

# Chapter 3

## Governing with Urban Living Labs



Serge Wachter

**Abstract** Within the European Union, Urban Living Labs now figure prominently in the urban governance toolbox. On the local stage, they are seen as auxiliaries that encourage citizen participation with a view to co-constructing policies designed to improve the quality of housing and the built environment. Their versatility is remarkable, and they are used both to boost new approaches to planning, such as tactical urbanism, and to renew the regeneration policies of large social housing areas. This text is the result of the SoHoLab research project and aims to provide a critical analysis of the roles and functions of Urban Living Labs as support tools for planning policies. Based on a review of the specialized literature and the work and experiments carried out within the framework of SoHoLab, it proposes an approach that strives to analyse ULLs as components of a new model of urban governance. From a critical perspective, it formulates the hypothesis that ULLs are not only tools of power aimed at promoting the empowerment of residents but also seeking to improve the legitimacy of planning policies and to impose a model of domination and forms of social control in accordance with the requirements of neoliberal city regulation.

**Keywords** Governmentality · Urban governance · Neoliberal city

### 3.1 On the Way to Experimentation and Innovation

The emergence of ULLs as constituent parts of a new model of governance has been stimulated by the combination of a series of factors, creating an ‘ecosystem’ that has allowed them to flourish. In particular, the uncertainties and tensions linked to the risks generated by the ecological and climate-change-related transitions have prepared a solid ground for reorienting planning practices. This vision of risk has also opened up a space of opportunity by creating a new urban offering that ULLs have been able to infiltrate.

---

S. Wachter (✉)

École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris-la-Villette, Paris, France

e-mail: [serge.wachter@club-internet.fr](mailto:serge.wachter@club-internet.fr)

© The Author(s) 2023

N. Aernouts et al. (eds.), *Urban Living Lab for Local Regeneration*,  
The Urban Book Series, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-19748-2\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-19748-2_3)

39

In this respect, Harriet Bulkeley believes that experimental methods in the field of local policy, in particular, those aimed at fighting climate change, are booming (Bulkeley et al. 2011). They especially target planning policies and lend themselves to approaches that put hypotheses to the test in a concrete sense. They provide the means to apply a trial-and-error method and to adjust tools through successive approximations. In so doing, these approaches follow the principles of incrementalism and of the continuous adaptation of intervention modes. Such flexibility is a key asset or resource that facilitates the adjustment and management of development projects. It provides room for manoeuvre when dealing with the dilemmas, conflicts and contradictions found in housing and urban policies (Severini et al. 2015). In short, and to echo four experts, we must recognize that ecological and energy transition policies include ingredients that essentially revolve around the following key words: ‘experimentation, learning, reflexivity and reversibility’ (Von Wirth et al. 2019). These characteristics form the pillars of a new method for regulating local public action.

From this standpoint, it is important to emphasize that both theoretical approaches and empirical studies carried out in different urban and organizational contexts show that Living Labs, or more precisely Urban Living Labs (ULLs), are highly experimental tools. Their hybrid nature and their position on the fringes or at the intersection of various local public action ‘ecosystems’ make it possible for them to encourage new institutional arrangements and innovative cooperation. This naturally supposes specific properties of conception or design and their operational implementation. Observing a cycle of experiments related to an Urban Living Lab (ULL) set up in Greater Manchester, specialists carrying out ‘action research’ concluded that this example of experimentation illustrated ‘how the practice of ULLs may involve different forms and techniques for learning, shielding, nurturing, empowering and participating within ULL’ (Bulkeley et al. 2011). Moreover, drawing on the lessons learned from the implementation of 40 ULLs in Europe, influential and no less eminent experts in the academic arena declared ex abrupto that ULLs are excellent tools with which to steer experimental towns. It is important to note that the term ‘experimental city’ is new and revealing. I believe it is rich in meaning, as it underlines the growing importance of experimentation in the ‘software’ of local urban planning policies. Above all else, it introduces—dare I say it—an epistemological watershed that invites us to observe and analyse interventions in the field of planning from a fresh perspective. In the light of the new approaches shown in these case studies, it must therefore be admitted that urban policies deserve to be increasingly considered and studied—and implemented—through the prism of experimentation. Indeed, ‘the recent upsurge of interest in the experimental city as an arena within and through which urban sustainability is governed, marks not only the emergence of the proliferation of forms of experimentation—from novel governance arrangements to demonstration projects, transition management processes to grassroots innovations—but also an increasing sensibility amongst the research community that urban interventions can be regarded in experimental terms’ (Marvin et al. 2011).

