



Assembling a Co-produced urban lab: The case of Nuns' island, Galway

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ABSTRACT

This paper details the contextual and conceptual elements involved in setting up an Urban Lab in the city of Galway, Ireland. The paper specifies the set-up of a lab in the post-industrial area of Nuns' Island, through a detailed reading of pertinent 'lab-centred' literatures. It contributes to this literature by (1) analysing a lab in the explicit context of an urban regeneration project and (2) exploring ways in which co-production may be put into practice. Urban Lab Galway is anticipated initially to play a major role supporting the urban regeneration of an area adjacent to a major university, which also owns substantial buildings and land on the site, and is thus not surprisingly supported by the local university in question. The paper motivates and details the reasons supporting co-produced initiatives, critically exploring the potential and difficulties attaching to such practices. The paper ends in a sustained engagement with the concept of 'creative destruction' in the context of lab-based engagements.

1. Introduction

'City' or 'Urban' (occasionally 'Living') Labs have become a global phenomenon, with presently more than 170 such entities operating in Europe alone (Scholl & Kemp, 2016, p. 90). Tasked with developing conceptual and practical tools to engage with, and occasionally steer, urban change and development, the organisational structures of such laboratories vary between locations but associate regularly with pre-existing university structures. From MIT's justly famous and globally operating 'Senseable City Lab' (Simeone et al., 2017) to San Raffaele Scientific Institutes's (FCSR) City of the Future Living Lab in Milan (Vicini & Sanna, 2013, pp. 254–259) or its off-beat, culturally focussed local twin Macao (Valli, 2015; D'Ovidio & Cossu, 2016) and from the privately financed 'smart city' focused City Lab Graz, Maastricht's M-LAB (Scholl & Kemp, 2016) to the postulation of entire urban quarters or even cities as 'laboratories' (Juujärvi & Pessa, 2013), the concept of the 'lab' has gained considerable currency and traction since the turn of the millennium. This also includes a number of 'virtual' urban labs (Prendinger et al., 2013) and entire manufactured cities like Masdar City in Abu Dhabi performing technology-oriented lab-like functions as per design as well experimental cities like Arcosanti, Arizona emerging from urban laboratories. (Ouroussoff, 2010; Evans, Schliwa and Luke 2016).

The present paper probes practices attached to and emanating from 'labs' in general before evaluating the suitability of lab-based ideas and activities in the context of an urban regeneration project underway in the former industrial quarter of Nuns' Island in the city of Galway, Ireland (Image 1). Given the nascent state of the lab, our approach embraces the need to both better understand practices arising from urban labs and also how we work towards developing genuinely bespoke practices for Galway and similarly structured urban environments. Elements of this *working towards* included in this paper encompass the reconceptualization of concepts of 'co-production', an awareness of wider issues borne of centralisation in Irish governance, a discussion on assemblage urbanism, the dialectic between research and action, the reflexivity on the 'lab(oratory)' concept, and, finally, a discussion of elements that favour the setting up and the success of an urban lab in a city like Galway.

It is perhaps incumbent upon us to highlight that in the world of global urbanization, the above invoked notion of "a city like Galway" cannot be an unquestioned point of departure. As a small urban agglomeration located on the European periphery with presently 80,000 inhabitants, Galway struggles size-wise to be recognized as a city. At the same time, Galway fulfils urban functions with regard to its considerable hinterland, as an internationally recognized tourist hub, as a site in the

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global production of medical equipment and through the existence of fairly large-scale third-level institutions. One of these institutions, the National University of Ireland Galway (NUI Galway²), is engaged in a process of urban redevelopment using a number of vacant university owned buildings on Nuns' Island as anchors to expand beyond its historic mid-nineteenth century campus. Nuns' Island is a modestly sized 15 acre post-industrial area bounded and intersected by rivers and canals that is situated between NUI Galway and the city's CBD. A number of the buildings owned by NUI Galway are early 19th century industrial structures that include a six storey former flour mill and a former whiskey distillery that sits prominently along the riverbank. €4.3 million national funding has recently been earmarked to kick-start the redevelopment of Nuns' Island into an Innovation and Creativity District as part of a wider €53 million investment into the city's transport infrastructure and public realm through the central government's Urban Regeneration and Development Fund [URDF] (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2021).

