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Where is agency in the context of urban transformation? Exploring the narratives of institutional stakeholders and community activists in Birmingham

Abstract

How do institutional stakeholders and community activists differ in their perception of their agency to affect change? We explore this question by synthesising Archer's theory (2003) of agency-structure dynamics, Easterly's (2006) development models, and debates on the 'just city' (Fainstein, 2010; Soja, 2010) to explore narratives around urban transformation in data from two projects in England's second city of Birmingham. Our results show that, whereas institutional stakeholders affiliated with local government feel rather disempowered and defer to signals from national government or investors, community activists are focused on opportunities to use their agency and create change in their local areas. The implications of this divergence for the aims of achieving empowerment and social justice are discussed. Also, the benefits of a co-production model used in one of the research projects are reflected upon. Building on this model through policies of collaboration, forming social connections, and active civic engagement could use the social energy and potential we identify to reinvigorate agency and the motivation of institutional stakeholders and generate change that is more bottom-up than top-down. To this end, we encourage greater reflection on notions of agency and participation in discussions on the 'just city'. However, in view of prevailing structural forces, we acknowledge that such efforts ultimately remain aspirational and difficult to achieve.

Key words: agency, participation, just city, **development, co-production.**

Introduction

How do individuals perceive their agency to negotiate structural forces acting upon cities, and to what extent is this contingent on an individual's position within or without institutions? This paper considers the perspectives on agency among institutional stakeholders, who have formal roles in institutions related to local government and/or legally defined powers and resources, with those of self-organised community activists and NGOs in

Birmingham as the city undergoes an urban transformation. We consider how members of these groups think about change and their ability to influence it. To this end, we apply Archer's structure-agency theory (2003) which, despite its potential, has not previously been used in this context. This is combined with Easterly's considerations (2006) of development models and Fainstein's (2010) and Soja's (2010) notions of planning a socially just city. Our aim is thus to contribute to current debates on planning, governance, and development since, as Rogerson and Giddings (2020) note, the proliferation of public and policy interests in the city does not seem to be accompanied by a similar increase in academic and theoretical analysis of the city's transformations. We are particularly interested in applying Archer's theory to the issue of a partnership of stakeholders, who differ in their positions, approaches, and capacities to change the city to understand opportunities and constraints for change towards a more just city.

We argue that, while institutional stakeholders feel rather overwhelmed and disempowered, community activists focus on opportunities to use their agency and create change in their areas. Therefore, the way towards a more equitable and just city is through change originating and fuelled locally, based on community research models and policy co-production. To present our arguments we open by exploring the analytical frames we use, as well as the methodology and potential challenges that come with using material from two different projects. Our analysis of interview data reveals two tales of urban transformation, in which the institutional stakeholder group was more pessimistic and appears to feel disillusioned, while community activists feel more agential about their ability to create change. Both appear to be reconciled to the power of structural forces, but the activists seek to find small and creative ways to resist. We explore reasons for relative feelings of disempowerment among the stakeholders, considering austerity, centralisation, and market forces, as well as the level of complexity they face in their roles. Simultaneously, we explain how the feelings of agency among activists is grounded in their first-hand experiences in a local context and scale. In this light, we argue for greater participation in making collaborative decisions and co-production to shape change and achieve social justice goals. However, in light of dominant structural forces and disconnection between citizens and institutions, we appreciate that the achievement of such aims remains difficult and ultimately aspirational.

Conceptual framework

In this paper we bring together literature from sociology, urban planning, and development studies and link it to the idea of co-production. Central to our analysis is Archer's (2003) theory of morphogenesis, which explains agency-structure dynamics. Her work can be better understood with relation to Giddens' theory of structuration (1984), which highlights the indispensable relationship between agency and structure while explaining the social world. Giddens' (1984) work sees agency and structure as simultaneous and co-constitutive, whereby structure is presented as reproduced through agency being simultaneously enabled and constrained by structure. Archer (2003) develops her different dualistic approach, also acknowledging the interdependence of structure and agency, but emphasising that they are different in substance and operate differently in time . Structures precede agency enabling and constraining agents, whose actions can lead to the reproduction (morphostasis) or transformation (morphogenesis) of structures, which become the context of future action for agents. This analytical approach allows us to investigate how structural context shapes behaviour and thinking, and how agents' actions reproduce or transform structural context. Archer (2003) also underlines the role of human reflexivity in mediating between personal concerns and structural contexts, shaping individuals' approaches towards constraints and opportunities, and eventually the decisions and actions they undertake.

We integrate Archer's dynamics into Easterly's (2006) analysis of development models, in which top-down, general approaches are contrasted with bottom-up, specific ones. Easterly uses the metaphor of planners and searchers, with the former determining what should be supplied and the latter finding out what is in need and how this can be provided. In general, planners aim at big goals but are not able to implement them effectively and sustainably, whereas searchers look for practical and feasible mechanisms to solve specific problems in local contexts. The planner and searcher approaches can be seen as ideal models that are useful to further understand how interviewees position themselves in terms of agency and structure, and how this could constrain or enable their activity. In relation to urban transformation, this chimes with the context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) approach, which focuses on configurations of 'what works, how, in which conditions and for whom' (Dalkin et al., 2015). According to the realist approach to regeneration and planning, when people see a purpose and an outcome, they may become more involved in participating. The

CMO approach was used in “Unlocking Social and Economic Innovation Together (USE-IT!) , one of the projects this paper draws from, which offers a purposive research and policy agenda linking needs, interests, and expertise through triangulating across residents, the university, and institutional stakeholders. In doing so, the project sought to overcome criticisms of the ‘partnership’ approach that this can be ambiguous, exploitative, and politicised (Hastings, 1996).

