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Trendy urbanists, innovation laboratories and best practices: in pursuit of 'progressive' urban planning in Mexico City

This research explores the role of trendy urbanists in best practice uptake within an innovation laboratory in Latin America. Trendy urbanists are the privileged professionals who aspire to be on the cutting edge of urban planning, frequently referencing best practice policies and programmes that they see as supporting 'livable' and 'sustainable' city building. Taking the case of the Laboratory for the City in Mexico City, I illustrate that the preferred best practices of trendy urbanists are reflective of their own privilege. I conclude that, by relying on best practices and trendy urbanists, innovation laboratories are susceptible to fostering inequitable planning outcomes.

Keywords: urban laboratories, best practices, urban equity, Mexico City, Latin America, global South

Introduction

Mexico City has become the latest celebrated example of Latin American urban planning, following cities that have included Bogotá (Montero, 2017a), Buenos Aires (Lederman, 2020) and Medellín (Sotomayor, 2017; 2015). As of 2020, urbanism associations, architecture magazines and travel blogs frequently bolster Mexico City as a revitalised, environmentally friendly and artistic destination, contrasting with its reputation in the 1990s as a polluted and crime-ridden megacity (Whitney et al., 2020). One way that this reputation has been built has been through the local adoption of urban planning best practices. In this article, I explore the connection between best-practice adoption and *trendy urbanists*, a set of privileged professionals who aim to be on the cutting edge of 'progressive' urban planning. By 'progressive urban planning', I refer to the best-practices policies and programmes that are being celebrated by powerful international networks and organisations to foster more 'livable' and 'sustainable' cities. These best practices, despite being the favoured policies and programmes of trendy urbanists, have been suggested to market-led (i.e. focused on attracting economic development), thereby perpetuating urban inequity by benefiting some city residents over others (Becker and Müller, 2013; Dieleman, 2013; Crossa, 2009). I therefore illustrate that, instead of fostering a more universally 'better' city for all, trendy urbanists support the ongoing perpetuation of decision making by privileged Latin American actors.

To illustrate the connections between trendy urbanists and best practice adoption, I explore the city government department of the Laboratorio para la Ciudad

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(Laboratory for the City) (LabCDMX), cited as Latin America's first innovation laboratory (Laboratory for the City, 2013). While innovation laboratories have gained popularity across the region over the last five years, little research has investigated the types of employee that they attract, or the impact of their chosen best practices once implemented. Furthermore, while previous research has focused on how best practices are established as 'best' (Montero, 2018; Prince, 2012; Roy, 2010), how they are assembled between locations (Peck and Theodore, 2015; McCann and Ward, 2012), and how they tend to benefit some city residents over others (Whitney et al., 2020; Delgadillo, 2014), little has been said about the privilege of local actors and the associated uptake of best practices. Here, then, I explore how trendy urbanists were both attracted to, and sought out by, the LabCDMX. I subsequently explore how the intersection between trendy urbanists and innovation laboratories can accelerate best practice uptake, thereby contributing to a history of urban planning initiatives that are conceptualised by the privileged and for the privileged (Lederman, 2015; Delgadillo, 2014).

My arguments for this article were formed based on data collected within the LabCDMX between 2016 and 2018. Specifically, I used a blended approach to data collection that was inspired by scholars who call for urban planning researchers to embed themselves within local planning milieus while maintaining sight of larger sociopolitical contexts (Montero, 2017a; Peck and Theodore, 2015). My data collection included (1) more than thirty semi-structured interviews with the LabCDMX's employees, (2) 17 months of participant observation from within the LabCDMX, and (3) participant observation at over 15 public talks hosted by the LabCDMX that featured national and international speakers. Semi-structured interviews focused on how and why urbanists within the LabCDMX saw themselves as fostering a 'better' city. Participant observation explored what urban planning policies and programmes were being referenced and how equity was conceptualised within the policy-making process. To analyse the data, I transcribed interviews and reviewed my participant observations to reveal what policies and programmes were referenced and why. My approach was inductive, first observing that the LabCDMX was using specific sets of globalised best practices chosen by a set of privileged urbanists. I then used my observations to support the conceptualisation of the term 'trendy urbanists'.

This article begins by introducing trendy urbanists, describing them as a set of urbanists who support city-building practices based on the latest manifestation of progressive urban planning. Subsequently, I introduce the LabCDMX and explore the literature on urban laboratories, associating them with inequitable urban planning outcomes. For my analysis, I discuss why trendy urbanists were attracted to the LabCDMX, focusing on how they defined themselves as a group through their collective 'good' intentions for the city. I contrast their intentions with the reality of urban inequity that is experienced disproportionately by the city's marginalised residents.

In my discussion, I illustrate how the LabCDMX inadvertently perpetuated inequity in three ways: through conceptualising its structure from innovation laboratories in the global North, by focusing on the hiring of trendy urbanists, and via intensifying local best practice uptake. To conclude, I call for the integration of equity into policy and programme development, suggesting that it must be a core goal of innovation laboratories within Latin America.