In this light, authors who are familiar with the development of recommendations and roadmaps for ULLs Labs clearly state that ULLs are considered spaces to facilitate experimentation about sustainability solutions’ (Von Wirth et al. 2019). Has

experimentation become the ‘ultima ratio’ of local policies and of planning policies in particular? There is no doubt that, according to this vision, ULLs stand out, if not as the key component of these experimental approaches, then at least as precious auxiliaries seeking to integrate citizens’ voices into ecological transition programmes. It is undeniable that a little local democracy cannot harm planning programmes. In reality, experimentation is characterized not only by practical activities but also by a cognitive process that leads to the production of shared knowledge. The result is a common wealth of data, reflections, and knowledge through which a dialogue can be initiated around a ‘shared’ project. Experimentation offers support and a vehicle for the consideration of long-term visions and short-term measures in the form of concrete actions and practices. It relates to collective research and exploration, a maieutic in which ‘a broad suite of stakeholders like firms, universities and actors from government and civil society are navigating, negotiating (and ideally) reducing uncertainty about new socio-technical innovations through real-world experiments, gaining knowledge and experience along the way in an iterative learning-by-doing and doing-by-learning process’ (Scholl and Kemp 2016, p. 231).

As we can see, experimentation represents both a conceptual turning point and a reference to empirical practices designed to offer shared operational solutions to the challenges of urban ecological transition. This makes it possible to introduce parameters into these new methodologies that take into account the needs and practices of inhabitants during collaborative planning sessions. These approaches are not limited to the energy transition currently in vogue. By extension, they are spreading to all sectors of local public action and constitute a point of reference, a corpus of best practices that also inspire urban regeneration programmes. It should be noted that the latter are active in places and neighbourhoods where citizen participation is, if not very weak, at least leaving a lot to be desired.

Looking more closely, we should emphasize that ULLs are ‘political beings’ that are constantly undergoing evolution and transformation. In a way, they are going through a Darwinian selection process, the outcome of which might allow only the best to survive. In particular, they are continually changing the boundaries of their jurisdiction by integrating new partnerships and new actors with whom to explore new modes of action. This experimental nature leads to solutions and scenarios being tested by diversifying local collaborations within new partner networks. This makes it possible to find new ways to test hybrid programmes for urban sustainability. The result is a governance ‘puzzle’, the components and operation of which are evolving and appear fragile, yet often prove to be surprisingly effective, resilient, and long-lived. This is nothing new. But there is more: these political regimes, as Clarence Stone would say, of which ULLs are a part offer the wherewithal to overcome the classic opposition between top-down and bottom-up approaches to urban planning. Indeed, ULLs’ ‘intelligent engineering’ offers the means to develop a new type of ‘lateral partnership’ which reinvents collaborative planning approaches. This opens the way to new intersectoral cooperation that creates shared knowledge within a network of actors engaged in local climate policies.

In this respect, it should be noted that experimentation is distinguished as a new mode of governance. It encourages the use of innovative approaches that break away

from the routines of ‘standard’ planning policies that are implemented without risk and which lead to ‘guaranteed and secure’ results. In this sense, experimental policies turn their backs on the modernist dream or illusion of total control of urban dynamics, which was representative of the golden era of technocratic and centralized planning. It should be noted that these policies combine, into an innovative duo, experimentation and citizen participation in the principles and modus operandi of collaborative planning. De facto, researchers working with Living Labs underline that these experimental practices open the way to new urban regulations that deserve to be analysed in the light of the concept of ‘soft governance’ or ‘informal governance’ (Scholl et al. 2016). These expressions are by no means insignificant; they relate to new practices for the coordination of collective action in the field of planning policy. Widespread urban experimentation is thus associated with a new, highly contemporary, and ‘very gentle’ art of governing people and things. With this orientation, researchers understand ULLs ‘as informal and temporary soft spaces of urban governance’ (Smas et al. 2016). The latter make it possible to explore various scenarios and opportunities for the application and implementation of soft governance.

It is worth noting that this new mode of regulation is constantly being challenged, revisited, and evaluated in arenas of deliberation that bring together the various protagonists of a ‘local political regime’. At the same time, searching for legitimacy, it explores all possible ways and platforms for citizen participation in local decision-making. This is undoubtedly both advantageous and a break away from top-down and ‘legal-bureaucratic’ visions, to use Max Weber’s expression. In particular, City Labs turn their backs on these hierarchical visions. They aim to represent cutting-edge soft governance tools for experimenting with new approaches and practices in the field of ‘collaborative planning’. Is this soft governance the expression of a new form of local power which also claims to co-construct the city with its inhabitants? Does it constitute a welcoming ground, a favourable ecosystem for the development of ULLs?