The inclusion of an urban lab in discussions on the redevelopment of Nuns' Island as well as in the city's successful UDRF bid is timely. Galway is expected to grow by 50% over the next two decades as the majority of Ireland's ongoing population rise will be concentrated in regional cities (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2021; Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, 2021). Yet, this growth is mired in legacy issues surrounding transport and mobility, urban quality and housing affordability and availability. Alongside this is the longstanding centralisation of Irish governance, particularly within the domains of development and planning (Boyle, 2018; Collins, 2020; Collins et al., 2021; Collins & Quinlavin, 2010; Murphy & Hearne, 2019; Murphy, 2019). This centralisation of power has had a debilitating effect on democratic representation and decision-making at a local level. Indeed, Ireland currently ranks bottom of the Local Autonomy Index

among European countries and has a proportion of locally elected representatives to public of 1:440 while the equivalent ratios in France and Germany are 1:120 and 1:350 respectively (Collins et al., 2021; Ferriter, 2020; Ladner et al., 2019, p. 236). This democratic deficit has left a void within local decision-making and accentuates the need for a space oriented towards place-based experimentation (Collins et al., 2021) that brings together a variety of urban actors across local government, business, community, arts and education.

In this paper we suggest that in the circumstances outlined above, an urban lab may come to fill a keenly felt democratic deficit while also providing an incubator space for Nuns' Island that supports activities, projects and interactions between different groups with the aim of creating a more sustainable and liveable city. We contend that practices associated with and emanating from 'co-produced' knowledge construction are best suited for such ambitions – and invite readers to think co-production as something other than positioned between the neat binaries of service provider and citizen or designer and end-user that have come to define the concept in the realms of governance and commercial design respectively (Brudney & England, 1983; Durose et al., 207; Ostrom, 1990; Vershuere et al., 2012; Voorberg et al., 2015). In the context of placemaking, co-production rather involves multiple voices and actors developing shared understandings of urban processes and the changes required to future-proof Galway's growth and development. In marked difference to 'consultative' engagements that have come to characterise planning practices in recent decades, 'co-production' is always material and thus resonates with the lived experience of stakeholders.

With NUI Galway furthermore a key player in establishing Urban Lab Galway, it is also necessary to move beyond entrepreneurial and 'triple helix models' of academic urban engagement that are geared towards the commercialisation of knowledge and are limited to the interactions



Image 1. Nuns' Island, NUI Galway and the inner city of Galway.

² At the time of writing, NUI Galway is undergoing a re-branding exercise; starting with the 2022/23 Academic Year, it will be known bi-lingually as 'Ollscoil na Gaillimhe - University of Galway'.

between business, government and industry (Clark, 1998; Fayolle & Redford, 2014; Thorp & Goldstein, 2010) in favour of a more civically minded engagement with the 'city in the round' in all its variety (Bell, 2019; Goddard, 2017, 2018; Goddard et al., 2016; Goddard et al., 2013; Goddard & Vallance, 2013, p. 13). We, the authors of this paper, are not

absent in this engagement. Our own individual and collective positionality and reflexive capacities are intimately woven into the following pages: we are members of an academic community that is at once part of and separate from the city of Galway. As professional neighbours to Nuns' Island, we furthermore welcome the revitalisation of derelict buildings and investment into a more diverse and vibrant urban quarter that may emerge as a result of interventions, some of which may emanate from the Urban Lab presented in this paper. We are, in other words, anything but distant and disinterested bystanders to urban transformative processes.

2. Co-production and experimentation

The reconceptualization of co-production we are suggesting in this paper positively aligns with an assemblage theorising of the urban that engages with Nuns' Island as a coming together of different actors, policies and relationships as well as ecological and human elements (Sweeney et al., 2018; McFarlane, 2011a; 2011b). We will unpack the notion of 'assemblages' further down in this paper; for here and now suffice it to flag that the situated and reflexive understanding of the urban that is inherent to assemblage-inspired thought and practice makes it eminently suitable to inform work in an urban lab. In addition, such a form of deliberation often works through the interplay between the actual and the possible in the making of place and thereby brings into contact differently structured ambitions and policies that are both mindful of a place's past while assembling possible futures.

Common to all 'labs' is the interweaving of 'learning' and 'doing' into a locally specific set of practices. These regularly evolve from interdisciplinary approaches towards comparative analyses of specific urban issues, problems and opportunities (Nesti, 2018). Many furthermore engage in experimentation beyond traditional forms of urban governance, which by their very nature posit an official state apparatus alongside or against the many manifestations of civil society (Bulkeley & Castán Broto, 2013). Practices associated with the idea of a 'lab' straddle a divide between the production of generalisable knowledge located within an existing economic context and the vernacular demands of a local environment and individual ambitions, dreams and aspirations.