On a final note, I wish to acknowledge that I am one of the trendy urbanists that I describe within this research. I am a white, queer, globally educated, cisgender male from the global North who, in Mexico City, lives in a centrally located neighbourhood. Prior to starting this research, I had nearly seven years of urban planning experience in cities around the world, where I referenced the same best practices that I examine within this research. The trendy urbanists in the LabCDMX were my contemporaries: we referenced similar best practices, we lived in similar neighbourhoods and we had similar urbanism preferences. Recognising this, throughout this article I comment on my role in perpetuating the best practices that I am also problematising.

Defining trendy urbanists

I use the term ‘trendy urbanists’ to describe the professionals who see themselves as being on the cutting edge of urban planning. Specifically, trendy urbanists collectively aim to reference the latest ‘progressive’ policies and programmes (i.e. best practices) during processes of policy making and city building. Best practices are the policies, programmes and projects that originated in one social, political, cultural and geographic context, yet are being adopted in another (Montero, 2017b). They are attractive to decision makers, such as trendy urbanists, as they are celebrated by powerful international knowledge networks (e.g. international NGOs, famous planners, development banks, etc.) as solutions to local urban issues (Lederman, 2015; Peck and Theodore, 2015; Roy, 2010). Trendy urbanists, eager to impact city planning locally, are especially interested in referencing best practices because they can simultaneously interact with their international peers while working to impact city planning in the local jurisdictions in which they work. The purpose of this research, then, is to focus on trendy urbanists and their local referencing of best practices inspired by international circuits of progressive urbanism. It must be noted, however, that there are other urbanism circuits and networks implementing different sets of best practices that can be seen as conflicting with the goals of trendy urbanists (e.g. automobile-centric cities, highway design, suburban development, etc.). This research does not suggest that all planners value so-called ‘progressive’ best practices, but rather explores how and why trendy urbanists are especially attracted to them.

The preferred best practice policies and programmes of trendy urbanists are constantly evolving, with changing disciplinary norms depending on the era in which

they are working. For example, the ideas generated from the garden city movement in the early 1900s (Buder, 1990), followed by the modernist approaches inspired by Le Corbusier in the 1950s (Le Corbusier, 1987), can be seen as popular with the trendy urbanists of those eras. In the 1970s and 1980s, the ideas of Jane Jacobs (Jacobs, 1961) and Jan Gehl (Gehl, 1971) influenced the trendy urbanists of that time to focus more attention on espousing the dangers of automobile-centric development. More recently, movements such as ‘smart cities’ (Ahvenniemi et al., 2017) and ‘happy cities’ (Montgomery, 2013) have, for example, become popular with trendy urbanists who are increasingly concerned with sustainability (United Nations, 2020). Importantly, each of these aforementioned urban planning approaches has been associated with an evolving set of ideas, or best practices, that are then referenced by trendy urbanists, alongside other practitioners, during the urban planning process. What is unique with contemporary trendy urbanists, however, is the speed with which they are referencing best practices. For example, best practice referencing is intensifying as planners are increasingly connected to their colleagues in other cities and countries (Lederman, 2020; Peck and Theodore, 2015). Furthermore, contemporary best practices are frequently connected to competitive city logic by promising a quick fix for mayors concerned with delivering outputs during their electoral cycles (Lederman, 2020; Montero, 2018). Therefore, as opposed to other eras, best practice referencing now forms part of competitive city policy designed for city administrations to showcase their city’s participation in what is currently considered to be the cutting edge of urban planning.

To explore the impact of trendy urbanists within a local urban context, I focus on the LabCDMX because it was one of their preferred workplaces in Mexico City. Trendy urbanists, however, do not only work in Mexico City or within the LabCDMX. Rather, they can be found in the civil, private and academic sectors in cities and countries around the world, showcasing slightly different demographic characteristics and urbanism preferences depending on their locale. In Mexico City, for example, many, but not all, have been educated at the most reputable public and private universities in the country, including the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, the Universidad Iberoamericana, El Colegio de México, and the Tecnológico de Monterrey. Many of them have had access to international exchanges in the global North, with experience from Canada, the United States and/or Western Europe (e.g. the UK, France, Germany, Spain, Scandinavia) being especially valued. These international exchanges are important to the trendy urbanist identity in Mexico City as they provide evidence of exposure to planning in what is considered to be the ‘developed’ world, thereby increasing their hireability in Mexico. Trendy urbanists in Mexico City tend to live in, or aspire to live in, the centralised and gentrifying neighbourhoods commonly associated with walkability and creativity (e.g. Roma, Condesa, Escandón, San Rafael, Juárez).

