



Overflow

W

Six future theses on the future of
Urban Governance.

A guide for urban organizations to
reflect and adapt to a future post
COVID-19.

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ABOUT



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The Hybrid City Lab ↗ is the urban and public design studio of zero360 ↗, a Berlin-based innovation and transformation company.

We explore desirable futures for public systems and help urban organizations to create equitable places in the digital age – within and well beyond the city. We work with public institutions, governments and municipalities, as well as civic actors, NGOs, and companies to design resilient strategies, implement tactical interventions, and accompany transformation processes.

This report shares distilled insights after our first year in a global pandemic. We aim to spark discussions and ask what future are we working toward as a global urban society. Future Overflow ↗ is a guide to reflect and adjust our strategies to move ahead.

GET IN TOUCH ↗

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This report is a result of a year of learning. COVID-19 brought with it an abundance of futures, a literal 'future overflow.' And if this pandemic has shown one thing, it's that futures are uncertain and full of speculation, risk, and trade-offs. This is not all bad. It also means that the future is yet to be made, and it is constantly re-shaped by our present day actions. Accordingly, this report doesn't predict anything. Rather we want to spark discussions about what we as a society can learn from a year of crisis, what we should be aiming for, and how this translates into decisions in our own organizations. If normal was a problem in the first place, we need an understanding of what should remain, what should change, and how.

We structured the manifold and oftentimes messy developments of the first pandemic year into six theses. As speaking, thinking, and acting go hand in hand this mapping comes with a very deliberate use of terms and language, making up a form of "future vocabulary" – a shared resource to provide mutual understanding for everyone who is part of the discussion. Thus, each thesis consists of vision, a challenge, two guiding principles (with goals and strategies) and a mapping of weak signals.

The core of this study are six theses around the future of urban governance. Six theses around public curation, pre-existing conditions, public recapture, city coalitions 2.0, remote cities, and the data city. Each of them with examples, implications and a strong call for action to join in exploring and realizing them.



**COVID BROUGHT WITH IT
AN ABUNDANCE OF FUTURES.
WE CALL IT FUTURE
OVERFLOW.**

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This report is the product of a year of learning. Like all of us, we did not expect 2020 to turn out the way it did – and we're expecting the coming years to shape up similarly. Like many of us, we took the chance to take a step back, reflect, and re-define what future we are actually aiming for.

For months now, we are all reading countless outlooks, forecasts, analyses and projections. We discuss probabilities, growth rates and avoidable and unavoidable developments. And in the process, we are confronted with countless key figures and (often contradictory) facts and predictions - one could also say

**Covid brought with it an abundance of futures.
We call it FutureOverflow.**

Ironically, however, 2021 – and everything that comes after that – remains a big black box. Despite all the outlooks and appeals, the future remains as uncertain as rarely ever before. Politics, society and the economy are still driving on sight: new rules for the next two weeks, cancelled and postponed dates and events, planning uncertainty for the foreseeable future. How does that fit together?

We believe it helps to be self-aware: a look into the future always reveals more about our wishes and perspectives in the present than about the future itself. With this knowledge, talking about the future makes new sense: It is no longer about predicting what will happen, but about better understanding where we come from and what we are striving for. And that works best in a dialog.

This report aims to spark exactly that. On the following pages, we share our collected insights from interviews and discussions, from our own research, and from a series of events, self-hosted and otherwise. Against the background of a global pandemic we asked ourselves, how our understanding of what it means to build better cities has changed:

**What needs to go?
And what do we want to preserve?**

Our insights are summarized in six theses about urban and public futures. They reach from resilience to digital public infrastructure, from strengthening civil society to addressing

systemic challenges holistically. We are lucky to have had the chance to work closely with friends, partners, clients, and experts while compiling them, and we are happy to take part in an open-minded conversation, that others kick-started and contributed, too. We believe the best thing we can all do is sharing what we see, offer our interpretations, and keep learning together. If 2020 was a year of crises, let's make the next one of resilience.

DESIGNING TRANSITIONS

While the pandemic was certainly a new challenge, many of the painful second and third-order effects that affected our lives were not – from overburdened public health systems and budgets, to out-of-date educational systems and (if at all existent) digital public infrastructure, from eroding trust in democratic institutions to lacking attention to many underlying problems like climate change or structural racism, from ramshackle urban infrastructure, and public housing, to dying city centers. If anything, 2020 has not just given us new challenges, but brought back so many old ones. Or, as many others have put it:

Normal was a problem in the first place. ↗

COVID-19, like many shocks before it, has made clear once again, that the problems we're facing when planning, managing, and governing public systems are – to use an overstrained but often underestimated word – complex in its essential sense: they are bound to bring us to dilemmas, paradoxical questions, and extremely difficult trade-offs: public health vs. securing livelihoods, stability vs. public innovation and reform, acquiring reliable data for decision making vs. speed and precaution, and so many more. The challenge of navigating a complex world lies not in neglecting these opposites, but in acknowledging their relevance. If „normal“ was problematic to begin with, then the „new normal“ can't mean to aim to once and for all solve these challenges. Rather, it seems promising to acknowledge trade-offs and to

create the conditions to constantly renegotiate them, to change our own perspectives, to factor in new data, new priorities, new learnings, to prepare for undecidable questions, not as the exception but the rule.

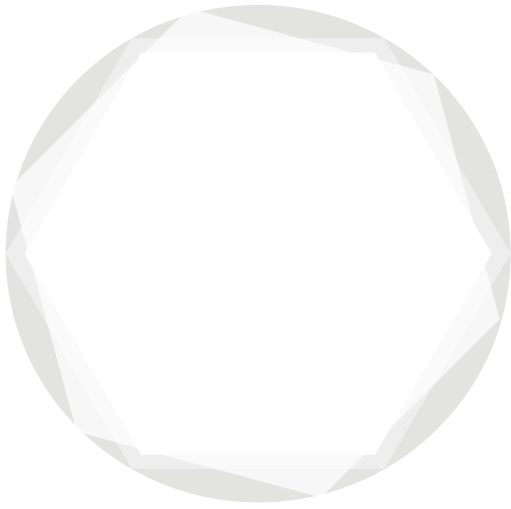
Yet, in many cases, our institutions – be they global or local, economic, political, educational, or otherwise – more often than not do not behave that way. They grew into very stable forms of themselves, where regardless of initial conditions, a similar, alas often dysfunctional, pattern prevails: new challenges are met with old recipes, novel ideas and perspectives miraculously lead to standard programs and measures, irritations – even a global pandemic crises – get absorbed and translated into well-known processes and rituals from the past.

The question now becomes:

Which unfit patterns did we come to observe in the crisis?

And how can we change them in a way that accounts better for the tasks at hand?