### 3.2 Living Labs and Tactical Urbanism

Spontaneously or as a result of interests or strategies, new approaches to planning are emerging and adapting to this new regime of budgetary austerity and managerial adjustment orchestrated by the state. The latter is exploring or, more accurately, experimenting with the ways and means of a form of soft governance that aims to incorporate inhabitants’ opinions into its guiding principles and modus operandi. This trend is of course having a knock-on effect on ways of managing cities and other local public administrations. This is particularly true of the ‘tactical’ urban planning approaches that have been gaining ground in recent years. Soft governance, the rise of experimental practices, and the development of ULLs are, if not the pillars, then at least the backdrop to these new approaches.

The term tactical urbanism covers a variety of practices that share a collaborative base that generally brings together a range of actors with a view to developing

alternative planning practices in order to offer goods and services outside the rationale of market rules. The most prominent of these actors are associations, architects' collectives, and other representatives of civil society. There is a connection between these approaches and the various forms of production and management of common goods that are governed by a collaborative spirit and a direction that is guided more by an ethic of sharing than by the individual appropriation of resources. It is also important to note that temporary urbanism is characterized by the new activities and functions that are put in place in the spaces and buildings they occupy or in which they are involved, identified by the term 'third places'. Living Labs, Fab Labs, and co-working spaces are very often included in the programming and realization of temporary urbanism operations, and it is very common for these activities and services specific to 'third places' to be present on those premises and sites where these ephemeral operations are carried out. It is worth noting that some authors liken these various forms of temporary occupation to a specific category of Living Labs that can be set up more specifically in wastelands or disused spaces in order to develop them and 'co-design' goods and services intended to meet local demand.

These transitional urbanism practices have gained impetus over recent years. Some believe that they open up new avenues for planning policies in which different notions of civic sense and citizenship can find means and channels to express themselves. They emerge and fit into the nooks and crannies of an urban planning and project-based urbanism that is considered to be lacking in innovation and in search of renewal or, even better, 'reinvention'. These 'non-standard' approaches are 'genetically' related to Living Labs and in most cases incorporate their main ingredients: innovation, experimentation, learning-by-doing, and participation of users and the various stakeholders. This trend is nurtured by approaches that promote urban sustainability in all its forms, ranging from shared gardens to short circuits and edible landscapes provided by urban agriculture, along with provisional or temporary installations and architecture in public spaces designed to house and accommodate various collaborative activities that generally follow the 'DIY' and 'grassroots initiative' philosophy. It surfs the fashionable and trendy approaches that advocate recycling and short circuits by blithely denouncing waste, the 'socially irresponsible carbon footprint' of current development and construction activities, and the absence of other efforts to protect the planet. In the same spirit, it promotes the values and practices of collaboration in the fields of uses and services that range from carpooling and the pooling of resources to the sharing of local goods previously managed by the sacrosanct right of ownership. Its members or sympathizers are generally sensitive to fashionable representations advocating a drive towards a 'frugal city' model—not to say a 'slow city'—applying at all levels, for individuals and local communities, the values and practices of sobriety, if not austerity. It should be added that in the rhetoric of the presentation and justifications of these experiments, one often finds a moralistic slant that stigmatizes the 'climatically incorrect' and environmentally insensitive approaches of 'standard' planning visions. These practices of the collaborative economy are of course widely encouraged and stimulated by digital platforms and social networks giving access to information on opportunities for exchange, sharing, and access to local collective goods and services. This collaborative urbanism or

even common goods urbanism, which, let us not forget, more often than not operates on the fringes of the dominant urban planning logics, was described in his time by Henri Lefebvre as the expression of the urbanism of men of good will.

Such visions are encouraged by urban coalitions which, willingly or not, stimulate and accompany these alternative practices that break away from 'standard' approaches to planning. These 'urbanism margins' are often incorporated into innovative approaches launched by towns wishing to offer real estate products and hybrid services that unite private developers and collectives or associations. If they are not from the 'social and solidarity sphere', then they at least distance themselves from profit and market rationales. I should add that they embody the practical aspect of an approach and methodology inspired by innovative experimental approaches that are user-centred and participatory and that are eligible to receive the Living Lab label (Canapero and Benavero 2016).