IFCommunity empowerment has become an increasingly important notion in urban regeneration, with policy aiming to strengthen and support the stake that communities have in regeneration programmes. Nevertheless, partnerships could be seen as tokenistic endeavours predominantly working to favour business and government agendas with the restricted influence of communities (MacLeavy, 2009). However, the mentioned author presents a counter case of a community-led urban regeneration project which brought together participants as partnering subjects, where power was distributed through community engagement in a comprehensive way to offer possibilities of developing and sustaining alternative modes of co-production. Another study, by Hemphill and co-researchers (2006), manifested the synergistic and social capital advantages of a partnership and the significance of urban leadership in creating a collaboration able to accomplish more than performance objectives. Coaffee and Healey (2003) argue that a change in urban governance to incorporate real citizen participation in local government processes needs to include all three levels of social formation: events of collective action, on-going governance practices, and discursive forms.

Our analytical framework is completed by placing agency-structure dynamics, linked to Easterly’s top-down and bottom-up models and the notion of co-production, within the debate on the ‘just city’. By drawing from the capabilities approach developed by Sen (1992; also Nussbaum, 2000), Fainstein claims that planning decisions should be judged on ‘whether their distributional outcomes enhanced the capabilities of the relatively disadvantaged’ (2010: 55). Fainstein (2010: 36) argues that urban planning needs to above all focus on equity, referring to ‘a distribution of both material and nonmaterial benefits derived from public policy that does not favour those who are already better off at the beginning’. However, she ultimately doubts the capacity of fragmented and marginalised groups to achieve meaningful

change in the face of powerful structural forces (Dlabac et al., 2022). We therefore supplement Fainstein's approach with the theory of spatial justice proposed by Soja (2010), which argues that the equitable distribution of resources across cities is a way of spatialising the concept of social justice, with reference to the path dependency of historically neglected areas and the marginalised communities who live in them. We contend that co-production methods can enable the participation of marginalised groups in decision-making processes and strengthen their capacity to influence change.

Soja builds on the work of Harvey (1972), whose notion of territorial justice called for mechanisms to achieve social justice across the city. This means counteracting disruptive processes that generate inequality and the uneven distribution of resources in favour of a territorial approach towards allocating resources, taking into consideration where and why areas of a city have been historically neglected. One of the projects this paper draws from, "The Democratic Foundations of the Just City", synthesised Fainstein and Soja to conceptualise socially just urban transformation as necessitating reduced socio-spatial inequalities, making recommendations on civic engagement and the use of indicators to build a more socially just city. Interviews explored how individuals perceived their agency and the power of structural forces, which referred to an economic system centred around growth and attracting international investment, the effects of national legislation, the centralisation of decision-making power, and major development projects. Our theoretical framework thus further the literature on agency-structure dynamics, as for instance Liao and collaborators' study (2018) in the context of gated communities in China that made use of Giddens' analytical lens.

Methodology

This paper uses data from two projects to compare results of interviews conducted with institutional stakeholders, defined as those representing roles and institutions with formal involvement in the city's urban development, and activists in Birmingham, including both self-organised community groups and NGOs. Both projects sought to understand how individuals relate to urban transformation, inequality, and decision-making, and aimed to develop recommendations to help overcome social marginalisation and disempowerment. What

unites both projects, beyond their geographical focus of Birmingham, is thus reflection on these issues and the attention paid to addressing challenges identified by the research.

"The Democratic Foundations of the Just City" analysed the role of local political leaders, housing associations, and private developers (referred to as 'institutional stakeholders'). It made comparisons with the case study cities of Birmingham, Lyon, and Zurich to develop policy recommendations for building more socially just cities. With a comparative approach across three European cities, the researchers also sought to identify the influence of local decisions vis-à-vis national government and structural forces in outcomes such as ghettoisation, gentrification, and the erosion of housing affordability. Project "Unlocking Social and Economic Innovation Together (USE-IT!) aimed to develop mechanisms to unlock the potential of disadvantaged communities, identify their assets, and connect them to the resources and skills they need to boost their resilience and benefit from urban development. USE-IT! operated in an inner-city district housing a highly diverse population that underperforms on metrics including income, educational attainment, and employment. A partnership of organisations from across the city worked to coordinate their actions, for example with some partners delivering community researcher training, others commissioning research, and then the findings of this research being implemented in a synchronised way across organisations. Both projects received ethical approval and all participants gave informed consent. Findings are presented with names and identifying details removed (as far as possible) to safeguard participants' anonymity. We have provided only key features of interviewees which limited the possibility of contextualisation of their accounts, but this rigid anonymisation was needed to secure confidentiality and prevent them from being identifiable in the context of their noticeable roles in institutions and local communities. Interviewees are summarised in Appendix 1, denoted with the prefixes IS (institutional stakeholder) and CA (community activist).

