

**Editors**

Stan Majoor, Marie Morel,  
Alex Straathof,  
Frank Suurenbroek & Willem van Winden

# LAB AMSTERDAM

WORKING  

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LEARNING  

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REFLECTIONS

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*Editors*

Stan Majoor, Marie Morel, Alex Straathof,  
Frank Suurenbroek & Willem van Winden

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# CONTENTS

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**Preface** 7

*Huib de Jong*

## I Labs

**1 Introduction** 11

*Stan Majoor & Marie Morel*

**2 Leading place-based innovation** 19

*Robin Hambleton*

**3 Social innovation in the city** 22

*Andrew Switzer & Stan Majoor*

## II Working

**4 The fieldlab method** 32

*Elke van der Heijden, Stan Majoor, Eric Reiman,  
Alex Straathof & Willem van Winden*

## III Learning

► *Creating learning environments*

**5 Learning at the Kitchen Table** 57

*Atze van den Bos & Marie-José Koerhuis*

**6 World of Food** 67

*Wander Meulemans*

**7 Playfully towards new relations** 78

*Mike de Kreek & Eltje Bos*

- ▶ *Stakeholder participation*
- 8 A stitch in time saves nine** 91  
*Roeland van Geuns, Rosanna Schoorl & Lisette Desain*
- 9 Observe like an urban planner** 102  
*Anneke Treffers, Frank Suurenbroek & Pim van Weelde*
- 10 Placing Zuidoost on the map** 116  
*Nuria Arbones Aran, Zita Ingen Housz & Willem van Winden*
- ▶ *New relations and shifting roles*
- 11 We all take part** 128  
*Martha Meerman*
- 12 The climate and the street** 140  
*Linda Hooijer, Andrew Switzer, Karin de Nijs & Jeroen Kluck*
- 13 Language matters, too** 152  
*Samir Achbab*

#### IV Reflections

- ▶ *Introduction*
- 14 Listening to locals** 167  
*Sandra Bos*
- 15 Building bridges with words** 174  
*Anna de Zeeuw*
- 16 Trust, a matter of supply and demand** 180  
*Elke van der Heijden*

#### V Conclusion

- 17 A lab in the city** 191  
*Stan Majoor, Marie Morel, Alex Straathof, Frank Suurenbroek & Willem van Winden*

Notes 199

The authors 210

Illustration credits 214

Acknowledgements 215

## PREFACE

In the last few years we have started to learn how to utilize the abundant resources of the dynamic city that is Amsterdam for the purpose of education and research. We regard the city as a multi-faceted and inspiring study environment: a lab in which topics for a master's thesis or research project can sometimes literally be found on its very streets. This enables us to further enrich our city by engaging in its challenges and grasping its opportunities.

When we embarked on our priority theme (i.e. an interdisciplinary research programme) Urban Management in 2012, we made it our ambition to expand existing knowledge and insights in a more structured and methodical fashion. Amidst numerous persistent urban problems, we are also observing new relations being forged between residents, companies and authorities. By understanding, fostering and nurturing those relations by means of practical studies carried out by students and staff members, we are helping the city to grow. We have combined research, education and practice in three fieldlabs, in Amsterdam Nieuw-West, Oost and Zuidoost. Subsequently we, together with those directly involved (e.g. residents, companies, social organizations, housing associations, administrators and others), have set out an appropriate research and change trajectory. As University of Applied Sciences, we have made additional funds available for this purpose which have been partly matched by parties in the city of Amsterdam. From the start, it has been our intention to use an interdisciplinary approach. After all, most metropolitan issues transcend the limits of one single discipline.

All things considered, we started off rather ambitiously five years ago. What progress have we made, what have we achieved? Readers of this book may draw their own conclusions; I for my part at least am proud of what our students, teachers and researchers have accomplished. This book is a demonstration of what we have done, why, how, and with whom. It presents the new expertise and insights gained and shared; the changes we effected with them, and the copious network we built throughout the city. Equally significant is the innovative methodological approach we developed *en route* and will continue over the next few years. Finally, and at the same time, this book highlights the difficulties and hurdles we encountered and perhaps may run into again. I wish you an inspirational read!