In Mexico City, as in other cities around the world, the current urbanism preferences of trendy urbanists are increasing in popularity (Freeland, 2019). Specifically,

the best practices that are currently popular with trendy urbanists focus on increasing sustainability, livability and transparent decision making in our cities, building upon the idea that the quality of life in our cities is directly related to infrastructure. These best practices can be seen as vague sets of orienting principles that are focused on improving urban quality of life. For example, the expansion of outdoor eating space, temporary bike lanes and an increase in open streets initiatives are currently very popular (Lederman, 2020; Whitney et al., 2020). With the recent COVID-19 pandemic starting in early 2020, the adoption of these best practices has accelerated in cities around the world as a way to provide more social distancing opportunities (Cobbs, 2020). These same best practices, however, have been simultaneously criticised for ignoring the needs of the city's poor, marginalised and racialised residents (Badger, 2020). Indeed, scholarly research has suggested that the preferred best practices of trendy urbanists tend to stratify cities through focusing on neighbourhoods that are ripe for economic development (Whitney et al., 2020; Delgado, 2014). Trendy urbanists, however, see themselves as contributing to a more equitable city, not a less equitable one, regardless of what the actual outcomes of their chosen best practices are.

The LabCDMX, best practices and innovation laboratories

The unofficial home of the trendy urbanist in Mexico City was the LabCDMX. From 2013 to 2018, the LabCDMX acted as the city government's experimental office for urban creativity, with the goal of providing a 'space for rethinking, reimagining, and reinventing the way citizens and government work together towards a more open, more livable and more imaginative city' (Laboratory for the City, 2013). The department was conceptualised as one strategy for then Mayor Miguel Mancera to showcase that Mexico City was participating in the most cutting-edge urban planning best practices from around the world. As the first so-called innovation laboratory in Latin America, its opening inspired similar departments to be either opened, or considered for opening, in Montevideo, Bogotá, Santiago, Buenos Aires, Medellín and Guadalajara. Little research, however, has explored the role of innovation laboratories within the context of Latin American cities, an especially important consideration given the region's history of urban inequity.

Innovation laboratories like the LabCDMX emerged in cities in Western Europe and the United States, gaining popularity over the last 15 years as a way to solve systemic problems within larger institutional systems (Roverssi, 2018; Gryszkiewicz et al., 2016; Tönurist et al., 2015). More specifically, innovation laboratories focus on policy and project development with the goal of injecting new ideas into existing institutional structures. Within urban planning, innovation laboratories encourage employees to see the city as a space of experimentation where new policies, programmes and

projects can influence decision-making processes. Best practices play an important role because they act as blueprints that have proven successful in other cities. For example, innovation laboratories frequently reference best practices when creating short-term pilot projects, lasting anywhere from a few days to a year or longer, to showcase their local effectiveness to other decision makers and to the public. Innovation laboratories, then, can be seen as local conduits for best-practice adoption: the logic is that city building can be informed by referencing what has already proven to be successful in other places.

The opening of the LabCDMX was first discussed by Gabriella Gomez-Mont, its future director, and Miguel Mancera in 2012. Gomez-Mont, then a senior fellow with Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED) Conferences, was a local creative type involved in filmmaking and art curation who became interested in best practices as a way to solve some of Mexico City's most pressing issues. Aware of the future mayor's interest in sustainability and green policy development (Sosa López, 2017; Sosa López and Montero, 2018), Gomez-Mont and her colleague Clora Romo, an architect who specialised in civic participation, invited Mancera to their local TEDx event in 2012. Following the event, Mancera invited Gomez-Mont to pitch a project as part of his government focused on urban innovation and public participation. During the six months of proposal writing, Gomez-Mont completed a four-month fellowship at Yale University as part of the World Fellows Program that was designed to bring together cross-sectoral leaders from around the world to share knowledge to increase their capacity to enact change in their local jurisdictions. At Yale, she researched existing innovation laboratories (e.g. New Urban Mechanics in Boston, the Office of Civic Innovation in San Francisco and other departments in the United Kingdom and Finland) to conceptualise the LabCDMX. Simultaneously Romo, based in Mexico City, researched the city government's structure. Gomez-Mont and Romo's proposal was accepted by Mancera in January 2013 and their LabCDMX became part of the Agencia de Gestión Urbana (Urban Management Agency) (AGU), a new government department designed to guide the overall management, centralisation and coordination of public services. Under the AGU, the LabCDMX was responsible for best practice adoption to help solve local urban planning issues in Mexico City.

It is important to note that the LabCDMX was not the first experiment with best practices in Mexico City. Rather, it was part of a larger push to continue to make the city a hub for progressive urbanism. Indeed, best practices have a long history in Mexico. For example, city-building practices forced on the region can date back to the Spanish conquest in the 1500s (Almandoz, 2015). Most recently, best-practice referencing focused on urban sustainability can be traced back to the city's first democratic elections in 1997, which made the mayor accountable to voting citizens for the first time. During this period, many city residents became concerned with rising crime and central city decay that followed the 1985 earthquake and subsequent suburbanisation.

