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# The Right to the City and its Laboratory

*City* and *Lab* are terms that have been frequently paired in recent years, revealing a contemporary zeitgeist that emerges from the acknowledgement that the world's exponential population growth is increasingly occurring in cities. This growth, the argument goes, has made the city too complex, too big, too messy, and too varied to be studied as anything but a scientific object. The laboratory—a place for controlled experimentation with specific techniques and instruments—is not just a metaphor but an Enlightenment model of thought that positions the city as an object that can be measured, designed, and controlled, if approached with enough care and rigor.

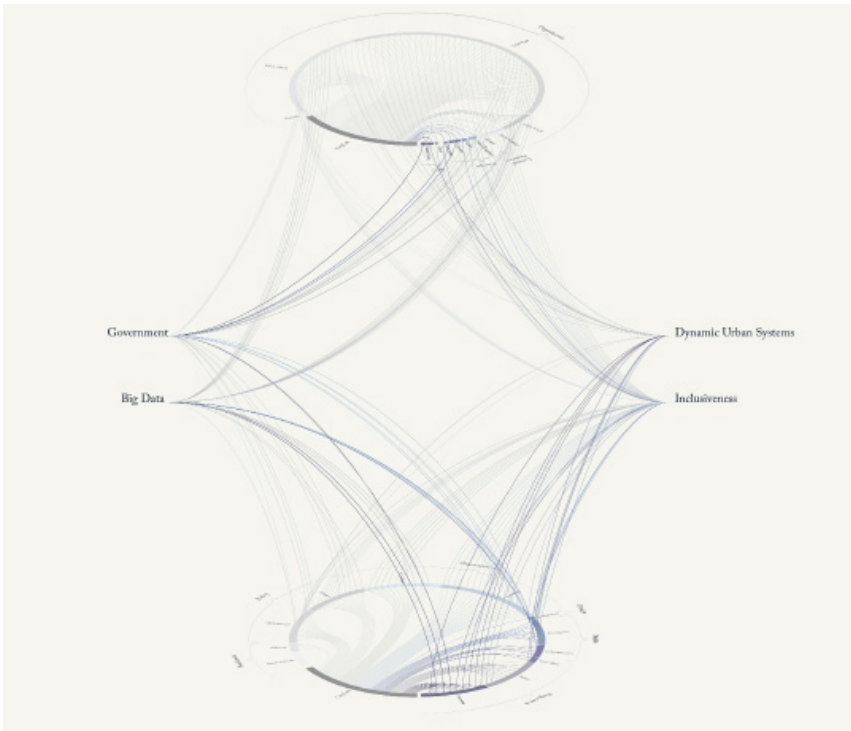
In the fall of 2014, *The Atlantic*—in partnership with The Aspen Institute and Bloomberg Philanthropies—hosted the second annual CityLab conference in Los Angeles. The stated goal of the three-day conference was for participants to “foster constructive dialogue and create scalable solutions to share with their constituencies across the world.” [1] An impressive line-up of more than three hundred distinguished speakers coupled with wide-spread media coverage has already positioned this emerging conference as a strong voice on the future city (the previous year's inaugural program was named Best Conference of 2013 at the FAME Awards). For those interested in the conjunctions of urbanism, commerce, and politics that define contemporary cities, CityLab's potential impact cannot be ignored; for those invested in the role of designers within this network of urban actors, CityLab's limits should not be overlooked.

CityLab was an undoubtedly productive think-tank on contemporary global issues that affect cities—sharing economies, affordability, inclusiveness, the role of government, etc. Perhaps even more revealing than the specific content was the organizational structure of the conference that allowed such knowledge to emerge. Implicit in this is a meta-assessment of *who* was brought to CityLab (including the disciplinary, geographic, and cultural backgrounds or biases of the attendees) and *what* they were brought there to discuss. In essence, who has the right to the laboratory of the city and what do the hypotheses they seek to test already assume?

While numerous topics were discussed at CityLab, they can be grouped into the thematic categories of the role of government and big data, as well as the design of dynamic urban systems for inclusion. Inclusive-

Citation: Neeraj Bhatia, “The Right to the City and its Laboratory,” in *The Avery Review*, no. 5 (February, 2014), <http://averyreview.com/issues/5/city-and-its-laboratory>

[1] *The Atlantic*, CityLab homepage, <http://www.theatlantic.com/live/events/citylab/2014>.