Some observers have interpreted this trend as being a gradual shift from one-off or isolated approaches towards the consecration of a future 'mainstream' of urban policy (Douay and Prévot 2016). This would seem excessive, even though many local authorities have incorporated this type of urbanism into their planning and political agendas. Are these emerging practices likely to take root in the metropolitan landscape? It is true that the 'collaborative urban factory' has found success with indulgent audiences. 'Urban modernists' have indeed become infatuated with this type of experience, which combines informality, creativity, and the festive culture that these approaches convey. In Western metropolises, in particular, this preference expresses 'postmaterialistic' aspirations held by social circles and urban places going through a process of gentrification. It is clear that some local authorities are surfing this wave by capturing and winning the loyalty of sympathizers, followers, or clients. Are we seeing the rise of a new model destined to become, if not dominant, then at least part of common, routine practices that are well placed on the planning agenda? Yes, certainly, but at the scale of micro-projects located on the fringes of an urban production that is, while ordinary, nevertheless the most massively structuring of housing, equipment, and infrastructure operations. For this is the destiny of this alternative urbanism: to intervene on the fringes, in the loopholes and interstices of development policies. Geographically speaking, interstice is the right word, because the elective sites of tactical urbanism are essentially abandoned zones, wastelands, and unoccupied land waiting to be used. Alternative urbanism is popular and high profile, but nevertheless only very moderately affects the essential internal workings of the production and functioning of urban fabrics.

In fact, the visibility and media coverage of these operations are inversely proportional to their real capacity to have significant effects on the urban layout. These projects also struggle to stand the test of time: their nature obeys the temporal cycles of the event and of temporary installations. Either way, this is neither dramatic nor deplorable, as the intent or ambition of temporary urbanism is not to change the architecture of the city. It is important to note that, in the most favourable contexts, these approaches convey values and 'positive feelings' which will spread through imitation and which open up promising avenues and new principles for planning

policies. Last but not least, temporary urban planning approaches rely on collective intelligence, the production of common goods, and cooperation; for better or for worse, they disseminate values of sharing and solidarity. In other words, their message is benevolent and offers a glimpse of avenues and possibilities for the creation of planning projects away from the hazards of real estate development. In this respect, they should be congratulated; they deserve to be encouraged, evaluated, and channelled. The rising number of such experiments nevertheless raises one question: is this collaborative model not the prerogative of metropolitanism—even more so in gentrified neighbourhoods with no real power to disseminate into disadvantaged areas, be they social housing neighbourhoods or low-density rural areas? In other words, just like temporary urban planning, Living Labs are still far from having won over the sensitive areas prioritized by city policy (Roux and Marron 2017).

For all of the above-mentioned reasons, at a minimal—one might say cosmetic—level and in many respects, ephemeral urbanism is on the road to institutionalization. Indeed, we can see that many institutions in charge of planning have appropriated the language and codes of this transitory urbanism. The latter now seems to have been incorporated or even digested into/by urban strategies for the production of the so-called ‘creative’ neoliberal city. All in all, one has to admit that ‘tactical urbanism is an essential new element of contemporary urban policy in metropolises that are caught up in the logic of competition to attract investment, creators and tourists’ (Douay and Prévot 2016, p. 18).

### 3.3 Governing with Urban Living Labs

When broadening the picture, one is forced to admit that the political and institutional forces behind this new urban offer—and the instruments that accompany it, such as ULLs—are subject to a new system of relationships between the state and local actors. This model is also influencing social behaviour and the values that drive it by amplifying and intensifying the individualization of society. In France, since the introduction of decentralization, many functions and responsibilities have been transferred to local authorities. This slimming down process has accelerated over recent years, and the state has continued and extended this transfer of important areas of public affairs management outside its sovereign perimeter. As H el ene Reigner points out, the transfer of full responsibility for the implementation and coherence of a growing number of state programmes to local authorities and their territorial partners was achieved in return for new forms of framing and controlling their actions through financial supervision, competition for access to national resources, the setting of standards and the awarding of labels, and the promotion of good practice (Reigner 2013). De facto, such changes are implemented by using new instruments of state spatial intervention that are less prescriptive and that open up a range of choices and opportunities for innovation to local actors: the definition of reference systems and guidelines, benchmarking, calls for projects, and, last but not least, recourse to mediation and participation mechanisms with inhabitants/users, such as Living Labs or ULLs.