To address these issues, best practices were used to spark urban revitalisation, revamp the city's image and attract investment (Zepeda, 2017). These best practices included, but were not limited to, the opening of a bus rapid transit system (the Metrobús) inspired by the TransMilenio in Bogotá (Sosa López and Montero, 2018); the 'revitalisation' of the city's Historic Centre based on New York City (Crossa, 2009); street redesigns for pedestrians and cyclists from a combination of cities in Western Europe, the United States and Colombia; and the development of new urban planning departments (Whitney et al., 2020). When Mancera took power in 2013, he continued to reference best practices. Specifically, he invested in bike lanes, expanded public space programmes, increased pedestrian safety programmes and opened new government departments, such as the LabCDMX (Schteingart and Ibarra, 2016; Sosa López, 2017). From an economic perspective, best practice adoption was successful: the city received praise from global planning networks, tourists and local urbanists for the city's impressive 'turnaround' (Flannery, 2016; Kazis, 2012). As explained by *Forbes* magazine, 'As Mexico sheds its reputation as a dirty, dangerous city, it is becoming recognised as a world-class metropolis in terms of economic activity, architecture, cuisine and culture' (Dieleman, 2013). *The Guardian* discusses the 'huge investments' in Mexico City that are being 'made in sustainable public transport systems', the 'cycling initiatives [that] are already thriving', and how 'pedestrians are gaining priority on some street designs' (Perry, 2015). Mancera's LabCDMX fit well within the city's larger establishment as Latin America's latest example of progressive urbanism.

However, many of Mexico City's celebrated best practices, like those implemented across the Latin America region (Swanson, 2013), have been suggested to perpetuate inequity. For example, the revitalisation of the Historic Centre neighbourhood (Becker and Müller, 2013; Crossa, 2009), greening initiatives (Dieleman, 2013) and street redesigns (Whitney et al., 2020) have been connected to decision making that favours neighbourhoods ripe for economic development. One reason for this is that many Mexican decision makers, including academics and government officials, tend to use best practices 'to justify political agendas that have maintained traditional authoritarian rule and preserved the prevalent socioeconomic structure' (Valenzuela-Aguilera, 2011, 291). Indeed, the intersection between privilege and urban planning is strong in Mexico, where hierarchies of race and class (Camus, 2019) encourage some to have access to decision making over others (Bayón and Saraví, 2019; Camus, 2019). Privilege is spatially structured into Mexican cities, where little opportunity exists for residents from different socio-economic backgrounds to interact with one another (Bayón and Saraví, 2013). Scholars have noted that best practices have done little to address inequities because they are constructed as 'best' by powerful knowledge networks who sell them as examples of what other governments and international development organisations 'should' be doing (Montero, 2017a; McFarlane, 2011; Temenos and McCann, 2012). Best practices then become seductive to local decision

makers as they are backed by the ‘famed experts in the global circuits of progressive urbanism’ (Stehlin, 2015, 127) that are used to create measurable outcomes during the short electoral cycles of local governments (Montero, 2018; Moore, 2013; Valenzuela-Aguilera, 2011). The result is that best practices have had limited impact on increasing urban equity within Mexico City; rather they have improved life in select neighbourhoods for those who can afford to live in them.

Urban laboratories can be seen as further institutionalising best practice policies and programmes within Mexico City. To date, however, research has focused on innovation laboratories in Western Europe and the United States (Schuurman and Tõnurist, 2016; Karvonen and Van Heur, 2014; Tõnurist et al., 2015; Magadley and Birdi, 2009). Most important to this research, however, is that scholars have suggested that innovation laboratories tend to downplay equity during the planning process. The disconnect, for example, between their hopeful potential and the actual power inequities that structure the decision-making process fosters a situation where urban laboratories ‘can hardly be considered progressive’ because they are shaped by pre-existing institutional elements and norms (Karvonen and Van Heur, 2014, 380). Additionally, it has been said that innovation laboratories are not as new as they claim: cross-cutting collaboration between different actors within government has long been receiving attention in urban planning practitioner and academic circles (Carstensen and Bason, 2012). Rather, innovation laboratories are the latest manifestation of globally informed planning agendas within local urban contexts.

While innovation labs have started to emerge over approximately the last eight years in Latin America (Laboratory for the City, 2013), little literature has focused on their appropriateness for the region’s cities. One study reflects on the implementation of an innovation laboratory in the public sector in Chile by illustrating the pre-existing structural and cultural dimensions that impacted the laboratory’s ability to respond to the needs of ‘real society’ (Valdivia and Ramírez-Alujas, 2017, 43). Other work has explored the barriers that innovation laboratories face in Latin America, including budgetary constraints, regional coordination issues, policy alignment with pre-existing institutions and public accountability (Ferreira and Botero, 2020). Other research has been completed by development banks, such as the Inter-American Development Bank, exploring their integration into pre-existing leadership and policy networks (Acevedo, 2016). Furthermore, a series of universities, existing innovation laboratories and other organisations launched a programme in 2018 called RedInnolabs to understand, in part, the existing ecosystem of innovation laboratories and their impact on public policy in Latin America (Rodríguez, 2018). Research, however, has yet to focus on the employees themselves and how they work to justify specific ideas within innovation laboratories. What, then, are the actual outcomes of innovation laboratories within the divided urban context of the Latin American city?

