Enhancing city vitality by building platforms for interactive political leadership

Experiences and results from a longitudinal design experiment

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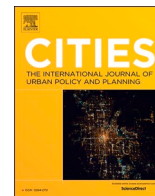
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A B S T R A C T

Efforts made by cities to enhance their vitality are often hampered by local councilors failing to set the political agenda, define pressing problems, and design and implement solutions that spur social cohesion, cultural creativity, and sustainable development. Experimentation with new forms of interactive political leadership may offer a solution by soliciting valuable input from affected citizens. Focusing on a Danish frontrunner municipality, this article reports on a longitudinal design experiment aimed at designing a platform for interactive political leadership and improving the functioning of the arenas for co-created policymaking that it supports. The analysis builds on mixed methods, and the findings advance our knowledge of the institutional design of co-creation and the effectiveness of new forms of citizen participation. The article concludes that design experiments can both produce context-dependent scientific knowledge about what works and enable practitioners to improve concrete efforts to enhance city vitality.

1. Introduction

Cities are facing increasing turbulence triggered by disruptive technologies, economic and cultural globalization, and the pervasiveness of complex societal problems, all of which interact to create 'events and demands that are highly variable, inconsistent, unexpected or unpredictable' (Ansell et al., 2021: 950). Urban turbulence is exacerbated by a series of overlapping, cross-boundary crises that tend to destabilize the current socio-political order and create uncertainty, hardship, and conflicting demands. The climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine that has generated a refugee crisis, an inflation crisis and an energy crisis provide stark illustrations. While facing a tsunami of crises caused by external events, most cities are also challenged by problems within their own system of governance, which struggles with organizational fragmentation, implementation problems, and a mounting cross-pressure between increasing popular demands and scarce public resources. These governance problems are occurring at a time when elected city councilors tend to exercise weak political leadership. Hence, elected politicians are often sidelined by professional public managers who are driving the policy process; they tend to suffer from tunnel vision inflicted by the many hours spent processing cases in standing political committees; and they lack face-to-face dialogue with relevant and affected citizens who could provide insights and ideas that

could help politicians to better understand the problems at hand and to develop innovative, yet feasible solutions (Kjær & Opstrup, 2016).

The problems facing modern cities combine to form a perfect storm that seriously constrains strategic political efforts to strengthen urban vitality, as measured in terms of the empowerment and well-being of citizens and the enhancement of social cohesion, cultural creativity, and sustainable economic growth (Mouratidis & Poortinga, 2020). One possible escape from this pinch is for elected city councilors to strengthen their political leadership, mobilize administrative and societal resources, and develop robust governance solutions characterized by flexible adaptation and proactive innovation in response to the heightened societal turbulence (Ansell et al., 2021; Sørensen & Ansell, 2021). While this is a tall order, as local place-based leadership takes place in the context of multi-scalar governance and entrenched policies (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005; Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020), the daunting task may be accomplished through the development of new forms of 'interactive political leadership' (Ansell & Torfing, 2017; Sørensen, 2020; Sørensen & Torfing, 2019), which in turn can be supported by the formation of institutional platforms designed to facilitate sustained interaction between elected politicians and local citizens and to spur their efforts to co-create innovative and adaptive solutions to urban challenges (Ansell & Gash, 2018).

We know very little about how such platforms affect the ability of

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local political leaders to develop adaptive and innovative policy solutions that can help enhancing the vitality of their city. In an attempt to fill this knowledge gap, this article asks: *How can cities enhance their vitality by building platforms of interactive political leadership and attempting to manage arenas for co-creation that involve local councilors and citizens in fostering innovative public value outcomes* (Ansell & Gash, 2018; Sørensen & Torfing, 2019)? This question is answered by reporting on the experiences from and results of a 6-year design experiment conducted in Gentofte, a Danish city working to create a more interactive political leadership by building platforms and arenas for co-creating public policy together with relevant and affected citizens. Denmark provides a global exemplar of good governance (Fukuyama, 2015; Marques & Morgan, 2021) and has lengthy traditions regarding the collaborative involvement of citizens in urban development. Gentofte Municipality is an affluent, well-managed municipality with a stable political majority. Hence, this represents a most likely case with respect to succeeding with interactive political leadership scaffolded by collaborative platforms. This means that the case has clear beacon potential, albeit the experiences are difficult to replicate in countries with a weak tradition for citizen engagement.

In 2014, the Gentofte City Council invited us to help diagnose the challenges to the exercise of local political leadership and provide inspiration for how to reform the operation of the city council in order to strengthen local councilors role as political leaders by creating new opportunities for develop concrete policy solutions in close dialogue with the citizens. We suggested some new models for interactive political leadership based on problem-focused interaction between elected politicians and selected groups of citizens. After some discussion back and forth in the City Council, our suggestions were adopted and implemented and in 2015, we were asked to evaluate the introduction of the new so-called 'task committees' that typically consist of five elected councilors and ten citizens working together to solve one of the pressing problems confronting the municipality (Sørensen & Torfing, 2016).[1] We gladly accepted the invitation and in June 2016 we submitted our evaluation report, which was based on a general study of the expectations and experiences of the elected councilors and an in-depth study of a task committee aiming to develop a new youth policy. After this initial round of evaluation, which focused on improving the institutional design of the platform for interactive political leadership, we followed two additional task committees, each aiming to co-create innovative solutions that enhance city vitality. First, one of our PhD students followed a task committee commissioned to develop a strategy for urban renewal in the field of general housing, and we then followed a task committee commissioned to develop the local libraries into cultural hubs. All three task committees were studied as part of a longitudinal design experiment aiming to diagnose problems and make suitable interventions aimed at improving the platform and arenas for interactive political leadership.

Conducting design experiments with the design and management of the Gentofte task committees allowed us to develop, test, and improve a promising prototype of what interactive political leadership may look like in practice in order to unleash its innovative potential. Although these committees ultimately proved an unequivocal success, the three rounds of our design experiment reveal that there is much to gain from continuously improving the institutional design of the general platform and the concrete arenas. Moreover, the empirical study demonstrates how design experiments can be an important tool – not only for researchers exploring the potential of new institutional designs, but also

for practitioners aiming to fulfill their governance ambitions.

On top of its contribution to the growing debate about the use of experimentation in social science research (Ansell & Bartenberger, 2016, 2017; Heijden, 2016), the article provides inputs to four important scholarly debates. First, the ongoing discussion of how citizen participation and co-creation can help strengthen political leadership and foster robust governance solutions in the face of mounting turbulence (Røiseland & Vabo, 2016; Sørensen et al., 2020; Sørensen et al., 2021). Second, the important research investigating the role of institutional design and management practices for creating successful outcomes of participatory and collaborative governance (Bryson et al., 2020; Fung, 2003; Smith, 2009). Third, the efforts to strengthen city vitality, which often focus more on measurement (see Griffin et al., 2016; Stern & Seifert, 2013) than improving urban environments through collaborative governance (Bruntlett & Bruntlett, 2018). And fourth, the brand-new call for the development of a positive public administration research seeking to identify and learn from governance success to improve public governance and create value for citizens and society at large (Compton et al., 2021; Douglas et al., 2021).