Such developments have as their backdrop the rise of remote government, a new form of regulation granting additional management capabilities and initiatives to the private sector and local authorities. The state is withdrawing from its territories, outsourcing functions by redistributing tasks and responsibilities and regulating local public action from afar (Epstein 2006). At the same time, this trend goes hand in hand with the consolidation and weight of a moral and cultural climate conducive to the dissemination of values and norms that accentuate and accelerate the transformation of the social realm into a society of individuals. These trends amplify and strengthen the entrepreneurial watershed that has been at work in Western urban societies since the 1990s.

By extending Epstein's argument, it is possible to view this process as a form of vigorous empowerment of local and urban political systems, a hypermodern *modus operandi* of power and of technologies of governmentality. To simplify, we can say that in this schema, local actors and more broadly individuals and civil society are invited—obliged?—to show initiative in finding solutions to the problems and difficulties they face. In truth, empowerment—and one of its vectors and supports objectified by the Living Labs—is not only citizen mobilization but also a form of power that releases energies, innovation, and capacities for action. We can see that when they exist or are available, it is a question of bringing out, exploiting, and valorizing local skills and resources. But we need to understand that this process simultaneously leads to domination, coercion, and submission to a new standard, thus placing individuals and the groups they form under a duty to take initiative, be autonomous, and take charge of improving their quality of life. Through the Living Labs, the new spirit of capitalism also infuses local public management and approaches to planning (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999). In the final analysis, do these empowerment practices not reflect the fundamental values and principles of liberal regimes founded on the love of human and citizen rights, with the ultimate aim of achieving freedom and individual emancipation?

It is worth noting that government at a distance is coupled with government by instruments. The latter is illustrated by the implementation of policies for activation and the allocation of duties and responsibilities to inhabitants and users and to their groups on the one hand, and to local actors on the other, cities in particular. In this context, the appearance and rise of Living Labs in urban regulation is one of the instrumental facets, and an illustration, of the rise of this form of government.

But there is more: according to several researchers who have theoretically and empirically investigated the *raison d'être* and *modus operandi* of many ULLs in Europe in different urban contexts, ULLs can be considered supports for the two main strengths on which urban governance is based. They are the expression of a new way of solving urban problems, one that calls for innovation, experimentation, and citizen participation in situations marked by uncertainty or contingencies and where a multitude of actors are led to deliberate and negotiate in order to reach compromises. This is now well known, and we can agree that ULLs have emerged as possible means of providing solutions to or desirable improvements of situations that pose problems and call for new tools or new ways of trying to solve them. ULLs are thus functional auxiliaries at the service of urban governance and are



particularly called upon to solve problems of a practical nature. As Karl Polanyi would say, they are 'embedded' in power relationships and games and are subject to political strategies. This is not really new and follows a pragmatist approach to public action in the tradition of John Dewey. It is true that Living Labs produce shared and reflexive knowledge to nourish academic research, but they are first and foremost tools that aim to offer concrete solutions to problems or contradictions perceived and experienced by actors or stakeholders on a local or urban stage. In this respect, and as we have seen, Living Labs or ULLs stand out as instruments that participate in the implementation of 'soft governance' that favours the regulation of conflictual and cooperative relationships between local actors.

Yet in addition to this, there is a second main thrust that ULLs follow. Their instrumental role goes hand in hand with a moral and symbolic component designed to influence and shape the behaviour of social agents. De facto, this reflects ambitions to improve the 'urban condition' of inhabitants through the use of appropriate socio-economic manipulations that aim to bring about new social behaviour. This second purpose, highlighted by researchers whose critical approach is to be commended, is not trivial (Bulkeley et al. 2019). It is in line with the idea that ULLs are also instruments of power which aim to spread values and a habitus that encourage inhabitants and users to, if not commit themselves, at least accept and comply with the social processes of transitions or changes to achieve greater urban sustainability. In fact, ULLs are the vectors and disseminators of ideas and representations that conform to the ecological correctness of precautionary or even 'frugal' behaviour with regard to the environment. In this respect, a Marxist movement resurrected from the limbo of the past might describe them as 'ideological apparatuses' at the service of a power that aims to coerce, subjugate, and educate. Of course, it goes without saying that ULLs are not disciplinary institutions operating under the influence of injunction or command. Their *modus operandi* is more incentivizing than coercive. In line with more recent work, such normalization has been analysed as the rise of a neohygienic and neoliberal governmentalization of behaviour (Reigner 2015).

