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Beyond consensus: politicizing urban experimental planning

Jana Weber[1*], Anke Klaever[2,3] and Samuel Mössner[4]

*Correspondence:
Jana Weber
jana.weber@fh-muenster.de
[1]Münster University of Applied Sciences, Münster, Germany
[2]Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Karlsruhe, Germany
[3]Technical University of Berlin, Berlin, Germany
[4]University of Münster, Münster, Germany

Abstract

In the face of multiple crises municipalities are confronted with complex transformations that challenge established modes of planning. In the absence of adaptive, integrative, and reflexive tools, they turn towards communicative and experimental formats. Rather than representing a paradigmatic shift, these formats function as provisional responses to institutional and epistemic gaps. While they are often associated with collaborative learning, innovation, and open-ended knowledge production, their proliferation can also be understood as symptomatic of the limited capacity of conventional, technocratic planning approaches to address contemporary urban challenges. Despite the innovative character and reported success of such experiments, empirical scholarship indicates that these formats are susceptible to reproducing post-political conditions: they can depoliticize conflicts, privilege expert knowledge over that of citizens, and stabilize existing power relations, thereby reinforcing dominant social orders. In this Perspective we draw on Jacques Rancière's theoretical thoughts to conceptualize urban experiments as sites where the *Distribution of the Sensible* and thus the prevailing social order can be either stabilized or disrupted. We show that experiments are inherently ambivalent: they can conceal contestation and uphold existing agendas, yet they can also activate processes of political subjectivation and render alternative urban imaginaries visible. We argue that realizing this potential requires recognizing citizens as political subjects, allowing for open-ended conflicts, avoiding pre-defined outcomes, and providing resources for sustained engagement. Transforming urban experiments into arenas for genuine democratic negotiation entails a reconfiguration of project logics, participatory arrangements, and institutional support structures to explicit embrace contestation.

Policy and practice recommendations

- Experimental planning should establish conditions for antagonistic debate in urban transformation.
- Dissent and conflict should be enabled instead of prevented in instruments like real-world laboratories.
- To do so, predetermined agendas and results should be avoided.
- Also, all participants, especially unheard or marginalized voices, should be recognized as political subjects.
- Questions concerning the design, governance and participation of urban experiments should be reviewed carefully.

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Keywords Post-politics, Rancière, Experimental planning, Real-world laboratories

Introduction

Multiple socio-political crises compel municipalities to devise responses to local challenges. In recent years, urban experiments have emerged as promising tools for supporting municipalities in addressing new complexities (Evans et al. 2018). Additionally, public funding schemes have promoted experimental approaches (Kern and Haupt 2021). In formats such as real-world laboratories or urban living labs, scientists and practitioners collaborate to co-produce new knowledge and to test innovative, context-specific approaches (Beecroft et al. 2019; Schäpke et al. 2018). The scope and potential of experimental formats are vast: ranging from supporting mobility transitions (Joost et al. 2025), to advancing sustainable energy systems (Fan et al. 2022), urban infrastructure (Bulkeley et al. 2016), or participatory governance (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Ståhlbröst 2009). The experimental and learning-oriented nature of such projects not only holds the potential to deliver solutions to urgent problems but also challenges the epistemology of planning. While the rational-comprehensive ideal of statutory planning has often been conceptualized as following a linear rationale guaranteeing predictability, planning practice is frequently messier than this ideal assumes. Experimental approaches explicitly center the planning process around uncertainty, iteration, and learning. They unfold through cycles of testing, failure, and learning and resist the closure that conventional planning theoretically seeks.

However, as scientists engaged in real-world laboratories, we are attentive to a growing critique of such formats: Experimental framings may obscure existing power relations, depoliticize contentious issues, or recast conflicts as ostensibly manageable technical problems (Torrens and von Wirth 2021; Sierhuis et al. 2024). Experimental framings are particularly problematic when they promise change while perpetuating established agendas and under the conditions of urban austerity experimental approaches risk being reduced to low-cost solutions (Verlinghieri et al. 2024). This positions the political role of experimental planning formats as both fundamental and ambivalent, particularly in times of contested urban transformation. These concerns motivated our contribution for this Perspective-Paper, prompting us to reflect on their ambivalent role as both celebrated instruments of innovation and contested sites.