Session Topics (middle), and the background of the CityLab Presenters — by Discipline (top) and Geography (bottom). Drawing by: Cesar Lopez, The Open Workshop.

ness—and, by association, questions of democratic participation, unemployment, gender equality, racial equality, and affordability—was the topic underlying the majority of discussions. It is widely accepted that inclusiveness is critical to the social, political, and economic health of the city, but it is not so clear how to tackle the widening economic gap in cities. Examining how power (and its underlying political and economic relationships) is formed, distributed, and beholden to its electorate reveals that control of cities is being transferred from citizens and the governments that represent them to transnational corporations and unelected organizations—a process that is to some extent replicated in the structure of CityLab itself. This disenfranchisement of the citizen from the larger neoliberal engines of globalization that affect their daily inhabitation threatens what Henri Lefebvre has referred to as the right to the city. For Lefebvre, the right to the city proposes that the power relations (primarily through capital) that govern the production of urban space need to be restructured to orient control to the urban inhabitant through participation and appropriation to eradicate unjust inequality. [2] Building upon Lefebvre, David Harvey has posited the following:

THE QUESTION OF WHAT KIND OF CITY WE WANT CANNOT BE DIVORCED FROM THAT OF WHAT KIND OF SOCIAL TIES, RELATIONSHIP TO NATURE, LIFESTYLES, TECHNOLOGIES AND AESTHETIC VALUES WE DESIRE. THE RIGHT TO THE CITY IS FAR MORE THAN THE INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY TO ACCESS URBAN RESOURCES: IT IS A RIGHT TO CHANGE OURSELVES BY CHANGING THE CITY. IT IS, MOREOVER, A COMMON RATHER THAN AN INDIVIDUAL RIGHT SINCE THIS TRANSFORMATION INEVITABLY DEPENDS UPON THE EXERCISE OF A COLLECTIVE POWER TO RESHAPE THE PROCESSES OF URBANIZATION. [3]

[2] Henri Lefebvre, *Le Droit a la ville* (Paris: Economica Publishers, 1968).

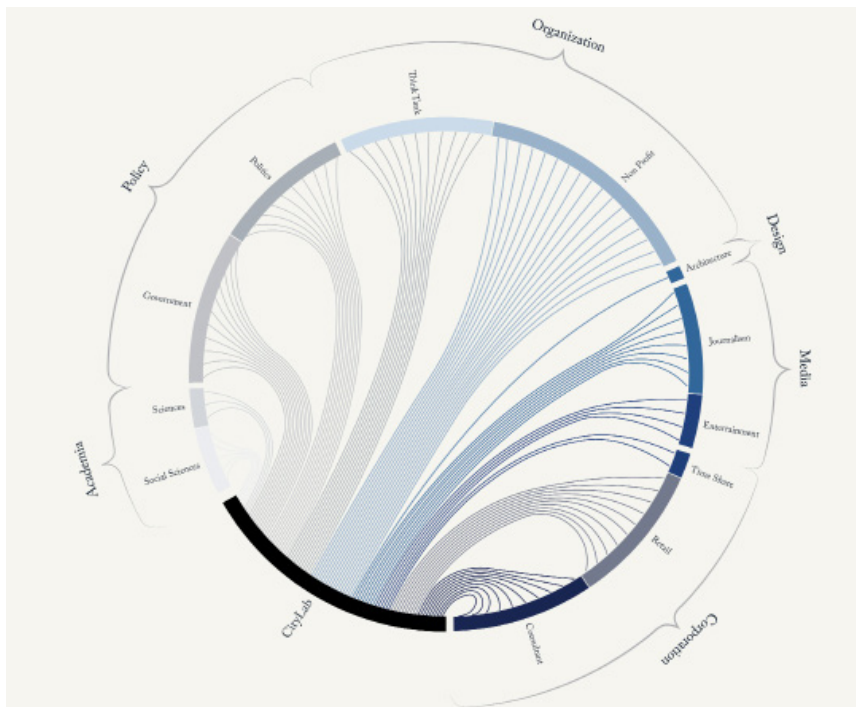
[3] David Harvey, "The Right to the City," in *New Left Review* 53 (2008), 23

Harvey goes on to argue that the freedom of collective agency over the

city, which is linked to our ability to change ourselves, is the most precious human right. The ability to change the city requires one to envision alternate futures and this conversation is the untapped potential in forums like CityLab. The question is whether it is possible to tackle such issues in forums like CityLab, which are disconnected from the individual actors that comprise cities.

The biases of CityLab and the organizations that stand behind the event can be discerned primarily because of the conference’s precise curation. As an invitation-based and funded event for both speakers and participants (attendees), CityLab is able to gather together specific voices that it deems critical to the future vision of the city. These voices were organized by The Aspen Institute into the speaker “types”—politicians and policymakers, organizations (think-tanks and nonprofit), designers, corporations, academics, and the media. The degree to which this curated group had the ability to act and explicitly change the city was exciting but also called into question the composition or relative prevalence of these group’s voices—organizations (30 percent), corporations (24 percent), policy (23 percent), media (13 percent), academia (9 percent), and spatial designers (1 percent).