For actors of change, internal or external to the organizations they are working with, that means that they are tasked with a new exercise: We move from designing urban systems to designing transitions within these systems, allowing for a switch from one behavioral pattern to another one. To sustainably reform our institutions means to find leverage points to intervene and co-create new ways of self-organizing, of problem solving, of organizational behavior with and within these very institutions. Especially in public systems, these organizations are deeply embedded networks of other actors, principles, regulations, and values. The goal is to approach this network structurally, to change contexts and conditions so that, say, an administration, a municipality or an NGO becomes capable to change and adapt themselves. Others have called this the „Art of Intervention“, as in many cases it has to do a lot with the presentation and exploration of alternative realities, possible futures, and re-interpretations of today's observations. But how to do that?



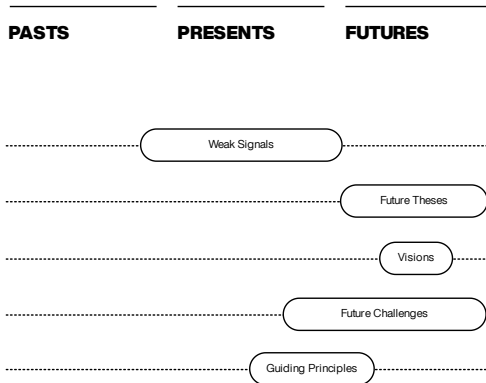
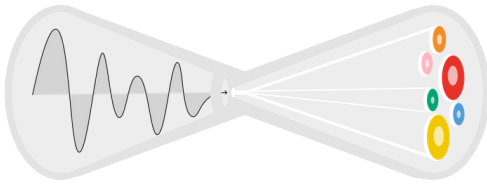
**NORMAL WAS A PROBLEM
IN THE FIRST PLACE.**

THIS RESEARCH

The goal now is to understand these challenges, and to help our institutions to react to them in a new, more functional way than before. To get us a little closer to that goal, we compiled a set of theses that offer a starting point for these discussions. They are derived from a series of interviews with public servants, researchers, experts, artists, and activities conducted throughout 2020. We talked to urban planners in city governments, to Chief Digital Officers in public administrations, to digital activists and community managers, to explorative artists and researchers, and many more. While initially these conversations centered around the immediate reactions and coping strategies to the pandemic, they gradually grew into more reflective discussions around changing roles and common observations in light of this year. Building upon these insights we compiled six theses for post-COVID urban futures, including descriptive and normative ideas, weak signals and potential implications for today's action. These do not serve as a prediction, but rather aim to offer a few new lenses to review our current decisions, and spark a conversation around what future we are actually aiming for. We had the chance to put them to the test, too, in a small and intimate setting in late 2020 where we invited clients, experts, partners, and practitioners to join us for a full day of reflecting on our theses (and learning together along the way).

This report reflects the current state of these findings, including valuable comments and additions from participants and partners, as well as our own reflections and outlooks. You will find examples from through-out the past year, initiatives that started even earlier and appeared in a new light, and outlooks and hopes for the time to come. We strongly encourage our readers to pick up this thread and join us in having these conversations.

Seriously, come say hi ↗

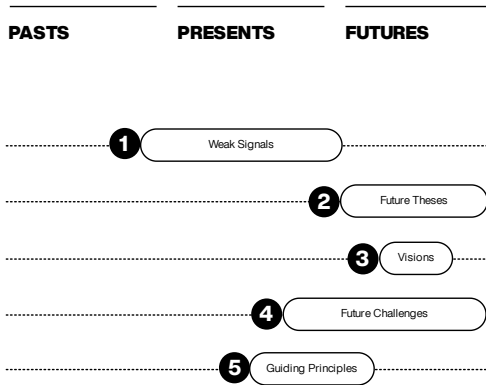
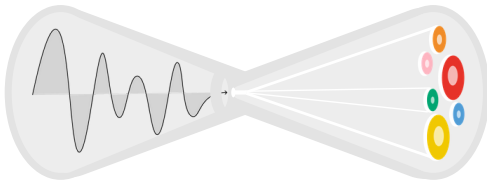


TALKING FUTURES. AN (SHORT) INTRO

The essential finding when dealing with complexity is this: complex situations demand selection. They often force us to pick a side, one priority, a value while knowing that there is another, equally relevant side, that has to be ignored or foreshadowed for the moment. To choose what side to pick in what moment is what public discourse, democratic participation, and data-driven research is for. One precondition, however, is that we are aware of the side, the trade-offs and the dimensions of our decisions in the first place. This is what the following report aims to do: To make transparent the dimensions of the challenges ahead and help navigate and mediate them. This discourse needs a clear and transparent language, and we would like to make ours explicit.

FUTURE VOCABULARY

Our theses follow a common set up: After a brief descriptive caption of our future thesis, including observations and examples for patterns we see emerging in the present we share our own vision, as a normative goal that we consider worth working toward. We then highlight the key decision, the future challenge that we believe urban designers, planners, and policy makers to be facing when trying to get there. We believe that there is not one way for the future to evolve. Rather, we felt that recognizing the relevant decisions and distinctions of tomorrow can be a more powerful, resilient, and illuminating tool than singular programmatic or even policy points. Thus, each thesis is embedded in a context that is opening up a “field of trade-offs” in between two dimensions, each marked by a guiding principle, consisting of a goal to strive for and a strategy to do so. The recognition and implied decisions for these dimensions is what this study aims to offer. Each thesis then closes with a mapping of weak signals and observations in this context to illustrate this field and help getting familiar with it.



1 WHAT ARE WEAK SIGNALS?

Weak signals of change can already be observed in the present and are believed to become increasingly important in impacting the future. Weak Signals are also known as emerging trends and can refer to the macro, meso and micro level

EXAMPLE → More and more physical objects have sensors and are communicating with other objects and actors.

2 WHAT ARE FUTURE THESES?

Future Theses are combination and extrapolation of current trends, that describe an assumed possible future.

EXAMPLE → Public Curation Thesis (see page 11 ↗) — In the future, city administrations will act as “public curators” that vet, connect, and amplify existing services, resources and initiatives throughout the city.

3 WHAT ARE VISIONS?

A subset of possible futures that is reflecting a normative, that is, desirable outplay of current trends.

EXAMPLE → Public Curation Thesis (see page 11 ↗) — We imagine a city, that is built upon a decentralized public infrastructure that still behaves efficiently and sustainably: Instead of concentrating all expertise and solutions at single public institutions, here the entire city – its citizens, organizations, communities, and companies – collectively explore and tackle public challenges with the support of local and national governments and institutions.

4 WHAT ARE FUTURE CHALLENGES?

Future is made by present day actions. These are driven by specific contexts and related trade-offs: They arise once we move on beyond understanding the problem toward working and implementing with the solution.

EXAMPLE → Public Curation Thesis (see page 11 ↗) — How might we transform our administrations into a curator of emerging and promising solutions and timely innovations for urban challenges? And how to grow capacities for reflection to deliberately decide between promoting existing solutions and procuring new ones.