To gather empirical data on "The Democratic Foundations of the Just City" projectthe academic researchers conducted two rounds of semi-structured qualitative interviews with eleven stakeholders in Birmingham's urban development. Participants included urban planners, current and former council officers, an elected city councillor, a senior leader in a private development company, and a housing association officer. By contrast, USE-IT! employed an innovative community research method to collect empirical data. A team of

community researchers trained and mentored by the University of Birmingham[1] collaboratively co-designed and conducted a range of projects, including an in-depth study linked to the UK2070 Commission (2020)[2]. The latter aimed to investigate spatial inequalities and economic disparities across the regions of the UK. Community research allows for the incorporation of different sets of expertise and skills through trained community researchers working in conjunction with academics (Goodson and Phillimore, 2010). The community researchers, supported by academic mentors, interviewed nine community activists and two institutional stakeholders, enquiring about their activity, impact and changes they perceive.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo to carry out a thematic analysis, using a cross-study mixed coding framework combining theoretical categories derived from the literature (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014) and empirical substantive categories that emerged from the interviews (Kelle, 2014). The themes of agency and perceived structural forces came through strongly in our both data sets and, owing to the prominence these two themes had, they were selected for further analysis. The interviews provided us with rich material, which should be analysed with caveats concerning issues about accessing the information on agency through interviews. For instance, interviewees may overstate their agency in attempts at better self-presentation. However, a lack of direct discussion about participants' agency and structure could make this issue less prominent. Furthermore, the interviews with institutional stakeholders manifested relatively low levels of agency, whereas higher levels of agency in accounts of local activists could be explained by their personal engagement in delivering change in their surroundings. We must also acknowledge that we could only examine how interviewees' agency and structure featured in their narratives, not how agential they were. the existing data did not include a direct discussion of agency and structure with our participants to explore their meanings. Instead, we put effort into conducting a rigorous analysis using the same coding framework for both datasets and performing cross-coding. The quotes included in this paper were selected based on relevance and succinctness.

[1] The team of community researchers who conducted the interviews used in this paper included: Jeanette Derbyshire (lead), Shazia Baig, Hameed Lea, Mark Robinson, and Jennifer Thomas, who were supported by the USE-IT! team of researchers at the University of Birmingham.

[2] Supporting the research of Dr Lucy Natarajan from University College London. .

Although we acknowledge the complexity and multidimensionality of differences and scale-related limitations of our samples, we have nevertheless been able to identify two different approaches and related narratives, featured prominently in the institutional stakeholder and community activist interviews. While not contrasting directly the two sets of interviews, the narratives from the two groups manifest two types of approaches representing Weber's ideal types that are more noticeable respectively in both samples. Thus, while not directly comparable, the results illuminate the different narratives adopted towards urban transformation according to the relationship individuals have with that process, and how they perceive both their own agency and the conditioning power of structural forces. The interviews with institutional stakeholder and local activists represent diverse data. As Babbie (2001) notes, qualitative fieldwork provides an opportunity for getting insight into the diversity and complexity of individuals' experiences. We have also applied the falsification method (Popper, 1959) to identify and examine counterexamples from both datasets (e.g. examples of disempowerment among the activists and of agency among the stakeholders). In line with Morrow's (2005) key transcendent standards such as social validity, recognition of subjectivity, and reflexivity, the adequacy of data and its interpretation were emphasised to secure the trustworthiness and credibility of the research.

Research context

Birmingham is the second largest city in England, belonging to the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), notable in Europe for its ethnic diversity, with 40.2% of the population being non-white, and with a notably youngerage profile and significant lower employment rates than the wider UK (O'Farrell, 2020a).Since the 1970s, the city's economy has been marked by growing precarity and inequality, with 41% of neighbourhoods belonging to the 10% most deprived nationally (Birmingham City Council, 2019a).

The city played a crucial role in the Industrial Revolution and had a dynamic, diversified industrial economy up until the second half of the twentieth century (O'Farrell, 2020b). However, since the 1970s, the city has transitioned from one of Britain's wealthiest regions to its second poorest (Spencer et al., 1986). The 1970s were significant for reforms to local government in England that produced a highly centralised model of decision-making

(Hambleton, 2016). Alongside this centralisation of top-down power, neoliberal reforms in the 1980s under the Thatcher government undermined the post-war social contract, such as Right to Buy legislation that dismantled social housing stock. The effect has been a residualisation of social housing, which now typically houses vulnerable people with multiple complex problems (Fenton et al., 2010).

Since 2010, the city council has experienced funding cuts that have negatively impacted its ability to deliver services, with reduced by half, coupled with instability in leadership and the loss of 48% of staff by 2019 (Birmingham City Council, 2019b). The withdrawal of support services has precipitated a substantial increase in homelessness (Shelter, 2018) and food bank use (Trussell Trust, 2019). At the same time, social segregation has increased, with poorer and marginalised residents increasingly concentrated into particular areas (Dlabac et al., 2019). These developments are congruent with intensifying neoliberalism in the UK that is privatisation, cuts to regulation and welfare provision, reducing expenditures on public goods, fiscal discipline, and encouragement of the free flow of capital and investment (Falk, 1999). Also in line with this logic, institutional stakeholders tend to interpret their roles as primarily to attract investment, explaining this as the only way to tackle Birmingham's persistent social and economic issues.