The article begins with a brief account of the theory of interactive political leadership and the role of the platforms and arenas in scaffolding the policy interaction with lay actors. Next, it introduces the empirical case and explains the basic design of the co-called Gentofte Model. The method section describes the procedures for conducting design experiments (Stoker & John, 2009), presents the methods used for data collection and data analysis, and discusses the impact of the constraints resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The empirical findings are presented in three parts: the first part briefly reports the results of the initial evaluation and transformation of the institutional design of the platforms and arenas for interactive political leadership; the second part briefly reports the experiences with building local leadership and management capacities in relation to a task committee on urban renewal; and the third part explicates the lessons learned from the last round of our longitudinal design experiment, where we made three consecutive interventions in a task committee aiming to transform public libraries into cultural hubs. The discussion reflects on what we have learned about using platforms for interactive political leadership to enhance city vitality and sum up our experiences with design experiments as a lever for change.

2. Theoretical framework

The education revolution and anti-authoritarian cultural revolts in the 1960s and 1970s, together with the positive and empowering experiences with citizen participation in the 1980s and 1990s, contributed to the development of an increasingly competent, critical, and assertive citizenry (Dalton & Welzel, 2014, 2017) interested in participating more directly and actively in critically discussing and proactively shaping decisions that affect their life quality. Citizens are neither satisfied with being treated as 'clients' by bureaucratic service organizations nor with being reduced to 'customers' choosing between public and private welfare providers in the newly constructed quasi-markets. Depending on national and local traditions, cultures, and experiences, growing numbers of citizens are demanding to be heard and considered as active partners in the production of governance solutions that can improve their quality of life. Citizens with less education and political knowledge who perceive elected politicians as unresponsive to their demands may turn their backs on political participation, supporting instead a 'stealth democracy', which leaves political decision-making to the governing elites (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). However, as documented in a design experiment conducted by Neblo et al. (2018), this preference for non-participation is often rooted in disaffection with the available options for democratic participation rather than with democracy per se. Hence, citizens frustrated with the limitations of electoral democracy and confrontational townhall meetings may still be motivated to participate in interactive political

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[1] It is important to note that in order to avoid the interactive arena being captured by strong interest groups, the local politicians chose to engage citizens rather than with private business firms and organized stakeholders. Sometimes, the invited citizens were business leaders or came from large interest organizations, but they were chosen because of their personal skills and competences and not as representatives of corporate actors.

processes through which they are able to communicate directly with elected politicians and are invited to contribute to the development of needs-based policy solutions (Ansell & Torfing, 2021a).

In response to the growing demands for direct and active participation, co-creation has emerged as a tool for mobilizing the resources of active citizens and responsible stakeholders, fostering innovative and adaptive solutions, and creating joint ownership over new and bold endeavors (Michels & De Graaf, 2010; Torfing et al., 2019; Ansell & Torfing, 2021a). Co-creation challenges the bureaucratic and professional monopoly on service production and public problem-solving (Brandsen et al., 2018), and it seeks to replace the New Public Management vision of public governance as based on public–private competition (Hood, 1991) with a preference for cross-boundary collaboration (Ansell & Gash, 2008) in line with the New Public Governance (Osborne, 2010). The aim of this collaborative turn in public governance is to involve relevant and affected actors in the constructive management of difference to find joint solutions to common problems (Gray, 1989).

In the public sector, co-creation was originally seen as a strategy for public managers and employees to mobilize local ideas and resources to improve and innovate public governance and services (Ostrom, 1996; Ostrom & Whitaker, 1973), and this perspective still seems to dominate recent research (Brandsen et al., 2018). However, co-creation may also help elected politicians to better understand the problems at hand and to design new and better solutions in response to local needs while fostering broad-based ownership of new solutions (Ansell & Torfing, 2017). This recent insight into co-created policymaking has led to the development of the concept of interactive political leadership (Sørensen, 2020; Sørensen & Torfing, 2018, 2019) aimed at capturing how the sustained interaction between politicians and societal actors may strengthen political leadership.

Tucker famously defined political leadership as the effort to undertake three core functions: 1) identify and define public problems that call for collective action; 2) formulate collective goals and policy proposals in response to problems on the political agenda; and 3) mobilize support for their implementation (Tucker, 1995). These basic functions of political leadership can all be strengthened by connecting the political elites with politically competent, critical, and assertive citizens and spurring dialogical interaction and mutual learning based on an open-ended exchange of experiences, ideas, and visions (Sørensen, 2020). As a channel for enhanced participation and better-informed policymaking, interactive political leadership may help to improve the legitimacy of public governance and restore trust in elected politicians (Hysing, 2015). As such, it may not only help to foster needs-based policy solutions that increase urban vitality but could also provide the antidote to the rise in authoritarian populism that preys on citizens' mistrust in insulated political elites that are isolated from the people (Stoker, 2016).

Interactive political leadership may also help to produce robust responses to the crisis-induced turbulence confronting modern cities. When hit by crises, cities often counter them with resilience strategies aimed at enhancing the socio-economic system's capacity to 'bounce back' and restore the equilibrium that has been disturbed (Meerow et al., 2016). Sometimes, however, the past equilibrium is neither possible to restore nor very attractive. In such cases, governance actors may seek to exploit the crisis to 'bounce forward' and get to a new and better place. This strategy for a more dynamic resilience is exactly what the new research literature refers to as 'robust governance' (Capano & Woo, 2018). Robust governance combines flexible adaptation with proactive innovation in an attempt to deal constructively with crisis-induced turbulence by using continuous and multidimensional strategic change as a tool to uphold basic values, goals, and functions (Ansell et al., 2015).

Successful, interactive political leadership based on co-created policymaking may help to foster robust governance solutions based on a combination of collective wisdom, collaborative innovation, and

learning-based adaptation (Landemore & Elster, 2012; Torfing, 2016; Ansell et al., 2021). However, many things can go wrong in the process of recruiting the participants in politically sponsored co-creation processes, building trust, promoting collaboration, stimulating creative and transformative learning, fostering agreement, and securing resources and support for implementation (Ansell & Torfing, 2021b). Avoiding or mitigating such problems requires the formation of platforms and arenas for co-creation (Ansell & Gash, 2018; Meijer & Boon, 2021) together with the exercise of a new form of co-creational leadership and management based on facilitation, horizontal alignment, distribution of leadership tasks and high-intensive communication (Hofstad et al., 2021).