5 WHAT ARE GUIDING PRINCIPLES?

A set of principles that define a corridor of desired outcomes, aiming to guide decision-making without providing a pre-defined solution. Guiding principles make trade-offs transparent and allow for autonomous but aligned actions towards a common goal, while understanding the implications of one goal in context of another.

EXAMPLE → Public Curation Guiding Principles (see page 11 ↗) — Promote and Procure as two sides of one coin when working toward a shared future vision of “public curation”. Each side has their own respective goal and a respective strategy to attain it.

SIX THESES ON FUTURE URBAN GOVERNANCE

Good governance implies recognizing relevant questions and deciding upon them. While the latter is to be rooted in democratic procedure, the former is an exercise in conceptual understanding of the context, the system, we are moving in and when to switch to other criteria, dimensions, or trade offs. The six theses we identified are thus to be understood as exemplary — and naturally to be extended to other contexts and dimensions as well. And the challenge lies in managing trade-offs in between them: Locating yourself in the system is the first step — and switching contexts deliberately is the second.

MANAGING TRADE-OFFS

PUBLIC CURATION

1

In the future, city administrations will act as “public curators” that vet, connect, and amplify existing services, resources and initiatives throughout the city. A trade-off between procure and promote.

PRE-EXISTING CONTINTIANT

2

COVID-19 made the pre-existing conditions of our cities painfully clear. But it also taught us the potential that lies in addressing underlying and longstanding inequalities. A trade-off between legacy and novelty.

PUBLIC RECAPUTRE

3

In the post-COVID city, digital public infrastructure becomes just as critical as streets and parks. This “recapture” of the digital invites planners and citizens to co-design digital public places. A trade-off between public and private.

CITY COALITIONS 2.0

4

The effects of COVID-19 were severely felt in cities – while trust in global institutions was often eroded along the way. This leads to a new type of inter-city-coalitions to share resources, data, and best practices. A trade-off between political and practical.

REMOTE CITIES

5

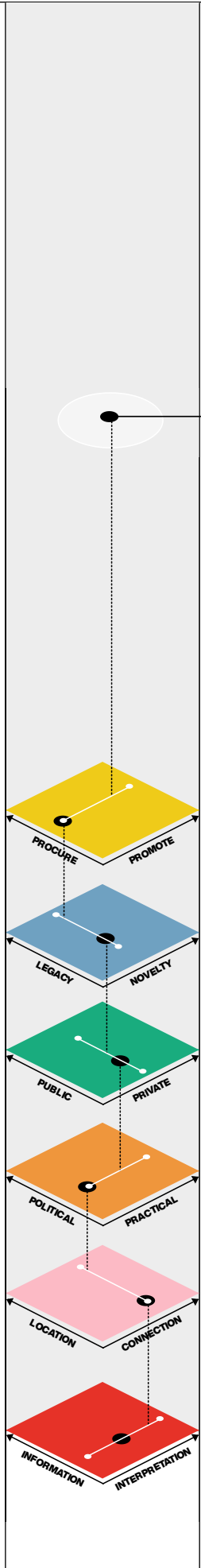
The world is shaping up to become remote-first in many areas. The results: plummeting real estate prices, irrelevant working-visas, marginal locational advantages, and a dissipating rural-urban divide. A trade-off between location and connection.

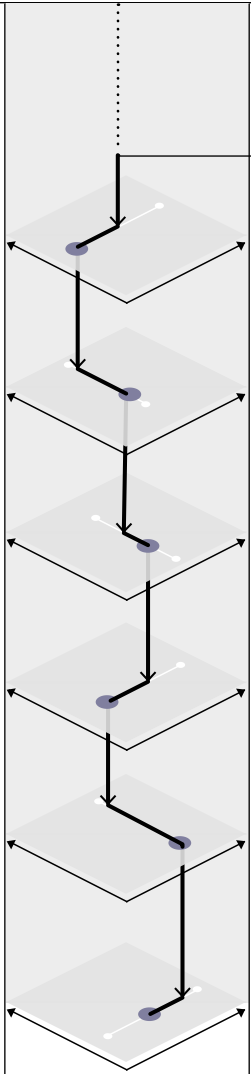
DATA CITIES

6

The pandemic has brought back the expert – and fueled deep doubts about where data is coming from and what it is supposed to mean: We witness a new understanding about quantitative data and qualitative interpretation. A trade-off between information and interpretation.

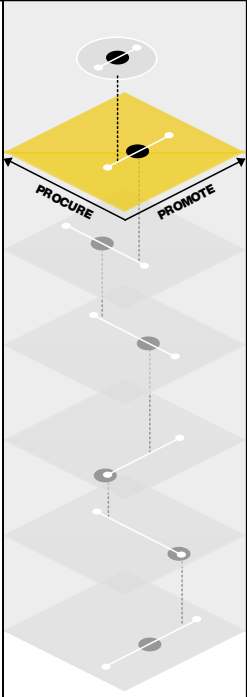
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URBAN INTERVENTION

Urban Interventions thus become managing trade-offs across the layers. As a result, a contextual positioning takes place, that can be mapped on a multi-layered system of “relevant criteria”. This positioning we understand as governance practice: It is a logic to translate complexity in the form of multi-layered decision making processes into a procedural mode of continuous re-positioning. Effectively, this allows organizations and decision makers to remind themselves of not-yet-discussed dimensions of a problem to mitigate unintended consequences and allows for transparent discourse. Of course, there are many more layers to any decision than just the six we highlighted here. Those unseen dimensions are always implied in the following. While we acknowledge these blind spots, we also think that the ones we did identify prove quite robust for a first exercise of managing multi-layered trade offs when governing in an urban world.



↔ MANAGING TRADE-OFFS

● PUBLIC CURATION

● PRE-EXISTING CONDITIONS

● PUBLIC RECAPTURE

● CITY COALITIONS 2.0

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FUTURE THESIS

PUBLIC CURATION

In the future, city administrations will act as “public curators” that vet, connect, and amplify existing services, resources and initiatives throughout the city.

OUR VISION

We imagine a city, that is built upon a decentralized public infrastructure that still behaves efficiently and sustainably: Instead of concentrating all expertise and solutions at single institutions, here the entire city — its citizens, organizations, communities, and companies — collectively explores and tackles shared challenges, oftentimes with the support of local and national governments and institutions. The central task that urban organizations find themselves with is then to identify new and emergent approaches for existing challenges, promoting them efficiently — and understanding when to switch back to procuring their own solutions.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

How might we transform our administrations into a curator of emerging and promising solutions and timely innovations for urban challenges? And how to grow capacities for reflection to deliberately decide between promoting existing solutions and procuring new ones?