Spatial designers, those who translate policy, economics, and theory (among other factors) into the material form of the city, and academics, those in a unique position to research the possibilities and ramifications of the city while being somewhat liberated from the economic and political machinery that govern the city, are noticeably underrepresented (and collectively do not outnumber the media). Not only does this question the role of spatial designers in being active agents in the future city rather than material administrators of (primarily) an economic and political agenda, it discounts the ability for the material artifact of the city to be a proactive agent in



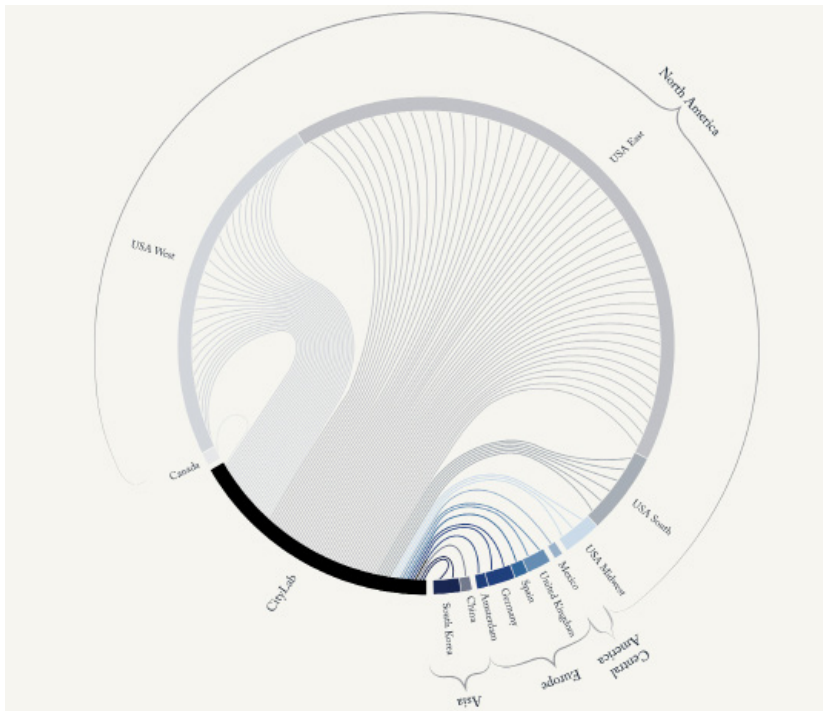
Disciplinary backgrounds (by education) of CityLab Presenters. Drawing by: Cesar Lopez, The Open Workshop.

reorienting the way we think about economic, political, and social systems, as well as ourselves.

The predominant voice of corporations, organizations, and policy-makers is no surprise, as we have witnessed an increased role of public-private partnerships as a mechanism to implement transformations to the city in recent years, blurring the line between the public and private realms. These partnerships point to a related fluid territory that was also evident at CityLab—the weakening distinction between local, state, and national governments. The leading voices at CityLab were that of mayors, from LA to Pittsburgh, Barcelona to Amsterdam. The message of former mayor Bloomberg (who is emblematic of the blurred line between public and private interest) in his introductory remarks suggested that city mayors are optimally positioned to create and implement large-scale changes to the urban environment, in part because of how power is divided among nation, state, and municipality, and in part because of the (relatively) small scale of the city, compared to the nation or state. Simultaneously, as noted throughout several discussions, it was *cities* that were seamlessly compared to states or countries when examining population size or economic output and their associated social and environmental ramifications.

CityLab's isolation of the city as the subject of study is an indication of the larger global role of cities, but it is also clear that the increasing power of the city does not enable it to operate as an autonomous entity. Instead, the larger trend of rescaling governance to subnational (city) and supranational (quasi-governmental or multinational corporate) entities has enabled cities to enter into direct relationships with these non-elected supranational bodies. One of the outcomes of this transformation is that local city economies are less dependent on national economies and have entered into a competitive model of economic development to compete in the global economy. Accordingly, local government moves toward governance of a series of actors not directly accountable to the local electorate. [4] This would mean that the larger framework of urbanization should not be separated from any reading of the city. For instance, an issue such as extracting resources from the hinterland and refining, transporting, and eventually consuming these resources in cities is intimately tied up in complex political and economic relationships that cannot be understood by solely focusing on the city. Moreover, when the city is understood as a node in a larger network of urbanization, it reveals the increasing disenfranchisement of the urban inhabitant to change the city. It would seem that the only way to reconcile such disenfranchisement would be to structure a productive discussion among corporations, organizations, policymakers, *and* spatial designers, as well as citizens. This would be a difficult, messy, and at times seemingly unproductive conversation, but it would add to the richness of the future CityLab conferences to think more holistically about the agency of the various actors

[4] Mark Purcell, "Excavating Lefebvre: The Right to the City and Its Urban Politics of the Inhabitant," in *GeoJournal* 58 (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 101.