A two-pronged movement is at the origin of this new form of domination. First of all, 'sustainable and inclusive urban development' appears as a post-Fordist avatar of environmental protection at the service of an overarching agenda: that of ensuring an urban climate for business and commerce. This regime prioritizes proactive supply policies to attract postindustrial economy capital and strategic metropolitan jobs. The regime tolerates or even encourages innovative approaches located on the fringes of mainstream planning practices, such as tactical urbanism. In so doing, it uses tools designed to reveal the preferences of residents with the intention of involving them in the design of programmes for the rehabilitation of their housing or their built environment. These programmes happily combine urban sustainability objectives with those of social compensation by mixing the two in a confusing fashion. They straddle social justice and environmental justice. Along the same lines and even more radically, updating the Marxist critique inspired by the fetishism of the commodity, Eric Swyngedouw asserts that 'sustainable urban development is the new opium of the people, a democratic anaesthetic that locks up the spaces of dispute for the expression of contradictions and oppositions' (Swyngedouw 2011, p. 130). This

may seem somewhat overstated, but it contains an element of truth. There is no question that the mainstream rhetoric on the frugal, inclusive, and resilient city plays a powerful role in depoliticizing the issues at stake on the urban stage.

Second, this domination operates a social selection and hierarchization of urban populations by valorizing the presence of some professional groups to the detriment of others. A categorization of uses and users therefore takes place. This differentiated management of urban space and of the social groups therein is justified through reference to the notion of the trickle-down effect, according to which this concentration of public investment in strategic areas produces benefits for all concerned. According to the same principle, an ‘ecologically correct’ habitus and ‘ecologically correct’ behaviours are similarly destined to spread from one place to the next, from gentrified neighbourhoods to working-class neighbourhoods, where social housing stocks are the dominant feature. In fact, it is a case of progressively sanitizing and disciplining certain types of use and user of the city in the urban space, of aligning behaviour with standards that are generally recognized as legitimate and which guarantee well-being, the integrity of the living environment, and supposedly better access to the city’s resources. These standards are generally those most widely shared by members of the creative class and those belonging to educated and privileged milieus (Rousseau 2008). It is a known fact that it is the representatives of the upper middle classes who express social demands in terms of quality of life. In other words, these ‘social circles’ are tremendous assets for attractiveness policies. The effect of this process relates to one of the fundamental drivers of cultural domination as described and analysed by Pierre Bourdieu. It should be noted that such strategic objectives set down by cities and other local authorities—either individually or in partnership—are generally displayed under a banner and rhetoric which reflect consensual intentions based on the attractiveness, sustainability, and social cohesion triptych. At the risk of repeating myself, let me say that ‘low-carbon and inclusive’ urban development has, in recent years, become a must on the policy agendas led by cities in France and in Europe. It has to be said that it is also one of the ideological and practical pillars of the European Union’s urban development programmes.

The quest for a good business climate and for neighbourhoods to seek a low-carbon trajectory is thus accompanied by the implementation of mechanisms for the social control of the space and of the populations therein. While this objective of becoming cleaner can be direct and explicit, it can also be more insidious and diffuse through the promotion of ‘good individual behaviour’ inspired by guidelines, ‘good practice’ catalogues, and benchmarking approaches which are produced and propagated via the ULLs’ current activities. It is important to remember that the latter constitute the building blocks of a soft governance system that aims to include the uses and requests of residents in an urban offering which combines the objectives of economic growth, social justice, and ecological transition. Additionally, they aim to make it easier to take into account the needs and requests of inhabitants in order to co-construct programmes and improve local democracy. Faced with the scale and universal nature of this project, one can only bow one’s head, as dissenting voices have difficulty in making themselves heard.

### 3.4 Gramsci and the ULLs

We should stress that ULLs and other instruments of empowerment and participatory activism also have a moral dimension and a cultural impact on individual awareness. They represent a brick or a constitutive part of a hegemonic regime in the sense of Antonio Gramsci: they legitimize a model of urbanity made up of good users and good uses and establish the domination of certain social groups and urban coalitions according to renewed, diffuse, and subtle mechanisms. Directly or indirectly, this vision of hegemony follows Pierre Bourdieu's approach to cultural domination as a key element of social reproduction (Ciavolella 2020).