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

PROMOTE

GOAL

→ Identify & Promote existing solutions

STRATEGY

Diversify, support and open up response strategies and solutions to new and rapidly-changing challenges. Grow capacities to identify and evaluate existing approaches. Become addressable and approachable for new initiatives. Provide tangible support for solutions from the public.

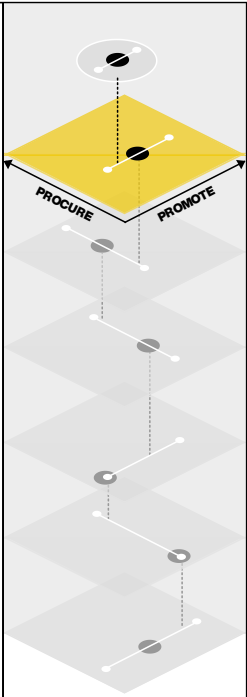
PROCURE

GOAL

→ Procure and commission solutions to fill the gaps structural dispositions

STRATEGY

Identify new opportunities, providing guiding principles and clearly binding criteria for others to cater to. Allocate budgets, priorities, and information to effectively address challenges.



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WEAK SIGNALS

PROCURE



REIMAGINING PUBLIC CURATION



COHERENT AND TRANSPARENT DESIGN & DECISION-MAKING PRINCIPLES



SCOUTING AS A PUBLIC SERVICE

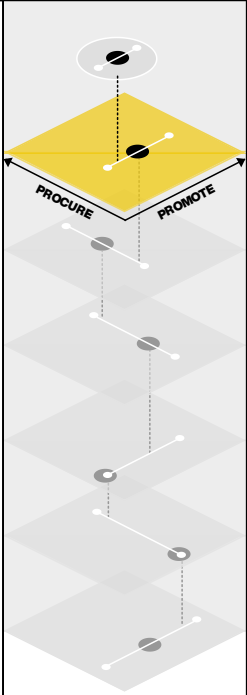
PROMOTE

COHERENT AND TRANSPARENT DESIGN & DECISION-MAKING PRINCIPLES

The establishment of a vision of a good public service can serve as a reference and decision-aid when improving existing services, and looking for new ones. The Good Service Principles, published by Lou Downe, the former Design Director of the UK Government, lay out, how concrete criteria and standards can be formulated in order to coordinate future-decision making. On the other hand, the incoherent application of such rules can lead to severe disputes, especially in situations of often changing and contradicting information. This is especially true for semi-public places like social media platforms: efforts to verify, filter, or contextualize have been met with mixed responses, mainly because the decision making processes behind them are intransparent, privatized, and incoherent.

SCOUTING AS A PUBLIC SERVICE

Establishing a routine for scouting not-yet promoted services in the public interest can prove very valuable. Especially if the civic sector or private sector is outperforming government responses, like for example in Bhutan and Nepal's FabLab community. Programs that specifically seek out and promote bottom-up innovation with help clustering and curating diverse ideas and projects without playing catch-up: The Prototype Fund* for instance, is a vehicle by the german chapter of the Open Knowledge Foundation that supports open source public interest tech on a large scale with public funds and coaching. Likewise, Wikimedia's UNLOCK Accelerator* aims to identify and promote visionary projects to advance their mission while providing them with a concise framework of references and context. What is interesting in this context is its position in-between a civil society of tech and open source activists, the national ministry and public funds, and a broader public. It might be a blueprint for similar initiatives on other issues in the future.



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▲ PROCURE



REIMAGINING PUBLIC CURATION



COHERENT AND TRANSPARENT DESIGN & DECISION-MAKING PRINCIPLES



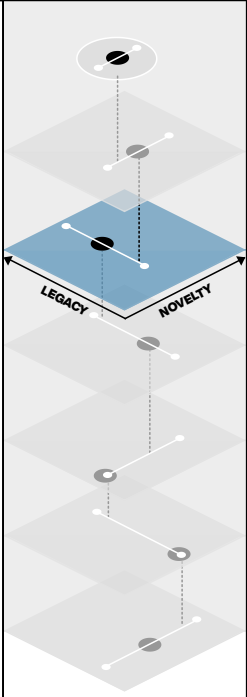
SCOUTING AS A PUBLIC SERVICE

▶ PROMOTE

REIMAGINING PUBLIC PROCUREMENT

While coming with necessary assumptions and principles, the current system of public procurement is often not well-suited for contemporary challenges. Alstair Parvin, Co-Founder of the Open Systems Lab explored some problems and opportunities for the procurement system in the UK that well apply across borders. Initiatives like Citymart in the US set out to do the same. To get there as a public institution, it helps to establish a vetting and negotiation process with private service organizations to create win-win-win situations, see for instance L.A.'s Department of Transportation Micro Mobility Start Up Approach.

However, outsourcing and forgetting is not an option: Not only is public trust into public institutions at an all time low already. The “absence of data and digital skills at the centre of government has become a life or death issue” and – as economist Mariana Mazzucato points out – outsourcing critical state capacities. in contexts where public-private partnerships are not premised on delivering public value leaves all societies stranded in cases of pandemic-like events.



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FUTURE THESIS

PRE-EXISTING CONDITIONS

COVID-19 made pre-existing conditions of our cities painfully clear. But it also taught us the potential that lies in addressing underlying and longstanding inequalities.

OUR VISION

We imagine a public that is capable of decisive collective action even without a directly visible threat – like a pandemic. We aim for sustainable momentum in light of more distant, abstract, or indirect matters, too, to tackle deliberate systemic change beyond growth-paradigms or nationalist grid locks.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Many “new” developments and challenges are only the most recent consequences of decades of neglect, that the pandemic made more obvious. For the future city, the challenge lies in translating short-term momentum into lasting systemic change. The central decision that public administrations find themselves with is to navigate novelty and legacy. That means, to use the momentum around new programs and initiatives and include long-term, abstract, indirect, or “boring” challenges collectively and decisively. That’s a hard sale.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

NOVELTY

GOAL

→ Create momentum for new programs, ideas, and initiatives to tackle emerging challenges.

STRATEGY

Learn to spot old challenges in a new guise. They tend to be blind spots, meaning we need diverse stakeholders and perspectives to identify and understand them and their consequences.

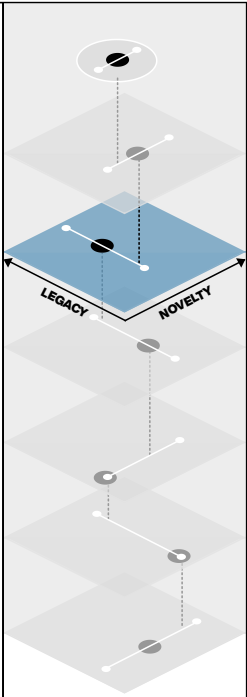
LEGACY

GOAL

→ Address underlying, systemic problems that are the result of past and often

STRATEGY

Address collective action problems for what they are. In many cases, clear, positive alternatives to plain denial are extremely helpful to move beyond grid locks and NIMBY problems.