The local authority is pursuing a strategy of attracting investment into the city, e.g. through the High Speed 2 (HS2) rail line and reimagining Birmingham as an extension of the capital (Birmingham City Council, 2014). The WMCA (2019) presented a £10 billion prospectus of housing, regeneration, commercial, and infrastructure opportunities for developers with new housing units, transport, office blocks, and developer-led regeneration of almost the entire city core (O'Farrell, 2020b). In the context of this urban transformation, we did not find evidence of articulated strategies to substantiate inclusive growth rhetoric. The risk remains that identified by Barber and Hall (2008): namely, instead of improving residents' quality of life, the 'trickle-down' vision of development will create enclaves of wealth in the city centre, push those on lower incomes out of the housing market, and exacerbate socio-spatial inequalities.

Analysis

Our analysis uncovered several themes relating to participants' understanding of their agency and its constraints, owing to various structural forces that they perceived and related to the level and scope of possible change they refer to. In organising these themes, we uncovered two tales of urban transformation: a more pessimistic story from the institutional stakeholder group (with some exceptions) that was geared towards seeking investment or deferring to higher levels of government, and a more empowered or engaged vision from the community activists. The second tale related to causes of disempowerment among the stakeholder group, with reference to structural forces such as austerity, centralisation, and market power. On the other hand, there were also comments around collaboration and building relationships which could underpin the transition towards a more inclusive approach to developing the city.

Two tales of urban transformation

There was a clear contrast between the narratives of institutional stakeholders and community activists. While the two often discussed agency with reference to different scales, such as city-wide complex change versus more specific ones at the neighbourhood level, we nonetheless note that former tended to use technocratic and abstract language with a rather disheartened and disillusioned attitude; several made comments along the lines of '*the system is the system and we can't change it*' (IS8). The comparison with activists who had organised local groups, campaigns, and charity work was striking. The latter's narratives had many examples of emotional language with a sense of excitement about what they hoped to achieve. Unlike the stakeholders, who spoke from the position of distanced professionals, the activists predominantly constructed their narratives from the perspective of engaged community members. Drawing from Archer's theory (2003), we find that there was greater agency expressed in the narratives of community leaders, while thinking in the categories of structures was more noticeable in interviews with stakeholders.

The positivity can be illustrated with this quote from an activist talking about their work: '*as a group, I'd say we have achieved what we set out to achieve (…) I just need to say about the group especially… we have had successful time'* (CA6). Similar optimism can be seen in this excerpt from another interview:

'*I think for what we are and what we are doing, we do very well, if I am honest. We work with the means we have got. I think if you saw our reports and stuff, what we have achieved is quite miraculous.'* (CA7)

However, we may also question whether the stronger feeling of agency and the level of personal commitment these individuals had to their causes might lead them to focus on positives and exaggerate the scale of change their work has achieved. For instance, this could be a factor in the positivity of the following activist:

'*We're well ahead of where we said we would be. Lots of people are saying "I've got to know more people, I feel less isolated, like I've got something to join in with, I can turn to people for help, use my skills, I feel like I'm listened to." Those kinds of outcomes. We've done really well… we have a brilliant core group of 50-60 residents who are involved in things and connected to each other, and they use language like "we feel like an extended family", that kind of stuff. This place… is a real centrepiece of connectivity.*' (CA1)

Another activist pointed to language highlighting differences in defining communities, as well as desired outcomes between grassroots organisations on the one hand and local government on the other. While the stakeholders focused on economic issues such as growth and employment, the activists generally stressed relationships and integration – although some also considered the financial dimension of their work, and likewise there were stakeholders who voiced an interest in social justice. One activist expressed mixed feelings about terms such as 'community' used by stakeholders, preferring terms closer to everyday experiences and less policy loaded, such as 'neighbourhood' or 'family'. The activists were rather critical about the language used by stakeholders. One activist felt that the language that institutional stakeholders use is not only strategic, but also reflects their paternalistic, biased, and class related attitude towards poorer areas:

'*Often the idea around community development is about financial accessibility and opportunity, funnelling people into the jobs market and getting them onto the career ladder. Whereas that doesn't work in a community like this. And again, people use the word community really loosely to just basically describe people who are living in a certain area. A community is a community when people have a*

relationship with each other. We use the word neighbourhood because community, I think, is a middle-class construct. Nobody in this neighbourhood would understand themselves as being a community. Those who get really involved call it a family, so they really from neighbourhood to family. The word community is a funders' middle-class luxury.' (CA2)

However, the idea that those living in an area prefer to think of themselves as a neighbourhood or family rather than a community might reflect their construct from their activist's position, rather than an identity prevailing in the locality. Another activist, who used to work in local government and thus had experience as a member of both groups, provided particularly useful material for our analysis. This participant highlighted the difference not only in language use but also in ways of thinking, referring to this as '*the culture clash*' (CA1). It may also be the case though that some institutional stakeholders are active in their communities and neighbourhoods, and as such the division between the two groups may be more fluid or situational that the idea of two different cultures that are opposed to one another. However, talking from different positions in different contexts may make individuals use certain narratives regarding changes, agency, and structures.