Current Geographic Locations of CityLab Presenters.  
Drawing by: Cesar Lopez, The Open Workshop.

in the city.

The segregation of the larger urban territory from the city is evident when examining the geographic origins of the CityLab speakers. Despite being hosted in California, the largest contingency of participants hailed from East Coast cities with a small minority of speakers from Western Europe and East Asia, despite the fact that the growth of cities is most evident in South America, Africa, the Middle East, and East Asia. Africa, in particular, surfaced in a series of talks, exposing the intimate connection between global urbanization and cities. These areas of the world are already witnessing the growth of competitive cities that embrace capitalism as their primary organizational structure and have a physical morphology that is very distinct from the European and American city core. Moving from the urban core to the periphery of American and European cities exposes hints of this new form of urbanism—it is often polycentric, networked, and spine-based. Yet much of the discussion still focused on twentieth-century cities, forms of density, and values that are increasingly at odds with how the competitive city is formed. One need not argue for either form in particular—these are simply realities on the ground, and it remains important to understand the structure of these competitive globalized cities and peripheries, instead of projecting twentieth-century nostalgia (and denial) onto an increasingly capitalist agglomeration.

In a recent article on the *CityLab* blog evaluating inequality in cities, Richard Florida remarked:

INEQUALITY IS NOT JUST AN OCCASIONAL BUG OF URBAN ECONOMIES. IT'S A FUNDAMENTAL FEATURE OF THEM, AN ELEMENTAL BYPRODUCT OF THE SAME BASIC CLUSTERING FORCE THAT UNDERPINS METROS' RISE AS CENTERS OF INNOVATION, STARTUPS AND ECONOMIC GROWTH. IN OTHER WORDS,

THE EXACT SAME PHENOMENON OF SKILL CLUSTERING THAT HAS MADE TECH HUBS LIKE SAN FRANCISCO, NEW YORK, AND BOSTON SUCH SUCCESSES HAS CONTRIBUTED TO THE RISE OF INEQUALITY, THE GROWING GAP BETWEEN THE HAVES AND THE HAVE-NOTS. [5]

The city as the object of study has become its own problem, and inequality is the primary by-product. When did the city become an animal that needed to be fed continually and that no one had control over? A 2014 study prepared by the economic consulting company IHS Global Insight for The United States Conference of Mayors declared that despite a growing number of jobs, the income divide in America was widening. [6] For instance, these pairs of cities/countries have similar levels of inequality; New York and Swaziland, Los Angeles and Dominican Republic, Chicago and El Salvador, San Francisco and Madagascar, Seattle and Nigeria. [7] The IHS report's conclusion estimated that inequality will grow in the United States and that "income inequality is a structural feature of the 21st-century economy." [8] By focusing on cities (over national and global systems that affect cities) as well as corporations, policymakers, and organizations (over urban inhabitants and spatial designers), conferences such as *CityLab* limit their potential examinations of the role and power of citizens in the decision-making processes of their cities.

[5] Richard Florida, "The Connection Between Successful Cities and Inequality," *CityLab* website (January 6, 2015), <http://www.citylab.com/politics/2015/01/the-connection-between-successful-cities-and-inequality/384243>.

[6] Global Insight, *U.S. Metro Economies: Income and Wage Gaps Across the US* (Lexington: Global Insights, Inc., 2014).

[7] Richard Florida, "The High Inequality of U.S. Metro Areas Compared to Countries," *CityLab* website (October 9, 2012), <http://www.citylab.com/work/2012/10/high-inequality-us-metro-areas-compared-countries/3079>.

[8] Global Insight, *U.S. Metro Economies: Income and Wage Gaps Across the US*, 13.



Occupy Wall Street, New York—protesting the growing income gap. Image under Creative Commons License, Courtesy of Flickr user: Andra Mihali.

Events and organizations like *CityLab* have been a powerful tool for organizing a strong voice on the city, and such a venue truly does have the power to change conversations on the city. But while *CityLab*'s emphasis on inclusivity is apt and timely, can this problem be addressed by solely examining cities without critically examining the larger frameworks of urbanization that support them? Without this holistic criticality, cities will continue to disguise themselves as a solution while creating problems that cannot be solved in any laboratory.