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FUTURE THESIS

OUR VISION

WEAK SIGNALS

LEGACY



SYSTEMIC AWARENESS



HOLISTIC URBAN ECONOMIES



TIME ZONING

NOVELTY

HOLISTIC URBAN ECONOMIES

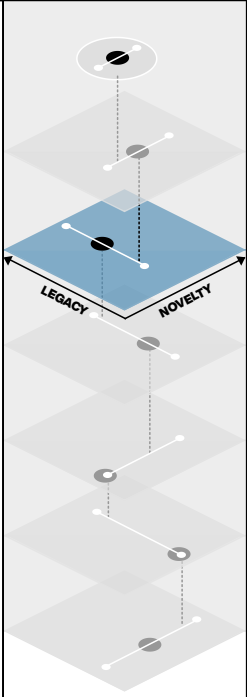
Recently, Amsterdam publicly vowed to adapt a new and more holistic approach to local economic policies, rooted in Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economic model. The concept is akin to similar ideas like de-growth and sustainability, that aim to redefine strategic goals along collective visions beyond GDPs. This often goes along with a renewed interest in the potential of digital cooperatives to address systemic challenges like real estate and ownership. New Zealand's Public intangibles asset management is a case in point.

SYSTEMIC AWARENESS

While we can never see our own blind spots, we can become aware of them. To do so, we need diverse stakeholders and perspectives to identify and understand them and their consequences. As a starter, resources, strategies, and interventions can be found in those communities that have been doing the work (and research) for a long time. The upcoming Sound Advice publication by 60+ architects and urbanists is but one example for the many voices and perspectives that are part of the systems we build. (Full disclosure: our team has had the chance to contribute to the list of essays in this publication). This goes along with often overlooked industries – like the economic sector of care and maintenance work. Addressing underlying and systemic challenges in these fields often involves projects that are “boring”, requiring greater budgets with less potential for prominent “innovation stories” and buzzwords.

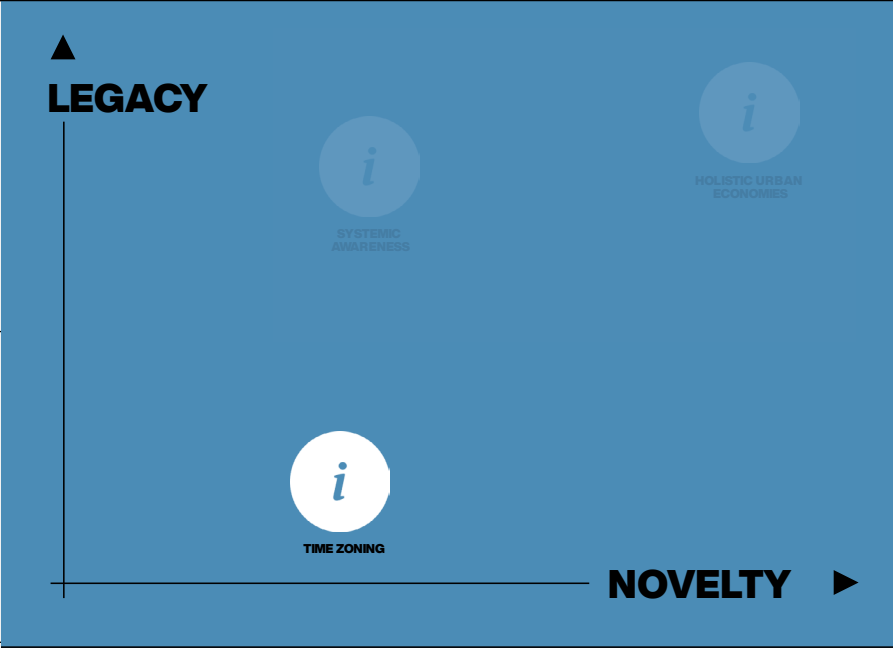
TIME ZONING

When facing such systemic challenges, it helps to differentiate. Short-term interventions serve as agile response projects to mitigate immedia pressure (from tactical urbanism and pop-up bike lanes to relief checks and short term payments). Mid-term approaches can iterate, match and adopt existing approaches, in

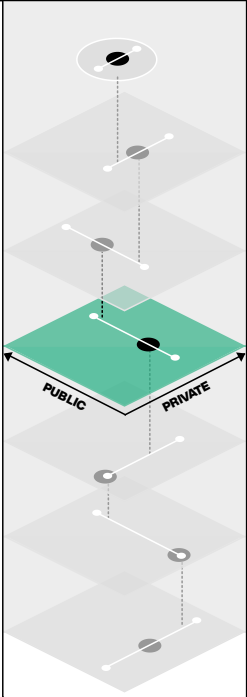


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order to institutionalize them. However there rarely is a shortcut for addressing systemic inequalities, requiring long-term thinking and commitment. It helps to understand change as a cyclic process – and to map out where we are on that cycle. Frameworks like transition cycle help with communicating and self-locating to promote empathy, foster collaboration and collective action.



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FUTURE THESIS

PUBLIC RECAPTURE

In the post-COVID city, digital public infrastructure becomes just as critical as streets and parks. This "recapture" of the digital invites planners and citizens to co-design digital public places.

OUR VISION

We imagine a city that understands its digital spaces to be just as vital for public life as its physical ones — and a public that dedicates just as much attention to the development of robust and inclusive platforms, infrastructure, and services as we knew it from streets, parks, buildings, and neighborhoods. For the post-COVID city, digital is no afterthought.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

As a consequence, planners and policy makers ought to treat digital public services and frameworks just as prudently as “classical” one. How might we expand our understanding (and budgets!) for public infrastructure to include digital tools and platforms? How might we understand both, analog and digital systems, as integrated elements of one strategy? This shift in focus and mindset highlights also highlights a new challenge in-between public and private ownership models: Creating and growing digital and physical commons can address issues such as resilience, sustainability, and collective responsibility. On the other hand, attention is needed to incentivise individual and small-scale initiatives that address local challenges with potential to scale up. See also **Thesis 1** ↗ .

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

PUBLIC

GOAL

→empower inclusive and equal access to civic services and commons for everyone.

STRATEGY

seek out, support, and connect old and new commons initiatives. Pro-tip: When looking for commons, look for commoners.

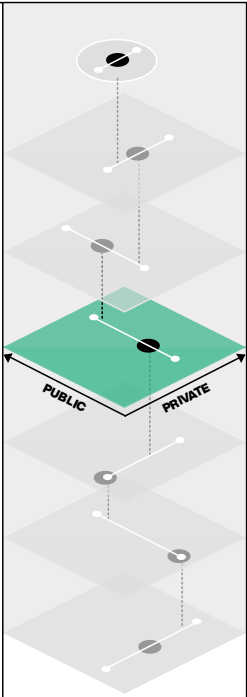
PRIVATE

GOAL

→ allow for individual solutions and decentralized approaches by communities, organizations, individuals, and private networks.