Stakeholders' narratives highlighted large-scale structural constraints and forces governing urban transformation, whereas activists' narratives were more grounded in their local contexts with tangible examples of problems and changes. One of the activists used the metaphor of an ecosystem to underline the importance of not seeking to direct change:

'*What we are developing here is an ecosystem. We're not in control of it. It grows and morphs… Things connect together and it moves and is fluid. That's how we see community life developing. Our job is not to control that, our job is to provide sun and rain and put some nutrients in the soil to give it the best chance of growing into something beautiful, but we can't control whether people set up certain groups or do this or that.*' (CA1)

The same activist went on to provide a critical account of the local authority's approach, which they felt was focused on control:

'*The council think of [communities] like a machine. They go, 'what we want to do is put this input in, pull this lever, and get that outcome.' But don't come and fix us*

> *– come and resource us! I think the biggest challenge is less the technical stuff, although that is challenging. It's the local authority seeing you as a machine that they need to pull levers with and do something to fix. We see it very differently.*' (CA1)

The above participant articulated a criticism that the local authority has an approach which deprives communities of ownership, agency, flexibility, and creativity. This point of not trying to 'fix' the area but instead provide resources for local people also has overtones of Soja's (2010) idea of spatial justice, which calls for strategies to both counter processes of inequality and overcome the historical neglect of certain areas. By contrast, instead of using an asset-based approach (mentioned by several activists) and enabling communities to use their assets and offer communities more resources to grow, it was felt that the local authority seeks to manage communities, define their problems, and commission work to fix issues identified by people far removed from the local context. However, given that communities elect representatives to make decisions for them and local government often has processes of engagement in urban interventions, the starkness of the divide between top-down and bottom-up visions may not be as sharp as it is presented by this activist. On the other hand, the above quote from the former institutional stakeholder turned activist reflects power dynamics and the relationality of agency in different settings.

It is worth noting that all community activists who mentioned the local authority tended to be negative about its bureaucracy, the staffing churn that made it hard to build relationships, and a sense that the local authority does not give clear answers or take responsibility. In this way they acknowledged the structural constraints that limit their work and its impact, as in the following quote: '*One of the big outcomes is that it is extremely difficult to make any progress to change. There's such a red-tape bureaucracy*' (CA4). Interestingly, some activists did not mention the local authority at all, instead talking about national-level policy and funding, suggesting that the city council has been squeezed out of consideration in some areas at the local level. This contrasts with increasing rhetoric about devolution from the national government. Several stakeholders also made criticisms of staffing churn and cuts that were negatively impacting their work, so the negative impacts of austerity were recognised by both groups.

Members of the stakeholder group, including the urban planner and council officers, did speak about social justice but commented on financial and legal restrictions that must be considered alongside this. Our analysis showed that the stakeholder group largely perceived private investment as a means of addressing the city's issues, such as poverty and unemployment. This 'trickle-down' approach is criticised by Marcuse (2009) for seeking to achieve change and equitable resource distribution from within the confines of a system that is fundamentally unable to achieve this . At the same time, with reference to the notion of the just city, Fainstein's (2010) critical stance towards the capacity of fragmented, disadvantaged minorities to resist the power of structural forces may be re-evaluated in relation to the agency of the activist group. The activists did not aim to change conditions on a city-wide level, or address structural forces widely, but instead typically sought to make small adjustments in their local area to make conditions more bearable to live with. This attitude may be illustrated by the words of one activist, who emphasises the focus on a specific problem and tangible activity: *'my husband and I run a charity that supports [vulnerable people]. Often, I come away from sessions and think "at least I know I'm doing some good somewhere." Because the big picture is just so overwhelming'* (CA4). Ultimately, the interviews suggest that both groups appear to believe that the structural forces in the city cannot be directly challenged, but whereas the stakeholders are rendered passive – at least in the context of their professional roles – the activists' narratives present them as seeking to make the best of this situation through making incremental improvements in their areas.

Why do institutional stakeholders feel disempowered?

To understand the narratives of the institutional stakeholders, they need to be placed in context. As noted already, the local authority has been successively undermined through deep budget cuts, which have reduced service provision and hence an active role for the council in parts of community life in the city. In the face of the structural forces it appeared that the institutional stakeholders largely doubted whether they can play a role in addressing Birmingham's issues through their work. Instead, they had adopted the attitude that investment resulting from the city's increased connectivity with London could solve issues with unemployment and poverty in the city, although this was not substantiated with evidence of strategies for using such investment to achieve inclusive development. Rather

than developing local strategies, the institutional stakeholders instead followed signals from higher levels of government or wanted the national government to 'stop attacking' the city, revealing a lack of agency in a professional capacity among the stakeholders. It appears to us that the stakeholder group had internalised the neoliberal logic of 'trickle-down' economics, with all growth as an inherent good to be encouraged, and even those who were sceptical of this approach did not believe any opposition to it could be mounted.

One leader in Birmingham City Council commented that, with the council having shrunk to half the size, they '*don't have the capacity to do thinking and development*' (IS11). Another council officer said that '*until the government stops attacking local authorities like Birmingham and taking money off them, we will continue to provide barely safety net services. And that impacts on everyone in the city*' (IS5). A councillor was also pessimistic, saying that '*across different things, not just housing, [there are now] broken systems. That's what austerity has created, broken systems*' (IS5). These narratives suggest a lack of agency in the professional role occupied by the stakeholders, which at the same time may not exclude their individual attempts to find ways to manage the impacts of austerity upon their work. A retired council officer was among the most pessimistic of the stakeholder group, referring to the Grenfell Tower disaster as evidence of the danger of austerity and outsourcing policies. This participant was also critical of leadership in the city, pointing to its limited resources and fragmented responsibilities:

> '*Birmingham has had a series of rather mediocre leaders over quite a long period of time… Birmingham is like a beached whale. There isn't any animating presence anymore, there's no leadership. To be fair to them, it's very difficult to see how you create leadership in a desert where there's no actual materials with which to do some leading. [The council] have been completely destroyed. You're down to quite minor subsidiary roles and activities'* (IS1).