The emphasis on constructing co-creation platforms and arenas is a part of a new turn toward generative governance focused on how to create institutional designs that stimulate and support co-creation processes without determining their form and content (Ansell & Miura, 2020; O'Reilly, 2011). Platforms are relatively permanent institutional constructs that provide organizational templates, procedures, resources, experiences, and advice that make it easy to form temporary, purpose-built arenas for multi-actor collaboration (Ansell & Torfing, 2021b). The emerging arenas for co-creation tend to be formed around a particular problem, challenge, or goal, and they are dissolved once they have served their purpose, although sometimes they manage to renew and expand their mandate or create a spill-over effect by giving rise to new arenas (Ansell & Torfing, 2021a).

The institutional design of platforms and arenas can be seen as a kind of hands-off metagovernance seeking to govern self-regulated governance processes remotely by shaping their form and framing their content (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). To be effective, hands-off metagovernance based on institutional design must be supplemented with a more hands-on metagovernance aimed at leading and managing the problem-focused co-creation processes without reverting too much to traditional bureaucratic forms of command and control (Peters et al., 2022; Torfing, 2022). As such, interactive political leadership through co-created policymaking challenges the traditional forms of top-down public leadership based on conditional rewards and punishment and calls for a new type of horizontal, distributive, and relational leadership (Hofstad et al., 2021). The responsibility for the metagoverning through the construction of platforms and arenas for interactive political leadership typically lies with leading politicians and their administrative aides who may team up to metagovern the co-creation process.

In sum, the design of institutional platforms and arenas for co-created policymaking provide opportunities for elected politicians to get much needed inputs that can strengthen their political leadership while enabling competent, critical, and assertive citizens to influence their living conditions. Platforms and arenas for interactive political leadership based on co-creation play an increasingly important role in urban governance (Haveri & Anttiroiko, 2021), often taking the form of urban living labs that bring together elected politicians, public managers, and citizens (Marvin et al., 2018; Von Wirth et al., 2019).

3. The Gentofte model

Several empirical studies confirm the growing demand of elected politicians for citizen and stakeholder input to better understand policy problems and to produce smart, robust solutions that enjoy widespread support (Ercan, 2014; Hambleton & Sweeting, 2014; Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2016, 2019; Lees-Marshment, 2015, 2016; Murphy et al., 2020 and Torfing et al., 2020). A Delphi study involving academics and expert practitioners in the identification of Danish municipalities that had recently experimented with the formation of arenas for interaction between politician and citizens confirmed that Gentofte was the ultimate frontrunner with respect to facilitating interactive political leadership. While a 'most likely' case tends to create a positivity bias, it is well suited to learn about the barriers to new forms of governance and how they can be overcome.

Let us briefly describe the core features of the so-called Gentofte Model (see Sørensen & Torfing, 2016, 2019). Gentofte Municipality, situated north of Copenhagen, has 75,000 inhabitants. It is an affluent, well-managed, and innovative municipality led by the Conservative Party, which commands an absolute majority but nonetheless rules based on a broad political coalition also comprising social democratic and liberal parties. After several years of experimentation with citizen participation, the City Council invited us to make some suggestions about how to strengthen political leadership based on citizen input. Based on our suggestions, the mayor and municipal CEO suggested a new model that was debated, amended, and finally approved by the City Council with effect from August 1, 2015. The new model was subsequently incorporated in the Local Governance Ordinance, which regulates the City Council's political work.

The institutional reform completely transformed the *modus operandi* of the City Council and its standing committees, introducing a new kind of thematic and participatory ad hoc committee: the task committee (Sørensen & Torfing, 2015). The new and relatively institutionalized framework regulating the use of task committees provides a platform for establishing problem-focused co-creation arenas that facilitate sustained interaction between elected politicians and local citizens around pressing policy problems. To begin with, the City Council formed eight task committees, typically consisting of five councilors and ten appointed citizens, who were assisted by three to four administrators acting as legal-administrative experts and practical facilitators. At the time of writing, 42 task committees established by the City Council have completed their respective missions.

The new platform works as follows. The City Council issues a written remit or mandate for each task committee. The mandate describes the background and nature of the policy problem, the overall political objectives, the existing policies requiring consideration, and the expected delivery (e.g., a vision, policy, strategy, action plan, or list of proposals). It also determines the timeframe and defines the 'competence profiles' of the citizens who are invited to participate in the task committee. People from key stakeholder organizations may participate as single individuals with special competences, but not as representatives of their organization equipped with a particular set of interests. The mandate and a call for citizen participants matching the competence profiles are widely advertised in local newspapers, on bulletin boards and at various websites. The call for participants urges citizens to register on the municipal website if they are interested in participating in a task committee and think they match one or more of the competence profiles. At a subsequent meeting, the local councilors compare the self-registered citizens with the competence profiles in the mandate and formally select and appoint the citizen participants. The citizens who were not appointed to a task committee are later offered alternative ways of participating in working groups, camps, public hearings etc. The City Council also decides which of the local councilors should participate in which task committees. The politicians are distributed based on a mathematical model ensuring the proportional representation of the different party alliances across the task committees.

Two local councilors appointed by the City Council chair the meetings, which meet for 2–3 h on fixed dates over a 3–6-month period, sometimes longer. The chair and vice-chair open and conclude the meetings, the rest being facilitated by skilled public administrators who are commissioned to get everyone involved in open-ended discussions about the problem at hand and possible solutions. The meetings are relatively informal, external guests are frequently invited, and deliberative techniques are applied to facilitate knowledge-sharing, stimulate discussion, and generate new ideas. The task committees are free to organize their work however they want, and they may choose to organize excursions, hearings and workshops, or form sub-committees. The task committee ultimately presents its results to the City Council, which then makes the final decision about whether to endorse, amend, or reject their proposal(s) and, if necessary, how to finance and implement it. Hence, the interactive policy process begins and ends with the local

council to ensure the primacy of politics in representative democracy.

Since the councilors' participation in the new task committees is time-consuming, the City Council has reduced the number of standing committee meetings. Aside from the Budget Committee and Planning Committee, all of the standing committees have gone from 11 to only four meetings per year, and their respective responsibilities have been redefined so that the focus is no longer on case-processing and budget control, but rather on the strategic monitoring of their policy area with special attention to the measurement of results and impacts and detection of problems and challenges that either call for new political guidelines for the administration or for co-created policymaking in a new task committee.

All in all, the introduction of task committees is a major municipal game changer aiming to replace sovereign political leadership with a more interactive political leadership. Like living labs, the task committees are placed-based platforms for open innovation, although the focus is more on co-created policymaking than on developing and testing prototypes of sustainable urban living. Still, new local policies may contribute to enhancing urban vitality by promoting new needs-based governance solutions.

