



Living labs: epistemic modelling, temporariness and land value

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ABSTRACT

Epistemic modelling is advanced in this paper as a civic design method within community-led living labs. Two long-term projects were examined to demonstrate how temporary architectural artefacts (thresholds, rooms, workshops, urban rooms) can operate as knowledge-producing instruments through which communities contest and reframe land value. Within the context of acute urban land scarcity and ongoing privatisation in London, UK, land access is directly connected to methods of strong community engagement, including embedded presence, co-making, and care-based governance. A collaborative autoethnographic process recorded and analysed conversations between the two architect-authors and an interlocutor for recurring themes. The analysis shows how provisional spatial interventions generate situated knowledge, negotiate power, and translate temporariness into pathways towards permanence. Findings highlight: a) the potential of living labs to treat land as a commons rather than a financial asset; b) the role of temporary architectures as epistemic artefacts that surface values, conflicts, and governance arrangements; c) the expansion of the architect's role from designer to host, organiser and carer. A contribution is made to the living labs literature by foregrounding land as a core resource and by offering a transferable framework for practice that connects temporary architecture, epistemic modelling and the revaluation of urban land.

PRACTICE RELEVANCE

Grounded insights are offered to architects, urban designers and community practitioners where land access and long-term engagement constitute central challenges. The role of the architect within community-led projects is evolving, with emphasis on adaptability, care and negotiation skills. The case studies demonstrate how architects can assume expanded roles, beyond design, encompassing facilitation, governance and relationship-building. Practical lessons are drawn around managing informal terms of engagement, navigating shifting power dynamics, and sustaining momentum in projects that operate across uncertain timelines. Attention is also drawn to the skill of working within the

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1. INTRODUCTION

Epistemic artefacts are understood as material and conceptual tools that generate and structure knowledge, not simply representations of prior ideas (Knorr Cetina 2001; Knuuttila 2021; Morrison & Morgan 1999). In architecture, drawings, diagrams, 1:1 prototypes and even temporary buildings can be designed to act as epistemic artefacts. Epistemic artefacts are constitutive of reasoning and discovery (Knorr Cetina 2001). They are partial, revisable and generative, enabling new forms of reasoning (Knuuttila 2011). In architecture, this can be seen in how drawings, models and temporary structures not only communicate ideas but actively shape decisions and reasoning. Models are epistemic tools: their incompleteness and material contingency stimulate surprise, iteration and collective governance, making them central to the production of architectural knowledge (Yaneva 2023).

Collective governance refers to arrangements where decision-making authority and responsibilities are distributed across community members, civic organisations and institutional actors rather than being held solely by formal authorities. This aligns with Ostrom's (1990/2015) work on commons governance and more recent urban scholarship that frames governance as a negotiated practice involving shared responsibilities and distributed agency.

Living labs are generally defined as real-world sites for collaborative experimentation, bringing together diverse actors to co-produce knowledge and innovation (ENOLL 2025; Voytenko et al. 2016) and they have been applied to test sustainability transitions (Ballon & Schuurman 2015; Steen & van Bueren 2017). In this paper, the term is adapted to describe community-led living labs, where the central constraint is access to land. The paper uses temporary architectural artefacts to model transformation in land value and thus land use.

Two long-term community projects in London are used as embedded case studies to explore the notion of temporary architecture as epistemic artefact: the Common Room (Roman Road, Bow, 2014–) and Livesey Exchange (LEX, Old Kent Road, 2015–). Both were initiated by the architect-authors and their collaborators, unfolding over more than a decade, and are analysed here as extended living labs in which temporary architecture functioned as epistemic artefacts. Community engagement and events are framed as epistemic models that produce new knowledge about the economic and governance complexities of metropolitan land.

In London, the shortage of affordable land for civic and community use is a structural problem (Christophers 2018; Madden & Marcuse 2016). Community groups are routinely displaced by speculative development. For community-led living labs, land is the core resource (Voytenko et al. 2016), yet access is precarious and mediated by uneven power relations with housing associations, local authorities and private developers. As Cruz and Forman (2020) argue in relation to the San Diego–Tijuana border, contested urban spaces are 'geographies of conflict' where exclusionary top-down policies collide with bottom-up networks of solidarity. Their call to 'localise the global' by exposing how structural inequalities are inscribed in space resonates with London's land crisis, where the politics of ownership and dispossession shape the conditions of community experimentation. In this light, temporary interventions are not merely pragmatic responses to scarcity but civic strategies for making visible the uneven distribution of land and for cultivating new forms of solidarity in the city. Land scarcity makes temporary architectural artefacts crucial as tools for testing value.

Temporary architecture has often been seen as provisional or marginal (Till 2009). Here it is understood as epistemic artefact: deliberately temporary, iterative and disobedient to normative procurement cycles (Flood & Grindon 2014). Its value lies in its incompleteness: it models hospitality, conflict and negotiation in real time, allowing participants to test and contest futures without the permanence of conventional development. The activation of epistemic artefacts in

neighbourhoods, such as through community engagement, artistic events, discursive dinners, gardening and so on, ‘models’ these artefacts, creating an ‘epistemic model’ that produces situated knowledge. Neither epistemic artefacts nor models depict a predetermined future; instead, they enable situated exploration of relationships, conflicts, values and possibilities. The central claim of this paper is that epistemic modelling (social events) via epistemic artefacts (temporary architecture) challenges neoliberal understandings of land as a financial asset and redefines the role of the architect as host, organiser and carer.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LIVING LABS AS MODELLED EPISTEMIC ARTEFACTS

2.1 LIVING LABS

Urban living labs are widely understood as participatory, place-based innovation environments where stakeholders co-create, test and implement new practices in real-life urban settings. The European Network of Living Labs defines them as ‘user-centered, open innovation ecosystems based on systematic user co-creation approach, integrating research and innovation processes in real life communities and settings’ (ENOLL 2025). Four dimensions distinguish urban living labs from other forms of policy experiment or community project: their aims (learning and experimentation), activities (iterative co-creation and development), participants (citizens and public, private and knowledge actors with decision-making power) and context (embeddedness in real-world urban conditions) (Steen & van Bueren 2017). Both the Common Room and LEX can be considered urban living labs: they mobilised local residents, community groups, municipal actors and architects as co-creators; they generated iterative prototypes from temporary structures to longer-term architectural interventions; and they were embedded in the governance challenges of land use, ownership, and value in London. Their significance lies not only in the spaces they produced but in the way they generated knowledge through practice, thereby aligning with the defining elements of urban living labs identified in the literature.

