



On the 'impertinence of impermanence' and three other critiques: Reflections on the relationship between experimentation and lasting – or significant? – change

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ABSTRACT

Experimentation, and street experiments in particular, have led to considerable academic and policy advances in sustainable and inclusive (mobility) planning over the past years. With increased popularity and confidence, the street experiments field has recently begun to turn to in-depth discussions on design and upscaling, more than questions of its own legitimacy or relevance. This commentary nevertheless explores four recurring critiques of (street) experimentation and proposes how looking more deeply at them might empower, rather than weaken, such initiatives. Engaging with these critiques is therefore not meant as a renewed criticism, per se, of (street) experiments. Rather, it recognizes that getting into the technicalities and specific designs and elements that might improve street experiments and their capacity to impact change advances knowledge in the field, but argues that advocates must not forget some key baseline critiques they might face - and be ready to either defend or amend their choices accordingly. This commentary is a call to be more creative and less conforming, and to come back again to the deeper motivations for what (street) experiments are meant to do; or develop a better understanding of those motivations. This commentary also leaves open questions that will require further research. Disconfirming some of the hypotheses emerging here would be no less interesting than confirming them. I hope the readers will thus see this commentary as an invitation for debating and exploring these critiques and reflections further.

Street experiments¹ are *en vogue*. The interest spans planning research (Bertolini, 2020; Scerri & Attard, 2023; Smeds & Papa, 2023; VanHoose et al., 2022), planning practice (Allianz der freien Straße, 2022; SET, 2023) and politics (for examples and discussions see: Porto 2020, Sadik-Khan and Solomonow 2017, Schmiedbauer and Schwarz 2023, Verlinghieri et al. 2023a). Among others this is motivated by street experiments' perceived potential to contribute to: improving liveability in terms of social equity (Aldred et al., 2021; Beyazit et al., 2023), traffic safety (Letunik, 2022), and more generally (Mehta, 2015; Smeds & Papa, 2023; Yeung, 2022); inducing greater environmental sustainability (e.g. through CO2 reduction from car driving; see e.g. Bertolini 2020); and inspiring broader change (Bertolini, 2020; VanHoose & Bertolini, 2023). Increasingly, research on street experiments

focuses on implementation-oriented details for upscaling, design and morphology (e.g. Natividade et al. 2021; Pollack Porter et al., 2022; Scerri and Attard, 2023). Critical academic reflections also continue to surface in the academic field (e.g. Sierhuis et al. 2023, Verlinghieri et al. 2023b), but more rarely. This commentary, inserted into the special issue on street experiments of the *Journal of Urban Mobility*, tries to reach both audiences and call for a return to some of the critical views – both new and old – to (re-)ground the debate on street experiments. Embracing the four criticisms presented in this article, then, is proposed not as a negation of the potentials in favour of liveability, sustainability, and change, but as a means to strengthen the very core of what the 'street experiment' struggles to be. These four criticisms are not new, but rather have been allowed to sink into the background as the Covid-19

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¹ Note that here "street experiments" are defined in a broad sense, aligned with Bertolini (2020, p.735): "an intentional, temporary change of the street use, regulation and/or form, aimed at exploring systemic change in urban mobility, away from "streets for traffic", and towards "streets for people"", and including the further specifications in that article. It might include broader terms such as "tactical urbanism", for example, when this is applied in a street setting (for instance, Barcelona's Superblocks have been discussed as "experiments" in street and traffic management and as "tactical urbanism" more broadly (see e.g. Angelovski et al. 2023, Nello-Deakin 2023). However, much debate could (and perhaps should) ensue on this definition.

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pandemic and other circumstances have made street experiments ever more promising. By digging up and collecting these critical perspectives on street experiments, the commentary hopes to both inspire debate and encourage an ethical and grounded approach to continued research and practice on street experiments. In the following, this commentary will thus turn to four recurring critiques of street experiments and shed some light on how they could be addressed.