Trendy urbanists in the LabCDMX

The LabCDMX is of note as it was almost entirely staffed by trendy urbanists. It attracted trendy urbanists through its institutional agenda, as well as through management who sought to hire them. Important was that all trendy urbanists saw the LabCDMX as ‘doing things differently’ from other government departments. These differences focused on allowing employees the opportunity to inject new ideas (i.e. best practices) into existing government structures, the flexibility to define projects based on their values, and their less ‘formal’ office culture (e.g. wearing casual clothes to the office, preferring workshops over more formal meetings, etc.). These differences were also reinforced by employees in other city government departments. For example, LabCDMX employees often explained that other government employees would comment that they were very ‘hipster’, meaning that they were seen as being especially concerned with projecting a fashionable image by preferring a specific set of urban planning policies and programmes (i.e. the best practices currently trending in international knowledge networks).

The LabCDMX’s focus on the local adoption of best practices was attractive to trendy urbanists eager to align their values with their employment. Management’s interest in candidates who had an ‘international outlook’ with knowledge of the Mexican planning context led them to be selected for hire. Employees were hired from diverse professional backgrounds in an effort to foster a cross-pollination of ideas between disciplines. Those hired included urban planners, geographers, video editors, international relations experts, industrial designers and communication specialists. While from different backgrounds, all were interested in impacting city-building agendas based on the latest best practices. Employees were hired in three ways: a job call released by the LabCDMX (i.e. an advertisement looking to hire a candidate with a specific skill set and background), candidates contacting the LabCDMX to express their interest in working there, and management approaching individuals who had the experience that they were looking for.

One employee, a geographer interested in mapping who was employed between 2016 and 2018, explained it this way:

It [the LabCDMX] had a very peculiar approach that you don’t see often within government. And, at that point, I saw that an office like that one was necessary in a city like this one: the chance for exploration, for experimentation, and to address challenges in a different way.

Another employee, a mobility expert who worked in the LabCDMX from 2015 to 2018, appreciated the focus on participatory planning when compared to other government departments. He states,

Myself, I was a fan of the LabCDMX before joining ... why is that? Because it was the only department of the government that I identified with. Even though I was very into

road safety and mobility, I never identified myself with the Department of Mobility and not either with the Department of the Environment where they have the bicycle programme. Because they were very closed, they didn't not organise events, they didn't invite the people to talk.

Like the trendy urbanists who worked within the LabCDMX, I was also attracted to it for similar reasons: it was the only space within the city government that had the stated purpose of integrating international knowledge into local policy making. After I moved to Mexico City in 2013 for my then partner's job, I saw the LabCDMX as the ideal starting point to involve myself in local urbanism issues. Employees were already using the best practices that I was familiar with and management was open to working with foreigners (as evidenced by the international speakers, interns and volunteers who were already working with the LabCDMX).

Just a bunch of 'fucking fresca' kids: privilege within the LabCDMX

We were like the fucking *fresca* kids from the LabCDMX.

Former employee (2013–2015)

Trendy urbanists working within the LabCDMX tended to recognise that they were privileged and that their preferred best practices were reflective of that privilege. One former employee, for instance, somewhat sarcastically labelled themselves and their colleagues as 'fucking *fresca* kids'. The term *fresca* (strawberry) is Mexican slang used to refer to privileged Mexicans. *Frescas* tend to come from middle- to upper-class families and are concerned with projecting a fashionable image. They are often, although not always, light-skinned (signifying their connection to European ancestry) and tend to have an identifiable accent in Spanish that allows others classify them as being *fresca*. While referring to employees as 'fucking *fresca*[s]' might sound accusatory, the tone of the interview was based on their reflection of how they saw the LabCDMX's employees in contrast to others working on urbanism issues in Mexico City: often under forty, educated at some of the country's best universities and holders of international experience. While the so-called level of '*fresca*-ness' differed significantly between employees, some of whom would dispute being labelled as such, interviewees tended to discuss themselves as a group that shared characteristics related to privilege and access to opportunities. One employee described the team in this way:

we are privileged people, like really. We have had access to studying in other places and to international experiences and to private schools ... We were always this part

of people that were the ‘cool guys’ [within government], like even in a superficial way ... Like in how we dress, the places we go to party, the places we go in a social scheme, and all that ... it’s kind of like reproducing something that we are trying to work against.

Another employee discussed how they saw issues of privilege within the LabCDMX as a reflection of Mexican society where those who come from specific classes (i.e. the middle to upper classes) and racial backgrounds (i.e. the light-skinned) are given priority to opportunities. This employee further explained the privilege of the LabCDMX’s employees when discussing their lifestyle habits. They stated,

oh yeah, public transport, we’re living in the cool places that are really connected. Our aspirational goals are like ‘I don’t want to buy a car, ever’. I just want to live in a city where I can travel anywhere without getting into a car. Of course, though, we all have Uber and all that. It is a reflection of the social stratification in Mexico.