STRATEGY

use social programs, legal frameworks, and technology as a means to provide low barrier inclusive access to tools and resources for autonomous self-organization.



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WEAK SIGNALS

PUBLIC



EXPLORING DIGITAL LAYERS OF THE CITY



DIGITAL COMMONS



THE ENTREPRENEURIAL STATE

PRIVATE ▶

THE ENTREPRENEURIAL STATE

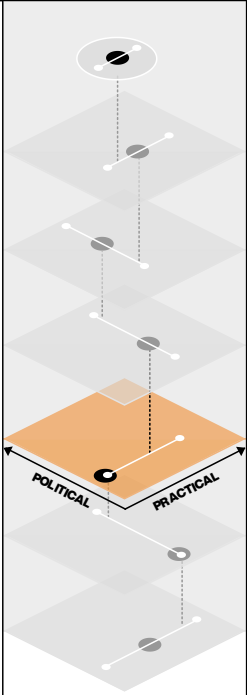
Understand technology as a means not an end. Mariana Mazzucato has shown that the presupposed distinction between public and private innovation is hardly maintainable anyway. Rather, public funds and programs regularly feed into private innovations. It might help to build upon this premise when aiming to mediate between those two worlds.

DIGITAL COMMONS

Using public technology to lower barriers and to provide more inclusive access to civic services has proven to be resilient in the past. In fact, “digital infrastructure might be the sanitation of our time.” Empowering and connecting communities and networks that manage commons, especially in context where (global) market dynamics shouldn’t be the exclusive way of finding a match between supply and demand or providing a service can provide many opportunities here. 2020 saw the launch of platforms like the Network of Open Resource Initiatives, for instance, building a resource to provide and connect digital commons and knowledge in an open and accessible way.

EXPLORING DIGITAL LAYERS OF THE CITY

...and making them work in the public interest. Embracing and understanding that urban planning today goes far beyond traditional categories like architecture and public management can go a long way. Digital design and development as well as cultural, technological, and social expertise are just as crucial for the development of resilient and livable cities. This includes the evolution and adaptation of traditional planning and procurement processes within public institutions and administrations. We need new regulatory and ownership models, and we can build them today. Benjamin Bratton's Stack Model is one of the ways to make the digital layers of an urban system and their interlinkages to the physical elements and material flows visible and open to discussion.



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FUTURE THESIS

CITY COALITIONS 2.0

The effects of COVID-19 were severely felt in cities – while trust in global institutions was often eroded along the way. This leads to a new type of informal inter-city-coalitions that share resources, data, and best practices.

OUR VISION

We imagine a global network not just of cities, but of citizens, that shares, explores, and connects issue-based resources, processes, and insights. From global common cooperatives to decentralized micro-societies, to confederal councils.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

These coalitions could not just include public officials and governments, but also local communities, citizens, and neighborhoods. How might we create issue- and knowledge-based exchange forums for practitioners and citizens across cities? They are driven by hands-on approaches, practical solutions to immediate problems, and spontaneous alliances. The future challenge for policy makers becomes to navigate in between these practical efforts to tackle solutions directly and political narratives and framework to integrate them in legitimized decision-making processes.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

POLITICAL

GOAL

→ Legitimize public decisions democratically, through transparent, open, and inclusive discourse.

STRATEGY

Grow and promote collective decision-making frameworks, strengthen a healthy public discourse in media and social networks, embrace communication and narrative-framing of the question as an integral part of finding answers.

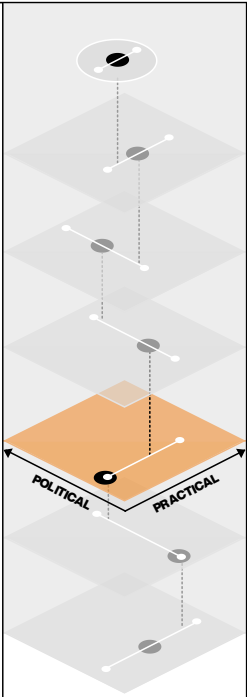
PRACTICAL

GOAL

→ Promote efficient hands-on solutions by communities of practice

STRATEGY

Small is beautiful! Identify minimum-viable legitimization and mandate structures for approaching problem-solution processes on the smallest level. Make transparent, who gets to decide, and why.



↔ MANAGING TRADE-OFFS

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WEAK SIGNALS

▲ POLITICAL



▶ PRACTICAL

LEARNING TOGETHER

From the very beginning of the COVID-crises, professionals and their organizations formed networks and alliances to work and learn together. While in many cases informally and ad-hoc, others, like the eurocities network, provided tangible resources and tools, in a more official and regular way. Places for open and trusted, discussions are invaluable resources when dealing with rapidly changing environments and scenarios.

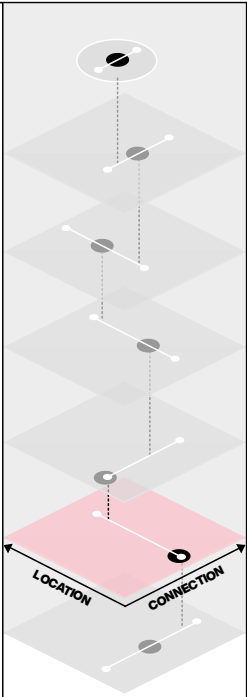
SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY

To respond to public challenges in a collective way, new forms of shared accountability are being tested. The goal is to make individual accountability for collective and social outcomes in complex systems more comprehensible. One example is the City of Lahti's personal CO2 emissions trading scheme.

Equally noteworthy is France's democracy experiment of citizens' councils. 150 people, chosen by lot but representative of the diversity of French society, accompanied by scientists and experts, were briefed on all issues related to combating climate change, and then drafted legislation by and for citizens.

HOW WE COPE

Forming and curating knowledge networks with practitioners, experts, and citizens to explore topics at hand in a trustful and open setting was one route that others – us included – took. From conferences, to regular calls, to specifically curated events around themes or regions. These led to our How do you Cope interview series. A quite practical and anecdotal take on exploring best practices, themes, and patterns that people in urban institutions face throughout this crisis.



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FUTURE THESIS

REMOTE CITIES

The world is shaping up to become remote-first in many areas. The results: plummeting real estate prices, irrelevant working-visas, marginal locational advantages, and a dissipating rural-urban divide.

