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REINVENTING THE WORLD THROUGH URBAN EXPERIMENTS

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Abstract: How can we envision the process of transitioning towards liveable, prosperous and sustainable cities? One way is as ‘experimentation’, seeing cities as a test bed for innovative and creative solutions, and the potential transfer and scaling-up of these ideas to other contexts. This short essay is based on a new book, entitled ‘The Experimental City’, which draws together insights from 32 researchers on social and urban issues across the world to address central questions, including: how are urban experiments conceived and enacted? Who instigates these experiments and who benefits from them? And how can the lessons from experiments be applied in other places?

Keywords: sustainable city, urban experimentation, urban transitions, urban innovation.

In the 1990s, Enrique Peñalosa, the Mayor of Bogotá, Colombia, gained international fame for transforming his city from one of the most dangerous and unpleasant places to live into a global leader in sustainability. His so-called ‘Bogotá experiment’ involved a range of strategies to remove automobiles from the city centre and create a more walkable and liveable built environment. This simple but radical approach fundamentally changed the trajectory of the city’s development.

Bogotá serves as a well-known example of a pervasive trend in cities today, that of urban experimentation. Experimentation is a common denominator in a wide range of current urban agendas including smart cities, eco cities, transition towns, urban living labs, and grassroots community projects. Advocates of urban experiments argue that there is a need to think and act

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radically to realise more liveable, resilient, prosperous, and healthy cities. They see experiments as catalysts to change the way that we design, build, manage and inhabit our built environment. But how are urban experiments conceived and enacted? Who instigates these experiments and who benefits from them? And how can the lessons from experiments be applied in other places?

In a new book, *The Experimental City* (Routledge 2016), a group of 32 social and urban researchers from the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden, India, Australia, and the US provide insights on the theory and practice of contemporary urban experiments. They present case studies ranging from ecological housing developments in Santiago, Chile, a community garden in Berlin that provides an arena for social learning and the aspirational project of Masdar City, a new development in the United Arab Emirates that serves as an open platform for low-carbon technological applications. The case studies represent a range of scales, from a building site to a district or neighbourhood and even an entire city or region. And they involve a combination of design strategies, large datasets, aspirations for social equity, regulations and incentives, economic strategies, and more.

A common theme of the book is that experimental activities are compelling because they embrace notions of innovation and creativity. There is a recognised need for change and experiments provide a means to achieve this. Moreover, they provide an opportunity to undertake concrete actions that can enhance a combination of agendas including economic development, environmental protection, social cohesion, creative sector support, infrastructure provision, and academic research. And most importantly, experiments are not simply about doing things differently; they involve a focus on learning from real-world inventions. Experiments involve the setup of a specific intervention that can be measured and evaluated. They are intentional activities that provide rigorous evidence of the effects and processes of change.

As a whole, the work reveals the powerful rhetoric of promising radical change. Advocates of experiments see these activities as an enticing way to realise genuine and tangible transformation of the contemporary conditions in cities. Meanwhile, sceptics suggest that urban experiments simply window dress activities by the dominant elites that do little to effect change. In most cases, the achievements of urban experimentation are somewhere in between. The wide range of stakeholders that conceive, fund, and operate urban experiments include local governments but also private companies, third sector organisations, and civil society organisations. This has the potential to result in a shift in the balance of power and influence, empowering some stakeholders while disempowering others. Thus, urban experimentation is a highly political endeavour that has significant implications on how cities are governed.

And a key question with all urban experiments is how the insights and learning is scaled up. How do these discrete interventions influence wider transformations? Advocates of urban experimentation promote ideas of upscaling, replication, transforming, seeding, rolling out, and

breaking through to describe how experiments can have broader influence. But there is often little information provided on how this will actually occur. Thus, the influence and impacts of urban experimentation continues to be a work in progress.

Urban experiments provide a compelling vision for how cities can address the grand challenges of humanity in the twenty-first century. From climate change impacts to economic uncertainty and social inequality, experimentation recognises that cities are both the problem and the solution to addressing widespread endemic problems. The rise of urban experiments at multiple scales in the Global North and South provides hope for conceiving and enacting radical change. However, there remain significant questions about the politics of experiments, about who benefits from these activities, and about how lessons can be transferred.

This essay is based on:

- Evans, J., Karvonen, A. and Raven, R. eds., 2016. *The Experimental City*. Routledge.

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