In the current context, ULLs are vectors for the transmission of new responsibilities and obligations towards Mother Nature and Planet Earth. When we look at the aims of many of the ULLs that have been created in recent years with the help of national or European subsidies and which are managed by actors, academic or not, we find that they are imbued with a 'superego' in which worldviews and practices in favour of the environment and the fight against climate change generally dominate. They aim to disseminate an ecological ethos among groups of users or residents. At the same time, they also blithely dream of an inclusive society and the social integration of populations suffering from marginalization. This initially concerns gentrified neighbourhoods whose residents find themselves being awarded prizes for excellence in urban sustainability, but this sobriety and the moral pressure which accompanies it also tend to spread to working-class neighbourhoods. Urban regeneration policies do not escape this rising tide of standardization on the road to the ecological conquest of the zones prioritized by city policy. In these neighbourhoods, where they exist, social ULLs generally operate on two levels, mixing the goals of social justice and environmental justice. They adapt social compensation actions to the ecological label, so to speak! Today, one cannot imagine an inclusive city that does not simultaneously stand to attention as a sign of respect to 'its' Majesty the environment. In this regard, experimental approaches are suitable test beds for trying out new incentives designed to spread 'low-carbon' or ecologically virtuous behaviour. From this perspective, ULLs play a normative role that encourages the empowerment of actors so that they integrate a habitus of, if not minimization, at least moderation of their environmental impact or carbon footprint. This process reflects a slogan addressed to city dwellers which often appears on the guideline leaflets, booklets of recommendations, or best conduct 'bibles' created and disseminated by the social and ecological entrepreneurs of cities in transition. Such catalogues challenge the city dweller as a subject and, on occasion, dictate rules of conduct in a *vademecum* intended to shape the reference image of 'a responsible citizen of the sustainable and inclusive city'.

It is worth noting that empowerment is an activator of individual responsibility for taking one's fate into one's own hands and becoming an entrepreneur of one's own life, and is a psycho-social process of integrating values designed to 'green' social behaviour. The scholarly doxa of the Anthropocene and the rising influence of 'fashionable' ideas are a sure sign: it is necessary to internalize the rules of a

discipline, if not to cherish Nature then at least to spare and respect—to revere?—its Majesty the environment! Is this not a supreme path, staked out by what we might call ‘bio-ULLs’, leading to ‘ecological empowerment’ and the acquisition of an environmental conscience? This is somewhat hazardous, but it might be effective if prototypes, good practices, or other suitable references are ‘shaped’ (ecological design) with a healthy pedagogical capacity to spread the ecological word. We have to accept that today, citizens or consumers must know how to—and learn to—cultivate their shared gardens and monitor their carbon footprints. In this atmosphere and this historical moment, the roads of bio-power analysed and denounced by Michel Foucault are not far away... Similarly, they echo a slippery slope that heralds a possible ecological dirigisme, a new moral order, and a road to servitude restricting the field of individual liberties (Hayek 2013). This arbitrariness generated by an all-powerful force, radicalized in its expressions and modes of operation, has found a striking and tragic illustration in the health policies that were pursued, particularly in France, in 2020 and which continue at the time of writing.

Why make things more complicated than they need to be? A carbon tax, a price signal, would be infinitely more transparent and effective for encouraging respect for the environment. Here again, the market can provide free-choice solutions that do not require mechanisms that moralize social life. In other words, can we count on the neutrality of prices and the market and stay away from the programmes of social and bureaucratic entrepreneurs who want to reform society by pretending to improve it? No, because in the current circumstances, the ideological power of fashionable ideas excels in creating tools to serve ideals (the sustainable and inclusive city) that are supposed to guarantee the achievement of the common good. This represents a rising force that flattens and levels awareness by contributing to new forms of ‘bio-empowerment’. The urban ecological order and that of the inclusive city is thus deployed by consent, through consensual alignment with the dominant and diffuse representations that impose behavioural norms by transforming individuals into ‘good city dwellers’.

In this spirit, there are different levers for achieving this, and ULLs are able to apply a maieutic and an art of persuasion that financial incentives do not possess. Through these instruments, social entrepreneurs of all kinds are at work to help moralize and normalize social behaviour. In so doing, they—like it or not—contribute to a form of depoliticization of the issues on the urban scene and agenda. Thus, in the experimental city (a testing ground for ‘soft governance’), ULLs are instruments and levers to support the fight against climate change. They stand out as new tools of persuasion—of domination?—and social control that aim to encourage the ecological empowerment of inhabitants. At the same time, they extol the virtues of the inclusive city and of the fight against exclusion and other forms of marginalizing fragile populations under the universal banner of social justice. De facto, ULLs constitute full-scale tests, demonstrators, and experimental prototypes to disseminate ‘good practices with low environmental impact’ and ‘ecologically correct’ beliefs in the uses and behaviour of inhabitants. Yet nowadays, social solidarity has also—and perhaps above all—become ecological and environmental, and vice versa. It is

mixed up with the various vulgates and commonplaces of the resilient and sustainable city. This is why, when they exist, the ULLs located in the neighbourhoods of large social housing complexes participate in this cultural hegemony, this levelling of awareness, and this standardization of behaviour and representations in the name of the neoliberal credo that the ‘inclusive and sustainable city’ represents.