Referring to Archer (2003), these factors constitute the structural context that constrains agential capacity of institutional stakeholders who are caught between the aims of their roles and possibilities to deliver change and contribute to morphogenesis.

The narratives we have gathered also shed light on how austerity and instability of leadership have particularly increased the challenges faced by vulnerable people. With reference to rising homelessness, a member of a campaigning group commented that the process to apply for emergency housing was intimidating, saying '*we attempted to fill in the council's online application form. The whole group attempted this and nobody managed to complete the process, including some people who know their stuff*' (CA3). When asked whether they had raised this issue with the council, the participant compared this to '*pushing a lorry uphill*' owing to bureaucracy, turnover of staff, and difficulty of finding a person to speak to. On the other hand, both IS3 and IS5 spoke about their work to incorporate the views and experiences of housing service users into the systems used by the local authority, and so there is a sign of collaboration to improve the citizen accessibility of public services. A key challenge therefore may be the sustainability of exchange and co-production, as well as the effectiveness of implementation of changes.

Alongside austerity, a concurrent trend is the dominant strength of market actors vis-a-vis the local authority. One activist talked about how adept developers are at avoiding affordable housing commitments (IS1). A council officer concurred, saying that '*we seem to be losing the battle with private developers, who come and dictate the conditions they are building on*' (IS3). Comments made by an officer working in housing are interesting for the extent to which they reveal the internalisation of neoliberalism and acceptance of the state's shrunken role. When asked what the local authority could do to encourage community integration, they responded '*that's not the council's role. I mean, that's market dynamics*' (IS7). Another stakeholder working in planning said '*we've got the system we've got, but I don't think it's structured in the right way to deliver affordable housing… And you can't solve that locally because the system is the system, isn't it?*' (IS8). Such narratives from stakeholders expose how they doubt their ability to have influence on change at the local level because of the power of structural forces. Surrendering the equitable distribution of resources across the city to market forces represents a clear abandonment of the principles of social and spatial justice (Fainstein, 2010; Soja, 2010). It should be noted that this is not necessarily a comment on the stakeholders' beliefs as individuals, but instead how they perceive the agency associated with their professional role and the power of structural forces that impact upon their work.

Another council officer was momentarily critical of austerity measures but then quickly added '*it's a culture change led by finances. Government isn't suddenly going to turn the tap back on and start funding lots of things. I think we will be doing things differently forever now*' (IS7). This pattern of voicing frustration with structural forces and then instantly correcting themselves, or being more ambivalent once this frustration was noted, was common among the stakeholder group. This likely shows the extent to which the group was attempting to self-censor during the interviews, caught between accidentally exposing their views and then correcting themselves towards what one called the 'corporate' view. Symptomatically, stakeholders reverted to using technocratic, impersonal language after revealing personal views. For example, the leader who said *'you can't solve that locally because the system is the system*' responded as follows when asked to explain what this meant: '*our approach is to try and get the maximum value for local communities out of major development proposals… That's a corporate approach to maximising community benefits*' (IS8). This is a response that does not answer the question or connect to the previous point, instead coming across as a rehearsed presentation of general aims rather than an opinion or even a meaningful description of the approach. When pressed further this participant was unable to specifically elaborate, instead giving verbose, non-committal responses. We suspect that this council officer is aware of the disconnect between the stated aims and the reality of Birmingham's issues, but perceives their agential capacity to be limited, conditioned by dominant structural forces and also uncertainty about the extent to which they can voice their opinion to outsiders.

A further reason for disempowerment among the stakeholder group was the centralisation of power and resources. A retired council officer noted that the local authority had been eroded to the point where '*it's not a major player and more. It's a channel for various kinds of government funding, but it's all got strings on back to Whitehall*' (IS1). This view correlates with analysis of centralisation of the English state made by Hambleton (2016). Further on in the interview, this participant spoke about how they perceived devolution as a means of centralising control:

> '*You localise services, which sounds good, giving people control, but by doing so you put responsibility at a level where it can no longer compete seriously with*

Whitehall. You've reduced the opposition to your centralising power to small, isolated, powerless units, and you win of course. That's great strategy' (IS1).

An urban planner spoke about how regulations made by the national government restrict the ability of the local authority to address problems. This interviewee also talked about how devolution rhetoric does not match the reality:

'*The government issued their social housing green paper and there's lots of warm words in there. It says all the right things. But there's still a lack of commitment to increasing funding for authorities to do things'* (IS2).

Centralisation, budget cuts, and the mismatch between rhetoric and reality aims appears to have put the local authority under critical pressure. Some participants seemed to doubt the role of the council altogether; several activists made no reference to the local authority, suggesting they did not see it as relevant or playing an influential role. One charity worker spoke about applying to national funding to support their work; another activist aimed at changing national policy. A community hub representative said they actively avoid interacting with the local authority as it has a tendency only to see problems that need to be fixed, rather than strengths to be encouraged. Further critical comments were made about the capacity of the local authority. One activist spoke about their frustration when interacting with the city council, saying they cannot get clear answers; in contrast, they perceived that '*the Citizens Advice Bureau is more open and powerful [than the city council]*' (CA9).