The first critique refers to what can provocatively be called the 'impertinence of impermanence'. Experiments can make it quick and easy for (local) governments to make interventions under the guise of temporary changes with the continued capacity to revert these changes fully (see e.g. [Letunik 2022](#) and [SET 2023](#) where street experiments are commended for being 'quick & cheap to implement compared to traditional planning'). Those advocating experimentation often see the quick, easy and reversible implementation as a key strength of experiments: they can also go wrong, but, if they do, then they can simply be removed – [Bertolini \(2020\)](#) also notes this in his review of both positive and problematic sides of street experiments. If the experiments ultimately emerge as desirable, the idea is that they might eventually be turned into something more permanent, depending on political will and other factors (see [VanHoose and Bertolini \(2023\)](#) for a brief exploration of the potential drawbacks of dissolving the initiatives once they have proven themselves). As [Bertolini \(2020\)](#) describes, the possibility to remove street experiments' physical elements again helps make street experiments feasible, but also often diminishes their capacity for more far-reaching or lasting change. [Sierhuis et al. \(2023\)](#) more recently go further into depth on this, challenging the a-political tendencies of urban experimentation more generally. Nevertheless, street experiments are often proposed with the explicit objective of advocating lasting change, and deliberately create hope and present alternatives that could become part of participants' daily lives ([Bertolini, 2020](#); [Lab van Troje, 2017](#); [VanHoose et al., 2022](#)). In that process, the people participating in setting up experiments often invest a lot of time and energy into creating new street spaces and uses in their own time, and expectations of permanence become continuously stronger. This could be seen even in some overall very celebrated and locally valued "Living Streets" experiments in Ghent, Belgium, for example, and was part of the reflection at the ending congress (see [Lab van Troje, 2017](#)), where hope was expressed for follow-up transformative steps to be taken by the local government. The expectations are frequently not met. Other such reflections were witnessed by the author in as diverse places as Mexico, Brazil, the UK and the Netherlands. Often, results from street experiments are intangible or slow to materialise ([Bertolini, 2020](#); [VanHoose et al., 2022](#)), leaving participants frustrated, especially if they had been working towards something more extensive. One can imagine 'participation fatigue' emerging, highlighting processes in which governments call on the same people repeatedly, asking for much time and energy but giving little back in return. This idea came into popular debate for some time in the Netherlands around 2018 ([Gebiedsontwikkeling.nu, 2018](#)), and seems adequate for describing some of the frustrations about lacking or inconclusive results despite active engagement ([Participation Fatigue, 2023](#)). The 'impertinence of impermanence' can also be connected to the idea of "responsibilization" of citizens, where the government gives its responsibility, for example for public space, over to the citizens using it ([Zandbergen & Jaffe, 2014](#)). Can one say that the government is avoiding making hard political decisions by having individuals implement their own street- and neighbourhood preferences and allowing it until someone complains? And subsequently seeing the government's role as manager of complaints in whichever way is politically acceptable at the time of the complaint? It is not that simple, certainly. However, perhaps the "responsibilization" should be reverted: returning much responsibility to the state, while citizens take the role of demanding that the state give more attention to the public interest, for example through the re-appropriation of streets for non-mobile, inclusive uses. Such a re-appropriation facilitated by the state might turn out to involve experiments or straight-up changes (i.e. not demarcated as

experimental), but citizens' demands are then less likely to be filtered by a managerial institutionalised approach. Instead, they would be led by a spirit of political action. This makes the negotiations that become necessary very different and returns focus to the questions of what the public interest is, who decides about it and based on what factors (finance? justice? supply-and-demand? individualism? kindness? mutual respect?). The 'impertinence' ultimately emerges not from expecting people to contribute to their own well-being and that of their neighbours. Rather, it comes from expecting citizens – to put it bluntly – to take the reins until the hard part is over, and then hand the 'product' over to an external judge, thereby leaving the formerly transformed space to its fate again, as if nothing had happened. Currently, it is hard to foresee which arguments will make decision-makers choose the extent to which an experiment can be made 'permanent', long-lasting, or perhaps even 'significant'. Often, it seems, the decisions are led by financial calculations. This is related to the next critique.