The vast literature on experimental planning can be broadly structured along three axes[1]. A dominant body of work focuses on the functional optimization of experimental planning approaches, addressing effectiveness, scalability, and policy integration. A second, yet smaller strand situates experimental formats within governmental rationalities, examining emerging modalities of power, interdependencies, and the management of uncertainty. A third strand, within which this contribution is positioned, engages with questions of societal transformation and contestation: Drawing (ant-)agonistic and post-foundational political thought (Landau et al. 2021), this strand interrogates how urban experiments both shape and are shaped by dynamics of political inclusion and exclusion, the strategic framing of societal constraints as well as the regulation of dissent. Against this background, our aim is to introduce a yet underrepresented theoretical perspective

[1] This structure along three axes was inspired by a presentation of Tim Schwanen at the 35th International Geographical Congress in Dublin in 2024. https://virtual.oxfordabstracts.com/event/5117/submission/2358.

into the study of urban experiments. Central to our reflections is the political thought of French political philosopher Jacques Rancière, whose work has had a significant influence in critical planning theory (see e.g. Allmendinger 2017; Legacy et al. 2019).

The rise of experimental planning approaches within post-political conditions

For some time, there has been a shift within urban planning theory and practice toward adopting new approaches responsive to the complexities, contingencies and non-linearities of (socio-ecological) transformations. In this context, experimental planning instruments have gained prominence in addressing the challenges of urban transformation (Evans et al. 2018; Caprotti and Cowley 2016). In theory, they are underpinned by a 'commitment to changing the way in which we build, manage and live in cities through explicitly staging experiments' (Evans et al. 2018, p. 2), thereby rendering urban space a site of active intervention, negotiation, and contestation. Under the transdisciplinary concept of 'real-world laboratory', with 'real-world experiments' as their core tool, experimental approaches have increasingly entered urban planning (Räuchle et al. 2021; Scholl and de Kraker 2021). Unlike many theoretically formalized planning procedures, often regarded as slow, inflexible and socially distant, experimental spaces can reveal alternatives (Räuchle 2021).

With their inherently interventionist character, urban experiments could challenge and reshape existing physical and institutional spaces (Parodi et al. 2018), aiming to foster communal sustainability and advance social justice (Savini and Bertolini 2019; Evans et al. 2018). Conceptually, they are open-ended in terms of both process and outcome, countering planning ideals grounded in technocratic notions of predictability and predefined outcomes (Räuchle 2021, p. 216) as they frame planning as a space for uncertainty, debate, and collective learning. Taken seriously, urban experiments in its initial design function as arenas of agonistic debate, where failure is not a weakness but a condition that can enable democratic urban futures (Evans et al. 2018; Bulkeley et al. 2019).

Yet, increasing skepticism in both scholarly and practical debates raises the question of whether such normative expectations impose burdens on experiments, contributing to the frequently ambiguous nature of their transformative impacts (Schäpke et al. 2018; Kern and Haupt 2021). Some scholars have argued that experimental urban planning is a vehicle of austerity urbanism (Verlinghieri et al. 2024), others have criticized the reduction of complexity despite its transdisciplinary and transformative nature (Smeds and Papa 2023). Another point of critique concerns their social exclusiveness, as they tend to privilege an academically educated and well-informed social class that is mobilized through experimental planning (Kohler and Manderscheid 2024), raising more general questions of social justice in the city (Fainstein 2010). As they tend to create exclusive spaces that primarily accommodate those who already feel heard, these initiatives often struggle to foster inclusive civic engagement, as the perspectives of less-heard groups remain underrepresented. Thus, civic engagement elements are conflict-ridden (Klaever and Verlinghieri 2025; Vitale Brovarone et al. 2023). Furthermore, critical scholarship considers experimental planning to be embedded within a post-political urban condition (Karvonen et al. 2014; van Wymeersch et al. 2019; Sierhuis et al. 2024; Sierhuis 2025; Verlinghieri et al. 2024). This raises fundamental questions concerning the (de-)politicization of urban experiments: who is recognized as a legitimate actor in planning processes, whose voices are included or excluded, and how are ostensibly consensual

positions strategically 'stage-managed' (MacLeod 2011, p. 2632) to marginalize alternative forms of knowledge. While critiques of urban experiments are often repeated, there is still a significant gap between theory and practice. Addressing this gap requires an approach that is theoretically robust while remaining attentive to the practical conditions of experimental planning.