4. Methodological approach

The Gentofte Model provides an interesting laboratory for studying the conditions for interactive political leadership. First, the selection of citizen participants based on competence profiles helps to avoid the participatory selection bias associated with open invitations that tend to favor the resourceful participants from the white retired middle class (Warren, 2013). Second, the mixed membership of the task committees, where politicians and citizens engage in joint discussions of how to solve pressing policy problems, tends to secure policy uptake (which is close to 100 % in Gentofte), as the participating politicians help to adjust the expectations of the citizens and tend to develop a strong sense of ownership of the policy proposals (see also Dryzek & Goodin, 2006). Finally, the permanent but adjustable platform for the formation of task committees helps to lower the transaction costs associated with the construction of new arenas for interactive political leadership and thus lends itself to adoption and adaptation in other municipalities (Sørensen & Torfing, 2019).

We have studied the Gentofte Model in three rounds since the autumn of 2015. Our study can best be described as a longitudinal *design experiment* (Stoker & John, 2009). In contrast to *Darwinian experiments* based on chance variation in numerous local projects and the natural selection of those that survive in the long run, design experiments have a clear focus on testing the impact of strategic interventions that are backed by theory and have a clear goal. In contrast to *controlled experiments*, design experiments do not abstract from the complexities of the real world by creating a closed system in which everything, but the intervention is controlled for; instead, they take place in open systems that may be impacted by concrete interventions but cannot be controlled (Ansell & Bartenberger, 2016). The downside of design experiments is that because they seek to identify the causal impact of context-dependent interventions in real-life settings, generalizing the results to other contexts is impossible without thorough translation efforts aiming to establish similarities and differences across contexts.

Design experiments emerged in aeronautics but have mostly been used in education research, where classroom environments are transformed to test the impact on learning (see Brown, 1992; Oshima et al., 2004). These origins may help to explain the rigorous technical procedure, which can be quite challenging when applied in a political environment. The first step in conducting a design experiment is to select a suitable real-life testing ground and define an overall goal to be achieved through experimentation. The next step is carefully diagnosing the problems in terms of the challenges and obstacles to goal achievement. The third step is to design and implement an intervention aiming to mitigate or remove one of the observed challenges and obstacles. To

overcome the ethical problem that would arise if researchers were to design an intervention that ended up harming the process and/or participants, it is necessary to build consensus about the problem diagnosis, the proposed intervention, and, preferably, let the practitioners implement it how they think best. The fourth step consists of measuring the impact of the intervention against some clear, agreed-upon criteria for successful goal achievement. If the intervention does not (or only partly) achieve the goal, new interventions are selected and implemented through an iterative process of diagnosis, intervention, and measurement of results. The final step is to establish causal inference between the interventions and their impact on the process, outputs, and outcomes while identifying the case-, sector-, and country-specific scope conditions (Stoker & John, 2009).

The collection of the data we needed to conduct a design experiment based on this simple recipe was based on mixed methods. In all three rounds of our longitudinal design experiment, we participated in preparatory meetings with politicians and administrators prior to a task committee meeting, observed face-to-face and online meetings in the task committees, analyzed available documents, conducted qualitative interviews with the participants to diagnose problems and assess the impact of interventions, and conducted mini-surveys to measure the participants' perceptions of the work in and aspirations of the task committees. Participation in the preparatory meetings was important for being able to create consensus about the goal of the design experiment, collectively diagnose barriers to goal achievement, foster agreement about relevant interventions, and ultimately evaluate these interventions. The observation of actual meetings allowed us to study the live politician–citizen interaction and was based on passive, non-participatory observation of who said what to whom and with what effect, how problems were defined and solutions developed, how conflicts were mitigated, and how leadership and management were exercised. Document studies included design documents, agendas, minutes, circulated reports, final proposal, etc., and they allowed us to study the formal structures, plans, and decisions. The qualitative interviews were semi-structured and enabled us to ask questions about the interaction process, the ensuing outputs and outcomes, and the drivers and barriers, while allowing the informant to mention important self-chosen incidents. Finally, mini-surveys were used to measure the participants' assessments of the process and its outputs and outcomes, and they were either administered online or in-person at the end of a physical meeting.

To archive the co-creation process and the data collected, we used a logbook in which we made entries every time we were in contact with the case. Here, we registered events and interpreted and reflected on their meaning and significance.

An overview of the data collected in each of the three rounds of the longitudinal design experiment is provided in Table 1.

The collection and coding of the data was conducted by three different researchers and broadly focused on the articulation of goals, barriers, interventions, and impacts, while allowing for the emergence of new coding sub-categories. Key documents, observations, and interviews were cross-coded to facilitate the discussion of coding precision and interpretations. The process was smooth and fairly standard, but problems with data collection arose in the third and most ambitious round of the design experiment, which was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdown in Denmark (March–May 2021) meant that only the first and last two meetings were physical, in-person meetings. The remaining five meetings were online. Online meetings were necessary to keep the co-creation process going, but they inhibited our ability to observe the meeting interaction and prevented us from conducting mini-surveys (handing out and collecting anonymous questionnaires in connection with physical meetings). Attempts at getting the participants to answer an online questionnaire resulted in a very low response rate. Short of a rigorous measurement of the impact of our interventions, we had to rely on a combination of observations and interviews when assessing the impact of the interventions, which produced slightly fuzzier answers than originally hoped.

Table 1
Data collection in three rounds of the longitudinal design experiment (2015–2021).

First round of the design experiment focusing on the evaluation of the overall institutional design of the platform and arenas for interactive political leadership and based on a study of the first eight task committees, especially the one aiming to develop a new youth policy (2015–2017)			
Preparatory meetings	8		
Observed meetings	9		
Collected documents	26		
Interviews	Politicians: 10	Citizens: 4	Administrators: 6	Total: 20
Mini-surveys	One survey administered to politicians (94 % response rate); one survey administered to administrative facilitators in eight task committees (100 % response rate); and one survey administered to the citizens participating in eight task committees (82 % response rate)		

Second round of the design experiment focusing on building local capacities to cope with paradoxes emerging in and around the attempt to lead and manage the co-creation process in the Task Committee on the Social Policy Aspects of Urban Renewal (2018–2020)			
Preparatory meetings	3		
Observed meetings	12		
Collected documents	30		
Interviews	Politicians: 4	Citizens: 4	Administrators: 5	Total: 13
Mini-surveys	N/A		

Third round of the design experiment aiming to discover how institutional design and process management can boost the innovation ambitions of citizens and politicians engaged in the co-creation of the development of public libraries into cultural hubs (2020–2021)			
Preparatory meetings	12		
Observed meetings	9		
Collected documents	38		
Interviews	Politicians: 4	Citizens: 8	Administrators: 3	Total: 15
Mini-surveys	One survey administered to all 15 members of the task committee online (response rate 47 %); and one survey administered to the same group in a meeting (response rate 95 %)		

On a final note, the design experiment was conducted based on an interactive research strategy requiring constant engagement and negotiation with actors from the field of study. This called for constant efforts to straddle the somewhat contradictory concerns for helping practitioners to achieve their goals and maintaining a certain distance to the case in order to allow critical reflection and draw lessons for research.