2.2 EPISTEMIC ARTEFACTS AND MODELLING

In the philosophy of science, cognitive science and educational research, the term ‘epistemic artefacts’ is used to describe the way in which humans do not just think ‘in their heads’ but also externalise and extend thinking into the world through artefacts (Knorr Cetina 2001). These artefacts are tools and objects created and used to support knowledge processes such as reasoning, inquiry, learning and problem solving (Hansen 2009; Knuuttila 2021; Rost & Knuuttila 2022). They are cognitive mediators that enable collaboration and trigger the discovery of new knowledge (Knorr Cetina 2001; Paavola & Hakkarainen 2005).

Epistemic artefacts are dynamic and provisional, and can be redesigned, tested and adapted as understanding evolves. This quality of epistemic artefacts provides a useful framework for understanding temporary architecture in the context of living labs, which have the ability to change as the sociopolitical environment shifts. Epistemic artefacts are the physical, material agents that support the emergence of new knowledge for systemic solutions. Epistemic modelling is a way of mapping out who knows what, who believes what, and how that changes when information is shared or discovered (Genin and Huber 2022). The events and social engagements in communities and local government together with reflective maps make up epistemic modelling as a practice. While the temporary architecture is framed as the epistemic artefact and is the physical container of the living lab, epistemic modelling is its functionality as a lab.

2.3 TEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE AS EPISTEMIC ARTEFACT

Traditional architectural modelling involves creating a smaller-scale representation of a building to explore its permanent physical form. In contrast, temporary architecture is adaptable and mobile, serving as a medium for experimentation in urban design and community engagement (Till 2009). However, conventional modelling is not suitable for designing temporary architecture, a critical field of contemporary design that responds to social and environmental needs with agility.

Epistemic artefacts and modelling provide a new theoretical framework for this type of architecture, supporting the development and production of urban living labs situated within discourses of urban resilience, sustainability and spatial politics (Robazza et al. 2024). The impermanence of temporary architecture challenges traditional architectural values of durability and monumentality, instead proposing an architecture of temporality and responsiveness, which is very similar to epistemic artefacts. They model social relationships at events (Kronenburg 1998) and critically assess the potential and obstacles to sociopolitical change through contemporary paradigms such as tactical urbanism (Lydon & Garcia 2015) and urban activism. Temporary architecture embodies a paradox: its impermanence gives it a unique ability to address urgent social and environmental issues while challenging architecture's traditional link to permanence.

2.4 LAND SCARCITY

Land is constantly being reshaped through redevelopment, infrastructure projects and changing land uses. Despite the mayor's 2016 initiative, local authorities in London are still selling public land (Brill & Raco 2021; Edwards 2016). Scarcity is created through land use prioritisation, governance and competition and access is linked to who is being positioned as the most legitimate and valuable (Mao et al. 2020). Governments, the market and landowners determine land use and development rights and create what is being framed as public good and private opportunity (Lens 2022). Communities are currently not considered legitimate, safe or valuable enough to have rights over land (Foster & Iaione 2016). In neoliberal cities with commercial developments prioritised, community facilities are sidelined by real estate developers, municipal finance needs and political actors. Ultimately, the allocation of land use determines scarcity (Sarkar et al. 2024). Public authorities often under-allocate land for community activities because these generate indirect or long-term benefits rather than immediate revenue (Tu et al. 2025).

Land is not neutral; it carries multifaceted value, although financial returns that generate rents and property tax dominate, overshadowing its social and ecological importance (Scott 2022). In many advanced economies, land is increasingly treated primarily as a financial asset, often detached from its productive or communal uses leading to speculative practices that position land as a wealth accumulation commodity rather than a public good. This creates perceived scarcity, and its high commercial value marginalises community use (Egerer et al. 2024). In terms of the idea that cities do not have enough land for community spaces, it is less about running out of land and more about who gets to decide how it is used, whose values count, and what trade-offs are acceptable.

3. METHODOLOGY, POSITIONALITY AND ETHICS

The paper was developed through collaborative autoethnography (Chang 2021), in which the two architect-authors and a third interlocutor engaged in a series of recorded discussions. For more details about the positionality of the three authors, see the supplemental data online (Appendix A). These conversations reflected on more than a decade of practice in the Common Room and LEX from two of the authors, and a similar amount of experience in socially engaged architecture and urbanism in London from the academic interlocutor. Rather than following a coding procedure typical of social science methodologies, the conversations were revisited collectively, and recurring themes were identified dialogically. Collaborative autoethnography is particularly suited to this study because it enabled researchers to build shared meaning through dialogue, uncover blind spots, and generate insights that extend beyond individual reflection (Chang 2021). The collective revisiting of experiences allowed themes to surface that might not have been visible through solitary analysis. At the same time, collaboration can produce uneven participation, conflict and compromise, and it may blur the boundaries between personal narrative and collective analysis (Chang 2021). The process inevitably reflected these tensions, as balance was sought between three different positionalities while still producing a coherent narrative.

The dialogic and relational method aligns with traditions of dialogic inquiry and friendship as method (Tillmann-Healy 2003). The research process was grounded in camaraderie, trust and

shared interests and social worlds. Knowledge was produced through exchange, questioning and reflection. The presence of a person who was not directly involved in the cases as an interlocutor served to mediate the reflections of the two practitioners, introducing a degree of external critique. While friendship as a method allows for trust and a depth of reflection that more distanced approaches may lack, it also carries risks. As Tillmann-Healy (2003) notes, close ties blur the line between friendship and research, making it harder to maintain critical distance and raising ethical challenges. For this paper, working within overlapping social and professional worlds created rich insights but it also meant that the three perspectives were necessarily partial. Some experiences that could be discussed openly between friends, such as incidents of misogyny, could not be set out in print without risk of libel. Instead, these shared experiences have been intimated in the text, acknowledging their presence and impact while remaining within the boundaries of ethical and professional responsibility. Friendship and mutual support framed both the practice and the reflective discussions, and positionality is therefore not an external limitation but a constitutive element of the knowledge produced.

