

The Public Collaboration Lab— Infrastructuring Redundancy with Communities-in-Place

Abstract In this article we share an example of challenge-driven learning in design education and consider the contribution of such approaches to the weaving of communities-in-place. We describe the research and practice of the Public Collaboration Lab (PCL), a prototype public social innovation lab developed and tested via a collaborative action research partnership between a London borough council and an art and design university. We make the case that this collaboration is an effective means of bringing capacity in design to public service innovation, granting the redundancy of resources necessary for the experimentation, reflection, and learning that leads to innovation – particularly at a time of financial austerity. We summarize three collaborative design experiments delivered by local government officers working with student designers and residents supported by design researchers and tutors. We identify particular qualities of participatory and collaborative design that foster the construction of meaningful connections among participants in the design process – connections that have the potential to catalyze or strengthen the relationships, experiences, and understandings that contribute to enrich communities-in-place, and infrastructure community resilience in the process.

Keywords

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Resilience through Redundancy

Resilience through redundancy is a natural strategy.¹ Nassim Taleb comments on the propensity of nature to overinsure itself, suggesting, “layers of redundancy are the central risk management property of natural systems.”² He points to human physiology as evidence of this: two kidneys when one will do, and the spare parts and extra capacity of the lungs, neural systems, and coronary arteries. Taleb also challenges the notion of cost in relation to redundancy. He argues that while redundancy “seems like a waste if nothing unusual happens, ... something unusual does happen – usually.”³ Furthermore, if we have surplus of an asset then we may be able to draw upon or trade that asset in times of shortage, and in this regard what appears to be insurance against risk is actually better understood as investment in opportunity.

For a system to be resilient it must have redundancy – multiple and diverse ways and means of achieving desired outcomes. However, local government in the UK – the city, district and borough councils, charged with ensuring the quality and continuity of public services aimed at ensuring equitable access to public goods for citizens – is under unprecedented attack in this regard. Redundancy here too often refers to reductions in the staffing required to deliver public services rather than the superabundance⁴ that affords surplus ways and means of achieving objectives and goals within resilient systems.

In the UK, local government has four main sources of funding: the Revenue Support Grant (RSG) received from Central Government, monies from local business via the Business Rates Retention Scheme, Council Tax paid by residents, and fees and charges for council services.

Bank bailouts and fiscal initiatives such as the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) – introduced in the 90s as a way to fund public infrastructure projects – have seen central government increasing the burden of debt servicing upon local government whilst at the same time reducing the funding provided to local government by an estimated thirty-seven percent⁵ between 2011 and 2016. A predicted further £7.8 billion, or seventy-eight percent, reduction over the next four years is anticipated to drive an unprecedented number of councils into financial crisis⁶ reducing support to the communities they serve.

In response to austerity, many local government services have been encouraged to become more efficient. Local and national scrutiny – including via legislative tools like The Local Government and Accountability Act 2014 – has driven many councils headlong into cost saving measures and round after round of restructuring and cost cutting in an attempt to deliver “more for less – providing services that meet people’s needs, while costing less.”⁷

This sounds like a sensible response, and to some extent it is; waste is rarely a virtue. However, often that which is seen as waste is in fact the redundancy essential to resilience. In the Local Government context, the pursuit of efficiency is pernicious in that it overlooks two key considerations, discussed below.

Efficiency versus Efficacy

“Efficiency is concerned with doing things right. Effectiveness is doing the right things.”⁸

Efficiency and effectiveness are not the same thing, and political imperatives can sometimes mean that “[local government] does the wrong things really well.”⁹ The pursuit of efficiency beyond that which is effective will inevitably reduce the quality of public services and outcomes. This is especially true of relational services, which are “deeply and profoundly based on the quality of interpersonal relations between participants.”¹⁰ Building relationships takes time, and, when the

1 Editorial note: while the body text conforms to U.S. English, all project titles and institution names adopt British English where appropriate.

2 Nassim N. Taleb, *Anti-Fragile: How to Live in a World We Don't Understand* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 44.

3 *Ibid.*, 45.

4 The Oxford English Dictionary (1788) defines “redundancy” as, “the state or quality of being redundant; superabundance, superfluity.”

5 The Comptroller and Auditor General, “Local Government Report: The Impact of Funding Reductions on Local Authorities” (National Audit Office, November 19, 2014), accessed March 13, 2018, <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Impact-of-funding-reductions-on-local-authorities.pdf>.

6 Sean Nolan and Joanne Pitt, *Balancing Local Authority Budgets* (CIPFA, 2016), accessed March 13, 2018, <http://www.cipfa.org/policy-and-guidance/publications/b/balancing-local-authority-budgets-online>.

7 Jamie Bartlett, *Getting More for Less: Efficiency in the Public Sector* (London: Demos, 2009), 7, available at http://bssec.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Getting_more_for_less.pdf.

8 Mike Bennett and Robert Hill, eds., *Efficient Local Government* (London: SOLACE Foundation Imprint, 2008), 4, accessed March 13, 2018, http://www.solace.org.uk/library_documents/21_SFI_Efficient_local_government_June2008.pdf.

9 Local government officer, workshop comment, 2016.

10 Carla Cipolla and Ezio Manzini, “Relational Services,” *Knowledge, Technology & Policy* 22, no. 1 (2009): 45–50, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12130-009-9066-z>.

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