Contested urban experiments: towards a post-political critique

A substantial body of urban research has engaged with questions of justice and democracy in the city since the 1960s (e.g. Lefebvre 1996 [1968]; Harvey 2009 [1973], Fainstein 2010) and has critically examined the limits of participation and decision-making, under what have been described as post-political conditions (e.g. Allmendinger 2017; Metzger 2018). While theoretically heterogeneous, critiques of post-political conditions share a common concern with the depoliticization of societal and planning processes. They highlight how conflictual issues are reframed as manageable problems, stabilizing a depoliticized agreement about urban futures, transforming the very nature of political participation towards a technical process to foster consensus. In this context, processes of inclusion and exclusion are structured through the strategic invocation of seemingly non-negotiable imperatives, limiting the scope of contestation and reinforcing expert-driven forms of governance (Swyngedouw 2009; Karvonen et al. 2014; Legacy et al. 2019; Savini and Raco 2019). This raises questions of whether and how such depoliticized arrangements can be disrupted, and under what conditions conflict re-emerges as a genuinely political moment.

Post-politics encompasses a diverse body of work[2]. Two significant approaches to conflict, democracy, and the political emerge in the work of Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière (see Purcell 2014; Hillier 2003; Dikeç 2013; Biesta 2011). Both conceptions of democracy are very close to each other: „Both raised fundamental questions about the extent to which the 'essence' of democratic politics can be captured as a particular order" (Biesta 2011, p. 141). They conceive democracy as a process that necessarily involves unsolvable differences and conflicts, that cannot be resolved through rational consensus (Purcell 2014, p. 170). For Mouffe, however, conflict is constitutive of the social and democratic politics needs to provide institutional conditions under which antagonism can be transformed into agonism (Biesta 2011, p. 148). Her agonistic conception should not be understood as a call to disrupt or transcend political orders, but for politicizing and democratically contesting their hegemonic foundations. This is reflected in the extensive literature on agonistic planning (e.g. Hillier 2003; Bäcklund and Mäntysalo 2010). Rancière's approach differs here. While Mouffe locates democratic action within a political order, Rancière locates the political in moments that interrupt the existing order itself (Biesta 2011, p. 148). Politics is therefore not primarily a matter of negotiating competing interests within established institutional arrangements but emerges when those who have no recognized part in the existing order assert equality and generate new political subjectivities (Rancière 2003, pp. 101, 225, cited in Biesta 2011, pp. 148–149). This shifts the analytical focus from the agonistic regulation of conflict to the conditions

[2] Prominent strands of post-political critique are associated with, among others, Colin Crouch (2008), with regard to post-democracy; Slavoj Žižek (1999), with a focus on ideology critique and the depoliticizing effects of consensus; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), in relation to critical discourse theory, hegemony and antagonism; Jacques Rancière (2002, 2010), and Mark Purcell (2000) in urban and geographical debates. Erik Swyngedouw (2009, 2014) has been particularly influential in translating Rancière's concepts into geographical thinking.

under which the established distribution of roles, voices and legitimate forms of knowledge can be challenged. Scholarship drawing on Rancière emphasizes dissensus and the disruption of established orders rather than the institutional regulation of conflicts (e.g. Mössner 2016; Allmendinger 2017; Metzger 2018; Legacy et al. 2019). We argue that a Rancièrian approach directs attention to experimental moments in which the boundaries of participation, political subjectivity and legitimate knowledge are reconfigured. This perspective remains underdeveloped in critical discussions of experimental planning but may be significant for understanding how practices can contribute to more substantive forms of socio-ecological transformation.

In his early writings, Rancière advocates for the equal consideration of all voices and the visibility of every individual (Rancière 2018 [1987]). He contrasts the consensus maintained by and for the few with 'dissensus' as the foundation of political activity (Rancière 2002), framing *Politics* as a practice of conflict or dispute. The mechanisms that sustain and legitimize consensus are captured by the concept of *Police* or *policing* (Rancière 2002). Here, *Police* do not merely denote exclusionary or executive measures, as commonly assumed, but encompasses all activities that enforce the prevailing *Distribution of the Sensible* (Rancière 2002). *Politics*, in contrast, is constituted by those acts that disrupt, reorder, reorganize, and spatially re-distribute this order (Rancière 2021). The disruptions of the political do not necessarily take the form of revolutionary or violent practices. More often, it is the subtle, less visible shift that constitutes the political for Rancière (Uitermark and Nicholls 2014, p. 973), which in practice manifest as a coexistence or intertwining of *Politics* and *Police* (Legacy et al. 2019). What is crucial is that the attempt to mitigate existing post-political conditions is initiated and led by previously excluded and marginalized positions, as they demand to be heard in a process of becoming a political subject (political subjectivation). The articulation of demands disrupts established orders and exposes unequal social relations, rendering them open to dispute rather than regulating them within negotiated settings. Thus, a Rancièrian perspective enables us to view urban experiments to be read as spaces where the existing order is either reproduced or temporarily disrupted. The analytical focus shifts from participation as such to the question of whether and how previously excluded voices become perceptible and contest the existing order. In line with this reading, the politicization of urban experiments requires prioritizing participation and the antagonistic debates they generate.