Having been destabilised by austerity, Birmingham City Council is under scrutiny from central government following the publication of the Kerslake Review (2014), which concluded there were systematic problems in the local authority's governance. As such, members of the institutional stakeholder group were also trying to take these recommendations about changing their way of working on board. While the group had a sense of discouragement and exhaustion with austerity, with several describing the council as being politically 'attacked' by the government, others felt that innovation could help them adapt to reduced staff and resources. One council officer commented that:

'*We've stopped being a paternalistic provider of most things and… started to try and play a different facilitative role, where you use the capacity you've got to bring people together and enable things in a different way*' (IS11).

The above stakeholder gave the example of the council providing a building and community groups providing the staff needed to run it, which suggests an interest in building relationships and collaborating with both citizens and other public service providers. Several institutional stakeholders made comments to this effect, with a councillor talking about their efforts to integrate the safety net for homeless people by collaborative service design and a council officer speaking excitedly about bringing the experiences of those who use services into service design through co-production. As such, the will to connect with communities and use their views to change policies was there, but there appears to be a lack of large scale and sustainable mechanisms for affecting change. The integration of lived expertise into policy design is an emerging trend in public services worldwide (No et al., 2017), also seen with the incorporation of community representatives into local government processes in urban regeneration (MacLeavy, 2009). We contend that using co-production methods of research with the use of accredited community researchers, as demonstrated on the USE-IT! project, can be one such mechanism for local people to participate in identifying problems and appropriate solutions. Training community researchers to work as partners in research informing policy is, moreover, also a mechanism to upskill, equip, and empower citizens, giving them opportunities to become more agential actors of change. Drawing on Archer's work (2003), this may lead to the transformation of wider social and political structures and thus morphogenesis going beyond specific issues and initiatives only at a local scale.

How could co-production and relationships facilitate morphogenesis and a just city?

Our analysis showed that the different narratives among the two groups present unobvious opportunities. When thinking about disparities, it is important to acknowledge diverse standpoints and positions in power structures. This access to knowledge, resources, and institutions is noted in Bourdieu's (1986) volumes of social, economic, cultural, and symbolic capitals. Activists do not always have the platform, skills, or confidence – and certainly lack the formal power – to affect change, with their voices frequently being unrecognised and undermined. Not only different language use, but also types of experience and modes of thinking need recognition and translation to build partner and sustainable relationships between the two groups.

The findings from USE-IT! support Negev and Teschner's (2013) claim that the technical knowledge of experts and the knowledge of individuals gained through lived experience complement one another. Our interviews with the institutional stakeholders and community activists showed that all members of both groups held, to a varying extent, some mixture of everyday experience as well as technical knowledge, alongside thoughts about 'the system', what changes they believed were required, and perceived challenges and forces. Both are valid forms of knowledge and are needed to understand the complexity of processes. As Landemore's (2012) study of cognitive diversity and Moore's (2014) exploration of asymmetrically distributed knowledge show, incorporating diverse forms of knowledge – rather than framing them as opposed to one another – can also access the expertise of marginalised individuals to reach more holistic decisions, in turn supporting democratic culture and contribute to social justice. As such, developing a range of mechanisms to ensure representation and participation in knowledge production and decision-making can help deliver more just urban planning and public services. We contend that this could infuse some of the energy and proactiveness observed among the activists into the rather sceptical and passive stakeholder group, opening up the possibilities for an agenda that moves beyond the 'heroic versus anti-heroic' dichotomy of framing political agency (Beveridge and Koch, 2016).

The notion of just urban transformation, and of achieving social and spatial justice in general, must be realised through a series of practical mechanisms that can enable citizens to reinvigorate institutional stakeholders, who have the power to enact policy changes and shape their work. A true dialogue can thus be established, underpinned by active community research and policy co-production (Goodson and Phillimore, 2010). Such tools may lead to collaboration in which the enthusiasm and insights of activists are combined with the resources and formal power of those within institutions. Our analysis leads us to contend that co-production methodologies enable the holistic identification and proposal of solutions to community needs, in turn creating bottom-up policies and practices with greater legitimacy that incorporate the valuable insights of knowledge gained from both lived and technical expertise. A further benefit of this approach is that it can also disrupt processes of inequality that perpetuate the neglect of certain areas of a city, typically those with more deprived and marginalised inhabitants. In reference to Easterly's work, we contend that such methods

could encourage a move away from the planner towards the searcher approach in urban development. Moreover, such collaboration can lead to relationships developing between stakeholders and activists. As the below quote shows, one of our interviewees pointed out that such encounters left institutional stakeholders feeling more understanding of a problem that previously had hitherto been an abstract policy issue:

> '*I remember [a city leader] saying "now when I make a decision, I don't think about a person who needs a house, I think about my friend" and they named [a person supported by the charity]. It's amazing the difference it makes, just having a relationship with people. It's far more impactful than I'm describing it. And the idea is, when people with influence make policy decisions that affect people living in poverty, they make them in a more informed way – in a more helpful, compassionate way … All of the people who took part have changed enormously. It changed how [the city leaders] work and they've shared that with their colleagues. And our [service users], being in a position where they could actually be listened to, has done enormous amounts for people's confidence*' (CA3).