**Professor Huib de Jong**

*Chair of the Board of Governors of Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences*

1

**LABS**



STAN MAJOR  
MARIE MOREL

## INTRODUCTION

**Cities around the world are currently at the centre of attention as testing grounds. The challenges they are facing are complex, varied and persistent: how do we keep neighbourhoods and estates liveable? How do we make the transition towards a truly sustainable economy and society? How do we integrate new groups of urban residents? These issues share a high degree of complexity and persistency; moreover, they also require the collective synergy of the energy, expertise and tools of residents, companies, administrations and institutions. This book is a record of how Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, together with the council and many other parties in its own city, has engaged in a creative process to address a number of important social issues. It introduces and analyses the methods, results, limitations and future targets encountered in the course of this process over the past few years.**

Recently, there has been a growing focus on cities as important players in social transition,<sup>1</sup> clearly in result of the fact that cities across the globe are accommodating a growing population and are therefore today confronted with major social, spatial, ecological and economic issues. At a time of frequently ineffective international cooperation, failed nation states and overpowering multinationals, it is the cities which are now emerging as powerful spatial and political entities to give shape to real transitions.<sup>2</sup> Cities have the advantage of their size and compactness; they are places where the energies of residents, companies and institutions can be directly linked.<sup>3</sup>



*Crowds in the city; at Hotel Victoria near Central Station.  
To many residents, the city's growing crowds are a source of great concern.*

In the Netherlands, this is manifest in the tendency among its (non-elected) mayors of major cities to present themselves during informal EU meetings, in networks such as *G32* (representing 38 large to medium-size Dutch municipalities) and in the media as confident and pragmatic problem solvers. Indeed, in the last few years the decentralization of responsibility in social and spatial policies has created more elbow-room for the cities. Kim Putters phrased this as a transition from a welfare *state* to a welfare *city*, a process complicated by the fact that legislation and financial control for the time being still reside with the national government.<sup>4</sup>

This renewed attention for the city as the stage for important social transformations comes with certain problems. On the one hand, it is far from certain whether solving problems at a local level will be feasible at a time when the economy is becoming more and more internationally interdependent.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, cities are not just success stories of people grabbing opportunities to better themselves, thus together effecting social changes. While cities are indeed engines of social progress and economic growth, they also harbour economic inequality and serious social tensions.<sup>6</sup> In the next few decades, the most important urban challenges will be social, economic and spatial developments such as these in combination with a necessary shift towards a sustainable economy. For this, much more is needed than technological innovation or funding alone. A critical debate on the direction in which the city will be moving and the choices that will have to be made will be essential. New forms of expertise will have to be developed, and collaboration between highly diverse participants needs to be stimulated. There will be few ready-made solutions. Experiments with new solution strategies at the level of neighbourhoods, housing estates and cities are crucial to make this transformation work.<sup>7</sup>