The projects discussed are not selected from a wider set of possible examples but represent the only long-term living lab projects realised by the architect-authors to date. This constitutes a form of convenience case study but it is also what enables depth of reflection and situated validity. This study therefore constitutes what Stake (1995) terms an intrinsic case study, selected not for comparison but for its inherent significance, and what Yin (2017) describes as a revelatory case, where proximity and direct involvement provide access to insights that would otherwise remain unavailable. The depth of engagement in these projects allows for what Lincoln and Guba (1985) define as situated validity, generated through close involvement and long-term observation rather than external detachment. In this sense, the research prioritises the credibility of embedded practice over claims to universal generalisation. Following Geertz's (1973) call for thick description, the aim is not statistical representativeness but the provision of richly contextualised accounts from which readers may assess the transferability (Lincoln & Guba 1985) of insights to other contexts. The inevitability of the cases reinforces the embedded nature of the inquiry.

The method is explicitly shaped by practice, understood as relational, care-oriented and attentive to hosting and guesting (Mullett 1988; Petrescu 2012; Tronto 2020). Who the authors are and the experiences they bring were central to the analysis. As feminist practitioners, the architect-authors interpret their projects through the lens of care, negotiation and coalition-building, recognising these as architectural acts. Their adoption of a community-led architectural approach that embraces ephemerality, temporality and uncertainty is consistent with the participatory action research method (Kindon et al. 2009).

While this paper foregrounds the positionality of the authors, the broader social dynamics within the living labs also require acknowledgement. Class, race and educational background shaped both participation and exclusion in subtle ways. For example, involvement in the case studies often depended on availability of unpaid time, privileging middle-class professionals and students, while long-term residents with caring responsibilities or insecure employment were less able to participate. In LEX, racial and migrant identities intersected with class to influence trust and coalition-building, reflecting wider inequalities in Southwark. These dynamics highlight the uneven burdens and exclusions that can accompany participatory urbanism, even in projects committed to inclusivity.

In a sense, the methodology adopted for this paper can itself be understood as a form of epistemic modelling. Just as temporary architectural artefacts in the living labs acted as tools for testing and negotiating futures, the recorded conversations, reflexive exchanges and collaborative writing processes functioned as epistemic models that generated new understandings of practice. The method was therefore not simply descriptive but constitutive, modelling knowledge through partial, revisable and dialogic artefacts of reflection (Knorr Cetina 2001; Knuuttila 2011). This alignment highlights the recursive character of the research: epistemic modelling was both the object of analysis in the case studies and the mode of inquiry through which the analysis was produced.

Table 1: Phases in the development of the Common Room

2013	Town Centre Group established by a local councillor as part of a GLA high street revitalisation. The Common Room conceived as InterAct hub.
2014	First actions to negotiate use of a 40-square-metre site on Roman Road; small timber ‘public living room’ constructed.
2014–2018	Initiated neighbourhood plan.
2016	Iterative chapters of co-creation with local residents, running events, initiating orchard and community.
2018	Reports and a crowdfunding film used to successfully negotiate a 25-year lease with Clarion Housing and fund the permanent building.
2022 (current)	Neighbourhood plan legally adopted.
2025 (current)	Permanent building. The Common Room is run by the Roman Road Trust, hosting a range of local activities.

The Common Room (Table 1) emerged in 2014 in the Bow neighbourhood of Tower Hamlets, London, where one of this paper’s authors, community members and the local residents’ association latterly called the Roman Road Trust identified the absence of residents’ voices in the development of the high street. The underused and insecure site was a 40-square-metre strip of land (Figure 1) belonging to Clarion Housing Association. The key problem was how to hold land in common in a high street context where community space was scarce and privatisation pressures were strong.



Figure 1: 40-square-metre piece of land off Roman Road in London, the site for the Common Room.
Photo: Torange Khonsari.

In terms of events and uses, various options have been modelled in the Common Room, responding to local social dynamics. In the first two years, before the Roman Road Trust took over, the activities outside teaching required funding to sustain, so were random and proposed by various students and residents with no defined purpose other than production of social relations. Over the life of the project uses have included art exhibitions, architecture training, community training (Figure 2),

ecology projects, heritage projects, children's birthdays, yoga and mental health sessions, public art commissioned events, neighbourhood planning sessions, creative writing classes and more. At present, lack of funds for service infrastructure such as a toilet and electricity reduce the possibility of the Common Room being used for long hours.

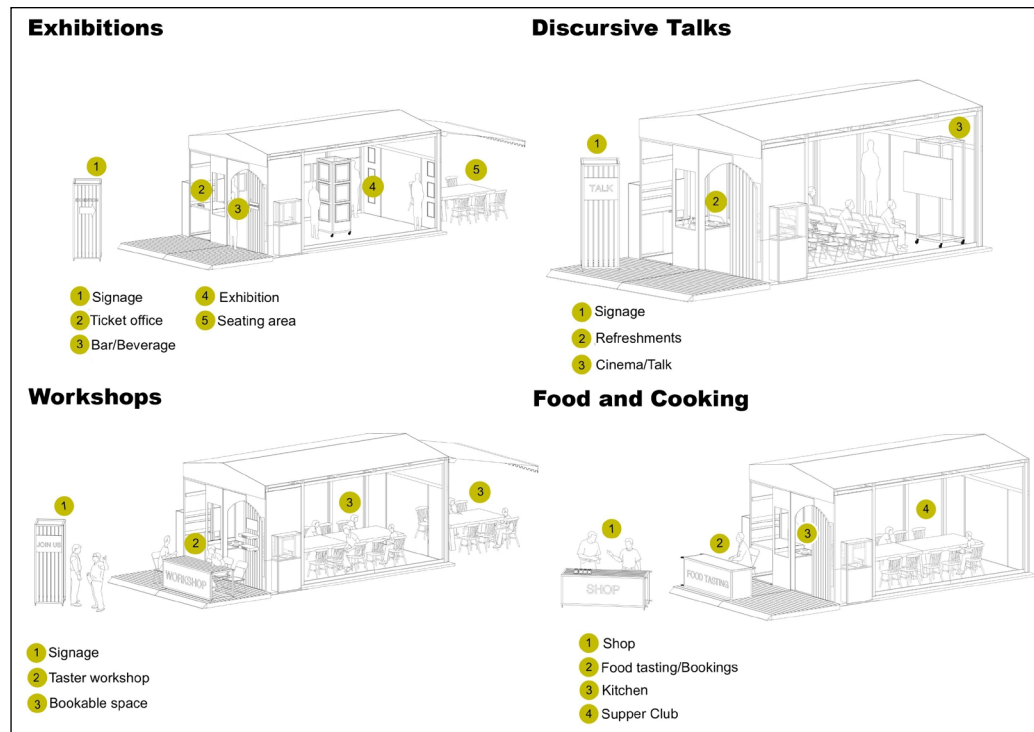


Figure 2: The Common Room activities.