5. The empirical findings

The empirical findings are presented in three parts, corresponding to the three rounds of the design experiment. The constraint on length prompts us to focus on the most recent and most ambitious round of the longitudinal design experiment and only provide brief accounts of the two first rounds.

5.1. First round: institutional design of platforms and arenas for interactive political leadership

In the first round of the design experiment, we intervened in the operations of the City Council by inspiring the local councilors to introduce a new type of task committees as a supplement to the standing political committees. We then made a detailed description of the new institutional design, which provided a platform for the formation,

support, and use of task committees as arenas for co-created policy-making enabling the exercise of interactive political leadership. The description was based on available documents and interviews with leading politicians and administrators. The interviews also mapped the positive expectations to the new task committees as well as the skeptical concerns. To see how the new design worked in practices, we followed a task committee where five local councilors worked with a diverse group of youngsters to develop a new youth policy aimed at improving the quality of life for young people. It worked quite well in terms of good participation, generating lively discussion, and developing an innovative policy proposal with considerable impact. To broaden our evaluative focus, we made a new series of interviews with citizens, administrators, and politicians from across the different task committees to see whether the good and bad expectations were justified and to assess the overall performance of the new task committees.

The assessment was guided by three overall goals for the introduction of the new task committees: 1) the generation of innovative policy solutions, 2) the strengthening of political leadership, and 3) the enhancement of effective citizen participation. The overall evaluation of the functioning of the new task committees was very positive, and the politicians struggled to find negative things to say. As for the contribution to innovative policymaking, 48 % of the politicians agreed that the task committees had contributed to new and better solutions that neither the standing committees nor the City Council could have developed. The administrators were even more positive than the politicians on this count. As regards the strengthening of political leadership, 53 % of the politicians agreed that participation had given them new inputs and ideas; 54 % agreed that the task committees had fostered a constructive and crosscutting dialogue that had stimulated mutual learning; and 60 % agreed that the task committees had given them a better understanding of the problems and challenges at hand. Finally, as regards the strengthening of effective citizen participation, 90 % of the citizens found that the politicians were responsive to the points that they raised, and 85 % agreed that they had plenty of opportunities to give the politicians critical feedback.

The evaluation report also identified a few problems and discussed how they could be addressed in the future. The list of problems and recommendations proved to be an impactful second intervention, since the politicians and administrators took upon themselves to adjust the platform for the formation, support, and use of task committees in response to the points raised in the evaluation report. Table 2 lists the critical points raised in the evaluation report (Sørensen & Torfing, 2016) and the corresponding changes in the institutional design of the platform.

Later interviews with leading politicians and administrators confirmed our observations that the changes made in the wake of the evaluation report have improved the performance of the task committees, which now constitute the main political activity for the local councilors. In sum, our interventions have proven effective in achieving the initial goals of building a well-functioning platform for interactive political leadership.

5.2. Second round: building local capacities to cope with paradoxes emerging in co-created policymaking

Whereas the first round of the design experiment focused on the hands-off metagovernance of the overall institutional design of the new platform, the second round was meant to focus on the hands-on leadership and management of the co-creation processes in the task committees. The administrative facilitators often face paradoxes that are difficult to handle. To help enhance the local capacity for developing successful coping strategies, one of our PhD students followed a new task committee focusing on urban renewal-related social problems (Christensen, 2021). The question to be addressed by the task committee was how areas with general housing could be renewed and developed in ways that solve pressing social problems (e.g., drug abuse, crime, lack of

Table 2

Critical points raised in the evaluation report and the corresponding changes.

Critical points	Corresponding changes
The mayor and municipal CEO played a key role in selecting the topics for the first eight task committees	An inspirational seminar for all councilors generates ideas for new topics, the administrators help to get the ball rolling, and citizens can provide input through participation in Gentofte Meets, which is a new, open political festival
The administration played a key role in formulating the written mandates issued by the City Council	Two councilors are selected to work with the administration in formulating the written mandates. The mandates are thoroughly discussed and formally endorsed by the City Council
The politicians seemed reluctant to speak up and voice their opinions in the task committee meetings because they wanted to listen to the citizens	The local councilors have decided to be more visible and outspoken in the discussions with citizens and try to combine listening with asking questions and voicing their opinions
The ongoing feedback from the task committees to the City Council was weak	There is regular feedback to the City Council in joint meetings held prior to the ordinary Council meetings
The link to the professional staff responsible for the implementation of new policy solutions was weak	The written mandate specifies whether and how professional staff should be involved in the task committee work; e. g., through participation in meetings and working groups
The task committees focused little on implementation and the role of the citizens herein	The written mandate requires task committees to specify whether and how citizens can play a role in implementing new solutions
There was no feedback to the citizens informing them about what happened with the new ideas and solutions	Citizens who have participated in a task committee are celebrated and given an update on the implementation of new ideas and solutions at an annual meeting

integration of ethnic minorities, mental illness, and loneliness).

To diagnose the leadership and management challenges, the study identified four basic paradoxes defined as situations where contradictory, yet interrelated elements co-exist and persist over time (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 386). The *goal paradox* arose from the contradiction between the political goals described in the mandate and the needs articulated by the citizens that may go beyond the political goals. The *professional paradox* was rooted in the contradiction between the need for professional expert knowledge about the problems at hand and how there were no professional experts participating in the task committee. The *diversity paradox* was triggered by the contradiction between the formal inclusion of a diverse group of citizens and the internal and informal exclusion of some of the voices. Finally, the *political paradox* emanated from the contradiction between the political power and responsibility of the City Council and the decision to delegate some of this to the task committee. The paradoxes interacted and tended to hamper the co-creation process, thus calling for leadership and management. While paradoxes cannot be resolved based on logic, the tensions can be eased by using different coping strategies that either try to marginalize or suppress one side of the paradox, separate the two contradictory elements in time or space, or question, problematize, or transcend the paradox by exploiting the productivity of the tension without removing it. The study found that the coping strategies focusing on marginalization and separation were predominant and that the more proactive coping strategies aiming at renegotiated the paradoxes were underutilized (Christensen, 2021). Hence, the facilitators would have much to gain from learning how to use the full repertoire of coping strategies.