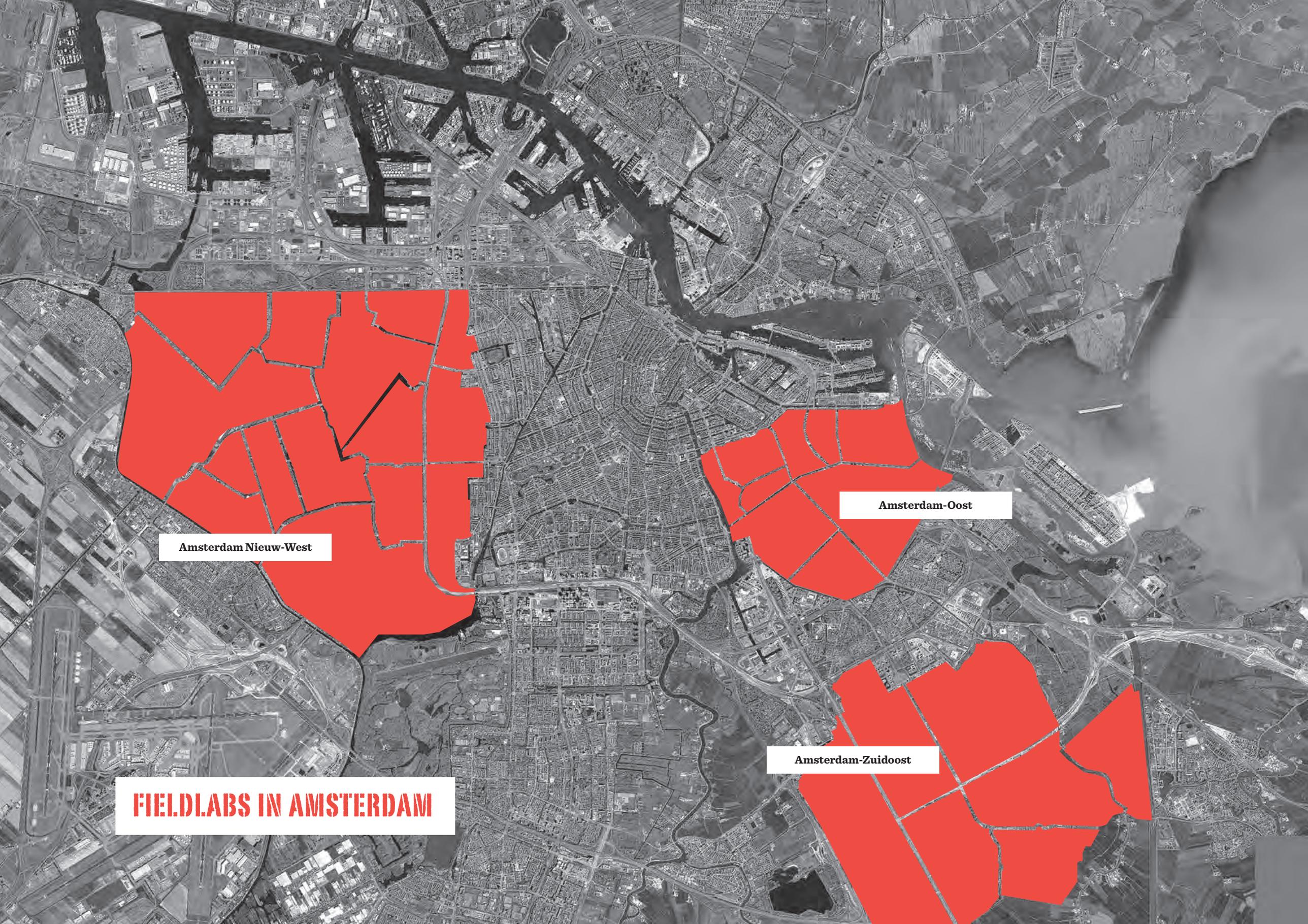
**Amsterdam as an urban lab** Amsterdam is a compact, independent-minded city in which knowledge-based institutions and innovative businesses densely cluster. Its extensive problems regarding social issues, sustainability and spatial growth make Amsterdam a perfect hothouse of social innovation. Following a period of stagnation and economic recession around 2010, the city has recently demonstrated significant growth.<sup>8</sup> Its council nurtures ambitious plans for fifty thousand new homes in the next ten years. Meanwhile, the city centre's quality of life has come under intense pressure due to mass tourism, while rising housing prices are becoming a serious problem due to gentrification and a soaring demand.<sup>9</sup> The job market is polarizing, with well-paid positions for creative knowledge workers at the top while, at the bottom, other groups are stranded in insecure menial jobs with little career perspective. Tenacious social and economic problems increasingly cluster in segregated parts of the city, often along its margins. And just as elsewhere in the Netherlands, despite many good intentions crucial sustainable development has barely begun.

In the last few years, the municipality has become entangled in a complicated reorganization in an attempt to downsize and operate in a more 'locality-oriented' manner. However, urban districts, as separate political organs intended to improve local coordination, have been abolished. Nonetheless, the last ten years have seen the rapid emergence — at least in certain neighbourhoods — of local initiatives by active residents as well as semi-professionals in areas such as public space management or supplying community services.<sup>10</sup> The council currently faces the important question as to how an administration may formulate effective local policies that tap into this energy.