Bringing theory to the field: Moments of de-politicization?

The following section presents a tabular overview translating Rancière's theoretical perspective elaborated above into a set of guiding questions for persons engaging in or analyzing urban experiments. Structured around nine dimensions, Table 1 maps each dimension between two poles, the reproduction of existing orders (*Police*) and their temporal disruption (*Politics*). A set of guiding questions follows each dimension inviting researchers and practitioners in urban experiments to a reflexive examination of the specific design of an experiment. The proposed questions shift the analytical focus from participation as such to the underlying configurations of experiments. Engaging with these questions allows a more fine-grained assessment of whether urban experiments open spaces for political subjectivation and (ant)agonistic debate or, conversely, stabilize existing power relations through controlled and depoliticized forms of engagement.

Table 1 Designing urban experiments between reproduction (Police) and disruption (Politics)

Dimension	Police (Reproduction)	Politics (Disruption)	Questions for designing urban experiments
Problem Framing	Problems predefined within existing orders; frame as solutions-oriented	Problem definitions are contested and reconfigured during the process	Who defines the problem? Can it be challenged or redefined within or beyond existing policy agendas?
Goals & Outcomes	Fixed, pre-legitimized outputs aligned with institutional logics	Goals and output can shift in response to emerging claims and conflicts during the process	Are outcomes predetermined, or can they evolve during the process?
Participation	Access controlled; roles assigned within institutional frameworks	Inclusion is open; new actors can appear and claim visibility	Who is included/excluded? Can new groups/people enter? Are boundaries of participation transparent and flexible?
Subject Positions & role of participants	Participants perform assigned roles; contribution is functionalized	Participants emerge as political subjects disrupting given roles	Can participants challenge and reconfigure roles? Does the design of the process allow for unanticipated dynamics?
Organization	Structured, consensus-oriented, procedurally managed by administrators and private contractors (planning agencies)	Open to interruption, dissent, and agenda shifts, self-organized and bottom-up	Does the format allow interruption and disagreement?
Conflict	Managed, regulated, translated into ostensible consensus	Sustained as dissensus revealing inequalities	Is conflict visible and productive, or suppressed?
Knowledge	Expert-driven; hierarchical validation of knowledge	Situated, experiential knowledge reshapes the discourse	Which knowledges count, and how are they made visible?
Control	Strong institutional steering and predictability	Partial loss of control; responsiveness to emergent dynamics	How much flexibility to deviate from plans?
Temporality	Fixed timelines driven by funding and policy cycles	Temporal openness; possibility of delay, rupture, transformation	Can the process adapt to emerging issues over time?

Table 1 draws on the existing literature on urban experiments, the Rancièrian perspective described in this contribution, and empirical data from experiments in Münster and Berlin in which the authors were involved as researchers. In the following, we bring these questions into dialogue with short empirical vignettes to highlight temporary reconfiguration and stabilization. Instead of an empirical analysis of these cases, they serve as illustrative examples that demonstrate how the guiding questions proposed enable a Rancièrian reading of urban experiments. In doing so, the empirical insights foreground a perspective underrepresented in debates on the politicization of urban experiments.

Münster: empirical vignette

In the Münster case, a section of a multi-lane road was closed for a four-day street experiment in October 2021, aiming to question and contribute to existing planning strategies for a so-called "Knowledge District" by inviting students to propose approaches for alternative, sustainable, and common-good-oriented uses of public space. The empirical data raises questions concerning its predetermination (Table 1, Dimension Problem Framing) and the position of students emerges as ambivalent (Table 1, Subject Position and Role of Participants).

During a panel discussion with academics, students, the city administration, and political representatives, previously unheard voices criticized Münster's urban development

for paying insufficient attention to residents' needs and for interpreting the common good too narrowly, thereby excluding parts of the population. In the experimental street space, these voices were active as students presented ideas for the sustainable development of the street and the wider neighborhood, some of them directly challenging the city's growth-oriented plans. The setting of a panel discussion produced a moment of dissensus, revealing voices and perspectives previously suppressed. Students' proposals and alternative uses of the street questioned the seemingly sustainable planning process. Through their temporal subjectification they enacted a political order by making contestation visible, if only for a moment. But, a continuous back-and-forth between progressive proposals and setbacks, shaped by administrative regulations and rigid interpretations of routine and rules, was noticeable. After a few days, the street returned to its previous normality, silencing these voices and dismantling the temporary disruption, thereby restoring the pre-existing order and reaffirming the dominance of *Police* over *Politics*.