These characteristics were also cited by other urbanists to identify the LabCDMX’s employees. When attending a public event on road safety hosted by the LabCDMX in early 2016, I was speaking casually with some local urbanists about Vision Zero policies, a best practice in road safety originally from Sweden that the LabCDMX was working to introduce into government. They were interested in confirming whether I was associated with the LabCDMX, citing my features (i.e. white European), foreign accent and style (i.e. I was wearing a bowtie at the time) as potential evidence.

Best practices, equity and the trendy urbanist

While trendy urbanists in the LabCDMX were universally interested in progressive city building, the balance between employees’ privileged interests and the local urban context was a constant struggle. For example, referenced best practices frequently came from countries and cities outside Mexico. Examples were plentiful and all focused on vague principles of livability, innovation and sustainability. Examples included, but were not limited to, open streets from Colombia and the United States, play streets for children from Western Europe, participatory planning approaches from the United States, and open government initiatives from the United States and Brazil (Table 1). A full list of all of the projects completed during the LabCDMX’s opening years can be found at <https://labcd.mx/> (in Spanish).

Table 1 A selection of best practices referenced in the LabCDMX

| Project | Project purpose | Best practice(s) referenced |
|--|---|---|
| Petoniños | To close streets to automobiles to provide space for children to play | Ciclovía from Bogotá, play streets from Western Europe, street closures from Mexico |
| Jugar la Ciudad | To encourage children to play in under-utilised public spaces through interventions (e.g. sculptures, toys, etc.) | Academic and professional thought on the importance of children in the city |
| Constitución CDMX | To create a city constitution by integrating residents' opinions into the planning process | Right to the City initiatives from Bolivia; trends in participatory urban planning |
| Ciudad Felices | To hold a workshop to explore how happiness can be cultivated within city planning | The United Nations' World Happiness Report; Charles Montgomery's book <i>Happy City</i> ; Bhutan's Gross Domestic Happiness Index |
| Ciudad Posible | To bring together representatives from Latin American innovation laboratories to share possibilities and barriers | The opening of innovation laboratories in Western Europe, the United States and Latin America |
| Redacción del Program Integral de Seguridad Vial (PISVI) | To produce a road safety law for Mexico City | Vision Zero from Sweden; pedestrian planning from Bogotá; policy planning from New York City |

The constant citing of the latest best practices created conflict between the employees' values and the appropriateness of their chosen policies and programmes for the local context. When speaking to one employee, they referred to the LabCDMX as an *espada de dos filos* (double-edged sword). They explained further:

It's something that we call *mame* [in Mexico] – it's something very derogatory ... we say *mame* to things that are really trendy, and everybody wants to be in the trend ... everybody is doing this, everything is beautiful, this is what the experts of the international community are saying. So when you are in that train, you can blind yourself of everything that is around, the real problems [in Mexico City] ... but maybe it's not to make it beautiful and trendy, maybe you have to work more in the roots of public policy instead of only being on the surface. It's very easy to be on the surface and to do the trending stuff ... and people like it because it's what everyone is talking about. This could be dangerous because that distracts you from the real stuff that you have to work on ... at the LabCDMX we love to make a lot of trendy events, but maybe the events distract us from doing the real job.

In other words, the trendy urbanists were conscious that their preferred best practices were reflective of their privilege as demonstrated through their education, work

experiences and international connections. It is important to note that they did not want to perpetuate elitism and were conscious of trying to challenge it. For example, employees started collecting data to illustrate the local relevance of their preferred best practices within Mexico City. The logic was then they could justify their preferred policies and programmes based on statistics that proved local need. One example of this was the Peatoniños ('Little Pedestrians') project that first emerged in the LabCDMX in 2015. The purpose of Peatoniños was to close streets down to cars and open them up for children to play, itself based on best practices for play streets emerging from Western Europe, the United States and the working class neighbourhoods of Mexico City (Tranter, 2016). The chosen locations of the Peatoniño projects were based on statistics illustrating the intersection between poverty, lack of public space and a high percentage of children living in the neighbourhood. The goal, then, was to provide public spaces to areas of the city that needed them to provide children with safe spaces to play. While it was a promising idea rooted in good intentions, some of the implemented Peatoniño projects illustrated that they remained conceived by trendy urbanists and for trendy urbanists. One intern who was working at the LabCDMX and involved in implementing a Peatoniño in Izatapalapa, one of the poorest boroughs in Mexico City, explained it to me this way:

We chose this neighbourhood because it has lots of children, is poor and lacks public green space. But it was really hard to explain to the local community why it was an important project, and there was a lot of scepticism and push-back against us. At first, they didn't care: they were, understandably, more concerned with things like access to clean water and violence in the neighbourhood. They didn't really understand why the hell the government would want to close down a small section of the street for children to play when there were no children playing on this street to begin with. We persisted, they came on board, and sometimes, despite our honest efforts to help, it felt like we were force-feeding them ideas and subtly manipulating them just to try our best to make the project happen in a poor area of the city.