Taken as a linguistic phenomenon, the use of the term 'laboratory' in this context principally designates social scientific spaces for the generation and dissemination of, as well as participatory engagement towards knowledge. Of particular interest is the fact that hardly anyone spells out the term in its entirety, preferring instead to deploy the rather cute abbreviated form, which points towards a somewhat conflicted identification of what such labs are purported to be about. What becomes visible here is a potentially dialectical intertwining of two goals that both support the institutionalization of urban knowledge-based practices underneath the umbrella of 'a lab': the controlled production of replicable, general knowledge associated with and emanating from laboratories on the one hand and something rather more endearing, humane, local and unremarkable on the other. In what follows, we maintain that the tension between these two aspirations can be rendered useful if mitigated by a rethinking of coproduction away from the established dualisms of 'service agents' and 'citizens' to include multiple actors in a geographically specific context. In the case of Nuns' Island, Galway this includes residents, students, businesses, local authorities, artists and NUI Galway among others. Such an expanded notion brings a diverse range of skills and voices to bear on the definition of urban problems within Galway and possible solutions that can create a positive oscillation between knowledge and everyday actions. We argue that conceptualising a lab in this manner can be conducive in the long term for the development of a practice-based, co-created form of policy that is both reflexive and experimental.

Virtually all 'lab-based' structures and activities start from an acknowledgment of the importance of urban ways of life for national and planetary deliberations and practices. Ever since 2007 (UN Habitat 2009), when humankind passed the watershed of more people living in

cities than in rural areas, an increased prominence has attached not merely to the production of knowledge about cities but equally to the ways in which such knowledge was produced. Part of this enduring interest stems from perceived and real challenges posed by urbanization and with the expected growth of regional urban centres across Ireland over the next two decades questions over urban quality and sustainability take on a local importance. With the climate imperative informing both Ireland's National Development Plan and National Planning Framework and therefore urban growth scenarios these questions become part of urban geography and not surprisingly, situated urban labs have become part of a portfolio of responses to steer 'the urban development trajectory' (Culwick et al., 2019, p. 9) and address the making of sustainable cities and communities. Galway, although evidently at the non-metropolitan end of the urban spectrum, is nonetheless encompassed by that global developmental path given its anticipated growth mentioned above and the urban challenges arising from same. We will explore the question of 'siting' an urban lab in the next section of this paper, but at present develop the view that urban labs are spaces of co-production and experimentation.

Co-production as a concept and practice has long positioned itself as an alternative to market and state dominated forms of governance with citizens and communities being placed as active stakeholders, untapped resources and the beneficiaries of collective forms of decision-making in service design and delivery (Allmark, 2020; Cahn, 2000; Ostrom, 1990; New Economics Foundation, 2008). As already stated, this has traditionally been conceived along dualistic lines. However, in the context of an urban lab we wish to posit an understanding of co-production that is appropriate to placemaking in a city such as Galway and Nuns' Island in particular. It is here that the concept of the assemblage promoted in urban geography by Colin McFarlane takes on importance (McFarlane, 2011a and b). Commonly deployed to recognise or emphasise "emergence, multiplicity and indeterminacy" in environments "composed of heterogeneous elements that may be human and non-human, organic and inorganic, technical and natural" (Anderson & McFarlane, 2011, p. 124), assemblage thinking grasps the processual, relational and generative nature of place (McFarlane, 2011a, p. 650). We propose that designing an urban lab as an assemblage is germane to the purpose of serving a city and its population and is entirely congruent with co-produced practices where new institutional arrangements can begin to articulate themselves.

Cities fulfil different functions within a scalar network of spatial relations, are organised along dissimilar forms of governance and are embedded within diverse cultural logics. This has led to a recognition of an epistemological need to not exclude any potentially significant forces within the study of urban phenomena. Where in the past, urban scientists had few scruples identifying a dominant logic within urban development and orientating their research to be in synch with such an identified rationality – be that an economic, ecological or social one – lab-based research grounded in co-production and assemblage thinking acknowledges the interdependencies, cross-pollinations and the plain old messiness of urban life as forming the object under scrutiny. In contrast to traditional forms of knowledge production, research in urban labs furthermore emphasises experimentation over routinised forms of academic or policy-producing practices (Voytenko et al., 2016; Kronsell & Mukhtar-Landgren, 2017; Fuenschilding et al., 2019; Marvin et al., 2018) and therefore deliberately tends to veer towards approaches best characterised as "learning from doing" (Evans, Karvonen, & Craven, 2018); the same rationale also encourages inter- or trans-disciplinary approaches to be applied within lab-based structures (Simon et al., 2018).