OUR VISION

We imagine a new paradigm, driven by the megatrends of our age: globalization, urbanization, digitalization. We can see the pandemic advancing a new area of labor and global connectivity, that re-makes the century-old push toward increasingly dense urban centers, and brings about worthwhile alternatives to urbanization that manages to include and cater to more people, more drastically than any migration policy program ever could.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

How might we seize the opportunity to rethink accessibility, ownership, and usage of real estate and placemaking in our cities? With many new opportunities and challenges for work and migration, public infrastructure and real estate, and old and new privileges. The resulting challenges are two-fold and so is the resulting task for policy makers and planners: We need to be preserving local and regional identities while strengthening networked and decentralized modes of city-making.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

LO-CATION

GOAL

→ Preserve and grow local and regional identity

STRATEGY

Understand, grown and preserve the intrinsic logics, economies, and identities of physical city spaces by specific research and exploration of old and new ways of physical interaction and cooperation.

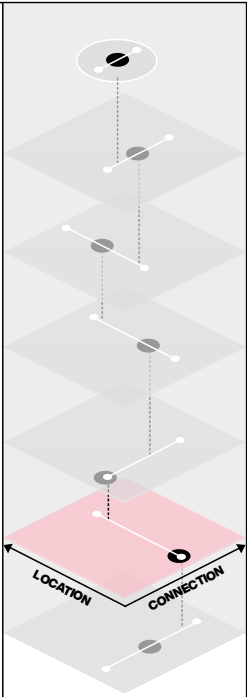
CON-NECTION

GOAL

→ Strengthen and connect networked actors beyond traditional (local) contexts

STRATEGY

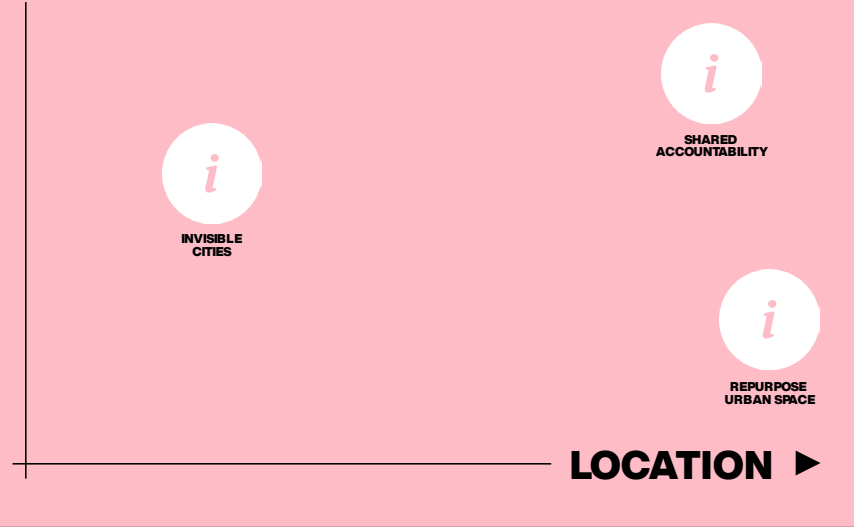
Decentralize essential urban functions from physical proximity, and ensure accessibility and connectivity for everyone.



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WEAK SIGNALS

CONNECTION



INVISIBLE CITIES

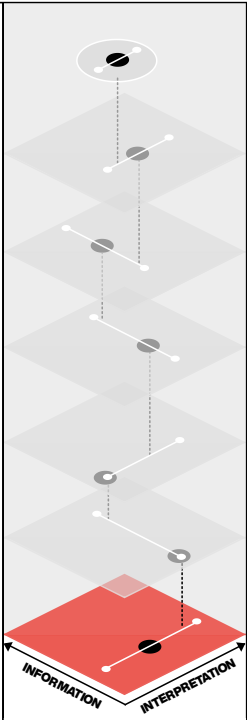
Where does city-making take place? After 2020 there are many more answers to this question: Like Ghost Kitchens that are popping up ever since the emergence of delivery services, these restaurants without guests may herald the detachment of places and services in and well beyond the city. Or embracing WFH as an opportunity and strategic advantage for your city – including special “remote work visas”.

REPURPOSE URBAN SPACE

An old challenge that has only been exacerbated in the past year has been to devise strategies to repurpose and redistribute less used office and retail space and also streets into new programming of stores and buildings. Digitization moved banking out of branches into mobile apps long before COVID-19 came around: In Zurich, a local retail bank reappropriated prominent spaces in the heart of the city into public co-working offices for its citizens.

RURAL CITIES

Providing access to urban functions and infrastructure remotely is one of the major challenges that shape up to allow for decentralised urbanism in remote areas. Here, too, Think global act local: Preserving and growing local and regional identity while aligning local initiatives for regional, national and global frameworks (like the SDGs) is the frame for reference here.



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FUTURE THESIS

OUR VISION

FUTURE CHALLENGES

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

DATA CITY

The pandemic has brought back the expert — and fueled deep doubts about where data is coming from and what it is supposed to mean: We witness a new understanding about quantitative data and qualitative interpretation.

We imagine an urban public that is deliberate and constructive about the use of ubiquitous data in all spheres of life. Rather than black or white thinking when it comes to exploring machine learning and data-assisted decision-making, we envision a new culture of difference, that is capable of telling quantitative facts from context and qualitative interpretation.

How might we facilitate a more constructive discourse around facts, truths, and collective decisions in our publics? This often means understanding and differentiating between information (data) and interpretation (discourse) and how to mediate their intersection. We are confronted and public discussing with complex data in real time. This provides new levels of transparency — and new dimensions of doubt and outright disbelief. The challenge to come lies in understanding and shaping the distinction between information and interpretation. For one, this means we need to provide data for decision that is reliable, granular and specific. Equally important is data for discussion, allowing for multiple perspectives, interpretations, and a deliberate public discourse.

INTER- PRETATION

GOAL

→ Create places for data-driven discourse and heterogeneous interpretation

STRATEGY

Provide healthy places for debate, vet and make various data sources accessible and understandable to lead relevant discussions and clearly differentiate facts and contexts.