Drawing: Torange Khonsari.

The architect acted as the host early in the project, but, once money had been raised to transform the model into a building, the Roman Road Trust took on the lease and the ownership of the space as a community space, reversing the host/guest relationship. The modelling of possible functions for the Common Room continues, as local community groups use it on a voluntary basis, facilitated by the Roman Road Trust (Figure 3). The programming of the site has been haphazard, with the site experiencing long periods of being inactive. The temporary structure nevertheless still occupies the land, signifying that it is not available.



Figure 3: The Common Room activities and its expansion onto the high street.

The epistemic artefacts produced as part of the Common Room were fragments of temporary architecture, which began as a threshold (Figure 4) testing how physical access maps against social access. The knowledge produced through active use contradicted the architectural perception of how people would use it during the design process. The deep threshold space, intended as an informal social space, was never used as intended. However, the design of the doors as pieces of urban furniture did work as an important aspect of modelling social relations. The residents suggested the threshold should become a kitchen that serves the inside and the outside space (Figure 5).



Figure 4: Threshold space at the entrance of the Common Room site.

Photo: Torange Khonsari.



Figure 5: Public kitchen at the Common Room site.

Photo: Torange Khonsari.

The next temporary architectural component as an epistemic artefact was the timber room with a roof (Figure 6). The aim of this room's construction was to encourage social interaction during the making process, fostering social relationships and inspiring residents to model their own ideas within the space. However, owing to London's transience, the people involved originally moved away. Thus, the responsibility of organising events relied on the architect and the Roman Road Trust.

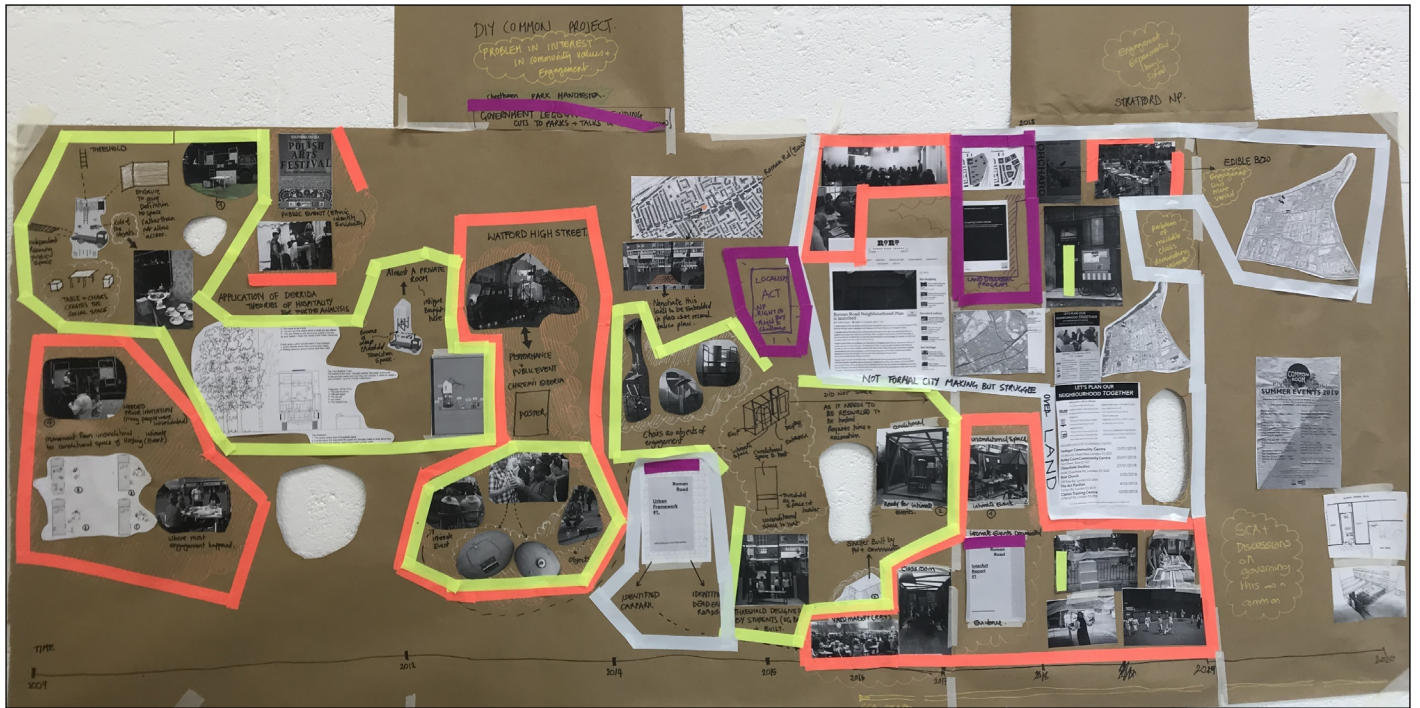


Figure 6: The 'room' in the Common Room, temporary architecture as model.

Photo: Torange Khonsari.

The epistemic artefacts and their modelling created new knowledge about how to shift the value of land from financial to social. This was through running social programmes and creating feasibility reports about their value. By 2020, access to land had been transferred to the Roman Road Trust through a 25-year lease, and the site now operates as an active community hub used for meetings and cultural events. Though modest in scale, the project demonstrated that provisional architecture could intervene into complex systemic issues such as land value, shifting it from purely financial calculation to recognition of its social and cultural worth.

These artefacts functioned as epistemic models through community-engaged events that resisted the prefiguring of a final design but actively tested ideas of hospitality, care and community governance. The project also used collaged maps, flow charts, reports and diagrams to understand various systemic relationships that deter or enable social resilience (Figure 7), and these items can also be viewed as epistemic artefacts.