The critical diagnosis of emerging paradoxes and recommendations for how to cope with them in a productive way were communicated to the internal network of task committee facilitators as well as the administrative leaders. The task committee facilitators were excited to learn about the results and clearly recognized the paradoxes and the different ways of coping with them. Both observations from preparatory

meetings and interviews seem to indicate that the intervention in the leadership and management practices of the facilitators has created a new vocabulary and mindset that allows the facilitators to identify and reflect on the paradoxes they encounter and find productive ways of coping with them. Indeed, it has become legitimate to talk about dilemmas, conflicts, and paradoxes in the co-creation process and to discuss how they can be handled through hands-on metagovernance.

5.3. Third round: stimulating the innovative ambition in the task committee on public libraries

Having thus aimed to enhance the capacity for coping with the paradoxes emerging in publicly sponsored co-creation processes, the third round of the design experiment focused on how to improve the co-created policymaking outcomes. To that end, we studied a task committee aiming to transform the public libraries into cultural hubs and made no less than four interventions.

The task committee was formed in October 2020, comprising five politicians and ten citizens with different profiles and backgrounds (37 citizens signed up to participate). A total of 18 meetings were held (November 2020–November 2021), one third of which were preparatory meetings. The written mandate defines the task committee objective as promoting and setting the course for the continued transformation of the public libraries into cultural hubs. The committee should base its work on the new cultural policy strategy, 'Together about culture', which aims to promote urban vitality. More precisely, the task committee was asked to deliver:

- A vision for how different generations can use the libraries
- A list of cultural library activities that can enhance community building, entrepreneurship, and diversity in the local neighborhoods
- A plan for developing the relationships between the central library and the five neighborhood libraries
- Recommendations for how libraries in the future can involve citizens in co-creation.

In the preparatory meetings we had with the two political chairs of the task committee and the four administrative facilitators, it was agreed that the goal of the design experiment should be to create and maintain a high innovation ambition among the participants, which would hopefully lead to innovative outcomes enhancing citizen empowerment and well-being. While innovation is essential to co-creation (Ansell & Torfing, 2021a, 2021b), it appeared difficult to spur further innovation since the well-funded and well-functioning libraries in Gentofte were already well under way to becoming cultural hubs.

Based on a careful, ongoing analysis of the barriers to goal achievement, we ended up making four interventions, all of which were discussed, planned, and executed in close collaboration with the political chairs and with assistance from the administrative facilitators. None of the task committee participants were consulted about the interventions, but they were informed about the design experiment and its results. As indicated in Table 3, some of the interventions had a more positive impact than others.

The *initial problem diagnosis* was that many of the task committee members did not fully embrace the idea of transforming the libraries into cultural hubs. A mini-survey conducted early in the process revealed how the participants were split right down the middle: One half wanted to maintain and improve the traditional library functions, while the other half wanted to develop new cultural functions and activities. Wanting to stick with what you've got while avoiding new and uncertain developments is known as 'the present bias', which manifest itself in several interviews. One citizen made this emblematic statement: 'I think we should maintain that the library is a place for books. So, I'm supporting the library part of the plans rather than the cultural part of it'. Others were equally reluctant to embrace innovations, while some were more enthusiastic.

Table 3
Summary of the background, content, and impact of the four interventions.

	Problem diagnosis	Intervention content	Impact on participants' innovation ambitions
Intervention #1	Present bias: Preference for maintaining what you have and avoiding new and uncertain developments	A new meeting format was tried, allowing people to articulate what they want to maintain and new things they may want to add	*Positive impact* on the participants' motivation to try something new and pursue innovation
Intervention #2	Over-steering: Facilitators took up a lot of space in highly structured meetings and were the nodal point in the debates	A new open meeting format was tried with no fixed agenda, more laid-back facilitation, and room for brainstorming	*Positive impact* on the number of new, innovative ideas formulated by the participants
Intervention #3	Knowledge gap: Very asymmetrical distribution of knowledge about the libraries among the participants	Site visits to all 6 libraries were organized so local librarians could provide information about library activities	Unintended *negative impact* on the participants' faith in their ability to propose new ideas and activities despite massive knowledge transfer
Intervention #4	Talk-centrism: The meetings in the co-creation arena tend to be all talk and no action, thus discouraging innovation	Practical testing of a co-created idea of a cultural event with local authors in the central library with emphasis on youth	*No discernable impact* on the participants' innovation ambition, partly due to failed implementation of the intervention

The ensuing *intervention* aimed to counter the present bias by designing the next meeting in a manner that clarified for all participants how the basic library functions relating to book loans and getting more people interested in reading books would be preserved, and that new and interesting cultural activities could be added without compromising the good things that already exist. Participants were divided into small groups and asked to list the library functions they wanted to preserve and then write out a wish list of new cultural activities to be added to the existing activities. All the items listed by the groups were positively recognized and appreciated in plenary discussions.

The *impact assessment* of the intervention was overly positive. Our observations indicated that the new meeting format worked well and created a good, relaxed group atmosphere. This impression was confirmed by our interviews. One of the facilitators claimed that the meeting design helped to show that there was no zero-sum game between maintaining or developing the libraries, since there was room for both continuity and discontinuity. One of the citizens reported that it was good to finally realize that the libraries would not be turned into a series of big, noisy events. Other informants confirmed this view.

The *subsequent problem diagnosis* was that there was a tendency toward over-steering that prevented the participants from setting the agenda and discussing new issues. The administrative facilitation was good and professional and helped to ensure that the meetings were clearly structured and conducted in a friendly atmosphere based on mutual respect. However, our observations identified a clear tendency that the facilitators took up a lot of space and time in the meetings and were very active in the debates, often making themselves the pivotal point. Some – but not all – of our interviews confirmed this, as some informants also praised the facilitators for balancing steering with discussions. However, one of the facilitators admits: 'The facilitation went well, but we didn't leave enough room for discussions among the participants. We probably took up too much space. But it's difficult not to

do so, since we need to make progress toward conclusions and the final delivery'.

The resulting *intervention* aimed to counter the over-steering problem by changing the meeting design by organizing an open meeting with no fixed agenda and no initial presentations and a somewhat withdrawn facilitator role that gave more room for brainstorming and free and open discussion of emerging issues raised by the participants.

The *impact assessment* of the second intervention was also positive. Our observations indicate that the structure and facilitation of the meeting was much more relaxed and that the participants initiated discussions that often had a brainstorming character. Hence, many new ideas emerged in the discussions: Libraries could provide mentors for young people, workshops for young aspiring authors, and concerts and events organized in collaboration with citizens. They could also use the outdoor area surrounding the libraries for concerts, speakers' corners, and small festivals in the summer. As one of the citizens put it: 'Suddenly, a lot of new ideas and proposals emerged, because room was made for speaking more openly'. The task committee was set for innovation.