Berlin: empirical vignette

The second example illustrates a potential refiguration of space in two street-space experiments in Berlin where citizens were invited via self-selection to contribute their ideas for redesigning street space (Table 1, Dimension Participation and Subject Position). Theoretically, such events create opportunities for the emergence of political subjects. In practice, however, spaces were constrained, channeling citizens into highly structured, formulaic arenas governed by rigid procedural rules. Although participation was formally open, it often felt conflict-ridden, with many residents unable to feel included and heard, despite the urban relevance of the experiments for them and their social networks. They even experienced their perspectives and place-based knowledge as carrying less weight than those of the experiment's initiators. This lack of recognition, combined with procedural rigidity, triggered acts of protest including graffiti criticizing political and scientific actors, attempts to disrupt or damage the newly designed spaces, and counter petitions. Rather than being productively engaged, conflict largely emerged outside the intended participatory formats, revealing tensions that the experimental design had failed to accommodate (Table 1, Dimension Conflict). Such reactions underscore that urban experiments are inherently political and that both participants and local residents act as political subjects seeking visibility and voice by challenging the roles assigned to them and exceeding the anticipated dynamics of the participatory process. In the Berlin cases, opposition often sought to preserve the existing order or struggled to accept the temporary, in-between design. Importantly, citizen opposition should not be reduced to NIMBYism; it represents a political subject in formation, engaged in a process of dis-identification from a given symbolic order.

Conclusions

In this Perspective, we engage with Rancière's thoughts on the political to advance the debate on the political character and capacity of urban experiments. Building on Rancière's distinction between *Police* and *Politics* we have developed a tabular overview (Table 1) that translates these abstract theoretical claims into nine dimensions and guiding questions for researchers and practitioners engaged with urban experiments. Two brief empirical vignettes illustrate how this approach could be transferred into practice,

highlighting small scale political moments of rupture, temporary reconfiguration, and stabilization. What makes a reading of urban experiments with a Rancièrian lense particularly productive is his focus on disrupting existing rules, routines and orders temporarily in the sense of a political moment. This stands in contrast to understandings of participation and conflictual debate that tend to focus on approaches working within the institutionalized order. Drawing on Rancière the question is not only whether urban experiments include diverse actors, but whether they create conditions for political subjectivation. Moments in which participants emerge as political subjects through their claims for more just und equal conditions – in this context in sustainable urban development and planning. However, embedded in post-political conditions, participatory planning and collaborative platforms as urban experiments are often reduced to information and consultation with antagonistic negotiation and genuine decision-making withheld (Sierhuis et al. 2024; Verlinghieri et al. 2024; Legacy et al. 2019; Swyngedouw 2009). This reproduces the logic of a *policing* order, stabilizing existing power dynamics and silencing dissent. Merely staging a new sustainability-oriented order is insufficient.

The approach developed in this Perspective ought to counteract this tendency of stabilizing post-political conditions. It should sharpen the reflexive capacity of those who design and engage in urban experiments. The dimensions presented in Table 1 such as problem framing, participation or conflict are not merely technical design questions, but sites where the political character of urban experiments is either empowered or weakened. Urban experiments should allow for open-ended antagonistic debate and sustain engagement beyond managed consensus. This entails a particular responsibility for planners, practitioners, politicians, and researchers, whose role in designing experimental formats positions them as key actors in enabling political subjectivation. Future research might examine how the reflexive approach to politicizing urban experiments presented here could be put into practice and developed further. For example, applying it in an empirical case study. Furthermore, it remains important to examine how and when urban experiments could contribute to more equitable and democratic urban transformation rather than serve as a tool for legitimizing existing power relations.

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Author contributions
A.K. initiated the collaboration for this contribution, drafted the initial version of the manuscript, provided empirical insights and continuously revised the following manuscript versions substantively. S.M. developed the theoretical framework and the tabular overview and contributed substantively to the ongoing revisions and manuscript versions. J.W. developed the theoretical framework, provided empirical insights, linked the state of research with the theoretical framework and contributed substantively to the ongoing revisions and manuscript versions. J.W. finalized the manuscript.

Data availability
No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate
No ethics statement was required.

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

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