The Common Room was constrained by limited resources and infrastructure: the absence of basic facilities made extended use difficult. Reliance on volunteer labour led to uneven burdens, highlighting the issue with grassroots projects being financial resilience. Without knowledge in collaborative governance and clear terms of engagement, grassroots projects can lead to conflicts. However, the temporary development of the Common Room resulted in its permanent state, securing its social land value and the Roman Road Trust's position as its governing organisation (Figure 8). This modest initiative led to various other urban initiatives such as a legally adopted neighbourhood plan entitled Roman Road Bow NP and a neighbourhood planning forum, a community orchard and two community garden developments.

Figure 7: Collage map created for the Common Room project, an epistemic artefact that visualised the modelling to reveal new and gaps in knowledge.

Source: Torange Khonsari.



Figure 8: The Common Room in its permanent state with community-led tile design.

4.2 LIVESEY EXCHANGE

LEX was initiated in 2015 in the London Borough of Southwark's Old Kent Road, an area undergoing rapid redevelopment and threatened with large-scale displacement. Residents and grassroots groups identified the lack of non-religious venues for gathering, alongside anxieties about gentrification and the loss of affordable space for cultural and civic activity. The key challenge was how to carve out civic infrastructure in the middle of a regeneration zone where 20,000 new homes are planned, dominated by speculative land practices. Eventually, after a number of phases (Table 2), a site was identified on the Old Kent Road, as shown in Figure 9.

2015–2019	Series of meetings and events in different locations mobilised residents and groups PemPeople, Action OKR, Vital OKR to evidence demand for civic space.
2015	Concept of LEX articulated; pop-up shop on Peckham High Street activated as a community hub by PemPeople.
2016	Exhibition and public discussion at Asylum Church in collaboration with community interest group Peckham Weeklies, business association Vital OKR, architects what if: projects, and MA Cities at London Met.
2016	‘Old Kent Road Studios’ crowdfunding campaign by what if: projects and PemPeople, supported by Mayor of London; Ledbury Estate garages offered by LB Southwark to PemPeople for temporary use.
2017	GLA Community Project Handbook elevates LEX as a case study; Grenfell Fire puts a stop to transformation of Ledbury Estate garages; Southwark Council offers an alternative site with a 10- to 15-year lease for a new building.
2018	LB Southwark confirms Livesey Exchange Ltd as the client for the new LEX buildings and architects what if: projects are appointed lead consultant.
2019	Urban room crowdfunding campaign by Action OKR and Vital OKR, supported by Mayor of London, ‘Urban Room’ shop offered by LB Southwark; OKR high street workshop contextualises proposed LEX buildings and explores programmes of use with local communities.
2021	Planning permission granted for LEX; considered a semi-permanent venue in the OKR Action Plan draft.
2023	Phase 1: construction of first LEX building with multifunctional space and workspaces.
2024	LEX is integrated into the Old Kent Road Area Action Plan (Southwark Council 2024) and recognised as a permanent venue.
2026	Second phase of development scheduled for completion January 2026.

Table 2: Phases in the development of LEX



Figure 9: Site on Old Kent Road leased by LEX from LB Southwark.

Photo: Alexander Christie.

As part of LEX, a series of temporary spaces were established as epistemic artefacts. Garages were activated as workshops and meeting spaces; an urban room in a pop-up shop provided a venue for exhibitions and events ([Spacehive 2019](#)); and a demountable semi-permanent structure, the first phase of LEX, was constructed to host cultural and civic programmes. Conventional architectural models, including a six-metre model of Old Kent Road built during a five-day workshop, were produced as tools for reflection and debate, unearthing new knowledge about the positioning of various stakeholders. Alongside the temporary architecture that occurred across sites, exhibitions and hands-on workshops in 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 ([Figures 10](#) and [11](#)) were chances for everyone involved to reflect together. They focused on questioning how land value is taken or used, and how the approaches used in LEX could be used in other similar projects.



Figure 10: Photographs of activities at Ledbury Garage open days 2016 (left) and 2017 (right).

Photos: Samuel Bradley (left); Ulrike Steven (right).



Figure 11: Open day 2018 for LEX at the Ledbury Garages.

Photo: Ulrike Steven.

Each artefact generated situated knowledge and epistemic modelling through meetings and events with the stakeholders and residents in grassroots spaces. The occupation of the Ledbury garages revealed residents' needs for skill-sharing and small-scale enterprise. The development of the urban room exposed tensions between community aspirations and top-down planning, particularly during its eventual collapse, when institutional control overtook grassroots autonomy. The large architectural model (Figure 12) created a collective forum for residents and policymakers to debate the future of the street, reframing redevelopment as a contested terrain of values rather than a technical inevitability while events and activities revealed new knowledge about what the community needed, their struggles and commitments, enabling the 1:1 modelling to become more focused in response.

Collaborators engaged in continuous modelling of values, social relationships, conflicts, land use and spatial reconfiguration in the industrial landscape of Old Kent Road. Photography and exhibitions reinforced the visibility of the project's claims, as well as using drawings and models, which were epistemic artefacts in themselves (Figure S1 in the supplemental data online).

Residents and stakeholders were collaborative modelmakers throughout, and tangible outcomes at every stage were important. Publications and exhibitions of drawings served as descriptive and representational models, enacting future potential building. While these outcomes varied in scale and complexity, they concentrated interests, funding and labour to drive systemic change. As Karvonen and van Heur (2014) argue, such 'laboratorisation' is not only about producing objects or prototypes but about cultivating situated, change-oriented and contingent experiments that reconfigure relationships between actors and institutions. In this sense, the activities in the living labs can be understood as forms of experimentation that materialised ideas in ways that mobilised coalitions and generated wider legitimacy.



Figure 12: Action OKR High Street Workshop, 2019. A 6-metre-long, 1:200 architectural model of Old Kent Road was built by students and residents showing the proposed LEX buildings.

Photo: Alexander Christie.