## References

- Boltanski L, Chiapello E (1999) *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Gallimard
- Bulkeley H, Castan Broto V, Maasen A (2011) Governing urban low carbon transition. In: Bulkeley H, Castan Broto V, Hodson M, Marvin S (Eds), *Cities and low carbon transition*. Routledge, pp 29–41
- Bulkeley H, Marvin S, Voytenko Y (Eds) (2019) Urban living laboratories: conducting the experimental city? *Europ Urban Regional Stud* 26(4):317–335
- Canapero L, Benavero F (2016) Neighbourhood regeneration at the grassroots participation: incubator co-creative process and system. *Int J Archit Res* 10(2):204–218
- Ciavolella R (2020) Les deux Gramsci de l’anthropologie politique. *Condition humaine/Conditions politiques*, 1. <https://revues.mshparisnord.fr/chcp/index.php?id=109>
- Douay N, Prévot M (2016) Circulation d’un modèle urbain ‘alternatif’? Le cas de l’urbanisme tactique et de sa réception à Paris. *Echo Géo* 36. <https://doi.org/10.4000/echogeo.14617>
- Epstein R (2006) *Gouverner à distance: Quand l’état se retire des territoires*. Editions Esprit
- Hayek FA (2013) *La route de la servitude*. PUF, Quadrige
- Marvin S, Bulkeley H, Lindsay M, McCormick K, Voytenko Palgan Y (eds) (2011) *Urban Living Labs*. Routledge, *Experimenting with city futures*
- Reigner H (2013) *Sous les pavés de la qualité urbaine. Gouvernement des territoires, gouvernement des conduites et formes renouvelées de la domination dans la ville néohygiéniste* [Habilitation, Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris]. <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00842287>
- Reigner H (2015) *Une gouvernementalisation néohygiéniste et néolibérale des conduites. La ville durable controversée. Les dynamiques urbaines dans le mouvement critique*. Pragmatismes
- Rousseau M (2008) Bringing politics back in: La gentrification comme politique de développement urbain? *Espaces et sociétés* 1:132–133
- Roux E, Marron Q (2017) Les Living Labs, de nouveaux dispositifs d’action publique pour penser les métropoles et les territoires. *Canad J Regional Sci Canad Regional Sci Assoc* 40(1):33–41
- Scholl C, Kemp R (2016) City Labs as vehicles for innovation in urban planning processes. *Urban Planning* 1(4):89–102
- Scholl C, Kemp R, de Kraker J (2016) City Labs as instruments to shape common ground on urban sustainability [Symposium paper, ICIS Maastricht University]
- Severini F, Salet W, Markins M (2015) Amsterdam: regulation dilemma in IJburg and Overamstel. Aprilab, Regulation dilemma report. [https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/2520878/163696\\_aprilab\\_regulation\\_dilemma\\_report\\_final\\_deliverable\\_3a\\_1\\_.pdf](https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/2520878/163696_aprilab_regulation_dilemma_report_final_deliverable_3a_1_.pdf)
- Smas L, Schmitt P, Perjo L, Tunström L (2016) Positioning ULLs—a new form of smart governance? In: Schrenk M, Popovich VV, Zeile P, Elisei P, Beyer C (Eds), *REAL CORP 2016—SMART ME UP! How to become and how to stay a Smart City, and does this improve quality of life?* Proceedings of 21st international conference on urban planning, regional development and information society, pp 919–923. [https://repository.corp.at/179/1/CORP2016\\_112.pdf](https://repository.corp.at/179/1/CORP2016_112.pdf)

- Swyngedouw E (2011) Les contradictions de la ville post-politique. a la recherche d'une politique démocratique de production environnementale. In: Béal V, Gauthier M, Pinson G (eds), *Le développement durable changera-t-il la ville? Le regard des sciences sociales*. Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, pp 129–159
- Von Wirth T, Fuenfschilling L, Frantzeskaki N, Coenen L (2019) Impacts of urban living labs on sustainability transitions: mechanisms and strategies for systemic change through experimentation. *Eur Plan Stud* 27(2):229–257

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