**A fieldlab** Worldwide, so-called *urban living labs* are emerging as environments in which similar new ways to tackle urban issues can be formulated and tested.<sup>11</sup> Although the word 'laboratory' may evoke images of segregated space, white lab coats and controlled variables, these labs are, in fact, situated in a given, complex reality. Despite their wide variety these labs nonetheless share some important characteristics. By approaching problems at a local level, the labs are able to operate within a specific context. The participation and engagement of those directly involved are crucial to this process: social institutions, administrations, businesses and residents all contribute their own values, interests and needs. Knowledge-based institutions contribute in significant ways to the organization of shared learning processes. The very fact that solutions are still fluid makes experimentation and evaluation so important.<sup>12</sup>

In Amsterdam, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS) in close collaboration with Amsterdam Municipality has initiated three such urban labs, called *fieldlabs*, as part of its priority theme Urban Management. In them, we try to develop at a local level innovative approaches to metropolitan problems. The focus is on innovation and a multi-disciplinary strategy. One important goal of these labs is to deploy individual projects and approaches in order to affect changes in existing governance structures.<sup>13</sup> Our aim is to develop expertise and to alter current practice *with* the people involved, rather than *for* them or *about* them. But how? What have our experiences been so far? What are our strengths and weaknesses? This book takes a critical look at our fieldlabs. Why this search for new forms of intervention, and for whom? Is it fed by the residents' own daily reality or by a political urge to intervene? And how can innovation on a local level be made relevant to the entire city?

**Guidelines for the reader** This book is structured around both methods and content. On the one hand, we will demonstrate how fieldlabs are organized and what is involved in working with and in them. On the other, we will show what the various fieldlab projects can teach us. In the first section, *Labs*, an introduction is followed by a presentation by Robin Hambleton



**Amsterdam Nieuw-West**

**Amsterdam-Oost**

**Amsterdam-Zuidoost**

**FIELDLABS IN AMSTERDAM**

of his views on the importance of leadership in local innovation. The next chapter, *Social innovation in the city*, is a theoretical exploration of social innovation, the ultimate goal of fieldlabs. Section II, *Working*, presents a practical guideline facilitating the communication of practical knowledge of and experience with fieldlab method and organization. This method provides the foundation for a number of different fieldlab projects which form the core of the rest of the book.

In Section III, *Learning*, we present nine such research and intervention projects in which new approaches are being developed and new relations established with regard to a number of persistent urban issues. The topics range from functional illiteracy in the Nieuw-West district to climate adaptation in the Watergraafsmeer estate in urban district Oost. The section is subdivided into three thematic subsections illustrating the various core values of the fieldlab method. *Creating learning environments* centres on the wide variety of local learning environments which deal with social issues, and how these can be actively created. *Stakeholder participation* focuses on the importance of making problem owners active parties instead of mere objects of study. *New relations and shifting roles* demonstrates the need for new forms of collaboration and for breaking down existing structures when dealing with these issues.

In Section IV, *Reflections*, three fieldlab coordinators share their reflections on working in fieldlabs, using their methodical and practical experiences to zoom in on the concepts of trust, language and focussing demand. Finally, a concluding chapter, *An Urban Laboratory*, evaluates what lessons can be learned about urban innovation and the function, potential and limitations of urban fieldlabs.



ROBIN HAMBLETON

## LEADING PLACE-BASED INNOVATION

Urban experimentation is on the rise. Cities in Europe, and elsewhere, are now far more willing than previously to adopt experimental approaches to public policy making. The reasons for this growth in urban innovation are many and varied. But a key theme is the desire to bring new perspectives, and ways of thinking, into the creative process of devising inventive solutions to social, economic and political challenges. It can be suggested that urban living labs, and the fieldlabs presented in this volume, provide a useful collection of intriguing examples. They form part of a wider movement in urban policy making – one that implies a move away from ‘top down’ delivery of pre-conceived policy solutions towards processes of decision-making that are, in many respects, ‘bottom up’ in their ethos, inclusive in style and grounded in the lived experience of local communities of place.

The role of leadership in promoting public innovation designed to create just and sustainable cities is an important but often neglected factor in studies of urban innovation. The agents involved in urban innovation are not able to do exactly as they choose. On the contrary, various powerful forces shape the context within which they operate. These forces do not rule out the possibility of progressive local leadership. Rather they place limits on what can be accomplished in particular places and at particular moments in time. Figure 1 provides a simplified picture of four sets of forces that shape the world of place-based governance in any given locality.<sup>1</sup>

At the bottom of the diagram are the non-negotiable environmental limits. Ignoring the fact that cities are part of the natural ecosystem is irresponsible, and failure to pay attention to environmental limits will store up unmanageable problems for future generations.<sup>2</sup> This side of the diagram