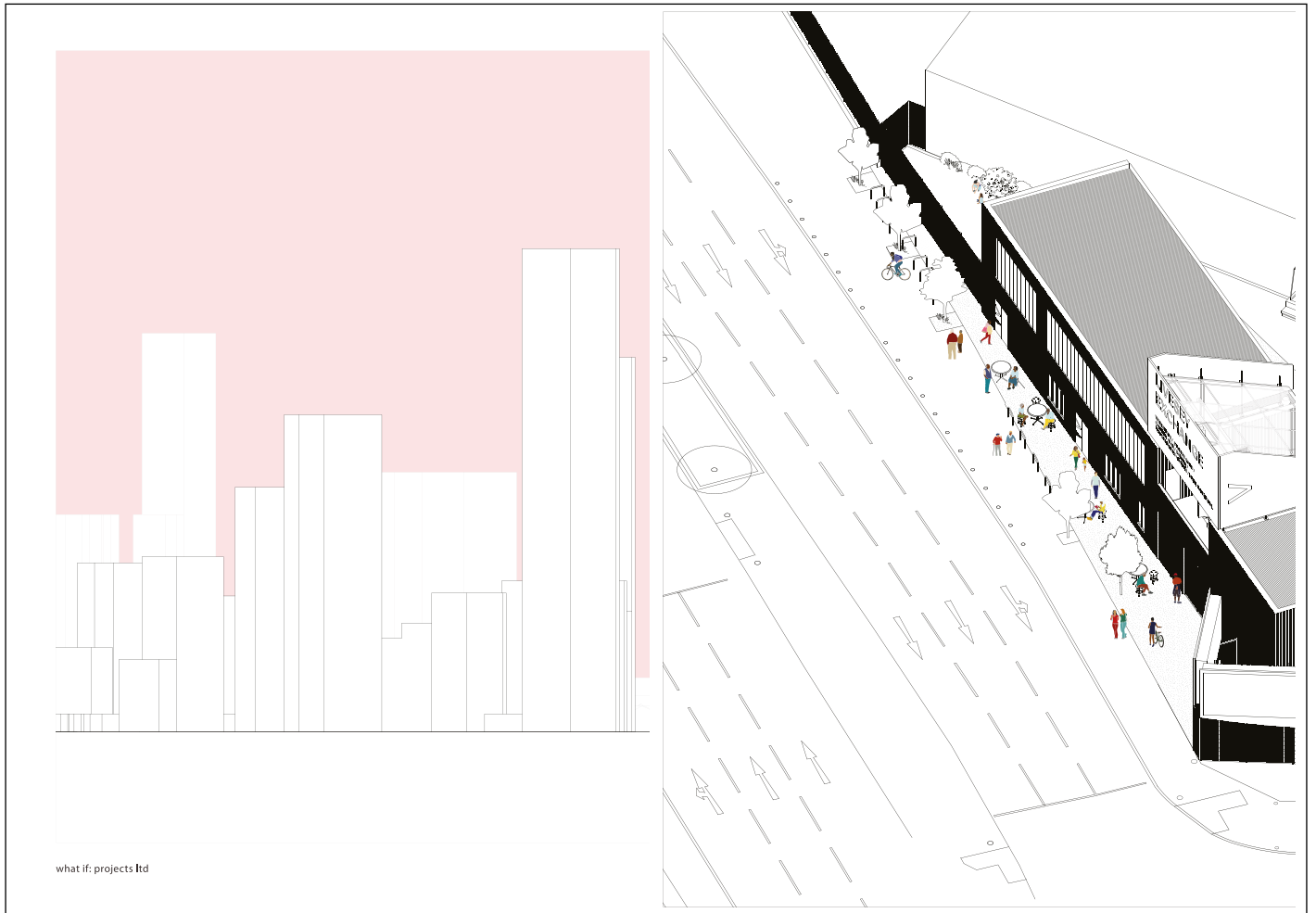
Today, LEX functions as a permanent yet currently incomplete civic hub, hosting workspaces and cultural programmes and even community council meetings. Through iterative temporary interventions, the project initially secured recognition from the Greater London Authority (GLA) and a 10- to 15-year lease from Southwark Council. Phase 1 of building was completed in 2023 (Figure 13), with Phase 2 due in 2026 (Figure 14). In policy terms, LEX has become embedded in the Old Kent Road Area Action Plan, demonstrating how temporary artefacts can translate into institutionalised policies. LEX encountered sustained challenges, however, in terms of power dynamics and conflict. Planning bureaucracy and limited experience with community-led processes slowed progress and contributed to power struggles between the parties involved; balancing grassroots coalition-building with institutional demands required continual negotiation; and the urban room's failure highlighted how fragile autonomy can be when external actors control resources. These conflicts show the difficulty of maintaining community-led practice at scale.



Figure 13: The LEX as a (semi-permanent) building in 2023, Phase 1.

Note: The building is engineered to be fully demountable except for its fixed foundation.

Photo: Alexander Christie.



The occupation of LEX is being tested by PemPeople; as its functions are not prescribed, it is trialling several different programmes for long-term functions of the building. In turn different uses will affect the values generated, some financial, some social. In the process of functional modelling of LEX, a community of users is forming that will shape its identity in the future (Figures 15 and 16).

Figure 14: Context section for LEX (left) and axonometric drawing of final scheme (right).
Source: Ulrike Steven and what if: projects.



Figure 15: Activities at LEX, trialling several different programmes for long-term functions of the building.
Photo: Alexander Christie.



Figure 16: Interior of LEX demountable building, Phase 1, at its opening

5. CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS: EPISTEMIC ARTEFACTS AND MODELLING IN PRACTICE

The two cases illustrate different strategies for using temporary architecture as epistemic artefacts, shaped by context, scale and political visibility. This section contains interpretive and comparative summary discussed below. The data for this comparison are presented in the supplemental data online (Appendix B).

5.1 STRATEGIES OF LAND ACQUISITION, ARCHITECTURAL INTERVENTION AND COALITION-BUILDING

The two projects pursued distinct but complementary strategies to acquire and hold land in a context of London's acute land scarcity (Christophers 2018). The Common Room operated at micro scale, informally negotiating a 25-year lease for a 40-square-metre strip of land owned by Clarion Housing Association. Here, temporary architectural artefacts functioned as epistemic models, testing the social value of land on the high street. The choice of a small site was intentional. It enabled an under-the-radar approach to experimentation and research through social engagement, incremental construction and discursive discussion. This informality in epistemic modelling helped build trust with residents and stakeholders. The small-scale, temporary architecture provided a platform for informal engagement without the time pressures of institutional deliverables. Crucially, it enabled coalition-building with a range of community groups, expanding their rights to neighbourhood land through parallel initiatives such as an orchard, a community garden and a legally adopted neighbourhood plan. Such coalitions are not only instrumental but constitutive: they generate collective governance and identities and publics that give legitimacy to community claims, turning disparate groups into durable civic actors (Bradley 2015).