The second critique refers to the commercialization of (street) experiments. It seems that one of the most successful types of street experiments in terms of lasting in the same or very similar form over a long time are parklets² ([Littke, 2016](#); [Lydon & Garcia, 2015](#)). These began as appropriations, sometimes commercial, sometimes not, of individual car-parking spaces along streets to host - instead of a car - a wooden stage that expands the sidewalk into that space, and then includes various kinds of furnishings: benches, plants, bike-parking spaces, tables, etc. In more commercial cases, the parklet is usually turned into a quite standard extension of a café/restaurant, with tables and chairs. In several countries, the process of creating a parklet has been completely institutionalised, with standardised procedures and regulations for application and implementation at the respective local municipalities ([Lydon & Garcia, 2015](#)). Parklets can, at least for those with an open mind, be a clear hint as to the kind of choice it is to use so much space for cars, when it could also be used for many other purposes (see e.g. [Rowe 2021](#), [von Schönfeld and Bertolini 2017](#)). However, the way parklets have been institutionalised and standardised around the world is very related to the extent to which parklets can be made financially viable and defensible through commercial interest. That is, the café or restaurant takes into account the potentially lost customer's parking space and takes responsibility for the consequences. This is made easier through the argument of it being possible to remove the parklet again. [Douay and Prevot \(2014\)](#), for instance, also note the dubious relation of parklets and commercialization, in the context of Park(ing) Day. It may be worthwhile to explore the extent to which the motivations for implementing parklets are about an environmental or civic improvement, versus the calculation of commercial benefits. None of this negates the value of parklets in general, and much less of those parklets that are less- or non-commercial, which may for instance create public space accessible also beyond those who can pay for a coffee or meal. However, the commercialisation such experiments does seem to diminish the radicality of these proposals in terms of lasting change. After all, if their ability to 'last' depends on their ability to incorporate themselves into existing financialising and managerial/bureaucratic processes, to what extent can they be radical? Or is it a question of what 'lasting' means, and the relation between 'lasting' and 'significant', as well as of which elements one wants to change? If the aim is to diminish car-use, why care about commercialisation? These are fair arguments, I would say. However, my own inclination based on experience within and outside academia, is to observe that continuing processes of commercialisation of public space that remain within the base-line logics of financial justification of choices (i.e. as "rational economic man"), also mean that moving away from car-use will not occur radically. Rather, in this way car-use reduction will likely be slow and isolated from many of the other

² Arguably, school streets should also be considered as a frequent example. However, depending on the context, these seem to last most when they are institutional initiatives from the start, rather than experiments first.

environmental and societal issues that car-use has brought with it, such as the impact on conviviality, imaginaries, and social justice. Parklets may not be the only kind of street experiment, but they are one of the most common ones, perhaps exactly *because* they are so aligned with the current commercial justifications for use of space. When a school street or “living street” or other form of street experiment is justified towards a wider public, or to ask for support from government, proponents often recur to the financial benefits for a given area – for local businesses, for example. It is not that financial considerations should be disregarded, necessarily, but it seems they are dominant. Even when safety and sustainability justifications are also increasingly powerful... are they ever enough if an initiative is not also considered “financially viable” or “profitable”? And when initiatives do not work within this commercial logic – perhaps it would be interesting to zoom in on that and discover why. That is, to ask whether something like an intersection adjustment, for example, outright disregards or even runs against commercial interests, or whether commercialization is only not an issue when no obvious opposition from commercial interests happens to surface. In Porto, Portugal, for example, a series of initiatives pedestrianizing twelve streets in the city during the Covid-19 Pandemic resulted in only a single one of them remaining as such, with a chief reason being the pressure for car access for commercial purposes (Porto, 2020; Revista Viva Porto, 2020). Beyond street experiments, it may be interesting to investigate whether “experimentation” that is given this name for the purpose of political acceptability and feasibility within a market-oriented context can ever be freed from a logic of commercial validation, and thus from societal exclusion or inclusion based on economic capabilities.