The *next problem diagnosis* was that the participants required more information about the libraries to be able to disrupt and innovate them. While some of the citizens had considerable knowledge about one or several of the six libraries because they were active and engaged users, many of the other citizens and some of the politicians had little knowledge about the library activities and therefore had problems making general recommendations for the future development of the libraries into cultural hubs.

The ensuing *intervention* aimed to counter the knowledge gap by providing detailed knowledge about the activities in all six libraries. Corona restrictions prevented in-person visits to the libraries, so three open meetings were instead organized in the form of online site-visits, where the local librarians could present their various activities. The one-hour long meetings tended to be dominated by presentations made by the respective libraries, which were followed by a round of questions and answers.

The *impact assessment* of the third intervention was negative. Our observations revealed a general pattern whereby the libraries presented the cultural activities that they were already hosting, while emphasizing their willingness to co-create activities with citizens. The citizens and some politicians would then ask questions, focusing on concrete proposals for new ideas for cultural activities. Finally, the library staff would respond defensively, explaining how almost all the new ideas and proposals already had been tried or were ongoing. At some point, one of the young citizens became really frustrated and asked: 'What is the task committee supposed to do if you've already done everything?' In an attempt at answering her own question, she suggested that the volume of activities could be expanded, since the libraries were empty most evenings. Others noted that the problem might be that the cultural activities were not visible enough. Our observations left us with the impression that the task committee participants were much better informed at the online site-visits but had less appetite for innovation, as everything they could think of had already been tried. The interviews with the facilitators, politicians, and citizens confirmed this impression.

The *final problem diagnosis* was that the task committee tended to be all talk and no action. Meetings involve talking, and even though talk is important when developing new ideas, experiencing that some of their new ideas can become reality through deliberate action may make some of the participants more ambitious and motivated to innovate. Hence, it became clear that several participants were looking forward to participating in the small working groups because they were more action-oriented. Several citizens said something similar to this positive statement: 'I'm looking forward to the working groups (…) so it all becomes more concrete. It can't just end up with a lot of talk (…) The working groups will help give us some ideas about how to make things happen'.

The resulting *intervention* aimed to counter the talk-centrism by letting the co-creation working group organize a co-created event at the central library. The working group discussed how the libraries could become platforms for the co-creation of cultural events, and it was suggested that the working group tested this idea in practice by letting a local writer who participated in the task committee organize an event with two other writers who recently published books on the transition from the industrial society to an innovation society. The topic of the meet-the-authors event would be: 'What will the future bring?'. It was a successful event with good attendance and lively discussion, but the co-creation process only involved a few librarians and the local writer and not, as initially planned, local youth who seldom come to such events. The event was reported to the task committee in a meeting on September 29, 2021, in the hope that it would generate further confidence in the ability to produce new innovative solutions.

The *impact assessment* of the fourth intervention was negative. This was partly because the event ended up being rather external to the task committee, as the local writer who proposed the event never participated in any task committee meetings after having received a green light for the event featuring himself (sic!). Few of the task committee participants themselves participated in the event, and the reporting of the event to the task committee was truly disappointing, since the writer did not show up and one of the administrators had to briefly recount what had happened. This meant that few of the participants saw what the practical test amounted to. A mini-survey conducted before and after the reporting of the practical test of the idea fostered by the working group shows that there was no significant change in the innovation ambitions of the task committee participants. Hence, the intervention proved unsuccessful toward obtaining the goal, but perhaps mostly due to the failure to prepare and implement the intervention properly and to make it visible for all the task committee participants.

Despite the negative evaluation of two of the interventions, the task committee ended up doing a good job developing a new policy for the libraries, which endorses the present efforts to develop them into cultural hubs and to provide a vision with some core principles for doing so, recommendations for enhanced visibility, involvement of youth and co-creation of events with citizens, and a catalogue with numerous ideas for further consideration. Although the delivery to the City Council was positively received and ultimately accepted, it contained very few genuinely innovative ideas. The lack of innovation is blamed on the online meetings, the absence of excursions to other municipalities, and the fact that the libraries were already rather innovative. Nevertheless, the ideas for generating new co-created cultural activities for young people, who are using the libraries less than other age groups, is seen as an important contribution that – together with a new spate of cultural activities – may help to enhance city vitality and citizen well-being.

6. Discussion of results

Considered together, the three rounds of the design experiment have helped to design a platform for interactive political leadership, and they have contributed to improving the leadership and management of concrete arenas for the co-creation of policy solutions that flexibly adapt and proactively innovate existing governance solutions. The first round of the design experiment helped to improve and fine-tune the platform guiding how the City Council uses a new kind of task committees to enhance policy development based on local citizen inputs. The second round of the design experiment helped the administrative facilitators to cope with emerging paradoxes in the co-creation processes involving citizens and politicians and thus to improve the results from these processes. The final round of the design experiment created in situ knowledge about how co-creation processes can be organized in order boost the participants' ambitions regarding innovation.

The results of the three task committees that we helped to design and improve have boosted urban vitality. The citizens were empowered by their task committee participation. Some of the young participants even mentioned that they were thinking of running for the City Council in the next election, because the political engagement had proven interesting

and rewarding. The new youth policy has fostered a series of new services and initiatives and triggered discussions of the 'performance culture' that – supported by parents and new social media – puts pressure on youth and leads to psychological problems. The latter has led to the formation of a new thematic task committee. The task committee on the social problems inherent to urban renewal has formulated ten principles for social housing renewal divided into four themes: strategy, governance, and organization; social networks and resources; structural and physical couplings; and diverse, innovative, and co-created projects. There is a general lack of concrete ideas, but it has been suggested that two street-level social workers be hired to strengthen the local voluntary work in general housing estates. Finally, the task committee on the transformation of public libraries into cultural hubs has created the first-ever local policy for library development and strengthened the visibility of the new cultural activities that will be based on co-creation and target young library users. In sum, citizens are empowered, and their well-being is enhanced by new youth services and social housing initiatives and a more flourishing cultural life. Other task committees, which we have not followed closely, have enhanced traffic safety, stimulated the transition to circular economy, and promoted the well-being of elderly. Hence, platforms of interactive political leadership seem to provide a potent tool for enhancing city vitality.