The invocation of 'experimental' (or broadly 'creative' and 'innovative', see Evans, Karvonen & Raven 2018) forms of knowledge production indirectly points towards a habitually implied disruptive momentum that can accompany lab-based practices, appropriately conceived. Often geared towards developing a "transformative potential" (Evans, 2016, p. 440) within a context that strategically deploys

academic credibility, urban experimentations “establish a process of governance that challenges and disrupts the status quo by reorientating policy and planning around inclusive innovation and learning activities” (Karvonen et al. 2014, 113). We will further develop this within the context of designing Galway’s own lab later in this paper. Academic credibility is crucial to such practices and is centred around the precarious balance that any lab has to strike between its knowledge-generating status as a lab and its generative, potentially progressive role within a local setting. Symptomatic of the perceived need to square science with more human-centred approaches mentioned above, the epistemological poise between ‘any city’ (the ‘lab’) and ‘this city’ (the ‘field’), mirrors older epistemological problems in the social and cultural sciences between ‘general’ and ‘particular’ or (especially in geography) between ‘nomothetic’ and ‘ideographic’ forms of knowledge. As Bruno Latour has taught us to see in his forensic analysis of Pasteur’s laboratory (Latour et al., 1988), in-between the laboratory and its environs (be that society, academia and/or a city) is where the validation of work takes place – *or not*; furthermore, this ‘in-between’ is in turn shaped by visible and invisible materials, rhetoric and practices that connect *and* separate a laboratory from non-lab-like structures and organisations. As such, the fact that there really never is a stable.

‘outside’ to ‘the lab’ invites potentially detrimental (because circular) forms of reasoning; like Latour, we assert that it is only through the practice of working in a lab that this challenge can be addressed. Through work practices, a novel model of science emerges that expands the notion of a ‘lab’ to embrace what could perhaps, following Evans, be labelled a “laboratory-clinic” (Evans, 2011, 226), a space that is at once pragmatically orientated towards problem solving while incorporating a no less realistic vision of learning while working. Co-production, we maintain, is central to this task and embodies, more than any other concept, a possible path towards addressing epistemological challenges borne of lab-based scientific practices.

Mapping a complex set of ambitions and practices is never an easy task. More than anything else, perhaps, the term ‘lab’ serves to frame practices that share a future-oriented urban focus. Our aim in setting up Nun’s Island Lab is to activate a hybrid knowledge production that is both generalisable and locally embedded. In the context of Galway, with its expected growth and paucity of local governance, this necessitates co-produced forms of engagement, close association with a university and proclivity towards experimentation.

3. Nuns’ Island

Nuns’ Island takes its name from the active Convent on its northern edge and the rivers and canals that border and run through it. Modest in scale, the district combines the natural elements of waterways and rivers with an eclectic built environment that includes Galway Cathedral, contemporary and historic housing, a secondary school, a theatre in a converted 19th century Presbyterian Church and a number of vacant mills owned by NUI Galway. With its mosaic of buildings and raft of historic and ongoing urban practices – from industrial production to religious worship and from the everyday car commute to artistic performance – Nuns’ Island is a varied space set between university and city. It is also home to an astonishingly diverse range of ecological niches and habitats.

The neglect that has come to shape Nuns’ Island is typical for inner city productive sites but is *a-typical* in the context of a place like Galway that has all but forgotten its productive past. Initially identified in Galway City’s 2017–23 Development Plan as a “potential regeneration area” and partially mentioned in parts of an official 2019 Public Realm Strategy, existing plans all recognise the ‘underutilisation’ of the area and the exceptional value of the spaces targeted for regeneration, not the least because of the natural and human-made waterways that criss-cross the area, an overabundance of cultural and natural heritage, flora and fauna and its immediate proximity to the largely medieval and comparatively diminutive urban centre. A 2016 Transport Strategy for

the city of Galway furthermore seeks to redirect traffic flows away from Nuns’ Island, obliterating its place as a ‘rat run’ in the collective imagination of most Galwegians. In sum, whereas the designation of Nuns’ Island as an abandoned area was not surprisingly met with disapproval from local residents’ during a number of ‘consultative’ meetings organised by the university, its status as an area earmarked for change is fitting given the predominance of an urban logic that abhors the absence of recognisable signs of development or ‘untamed nature’ (Gandy, 2013).

