urban governance into an uneven, pockmarked landscape of competing experimental projects; what some in Barking call “initiative-itis” (Interview, 2021).

## Conclusions

In this article, we have sought to discern the multiple origins, rationales, dynamics, prospects, and contradictions of an emerging model within prevailing trends for the experimental city (Karvonen 2018) and innovatory urban governance (McGuirk et al. 2022). Efforts to mobilise cooperative peer-to-peer production in an ambitiously holistic redesign of urban provisioning systems invites the moniker “participatory experimental urbanism”—a harbinger, perhaps, of local economic development futures. In blending “civic” and “organic” forms of urban living lab (Bulkeley et al. 2019), participatory experimental urbanism advances a platform architecture as the mediating infrastructure for a new economics of participation. This mutation of the urban living lab remakes the “field-site” as a “laboratory” for participation (Gieryn 2006), enrolling citizens to *participate* as observed and measured experimental test-subjects *and* active reflexive co-producers of knowledge and prefigurative social relations. Despite claims of empowering participants to cultivate new civic economies, we suggest platform mediation risks becomes *self-serving*, displacing and reworking the local state and inaugurating a new paternalism described by participant-observers as Fabianism 3.0. As such, the emergence of participatory experimental urbanism has profound implications for experimental knowledge production, policymaking, political governance, and welfare reform.

By following the assemblage and translation of a high-profile model, we traced participatory experimental urbanism from its materialisation in the London boroughs of Lambeth and Barking & Dagenham back to a design and architecture milieu experimenting with place-based prototypes for redesigning local economies “from scratch” (Wills 2016), freed from state and market mediations. Redesigning local economies is an extraordinary move to make in the constrained context of austerity whereby most local authority interventions seek to reconfigure procurement and commissioning of service provision, not the underlying structure of economies. In aspiring to rewrite the rules of the local economic game, participatory experimental urbanism aims to cultivate cooperative subjectivities and governmentalities that may prefigure new social relations based not on legal rights or monetary exchange but co-production and mutual dependency upon “common denominator” activities, driven by the logics of agglomeration to foster dense participatory ecosystems. Yet, pushing design-thinking to its limits by redesigning entire urban provisioning systems, participatory experimental



urbanism crashes into the contradictions of the commodity form in the late-capitalist conjuncture, reproducing its symptomatic expressions in participatory art (Bishop 2012) and autonomous design (Escobar 2018).

Contradictions abound when utopian visions for emancipation from the alienating mediations of capital are packaged up and sold in a marketplace of fast policy ideas. Our study foregrounds the dependency of participatory experimental urbanism on the non-profit industrial complex of philanthropic foundations, think tanks, and innovation consultancies, portending how the local state might be reimaged as a new mode of urban governance—a mode defined by “public-common-philanthropic partnerships” as much as by conventional public-private partnerships (Thompson 2023). It suggests an enlarged role for unaccountable non-profit agencies—constituting a “derivative” third sector or “philanthropic complex”—in ways which problematise important notions of “the public” (Martin 2015). If, as Martin (2015:91–92) speculates, the philanthropic complex renders the public a “derivative of private values”—guided by measurable impact, fiduciary accountability, and technical expertise rather than democratic deliberation, representation, or public value—urban policy experiments are transformed into derivatives to be impact-measured, risk-managed, performance-monitored, and, ultimately, profited upon. Just as finance is the derivative of the commodity form, so participation is the derivative of the public; the philanthropic complex derivative of the state.

The participatory-experimental philanthropic complex described here, following Martin (2015:92), “is at once regulatory, constitutive of publics, and compatible with a proselytizing conservatism as much as a moralizing liberalism. Returns on investment cannot be left as an article of faith; they need to be measured and demonstrated”. Indeed, this is the very *modus operandi* of Open Works and Participatory City—*made to measure*, as the 2019 evaluation report is titled, pun intended (Participatory City 2019). It is no coincidence, then, Participatory City (2019, 2020) spends so much time and resources collecting quantitative and qualitative data, rigorously analysing its own performance, and measuring impacts—essential for demonstrating claims about scalar multipliers *and* for generating a derivatives market in further policy speculation on claims unrealised. That this emerging market is growing is evident by the recent franchise expansion as Participatory Canada, with partner projects in Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, and Edmonton. Participatory City’s programme funding ends in 2023, now in “legacy mode” (Interview, 2023) searching for new funders. But this need not spell the end of participatory experimental urbanism; examples proliferate across Britain, such as Civic Square in Birmingham, and no doubt Participatory City will move on and mutate somewhere if not London.

There is a need to continue following participatory experimental urbanism as it moves and mutates through globalising fast policy circuits. Likely significant impact on participants and places makes it deserving of more engaged, ethnographic research than documented here. We have not sought to measure or evaluate such experiments on their own terms so much as focus on initial experimentation to deconstruct their logics and situate them within wider

conjunctural dynamics. So far, just one cooperative enterprise has been incubated—Grounded, an appositely-named coffeeshop co-op—reflecting the difficulty of intensive early-stage incubation (especially for democratic firms, marginalised under capitalism) as well as progress lost to the pandemic. As the model takes hold further, critical attention should turn to assess its achievements against its speculative theories of change.

To be clear, we don't wish to downplay achievements or deter further experimentation. Such ambitious visions for full-system place-based transformation and resolution of wicked problems in unsettling times is to be lauded. Yet the potential to perform more hopeful futures must be read within conjunctural contexts (see Leitner and Sheppard 2022). While participatory experimental urbanism could potentially initiate the kind of democratic design-thinking and prefigurative worldmaking led by autonomous Indigenous communities at the peripheral frontiers of global capitalism (Escobar 2018), this utopian promise is especially challenging to realise in peripheralised spaces of cities of the global North, dealing with the different challenges of working-class decomposition, weakened solidarities, racialised inequalities, creeping gentrification, political austerity, and financialised and speculative forms of urban development suffocating the growth of alternatives.

By studying the emergence and contradictions of participatory experimental urbanism—responding to McGuirk et al.'s (2022) call to focus on the wider political economy—we have demonstrated how the prospects for these circulating ideas taking hold are profoundly conditioned by the politics of the present. A “switch” in philanthropic funding strategies away from ad hoc grant-giving towards holistic place-based strategies, from 2017, coincided and conjoined with the restless search of local authorities for alternative solutions to wicked problems in times of deepening fiscal austerity to create the environment for participatory experimental urbanism to grow, mutate, and evolve. By thinking conjuncturally, it becomes possible to interpret how such structurally and contingently overdetermined conditions both create the supply and demand for participatory experimental urbanism *and* depoliticise and distance it from the radical praxis to which it aspires.

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## Data Availability Statement

Due to reasons of confidentiality and anonymity, supporting data cannot be made openly available.

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