By contrast, LEX unfolded at meso scale within the regeneration zone of Old Kent Road. Rather than a single site, the project and associated initiatives mobilised a series of temporary occupations: garages, a pop-up urban room and workshops that acted as iterative epistemic artefacts. Each intervention materialised community claims to land, creating visibility and building political momentum. Coalition-building was central: PemPeople, Action OKR, Vital OKR and what if: projects convened networks of residents, activists, students and policymakers. These coalitions functioned not only as architectural collaborations but as political assemblages, where exhibitions, models and events worked alongside campaigning and advocacy to evidence demand for civic space. As neighbourhood planning research highlights, such coalitions are often sustained as much by

antagonism and conflict as by consensus (Bradley 2015). In LEX, this was visible in contestations with Southwark Council, where recognition was ultimately achieved through political negotiation and incorporation into the Old Kent Road Area Action Plan (Southwark Council 2025). This demonstrates that coalitions formed around living labs extend beyond architecture: they are simultaneously architectural, civic and political projects that produce new collective identities and negotiate power within the city.

5.2 SHIFTING LAND VALUES

Both cases demonstrate how temporary, community-led architecture can reframe land value beyond its neoliberal construction as a financial asset (Madden & Marcuse 2016). The Common Room hosted intimate hosting events, served as a venue for public events like the Roman Road Festival, and was used for civic meetings related to neighbourhood plan development. These epistemic models produced relational, civic and cultural value in the neighbourhood. Reports and visual artefacts produced by Public Works and LMU students further reinforced this shift, providing evidence of social value that was legible to landowners.

At LEX, architectural artefacts, including the six-metre model of Old Kent Road, enabled residents and local groups to contest speculative redevelopment narratives. By rendering visible alternative valuations (community cohesion, skill-sharing, cultural life), these epistemic artefacts contributed to reframing land as civic infrastructure. The project's eventual embedding in GLA literature and Southwark's area action plan demonstrates how epistemic modelling can translate provisional community values into institutional recognition.

5.3 EPISTEMIC ARTEFACTS AS ITERATIVE, REAL-WORLD TESTING

Across both cases, temporary structures and associated artefacts acted as epistemic models that enabled iterative testing in real-world conditions. In line with Yaneva's (2009) account of models as 'epistemic things' that generate knowledge through collective engagement, these artefacts did not merely represent future scenarios but actively shaped interactions, decisions and alliances. At the Common Room, temporary structures enabled community events that revealed neighbourhood culture and social dynamics, while at LEX the garages and urban room provided forums in which social practices, from peer-to-peer skill-sharing to planning debates, were modelled, producing new learning, which could then be implemented in the next stages, along with new insights and coalitions.

In both instances, temporariness was not a shortcoming but a method evolved through scarcity. By refusing closure, these artefacts kept multiple futures open and allowed conflicts and failures to surface. The collapse of the urban room, for example, highlighted the fragility of autonomy when institutions dominate resources. Similarly, long periods of inactivity at the Common Room exposed the limits of volunteer-led initiatives. These failures can be understood through the lens of urban experimentation: that urban living labs and related initiatives are part of a broader politics of experimentation in which cities are governed through iterative, provisional projects (Bulkeley et al. 2016). Seen in this light, the Common Room and LEX functioned not only as community experiments but as interventions within wider governance logics, negotiating between grassroots practice and institutional systems.

Theoretically, this underscores the value of treating temporary architecture as situated epistemic modelling (Till 2009; Knorr Cetina 2001). Temporary architecture is not marginal to architectural practice but central to knowledge production: it mediates between communities and institutions, exposes tacit values and tests arrangements of land and localised civic relations. Petrescu's (2012) concept of relational practice reinforces this interpretation, emphasising how architectural interventions act less as static objects and more as relational devices that enable new forms of sociability and collective agency. In both cases, artefacts such as the Common Room's pavilion or the OKR Urban Room and LEX produced 'relationscapes' that catalysed networks of residents, policymakers and activists, embedding architecture in wider sociopolitical processes.

Taken together, the Common Room and LEX show that community-led living labs can reconfigure relationships between land, value, community and architecture through modelling epistemic artefacts. Land acquisition, coalition-building and architectural interventions were not separate steps but mutually constitutive processes: each temporary artefact both secured land and modelled new forms of value. These practices foreground temporariness as a strategy, not an interim phase, and position architecture as a civic instrument for systemic change. An example of experimental urbanism that links epistemic artefacts with relational practice to expand the possibilities of governance and solidarity in the city.

6. DISCUSSION: NEW MODELS OF PRACTICE

6.1 LIVING LABS AS COMMUNITY-LED URBANISM

The two case studies expand the living labs literature by reorienting it from innovation-driven experimentation (ENOLL 2025; Voytenko et al. 2016) towards community-led urbanism. In both cases, land scarcity was not an external constraint but the terrain on which the living labs were constituted. Temporary architectures did not test technologies but held land long enough to demonstrate social value, negotiate access and contest speculative development. This shifts the discourse from living labs as innovation ecosystems to living labs as land-based struggles, foregrounding the material politics of urban ground (Bulkeley et al. 2016; Steen & van Bueren 2017).

Situating these practices within debates on urban experimentation highlights how they embody what Karvonen and van Heur (2014) describe as the three achievements of urban laboratories: situatedness, change-orientation and contingency. The Common Room's reliance on incremental, low-profile interventions demonstrates how experimentation is profoundly situated in the micro-politics of the high street. LEX, by contrast, was change-oriented at the meso scale, mobilising iterative artefacts to reconfigure institutional processes and embed civic infrastructure in planning policy. Both cases foreground contingency: their successes and failures, whether the collapse of the urban room or the pauses in the Common Room, reveal the indeterminacy of grassroots experimentation. Taken together, they show that living labs can function not only as testbeds for negotiating new land values but as epistemic models of community-led land governance.

6.2 ENGAGEMENT AS EPISTEMIC MODELLING

Community engagement is an essential craft of a community-led architecture and here it is framed as epistemic models. The creation of thresholds, workshops and models was inseparable from acts of hosting, convening and mediating. Engagement was facilitated by epistemic artefacts that made participation tangible: a model to debate, a threshold to cross, a workshop to enter. These artefacts generated knowledge not only about spatial form but about governance and values, turning engagement itself into a design act.