While the first round of the design experiment produced learning about how hands-off metagovernance can generate institutional designs and organizational templates supporting the initiation and facilitation of the task committees, the second round created learning about the hands-on metagovernance of co-creation processes capable of making use of more proactive coping strategies aimed at exploring, questioning, and embracing emerging paradoxes and to exploit them in ways that stimulate rather than hamper the co-creation of solutions. The final round of the design experiment produced even more fine-grained learning about how particular processes can stimulate the appetite for innovation among the participants. As regards the latter, four important learning points stand out:

- The present bias hampering innovation can be successfully countered by creating a safe, open environment in which the participants in a co-creation process can clearly state and gain acceptance of what they want to maintain and what they may want to ask. This finding is supported by Heifetz et al. (2009), who emphasize that signaling the ambition to integrate old and new solutions is a key feature of adaptive leadership.
- The tendency toward the over-steering of co-creation processes can be successfully countered by open meetings without any fixed agenda or lengthy presentations and more relaxed facilitation. The open meeting format created space for brainstorming new ideas, which stimulated innovation. This finding is in line with new research suggesting that clear rules and procedures may stimulate brainstorming, but facilitator interventions should be kept to a minimum (Paulus & Kenworthy, 2019).
- While physical, in-person visits may help to counter the knowledge gap in co-creation processes, it is extremely important to ensure that knowledge is not transferred through one-way communication between experts and relevant citizens, leaving the latter in a position where they are limited to asking critical questions that force the former into a defensive position. New research thus calls for the co-creation of knowledge rather than knowledge being transferred through one-way communication (Jull et al., 2017).
- The problem with talk-centric processes can only be countered by practical action if the practical action is well-planned, well-executed, and collectively evaluated by the participants in the co-creation process. The importance of the action-centric dimension of co-creation is confirmed by Ansell et al. (2021).

When considering these learnings, we must remember that the task committees excluded interest-based corporate actors who might have undermined the co-creation of public value outcomes. Hence, the results are only relevant for local co-creation involving citizens rather than corporate powerholders. We should also bear in mind that design experiments merely produce context-dependent knowledge of what works in specific real-life settings. What works in our design experiment may not work in another context. That said, there is nothing to prevent learning obtained in a specific design experiment from being included in a 'leading and managing co-creation toolbox' if the context-dependence of the new learnings is clearly specified, thus allowing leaders and managers in other contexts to reflect on the similarities and differences between their own context and that from which the learning was drawn. In our case, the replication of results may be impaired by the fact that Denmark is a global exemplar of 'good governance' and that Gentofte Municipality is a Danish co-creation frontrunner. However, in North-western Europe and some parts of North America and the Antipodes, there will be cities with progressive governments and strong collaborative traditions that may learn from the Gentofte case and pursue urban vitality through platforms for interactive political leadership. Such cities may learn from the impact of institutional designs, different leadership and management strategies and different process formats, but they will have to translate the lessons that can be drawn from the Gentofte case to their own specific context.

One important reflection concerns what we have learned from using design experiments to explore how local councilors can improve their political leadership by designing platforms and arenas for the co-creation of policy solutions with citizens. The present study shows how design experiments also work well as a research method in public governance studies focusing on co-creation. Diagnosing problems and barriers for achieving a particular goal in and through co-creation has allowed us to formulate hypotheses about the kind of solution that could alleviate the problem. Testing the hypotheses in practice and assessing the impact of different design interventions has not only helped us to see what works in practice, but also to understand the importance of thinking the interventions through to avoid unintended negative effects and to ensure proper implementation. In short, our study demonstrates that design experiments offer a near-perfect tool for advancing a positive public administration research aiming to find and enlarge solutions to pressing governance problems.

Finally, yet importantly, our evaluation of design experiments as a strategy for improving public governance in general and co-creation processes in particular is positive. The leading politicians and administrators responsible for designing the platforms for interactive political leadership, the administrative facilitators of the co-creation arenas, and the political chairs of the task committees have all been positive about the learning outcome of the design experiments. In particular, the administrative facilitators and political chairs seem to have developed a more reflective and experimental approach to their exercise of leadership and management. In the third round of the design experiment, they ended up constantly monitoring what was going on with a view to detecting problems in the facilitation of the process and trying to come up with and test new solutions. Our hope is that they will carry this reflective mindset and experimental practice into the next co-creation process and thus integrate a design experiment mindset in their leadership and management strategy. The positive practical impact of the design experiment even had an impact beyond the task committee. Hence, the open meeting format appears so successful that the political chairs have recommended that it should be generally applied in future task committees when the goal is to stimulate the brainstorming of new ideas.

7. Conclusion

Of particular relevance to this special issue, our study shows that platforms for interactive political leadership facilitate and support the co-creation of public policy solutions that may contribute to enhancing city vitality through empowered participation of the present and future

citizen participants, greater social cohesions obtained through engagement in multi-actor problem-solving, and increasing social well-being as a result of joint endeavors to improve the living conditions for young people, social development of deprived neighborhoods, and the creation of a flourishing cultural life. Place-based leadership based on co-created policymaking tends to foster a greater proximity between leaders and their critical followers, which may usher in new forms of interactive democracy (Rosanvallon, 2011).

Our longitudinal design experiment demonstrates that cities aiming to enhance their vitality may benefit from the design of platforms supporting the development of an interactive political leadership whereby public policy responses to pressing problems are co-created together with lay actors. Ideally, the design of platforms for interactive political leadership should make it easy to form problem-focused co-creation arenas, ensure the participation of a diverse group of citizens, foster trust-based interaction with room for open discussion and mutual learning, and develop a sense of common ownership over new and bold policy solutions. Since institutional design is not enough to guarantee success, design experiments should also help to develop forms of leadership and management that can cope constructively with emerging paradoxes and create and maintain a shared motivation to pursue innovative outcomes. Longitudinal design experiments such as the one we have conducted tend to support a continuous improvement of institutional designs and management practices that in turn help to facilitate the collaborative innovation of robust solutions to turbulent problems.

Design experiments are resource-intensive, predicated on the cultivation of close and trust-based researcher–practitioner relations, and they depend on the ability to rigorously measure the impact on real-life interventions. The last requirement was the Achilles heel of our design experiment but does not seem to present an insurmountable obstacle in a post-Corona era. For a more comprehensive assessment of the value of design experiments for public governance research in general and for enhancing political co-creation of urban vitality in particular, more studies and comparative work are required. Experimentation is becoming increasingly fashionable within the social sciences (Coleman, 2018), but lab-based experiments and survey experiments are unfortunately more common than design experiments. However, the theoretical value and practical relevance of design experiments may help to enhance their future usage in the social sciences. Design experiments are based on an interactive research strategy that brings researchers and practitioners together in a joint effort to find and enlarge what works in practice, and generated insight may both add to the stock of research-based knowledge by drawing causal inference between means and ends and to the practical toolbox of public governance actors by adding new ideas, strategies, and instruments.

Declaration of competing interest

There is no conflict of interest regarding publication of this article.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

Acknowledgements

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