How, then, does the local siting become a vector in the scientific work accomplished in an urban lab? We contend, based on considerable work that contributed to the development of Galway’s own lab currently in the process of being set up, that such a contribution depends on the *recognition* of potentially transformative practices, the *apperception* of local possibilities and the *articulation* of a political will to engage with same. It is the intersection between these three vectors that allows the siting of a lab to become important – rather than any “site” per se. In fact, the active work conducted in Galway has mostly been directed towards assuring that these different trajectories have been in place prior to the setting up a lab.

Placing a nascent lab within the parameters and practices associated with a major urban regeneration project has been fortuitous in this regard. Taking residence within Nuns’ Island, Galway’s Urban Lab is thus equally an active promoter, as it is a beneficiary of, structural interventionism. This duality of purpose shapes the way we – active participants in the design of both the urban regeneration and the creation of an Urban Lab presently underway – conceptualise an initial set of actions and practices. And while none of this is unique to Galway (see Carter, 2013 for a reflection on similarly structured examples in Manchester and the analysis of Palermo detailed in; Trapani, 2016), neither is the direct involvement of a local university in leading lab- or regeneration-connected activities (see Addie et al., 2018). But if universities are indeed, in the words of Robin Hambleton, the ‘sleeping giants of place-based leadership’ (quoted in Melhuish, 2015, p. 9; see also Hambleton, 2014, p. 160) it does require a modicum of leadership for a local giant to awake from its perennial slumber. Fortuitously for our engagement with lab-based practices, NUI Galway actively dwells on a well-established tradition of “outreach” and “community-based” teaching and learning (known locally as the ‘Community Knowledge Initiative’, see McIlrath & McMenamin, 2019) which rendered the engagement with wider communities and the re-positioning the university vis-à-vis its hosting geographical context stronger and less beset with the conversational obstacle of being perceived as a novelty. The focus of the intervention was a largely neglected (and thus taken-for-granted) part of Galway’s social and material infrastructure; in time we hope that the organic embedding of an urban lab within transformative practices will allow insights and their reflective incorporation into “learning” radiate across spaces and scales.

Urban Lab Galway occupies a pivotal place and role in the design and delivery of this change. When first involved in the drafting of ideas attached to the site, we were clear in our minds that this should not become another developer-led, profit-maximising and therefore missed opportunity, as is (unfortunately) the norm in Ireland (Daly, 2016, see also; Kitchin et al., 2012). The idea for an urban lab emerged from this inspiration and became, in fact, its engine: conceptualised as a place actively involved in squaring the circle between community work that involves a lot of listening skills, professional expertise that moves with and against whatever established scientific consensus exists and the development of concrete, locally resonating visions, ‘the lab’ allowed for the unification of ambitions underneath the veneer of scientific respectability. The latter was thus deployed strategically to promote activities that would at once challenge, research and seek to transform a dominant status quo – all the while serving the needs of city, its citizens, and the many different practices that make a university.

4. The city lab as work

The site-specific considerations articulated above translate into identifiable work practices and ambitions that motivate the setting up of an urban laboratory. Central to our own ambitions is an attempt pragmatically to bridge the divide between centralised, bureaucratic forms of planning required by law and politics with valued forms of multiple, street- and home-based forms of participation through collaborative, project-based interventions. In Galway as elsewhere, both poles exist but operate in spheres of their own: planners in city hall take their directives from central government in Dublin (to which they are ultimately accountable; see [Lennon, 2019](#)) while a plethora of citizen-inspired local action groups, some broad, some with highly specific goals, meet, discuss and propose. We conceptualise Urban Lab Galway as the creative and deliberately active hinge between the two. In this, we are inspired by the approach embraced by Michael Sorkin, who saw the goal of urban work as a continuation of the search for a happy, useful mean and [...] the incremental infusion and progressive extension of conventional artistic, social, and environmental practices [...] critical in creating a context for our larger practice and as vital research for applications on the ground. We don't shy from the pursuit of small victories: once departing the realm of theory, negotiation must ensue. The struggle is to find a productive outcome, whether via self-criticism, *détournement*, holding feet to the fire, cajolery, or just through making the case clearly ([Sorkin, 2018](#), pp. 19–20).