Such perspectives lead us to believe that co-production can be a mechanism for changing both the approach and values of urban decision-makers. Referring to Archer's (2003) notions of morphogenesis and morphostasis, our findings demonstrate that there is a paradox, whereby those in official roles who could use their positions to implement changes are not active agents contributing to morphogenesis, whereas those outside institutions who volunteer their time and efforts as activists can contribute to small bottom-up change. Scaling up mechanisms to link together and empower these efforts, such as through participatory action research methods as employed on the USE-IT! project X, could infuse the work of seemingly dispirited institutional stakeholders with the energy and, crucially, the knowledge gained through the lived experience of activists and a wider range of other citizens, too. Within the context of an urban transformation such as that reshaping Birmingham, this could provide a platform for local communities to influence changes taking place and disrupt the depoliticised urban regime, creating a space for a plurality of political outcomes (Beveridge and Koch, 2016). This would in turn mitigate the negative effects of investment and its associated risk of displacement, thus building resistance to dominant structural forces.

Conclusion

In the context of an urban transformation in one of the UK's major cities, we find that agency is noticeable predominantly in the narratives of community activists who do not have formal institutional roles. These individuals seek to resist and counteract negative changes in their areas and try to draw from existing assets in the context of structural constraints. However, these islands of agency and morphogenesis, to use Archer's term (2003), are a fragmented archipelago cast adrift in an ocean of morphostasis, whereby institutional stakeholders are compelled – in their professional lives, at least – to internalise, reproduce, and reinforce processes of inequality. From the point of view of Easterly's model, activists can be seen as searchers who are focused on getting specific things done on a local level, acting in agential and tangible ways, whereas institutional stakeholders do not view themselves as agents of change and thus are not committed to act in agential ways.

The interviews showed a rather superficial commitment to justice among the stakeholder group that did not appear to be matched by specific strategies to disrupt processes of injustice. However, we also note that the two groups are likely measuring their agency against different aims and frames of reference: from a city-wide or national vantage point in the case of stakeholders to a frequently neighbourhood level in the case of activists. The relative complexity of issues faced by the former group (and professional restrictions on expressing views openly) must also be acknowledged. Nevertheless, we assert that the activists maintained a level of enthusiasm about their agency to affect change that was almost entirely absent in the stakeholder group. The activists also were far less likely to view structural forces such as austerity, centralisation, or market power as insurmountable challenges.

The institutional stakeholders expressed neither the agency nor the inclination to pursue social justice goals, perceiving themselves as unable to countervail structural forces. The thinking and perception of their agency among the group has been thoroughly morphed by structural forces, shown through the internationalisation of neoliberal 'trickle-down' logic and self-correction after making critical comments. We found that the rhetoric of this group was, with few exceptions, geared towards investment and the pursuit of flagship projects to attract capital into the city. Stakeholders who discussed social justice felt that this was an impossible aspiration and believed private investment would achieve it on their behalf.

However, while investment may be transforming the city, the data show that inequalities are intensifying (Dlabac et al., 2019). There is neither a strategy nor a belief that the aims of the just city can realistically be achieved – namely, the equitable distribution of resources (Fainstein, 2010) and the disruption of processes that perpetuate inequality (Soja, 2010). Debates on the just city therefore ought to consider individual agency and ideology as factors that can enable or prevent the realisation of these aims, along with further experimentation with mechanisms such as co-production that can move the discussion of the just city from theory to practice.

While this may seem like a pessimistic outlook, we believe that there remains space for collaboration between citizens and institutions that can co-produce a vision of a just future. Models such as USE-IT! demonstrate how projects orientated towards social justice goals can facilitate more inclusive decision-making and empower citizens, making them more agential (and perhaps even more like activists themselves). Co-production offers citizens a stake in change and can help resist structural forces that threaten to overwhelm communities. A culture of continuous civic engagement and relationship building needs to be encouraged – of which project USE-IT! sowed the first seeds. We recognise the significant restrictions placed upon institutional stakeholders who participated in this research, which they were also aware of. However, our research indicates that alternatives do exist to a society of ever-increasing inequalities. Co-production can overcome disempowerment found among marginalised groups and perhaps even the lack of agency among the institutional stakeholders, thus helping to aggregate and scale up the energy and engagement that we found among community activists. Doing so could unlock morphogenetic change – and build a more just city for all citizens.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Table 1: List of institutional stakeholders (IS) interviewed for project Y.

IS1	Retired senior council officer
IS2	Urban planner
IS3	Council officer
IS4	Council officer
IS5	Elected councillor
IS6	Senior council officer
IS7	Senior council officer
IS8	Property developer
IS9	Housing association officer
IS10	Senior council officer
IS11	Senior council officer

Table 2: List of community activists (CA) interviewed for project X.

CA1	Community hub representative
CA2	Neighbourhood charity activist
CA3	Neighbourhood charity activist
CA4	Campaigning group activist
CA5	Member of residents' group
CA6	Campaigning group activist
CA7	Charity representative
CA8	Charity representative
CA9	Faith and community leader

CA10	City councillor
CA11	Council officer