Failures and tensions are instructive here. The urban room's collapse revealed how quickly community autonomy can be undermined when institutional partners dominate resources. Long periods of inactivity at the Common Room showed the fragility of volunteer-led infrastructure. Rather than undermining their legitimacy, these difficulties highlight the limits and risks of engagement as craft, and the importance of sustaining capacity and alliances.

6.3 EPISTEMIC ARCHITECTS AND THE EXPANSION OF PRACTICE

The cases also point to a redefinition of architectural expertise. The architects involved were not only designers of buildings but also epistemic practitioners, creating artefacts that modelled futures, convened publics and mediated between communities and institutions. This resonates with scholarship that emphasises architecture as a relational and performative practice (Cupers 2013; Yaneva 2009) but extends it by positioning temporary artefacts as instruments of civic knowledge production. In this sense, the architects functioned as what Karvonen and van Heur (2014) describe as urban experimenters, embedding situatedness, change-orientation and contingency into practice.

At the same time, the projects illuminate the political risks of experimental urbanism. Bulkeley et al. (2016) caution that urban experiments are rarely neutral: they are implicated in governing transitions and often entangled with institutional agendas. LEX's absorption into the Old Kent Road Area Action Plan exemplifies this double-edged dynamic, where experimental practices can open new civic imaginaries while also being co-opted into existing policy frameworks. Yet, even here, the epistemic artefacts served as tools of partial resistance by keeping knowledge production visible and contestable rather than allowing enclosure.

Finally, the role of storytelling as identified by Sandercock (2003) is central: artefacts and practices were not only material interventions but narrative devices through which communities articulated values, histories and claims to land. The figure that emerges is that of the epistemic architect, a practitioner who hosts, convenes and produces artefacts and stories that test land, value and governance in real time. This expansion of practice raises important questions for pedagogy and professional ethics: what skills and capacities are required of architects in contexts shaped by land scarcity, finance-driven development and precarious tenure?

7. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has examined the Common Room and LEX as long-term community-led living labs in London, analysing how temporary architecture functions as epistemic modelling in contexts of land scarcity. Both cases illustrate how provisional artefacts – thresholds, rooms, workshops, models – can be used to generate situated knowledge, negotiate governance and contest dominant understandings of land value.

Three central insights emerge. First, land access is the core problem for community-led living labs: it is not a neutral backdrop but the terrain of experimentation itself. In contexts of enclosure and speculation temporary artefacts become necessary instruments for holding space long enough to evidence community value. Second, temporary architectures are not placeholders but epistemic artefacts. Their incompleteness is productive, enabling iterative testing and surfacing conflicts and failures that are constitutive of knowledge production. Third, the cases highlight the expansion of architectural practice: architects act as epistemic practitioners: hosts, organisers, fundraisers and mediators, whose craft lies in creating artefacts that convene publics and tests alternative values of land.

These findings contribute to the living labs literature by reframing community-led projects not as sites of technological co-innovation but as land-based experiments in value and governance. They demonstrate that living labs can operate at multiple scales: from the micro level of a modest high street commons (the Common Room) to the meso level of civic infrastructure integrated into regeneration policy (LEX).

This study demonstrates that epistemic modelling provides a valuable lens for analysing how temporary artefacts generate knowledge in contested places.

The absence of formal interviews or external participant accounts means the analysis is interpretive and practitioner-led. This limits generalisability but ensures that the paper contributes deeply situated knowledge about practice-led experimentation. The reflections here foreground insider perspectives, but future work could extend this approach by incorporating longitudinal interviews with residents and policymakers to triangulate findings. The findings suggest that comparative and longitudinal research would be especially useful in tracing how such temporary interventions alter land values and governance over time. Living labs, in this sense, must be theorised not only as sites of co-innovation but also as terrains where epistemic artefacts actively contest value and reshape relations between communities and institutions.

7.1 IMPLICATIONS

For policymakers, the cases underline that land scarcity is not a natural condition but a product of planning policy and land use allocation. Provisional occupation can reconfigure perceptions of land value and open pathways to longer-term recognition, so planning frameworks should support

temporary, community-led interventions as legitimate forms of urban experimentation that contribute to more equitable land governance.

For practitioners, the study highlights the fragility of temporary architecture as a method and the need for skills that extend well beyond design expertise. Negotiation, care, hosting, fundraising and coalition-building are as crucial as technical design knowledge. The figure of the epistemic architect encapsulates this expanded role, positioning architects not only as makers of objects but also as designers of processes and artefacts that mediate civic knowledge and enable collective action.

For communities, temporary architecture offers a practical means of establishing presence, testing claims and negotiating recognition. Yet these practices also depend on sustained resources and support. Without such backing, the burdens of volunteering risk becoming uneven and unsustainable and trust-building, care practices, and collective governance are essential to sustaining community-led experimentation. Epistemic artefacts can play a vital role in securing ground and negotiating power, provided they are supported by long-term commitment.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no financial or commercial competing interests.

The research presented in this article is based on two of the authors' own architectural practices and long-term involvement in the two projects discussed (the Common Room and Livesey Exchange). In these community-led projects the authors did not receive profit or hold any financial stake.

As practitioner-authors, their dual role as both researchers and participants constitutes an embedded positionality that is acknowledged in the methodology. This positionality shaped access to data, interpretation and emphasis. The authors have sought to mitigate bias through reflexive dialogue, collaborative analysis and the inclusion of an academic interlocutor who was only peripherally involved in one of the projects.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting this study consist primarily of reflexive discussions among the authors and practice-based documentation. Because of the personal, practice-based and contextual nature of these materials, they are not publicly available. The original audio recordings of the author discussions were deleted after note-taking, owing to the sensitive and confidential nature of the conversations, which included references unsuitable for public dissemination (e.g. potentially libellous or personally identifiable details). Only anonymised notes were retained. Summaries and contextual information are provided within the article and its supplemental data. Further details may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS

There was no formal ethics procedure carried out via the authors' affiliated universities. The research is situated within professional practice and community engagement, outside the scope of such procedures. Participation in the living labs was voluntary and embedded in everyday life. Photographs reproduced in the paper were used with permission of photographers, and consent was obtained from participants at the time of photographing, where identifiable. No sensitive personal data are reported.

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SUPPLEMENTAL DATA

Supplemental data for this article can be found at: <https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.645.s1>

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