Note the plurality of creative and judicious practices espoused here; a plurality that matches Galway's larger ambitions and articulated practices on the ground. Conjoining such creative energy with the context of a city lab makes sense in most places but even more so in a city that thrives and markets itself on the notion of "plurality," especially in the context of the marketable arts. Nuns' Island presently contributes in a minor way to this by housing a small theatre venue in the form of a converted former Presbyterian church. More important than this local detail is the deliberate embrace of a range of creative practices that form a key component of Galway's economy ([Collins & Fahy, 2011](#); [Collins & Power, 2019](#)). Building on this tradition, Urban Lab Galway from early on in its design phase conceptualised vacant buildings (many of which are owned by NUI Galway) not merely in the form of financial assets but as spaces for innovation in a range of different but mutually supporting contexts; it was here that the creative arts, entrepreneurship and critical thinking would meet and bring about conjoint practices that resonate across the urban spectrum and beyond. An urban lab was conceptualised as key in bringing about a broad commitment by all stakeholders to revive and redevelop this part of the town – not as an abstraction but in the form of a shared resource that would enable and help to materialise rich practices. Here the diverse range of buildings (some new, some old, some in use, some abandoned), of practices and daily routines, of eco-systems and stories that we wrote about further up in this paper becomes a source of inspiration and creative engagements. But more than that: rather than positioning the lab as the (knowledge-producing) apex of urban activities, we wanted Urban Lab Galway to continuously re-invent and perform *itself* as a site for the interpretation and transformation of urban life, not in the form of a Trotskyist "permanent" revolution but as a site for self-critical introspection that embodies gestures of reaching out, transforming and giving back. In a word: a site for co-production.

Learning from and with successful, locally anchored cultural producers like Druid, Macnas, the Galway Arts Festival, Theatre 57 and others in the context of an urban lab implies a conscious embedding of enquiry in unambiguously European and experimental dimensions. As such, we aim to explore the making of a user-centred space that does more than merely 'add value' to otherwise unchanged university and local governmental urban practices; rather, our goal is to transform both in a creative and judicious manner through active forms of learning and co-creation ([Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2014](#)). Guided by an emerging critical literature on urban labs, we explore the coproduction of practices and a careful nurturing of 'grey spaces of new civic interfaces [...]

that bring together universities and the public, private and civil society sectors on a basis of equality, trust and openness' ([Chatterton et al., 2018](#), 226). Finally, and involving the creation and maintenance of 'safe spaces' ([Culwick et al., 2019](#)) within increasingly complex yet democratically organised urban environments that are fundamentally threatened by climate change, we conceptualise Galway's Urban Lab on Nuns' Island as a contributor to knowledge about urban environments below the scale of metropolitan urban agglomerations. The challenges faced by cities pegged at a comparatively modest scale involve the same issues of sustainability, mobility, housing and re-orientation of economic activities along circular logics and practices as do their cosmopolitan sister cities. However, they operate within more restrictive budgets, are motivated by personal, rather than abstract networks, and often profit considerably less from the achievement of economies of scale possible within larger cities and their hinterlands. In other words: solutions will have to acknowledge these realities and questions will have to be *framed differently* to be effective locally.

Debates around the deployment and validity of NIMBY-ism as forms of protest within existing public participation routines are instrumental in this regard (see [Gibson, 2005](#); [Sebastien, 2017](#)) since they highlight some of the shortcomings of traditional forms of urban governance and of nominally participatory forms of planning. Correspondingly, the question of how and on what basis individuals and groups are invited to participate in actions forming around such 'sharing' practices becomes ever more important in the present context – as recognized in the overt emphasis put on participation, partnerships and co-production in the UN's 2016 New Urban Agenda ([UN Habitat 3, 2016](#)). Beyond the binary differentiation between state and lay participants ([Nabatchi et al., 2017](#)), questions of embodied agency matter crucially here not the least because participation and motivation are closely related and can always be used to question the legitimacy of emergent and adopted positions within public forms of dialogue and exchange ([Strohmayr, 2016](#)). Is it, to stick closer to the theme of the present paper, important whether a 'lab' emerges as a result of official actions or begins to form organically? Does it matter whether an entity is called 'a lab' (see [D'Ovidio & Cossu, 2016](#)) rather than something else? We contend, based on the analysis presented here, that a more work-centred approach to expertise, resources and visions explicitly build around co-creative practices holds promise in this regard: work that is akin to forms of social learning where "there is less reliance on talk and debate and more on showing and learning by doing" ([Watson, 2014](#), p. 72) is more likely to emerge from within a non-aligned space of the kind provided by an urban lab. Universities are ideally positioned to offer such a space not least because they offer the security of a publicly funded institution, the rigour and sincerity associated with scholarly activities and a non-partisan set of interests; as such, universities can become incubators for the development of a new, place-based form of 'spatial civic agency' ([Sara & Jones, 2018](#), p. 10).