On one hand, employees were eager to make projects relevant to those in poor areas of the city to try and make their project more equitable. On the other hand, their best practices remained conceived by them based on the best practices that they valued. Key here is that the Peatoniño project in Izatapalapa was not implemented without engaging the community; rather, employees participated in months of public consultation. I attended three of these public consultation meetings myself, observing how employees were keen on doing good work and making sure that they were delivering a high-quality public space to the neighbourhood residents. Upon speaking with a few residents who lived near the space, they seemed to agree that it was pretty, but still did not believe that it was a pressing issue for the government to focus on.

The disconnect between best practice and the local reality of residents in poor neighbourhoods was a constant theme in the LabCDMX. One employee shared with me a project that they were working on that involved intervening in three existing public spaces in Mexico City's Historic Centre. The purpose of the project was to inspire children to play with their families and friends in the public spaces; it was based on emerging ideas of engaging children in the city from the United Kingdom. The three locations for the interventions were chosen because they were also in poor neighbourhoods: here, employees observed that there were not many children playing in the public spaces, despite there being many children living in the area. To understand more, employees held workshops to learn why children were not playing in the public space to conceptualise what type of intervention they could do to encourage them to play. However, when holding one workshop in Plaza de la Soledad in the Historic Centre, where they had gathered various local residents and their children, the employee recounts the following:

The space was so dangerous that it was above what we could do. We went there, we tried it out, we did the workshop, and then we ended up at the point where we felt so threatened ... what we found out was that this [Plaza de la Soledad] one was in front of one of the biggest *vecindades* [housing co-ops] that sells drugs in the Centre. So, the whole time we were there doing the workshops there were like, you know how you call them 'eagles' [drug peddlers who observe who is in their territory]; they were looking at us, seeing who we were talking with. And it was so dangerous that we are like 'okay, we are not doing this'.

Being at the forefront of best-practice policy implementation in Mexico City had its unexpected outcomes. In this case, that outcome was the interaction between global best practices in public space activation and the reality of the city's culture of drug distribution centres. Again, like the Peatoníño project in Iztapalapa, employees had the best of intentions to create a 'better' neighbourhood for residents.

A catalyst for change?

The LabCDMX illustrates how innovation laboratories can intensify best practice uptake, privileging the preferences of trendy urbanists. A result is that their chosen policies and projects often reflect the values of trendy urbanists, not necessarily the residents who live in the neighbourhoods where the best practices are being implemented. The LabCDMX therefore exemplifies how planning embodies the local class struggles of the capitalist city where urbanists can end up neutralising, instead of upholding, residents' desires (Mack, 2019; Koch and Sanchez Steiner, 2017). For example, when working outside professional-class neighbourhoods, in the poor spaces of the city, trendy urbanists often confused participatory planning with informing

a community why the project they wanted to implement was good for them. Best practices acted as a template that employees could use to work towards creating the urbanism approaches that they valued. Specifically, the conflict between best practices and the values of employees in the LabCDMX can be seen at three levels: its conceptualisation was inspired urban laboratories in the cities of the global North, it privileged the urbanism preferences of trendy urbanists, and it relied on best practices to help solve local urbanism issues.

To begin, the LabCDMX was conceptualised around innovation laboratories that emerged from outside the Latin American region. It is an example of planning being adapted to the local context based on what cities in the so-called ‘developed’ world are doing. Within Latin America, there is a long and documented history of government departments being modeled on, or forced upon the region by, those from the Global North (Watson, 2009). Research has suggested that heavy reliance on institutional designs from abroad tends to have inequitable outcomes (Whitney et al., 2020; Dieleman, 2013; Watson, 2009). These departments are opened with agendas that are assumed to create desirable outcomes, but often involve some ideas being implemented in neighbourhoods based on the goals and mandates of the departments themselves. The LabCDMX, continuing in this tradition, relied on ideas from abroad. In fact, it was specifically designed to perpetuate best practice, assuming that ‘better’ outcomes (i.e. more sustainable and equitable) could be achieved locally.

Second, the LabCDMX disproportionately attracted trendy urbanists, creating a concentration of them within the city government. Trendy urbanists, however, were not neutral agents, but rather positioned within their own personal values and beliefs. As research has suggested, the values of urbanists and other professionals influence their preference for some policies and projects over others (Ward, 2002; Healey and Upton, 2010). The LabCDMX, therefore, fostered a situation where the preferred ideas of a set of privileged actors, in this case trendy urbanists, allowed them to perpetuate their values through their urbanism preferences. In Latin America, the intersection between the privileged and urban planning policy and programming is very strong. In Mexico, privilege related to race and class, a result of the Spanish conquest (Camus, 2019), influences access to power and opportunity (Bayón and Saraví, 2019). The trendy urbanists who worked within the LabCDMX, many, but not all of whom, were educated at the country’s best universities and connected to planning ideas from abroad, inadvertently worked to reinforce a system of decision making based on their values.