The third critique refers to the question of privilege. The retelling of this critique in relation to street experiments is mainly based on ongoing observations of such initiatives throughout Europe and Latin America (personal and in articles), and on conversations with others working on this topic. The places where street experiments are implemented, at least in a formalized way, are usually already privileged or else located in areas where the experiment frequently leads to gentrification and displacement of people in socio-economically less privileged circumstances. A more thorough analysis of the experiments collected on the streetexperiments.com website could be conducted in this regard, but a quick superficial search there, as well as the following of recent research on street experiments at a geography conference in 2023 supports this hypothesis; see also Descant (2020). The implementation of street experiments in privileged areas is frequently defended with arguments such as: if the privileged become convinced of the value of a given intervention, then the intervention will be more likely to become mainstream, and eventually lead to adoption in all sorts of areas, including those of the less privileged (this was an argument commonly raised by respondents I interviewed in Mexico City about where cycle lanes and “eco-bici” shared bicycle stations were being placed). This logic sounds rather a lot like the “trickle-down” effect advertised in economics. Whether the economics of it does or does not work, it is an approach that removes responsibility, choices and decisions from planners, policy-makers and (non-organised and/or non-wealthy) citizens. The privileged locations of street experiments might also be looked upon with a woeful smile, saying something like, “well, the privileged simply have more time and money to invest in such things. But that should not mean they should not do it!” Again, perhaps true, but it is also a depoliticised approach that diverts from the social responsibility of challenging privilege or encouraging efforts to facilitate and protect improvements also with and for less privileged people. When looking at exceptions, where street experiments have been implemented explicitly in less privileged locations, some research places significant emphasis on gentrifying effects (Goossens et al., 2020; Slabaugh et al., 2023), others demonstrate the effect of experiments being used as “flagships” and therefore needing to emphasize feasibility, as well as the impact of non-equity-oriented policies (Anguelovski et al., 2023). Some even highlight what seem to be specifically equity-oriented approaches that

show experiments being initiated by local government specifically in non-privileged areas (e.g. Aldred et al. 2021). Without wanting to be overly cynical, it might be worth questioning whether street experiments in less privileged locations (usually implemented by local governments) are found there because of true concern and care for those locations and the people living there, or because this is where the implementation may be “easier” or a quick win in terms of governmental image and substituting a more permanent logic in political decision-making by those governments (for diverse perspectives, see: Aldred et al. 2021, Anguelovski et al. 2023, Douay and Prevot 2014, SET 2023, Verlinghieri et al. 2023b, Vitale Brovarone et al. 2023). And where well-intentioned action truly is attempted, when can it truly trigger improvement when its implementation is contingent on conditions systemically dependent on societal inequalities? Furthermore, in the existing research and policies on equity, there seems to be a focus on ethnicity and combined socio-economic lack of privilege, but little emphasis on income, wealth, or family composition, for example, which might be impactful categories. Despite the steps already taken, and questions already asked, it seems worthwhile to explore the relationship between experimentation and privilege even further.³

Finally, I want to highlight a fourth critique. This one concerns a geographical bias of research on street experiments in the “Global North” and Latin America, notably in academic research and broader publications⁴. My own background and experience led me to see the Global North and Latin America as extremely rich and worthy of investigation, providing many valuable insights. However, there are more such places in the world, and even more very different and interesting places to compare and contrast realities with. There are countless streets around the world that embody what street experiments are about, without having ever been so designated nor designed. I expect that it would be extremely valuable to explore that further, and compare and contrast the power of, for example, a conscious, designated experimentation and a more organic one in achieving the ultimate goals of street experiments as defined in current research (as in Bertolini’s (2020): “towards streets for people and away from streets for traffic”). For example, one might ask if less planned “experimentation” would depend on less interventional or controlling authorities. Within such research it would be crucial to avoid a linear evolutionary perspective⁵ that perceives a low-car-traffic street that does not divide pedestrian space from car-space in an urban area in the interior of, say, the Democratic Republic of Congo or Tanzania, to be more primitive and not “developed enough” yet. The underlying assumption in those approaches is usually that if the area did become more “developed” it would end up making way for more cars, more segregation, and only *after* that stage might end up “experimenting” with less car-centric approaches (as the most evolved form of implementing people-centred ideas?). Some authors have recently highlighted the value in comparing streets in the Netherlands and Japan (van den Heuvel et al., 2020) which already demonstrate significant unexpected insights between distant countries within the “Global North”. What about doing something like this with India, Kazakhstan, or Madagascar? Or even the South Pole, while we’re at it?