5. The lab as a deconstructive presence

This paper positions a particular urban lab at a crossroad of ambitions, diverse practices and tensions all emulating the messiness of urban life that has been a hallmark of public spaces since Salomon's Jerusalem and Montesquieu's Paris (see [Berman, 2017](#), p. 674, p.681). Where heretofore work on cities was mostly conducted in a disinterested, diagnostic manner bend on parcelling the city into manageable portions (e.g. housing, transport, shopping, producing, recreation, etc.), which in turn translated into (and corresponded with) colourful spatial designations inspiring developmental planning maps across the scales, work in urban labs embraces a more holistic ethos. Such principles do not, however, imply an abandonment of analytical standards. It is here that we draw on the work of Scholl and Kemp who adopt a rubric of five key principles for structuring a city lab: learning achieved, co-creation, boundary work, openness and innovation (2016, p. 91; a substantially extended engagement can be found in [Scholl et al., 2017](#)) Although

these principles emerge from the M-Lab in Maastricht, with its specific focus on the generation of new ideas and practices through community engagement in local planning processes, the reflexive and experimental qualities embedded in these principles are relevant to other lab formations, including the proposed work of Urban Lab Galway, situated both physically and conceptually at the university-city interface. Framed generically, 'learning achieved' not only asks what lessons were learned in the development of new and particular projects and practices but also what was learned about the functioning of the lab itself; 'co-creation', as we have also discussed above, asks who was involved in particular projects and practices and what new and shared meanings emerged; 'boundary work' considers the ways in which new relations were formed between institutions and different social actors and between generalisable forms of knowledge and more localised ways of knowing and doing while also reflecting on the ways in which the lab itself functioned as a boundary organisation; 'value creation' considers how open and reflexive particular lab practices and processes are and how interest among different actors was maintained throughout a project; 'innovation' considers whether the lab supported different social actors in doing something innovative and what this may have consisted of.

Each of these five constitutive principles, but even more their combined practices, are experimental in the way that it seeks to learn and innovate rather than achieve a predetermined outcome while also carrying a willingness to consider both success and failure as transformative opportunities; each principle is furthermore reflexive in the way that it continually considers and reconsiders the functioning of the lab itself. Crucially, these experimental and reflexive values, through the continual maintenance of transformative practices, local possibilities and political will, can inform the three vectors of *recognition*, *apperception*, and *articulation* that allow the particular siting of an urban lab to become important. In other words, adopting these five practice-infused rubrics would allow for a principled and comparative, if always tentative, translation of work conducted into a perspective resonating with and shaped by Irish and Galway realities. Such translations resonate strongly with a no less normative, locally anchored transition from planning practices which at best accord a 'right to speak' to those in the margins of urban power (but which are most directly affected by decisions) towards an articulated 'right to choose' (on this differentiation see [Sorkin, 2013](#), p. 87). If the 'common good' is by necessity embedded within ideas of what constitutes a 'good' city, universities qua urban labs owe their hosting cities at least a space for the formulation of "goodness" and are at best directly involved in the delivery of same within local contexts.

At a macro-level, our hopes are even more ambitious. Accepting that the continuous structuring and re-structuring of local realities under capitalism – the latter conceptualised as part of an 'evolutionary' and 'organic process' – is not an accident or indeed restricted to *certain* times and *certain* spaces but is entirely systemic in its many forms and materialisations leads us to recognise a no less universal but normative need to construct corresponding mechanisms that mitigate the local consequences of capitalism's inherent logic. Joseph Schumpeter, following Karl Marx, alluded to the innovation-induced (and -inducing) progression described above as the 'process of creative destruction' (1976, pp. 81–86), noting its systematic features as follows:

A system – any system, economic or other – that at every given point of time fully utilizes its potential to the best advantage may yet in the long run be inferior to a system that does so at *no* given point on time, because the latter's failure to do so may be a condition for the level or speed of long-run performance (1976, p.83).