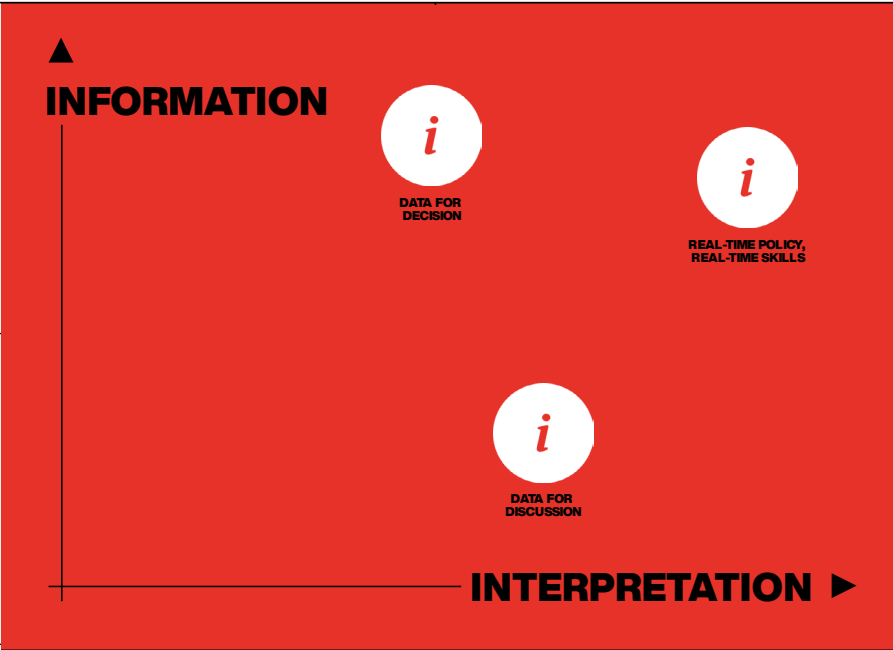
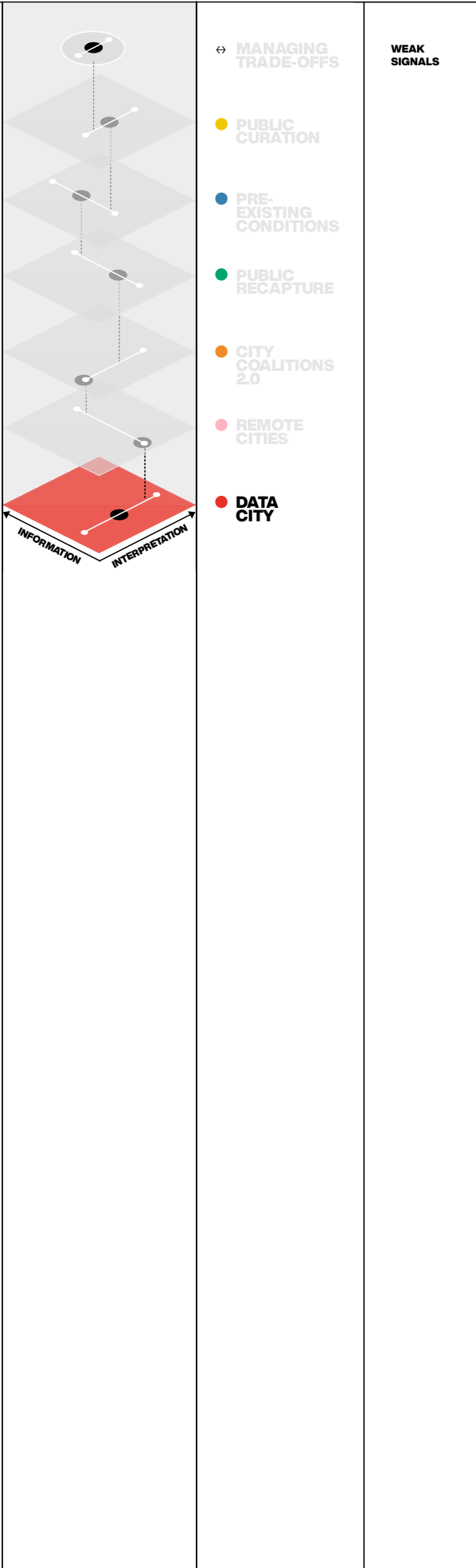
INFORMA- TION

GOAL

→ Generate and provide precise and real-time information about urban activities

STRATEGY

Continuously Improve data visualization, literacy and documentation models to allow for high-quality discussions and understanding of everyone involved.



DATA FOR DECISION

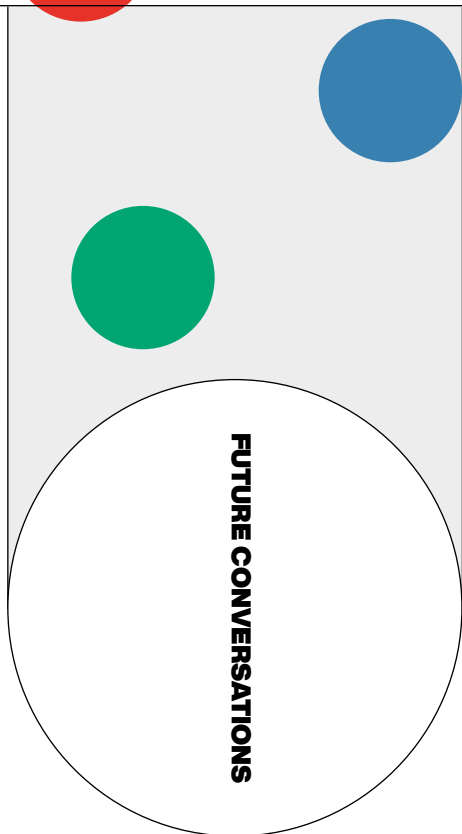
The COVID-crisis has seen countless efforts (and battles) for objective data. From dashboards, to metaphors, to statistics, they provided the basis not only for decisions, but also for dissent and protests. The task to tell fact from fiction, especially in online networks, is partly taken on by private corporations like twitter and facebook – with disputed results, due to intransparent and incoherent decision making. This increasingly includes the establishment and iteration of ethical data principles, such as those of Sarah Gold.

DATA FOR DISCUSSION

To treat data as a conversation-enabler, rather than a resource for absolute truth, it helps to foster societal sense-making infrastructures: Many governments are having to address the spread of misinformation and its effects on the most vulnerable. Establishing a routine of improving interpretation and data capturing assumptions is a first step here: What conversations should we have, how can we remove subjective bias and measure it through data? Establish and iterate upon ethical Data principles (Martin Jordan GDS)

REAL-TIME POLICY, REAL-TIME SKILLS

To look into established real time decision making practices of the digital product management discipline or others to find a routine to create, measure, learn and improve upon policies requires new skills. This also includes (re-)building trust in public institutions, media, and communities and to own up to mistakes and open questions. “Statistical illiteracy isn’t a niche problem. During a pandemic it can be fatal.” Creating or reforming Statistical Offices that vet and integrate various data-sources (also citizen sciences data) into shared sense-making processes can be a valuable step in this direction.



DESIGNED FOR CONVERSATIONS

This report was designed to spark high quality conversations about the future. By now we know the future is and remains uncertain. This is sometimes nerve wracking but mainly a good thing. Uncertainty is our freedom to shape future hopes and expectations in the present. If the future was not uncertain, we would not be able to change it. Thus, our theses are an invitation to rethink our implicit or explicit future stances. Let's use them to spark new and old conversations and to ask ourselves: How do these trends affect me, my organization, our cities, and our future. What am I willing to give or give up to either prevent or accelerate the thesis from happening. We believe that whether working in complex present day systems or dealing with futures a necessary routine is scouting for blind spots and sparking conversations around them: We hope our report checks both boxes. If so, let's talk!



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