³ Indeed, might there be an inverse relationship when comparing street experiments with other types of experiments? When it comes to experimenting with higher-risk implementations, such as pesticides or varied types of water sanitation or provision for example, might less privileged people be more likely to be “first served”? With which justification?

⁴ The ‘Street Experiments Tool’ (<https://streetexperiments.com/>) shows some examples from elsewhere, but those examples seem to be generally inspired by what is seen as a global trend, originating in the Global North, rather than seen as locally inspired initiatives. These examples also do not seem to be quickly picked up in academia nor practice on the subject.

⁵ See also developmentalist and evolutionary perspectives as discussed for example by Dirlik (2014) and Chapter 1 of Graeber and Wengrow (2021).

Ultimately, this commentary hopes to encourage planners (and others) engaging with (street) experiments to (re-)ground their motivations and actions within the tumult of enthusiasms arising in relation to many types of experiments. The Multi-level Perspective (MLP) (Geels, 2012) and sustainability transitions studies (Loorbach et al., 2017; Markard et al., 2012) have inspired much research on street experiments (VanHoose et al., 2022; von Schönfeld & Bertolini, 2017). The vision there is one of niches slowly infiltrating regimes. This perspective can be a useful analytical tool. But, at least in most (street) experiment applications, it seems to place market-driven niches alongside politically driven ones and to neutralise the political choices of the 'regime'. It also seems to remove the regime from engaging in its own niche-work, and emphasises long-term change as being almost invariably slow change. In short, such an approach (whether linked or not to the MLP), reduces efforts for change to their marketing capacities. Perhaps switching up the theoretical groundwork more frequently (as done for example by Verlinghieri et al. (2023b) and addressing some of the questions raised by the critiques related in this commentary, can provide further hints towards more creative and ultimately even environmentally and socially more just societal and planetary configurations. Graeber and Wengrow (2021, pp. 525–526) argue that myths are important tools for understanding the past and present, and for imagining the future, but that there is recently in human history an unusually un-creative and small set of dominant myths about human nature (e.g. we are left to choose between a Hobbesian or a Rousseau-ian worldview). In line with Graeber and Wengrow, I would like to end this commentary with a call for creating different myths. Creative myths. Concretely, for (street) experiments, this might entail different myths in terms of what the role of markets can and should be, what the role of politics can and should be, and what "post-car" might mean. It may align with the idea of post-mobility (Cresswell, 2020; Ferreira et al., 2017; von Schönfeld & Ferreira, 2022), but it also invites creativity beyond binaries (Keskitalo, 2023), even beyond 'third ways', challenging the idea of 'scaling up' as a virtue, and so on (for some inspiration, see Bina et al. 2020, Wall Kimmerer 2013, Zapata and Bates 2021). In Graeber and Wengrow's (2021, p.8) words, "is not the capacity to experiment with different forms of social organization itself a quintessential part of what makes us human? [...] The ultimate question of human history [...] is not our equal access to material resources (land, calories, means of production), much though these things are obviously important, but our equal capacity to contribute to decisions about how to live together. Of course, to exercise that capacity implies that there should be something meaningful to decide in the first place." Indeed, I hope that the search for those meaningful "somethings" (in my view, plural) and the kind of experimentation these authors refer to, will motivate continued implementations and explorations of both experiments in general and street experiments in particular.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Kim Carlotta von Schönfeld: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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