This is important for two related reasons. First, if the local consequences of capitalist activities are always in the process of adjusting to possible futures, it stands to reason that designing a system not around present needs but around as wide a mix of possible responses is entirely congruent with the systemic properties of that (capitalist) system. We see much of this in play in the positioning, indeed the ranking, of cities according to their ability to respond in a non-static manner to global

challenges. Urban labs built around the notion of an assemblage and (crucially) embracing a co-produced *raison d'être* appear to us to be better placed (and thus *better places*) to engage creatively and critically with this logic for the betterment of their host cities. Key would appear to be the recognition of locally resonating mixes and responses that are both open to change while seeking to preserve those rich principles that work. But beyond such idealist reconfigurations, we assert that such a considered, open and open-ended set up of work practices will also yield competitively *better* results precisely because it is systemically immunised against the very idea of a 'result'. Assemblage urbanism is therefore dynamic urbanism incorporate.

Second, the adaptation of a spatial civic agency developed above, conjoint with the development of co-produced skills and urban forms of awareness, would appear to deliver a system less prone occasionally to crack at the seams, to undergo periodic convulsions precisely because all actors are proficient in the scouting of challenges, the formulation of questions and the navigation of a diverse range of possible answers. In this system, an even distribution of competencies makes apparent any imbalances in the organisational attribution of and claim to power otherwise diluted within the normal delivery of planning decisions; the 'good' city thus emerges first and foremost as a city of 'good' decision making and governance.

6. Conclusion

Returning to Nuns' Island in the heart of Galway City, we encounter a space that is wearing the signs of Schumpeter's creative destruction more openly than most places in the West of Ireland. What appears as 'neglect' to some is often but the palimpsest of material memory to others – residents, spatially minded scholars (i.e. archaeologists, historians and geographers), ecologists and those passing through. From the start, we regarded the existing multiplicity of materials, stories and environments as a boon for the placing of an urban lab; now we regard the urban lab as a potential multiplier of a richness already present *in situ*. Beyond the dreaded rhetoric employed by masterplans or similar marketing exercises (which we have participated in more than once), it is the lived and living engagement with the dialectic of transformative processes in which abandonment and neglect create opportunities aplenty: for plants to occupy niches that do not readily exist elsewhere, for entrepreneurial élan to dwell where previous forms of entrepreneurial activity succeeded and failed, for the preservation and re-inscription of heritage or for untried forms of living together, of mobility and working. This rich tapestry of a presence that is both mindful of its past – not as nostalgia but as potential – while constructively assembling a multitude of possible futures, in short: the deconstructive presence of the lab, is what we have sought to put into place in Galway. In the context of such an assembled set of work principles and possibilities, 'urban regeneration' ceases to be a momentary form of intervention and gives way to an ongoing, self-reflective practice of co-produced forms of 'urban living': the continuous mitigation and shaping of capitalism's innermost dynamic.

As we continue to work on this project, we find ourselves in the midst of an unprecedented interruption of this dynamic caused by a new zoonotic pathogen spreading globally: while we isolate our individual selves and witness an ever-increasing number of interactions gravitate towards some virtual presence or another, major transformations of urban environments grind to a halt. It remains to be seen what kind of explicitly place-based pedagogy can emerge during (or after) a prolonged crisis. We take solace, hope even, from the disruption of well-rehearsed urban routines and taken-for-granted manners of operating and their replacement with actions that can be witnessed in many places in the spring of 2020: from pop-up cycle lanes in Kreuzberg to the reduction of condoned speeds attached to private cars in Milan and Brussels, from the reconquest of differently structured vacant sites by people living within walking distance to the invention of novel forms of social co-existence not solely defined by proximity. We see the future of

the city as considerably more 'up for grabs' that we had dared imagine a year ago. In addition, we see great value in approaching such possible futures with the help of assemblage-derived tools: if CoVid-19 has invited one realisation pertinent to work on 'the urban,' it must surely be the validation of 'thinking outside the box' given the obvious validation of experimental modes of thinking and doing. If the deconstruction of 'participation' within the context of a locally anchored, pedagogy-embracing urban lab described in this paper could aid in the transformation of both Nuns' Island and Galway, something would indeed have been accomplished.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Ulf Strohmayr: Writing – review & editing, All three authors contributed equally to the writing of the submitted paper. **Patrick Collins:** Writing – review & editing, All three authors contributed equally to the writing of the submitted paper. **Mark Rainey:** Writing – review & editing, All three authors contributed equally to the writing of the submitted paper.

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