Third, the LabCDMX was conceptualised to translate globalised best practices into city government. This process, however, disregarded that best practice implementation in Mexico tends to benefit those who live in neighbourhoods ripe for economic development, ignoring areas that have less economic potential. Even when the trendy urbanists tried to break these investment cycles,

their ideas remained based on best practices, not on the demonstrated local needs of the poor neighbourhoods in which they wanted to work. Research has suggested that adopting best practices in poor neighbourhoods will not always have desirable outcomes. For example, over the past 15 years, many cities in Latin America have emerged as sites of best practice experimentation with programmes such as downtown revitalisation, slum upgrading, participatory planning and streetscape improvements (see Crossa, 2009; Dieleman, 2013; Ballesteros et al., 2015; Sotomayor, 2017). These best practices have been sold by decision makers as universally beneficial for the city, yet have frequently been used to attract economic capital, contributing to ‘green’ gentrification and undermining planning equity (Valenzuela-Aguilera, 2011; Lederman, 2015; Anguelovski et al., 2018). A result is that the privileged have access to neighbourhoods that are getting ‘better’, where the poor continue to live ‘in distant and poorly serviced peripheral areas, but also in deteriorated sectors close to the city centre’ (Sabatini, 2006, 3). While the LabCDMX’s trendy urbanists attempted to invest in poor neighbourhoods, they were unable to break the cycle of imposing what they considered to be ‘best’ on residents who lived there.

The intersection of innovation laboratories, trendy urbanists, and best practices created the perfect storm to perpetuate planning based on the values of specific actors. In particular, the LabCDMX illustrates how innovation laboratories can intensify the uptake of best practices under the assumption that these policies and programmes are ‘good’ for the city. Therefore the trendy urbanists in the LabCDMX did not conceptualise what was needed for the city; rather they relied on the best practices that they already knew to try and prove their legitimacy in the city in which they worked.

Conclusion

Calling on urban planning to create solutions to some of Mexico City’s most pressing urban issues, the LabCDMX created an institutional opening within the city government. This opening attracted a specific type privileged urbanist, which I call the trendy urbanist. Specifically, I use the term ‘trendy urbanist’ to describe professionals who see themselves as being on the cutting edge of urban planning. While these trendy urbanists were committed to progressive city building, the process of fitting best practices within the local context in which they worked proved to benefit some city residents over others. Further complicating the situation was that the LabCDMX was designed to function as a conduit for best practice adoption. Innovation laboratories and trendy urbanists cannot challenge systems of inequity through best practices alone. Rather, equity needs to be a guiding principle where the local context informs what policies and programs are deemed to be most relevant.

The results of this research contribute to the literature on best practices and urban laboratories. Specifically, they illustrate that an institutional agenda focused on best practices can perpetuate inequity by attracting trendy urbanists as employees. While previous research has focused on how best practices are established as ‘best’ (Montero, 2018; Prince, 2012; Roy, 2010), how they are assembled between locations (Peck and Theodore, 2015; McCann and Ward, 2012), and how they tend to benefit some city residents over others (Whitney et al., 2020; Delgadillo, 2014), here I demonstrate that trendy urbanists have become one of the key actors perpetuating best practice uptake. I then suggest that, despite the stated role of innovation laboratories in fostering more innovative cities, they can become spaces that accelerate the reproduction of urban planning initiatives that are conceptualised by the privileged and for the privileged (Lederman, 2015; Delgadillo, 2014).

The LabCDMX was officially closed at the end of December 2018 with the inauguration of the new city government of Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo. While the decision to close the LabCDMX was made in meetings behind closed doors, what I have learned was that it was a controversial symbol for many. Some urbanists suggested to me that the LabCDMX achieved great progress, breaking down barriers between city government departments, ultimately stimulating conversations about the role of international best practice expertise in local urban planning processes. Others, however, saw it as perpetuating elitist projects that were disconnected from what was important in Mexico City. The conversations I had with urbanists tended to evoke passionate responses. One official told me that they thought that they had achieved more in two months than the LabCDMX had in its entire ‘goddam fucking six-year history’. It is not important whether this statement is true or not; what matters is that the LabCDMX tended to evoke heated debate about its relevance.

What is important to illustrate from the LabCDMX is that city planning cannot be separated from the urbanists responsible for policy and programme development. The values of these urbanists are especially important to consider within innovation laboratories that are gaining popularity across the Latin American region. If innovation laboratories do not embed equity as a fundamental component of their institutional agenda, they may risk becoming elitist beacons driven by trendy urbanists. Considering the nature of innovation laboratories is of key importance in Latin America where privilege dictates access to decision making: those who have it are given the power to steer urban planning agendas on behalf of those who remain voiceless.

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