

Social Labs in Community Libraries

by

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Abstract

Research problem: Governments are looking for ways to empower communities to create desired change for themselves. Social Labs empower diverse groups to tackle complex social challenges effectively. Community libraries, as a central social space in the community, have the power to bridge gaps between people, and build social capital. The study explored how Social Labs might be effectively designed to operate in community libraries, in order to empower the communities that they serve.

Methodology: Four different qualitative methodologies were employed: “The Art of Social Labs” online course was attended to gather data on Social Labs principles and practice, Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Labs practitioners and experts, a case study was conducted on Tamaki Mental Health and Wellbeing Lab, and the Design for Social Innovation Symposium was attended.

Results: Two paths for community libraries wishing to implement Social Labs emerged: gradual ground-up development, and partnering with existing Lab teams. A number of useful approaches and considerations for Social Labs design for community libraries were also captured.

Implications: Community Libraries wishing to empower their communities to tackle complex social challenges will find this a useful guide to principles and design considerations of Social Labs in community libraries. Other useful design tools and approaches to community empowerment are also discussed. Researchers and practitioners from other disciplines may also find the study useful, considering the current dearth of literature on Social Labs.

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1. Introduction

Modern libraries have always been places where individuals can learn and improve themselves. An often cited traditional function of the library is to enable citizens to participate in democracy; for example the American Library Association (“Democracy Statement” n.d., para. 1) states that “[A free society] must ensure that citizens have the resources to develop the information literacy skills necessary to participate in the democratic process”, and this, it claims, is done in our libraries.

However, governments are now looking to empower ordinary people and communities not just to participate in democracy and civic life in the sense of electing and directing government leaders, but creating change for themselves at a community level. For example, Auckland Council has this year adopted an “Empowered Communities Approach”, which the General Manager of Community Development, Arts and Culture describes thus: “An empowered community is one where individuals, whanau and communities have the means to influence decisions, take action and make change happen in their lives and communities. This includes communities of place, interest and identity” (“Auckland Council announces” n.d., para. 7).

The Social Labs method is one method of Social Innovation that local governments could use to empower communities to make change happen for themselves. Social Labs are designed to tackle complex social challenges, which are the challenges that will frequently be faced by communities, for example homelessness, youth unemployment, and so on. As Hassan describes (2014b, p. 7), traditionally, complex social challenges have been approached as technical challenges, which is highly problematic, and he describes the difference between technical and complex social challenges thus:

An example of a technical challenge is sending a man to the moon. The problem is clearly defined and the solution unequivocal. Implementation may require solving many difficult problems, but the desired outcome is plainly understood and agreed upon. In contrast,

multiple perceptions of both the problem and the solution are characteristic of complex systems.

(Hassan, 2014b, p. 7)

So for dealing with complex social challenges, simplistic technical methodologies where the problem and solution are arbitrarily defined and then actors set about creating a solution is clearly a deficient methodology. Hassan thus advocates the Social Labs method for dealing with complex social challenges. Hassan (2014b, p. 3) defines Social Labs as having three core characteristics:

1. They are social. Social labs start by bringing together diverse participants to work in a team that acts collectively. They are ideally drawn from different sectors of society, such as government, civil society, and the business community. The participation of diverse stakeholders beyond consultation, as opposed to teams of experts or technocrats, represents the social nature of social labs.
2. They are experimental. Social labs are not one-off experiences. They're ongoing and sustained efforts. The team doing the work takes an iterative approach to the challenges it wants to address, prototyping interventions and managing a portfolio of promising solutions. This reflects the experimental nature of social labs, as opposed to the project-based nature of many social interventions.
3. They are systemic. The ideas and initiatives developing in social labs, released as prototypes, aspire to be systemic in nature. This means trying to come up with solutions that go beyond dealing with a part of the whole or symptoms and address the root cause of why things are not working in the first place.

This study explored how Social Labs could be situated in community libraries, leveraging their position in the community to facilitate the community empowerment that governments aspire for communities to achieve for themselves. The reasons that community libraries have great potential as sites for community empowerment through Social Labs will be explored below in “Rationale”.

2. Rationale

Community libraries are shared and inclusive community spaces which promote the development of social capital(Goulding, 2004, p. 4), and as stated in by Kretzman & Rans (2005, p. 2):

While many places and organizations “bond” together people of like mind, libraries also have the capacity to “bridge” – bring together different types of people who may not share experiences with each other otherwise.

Social Labs aim to bring together diverse actors in the system that exists around a social challenge, and we can see that libraries are central community spaces that bridge gaps between diversity. As Tennant(n.d., para. 3) states, “the mission of librarians is to empower”, so Social Labs were therefore explored as one method which community libraries could use to empower communities to make changes they want to see, and tackle complex social challenges at the community scale, thus achieving governments such as Auckland Council’s aspiration for communities to be empowered to help themselves.

As Goulding(2004, p. 5) says “there is a real opportunity for librarians to stake a claim for the library in civic renewal and community building and emphasize their role in building social capital.” Social Labs build social capital, but not just for social capital’s sake; they build social capital with the explicit objective of enabling society to meet its complex social challenges. They also build the capacity of participants to participate in Social Labs, developing shared understanding of the problem from multiple perspectives, and prototyping solutions as they “learn by doing”, thus building the resilience of the community as a whole. Community libraries that implement Social Labs can position themselves as social innovation hubs for the communities that they serve. The study will give library leaders a way to approach design and facilitation of Social Labs, if they should wish to pursue this.

Although some community empowerment methodologies have been explored by libraries, particularly community asset mapping, for example Community Centre Gellerup (“From ‘book container’ to community centre,” n.d.), and Chicago Public Libraries (Kretzmann & Rans, 2005), the Social Labs approach to community empowerment has not been explored, and thus does not exist in the literature. As such, this study will be a unique and significant contribution to the library and information science literature. Also, considering the dearth of peer-reviewed literature on Social Labs in any discipline, this study may be useful to those from other disciplines wishing to learn about Social Labs, as discussed by Hassan, and in terms of examples from the field in New Zealand.

3. Problem Statement

Designing a Social Lab for a community library has not been done before; as such, it is unexplored territory. While principles can be taken from Hassan’s Social Lab model, the context of a social lab is significant; how can the model be effectively adapted to this setting? How can it be implemented within the constraints presented in the community library context, and how can it be designed to take best advantage of the opportunities presented in this context? These are the issues that were tackled in the study. How the lab can be facilitated to make it successful is also considered, since good facilitation is key to making the “social” part of a social lab work.

3.1 Research Question

How could a social lab be developed in a community library, as a way of empowering the community to tackle a locally significant complex social challenge and effect desired social change? What are the important design considerations, challenges, and opportunities when doing so? How can facilitation be effectively designed to make the lab successful?

4. Limitations

It was pointed out by several of the experts that were interviewed in the study that one can't learn that much about designing a social lab in a library without actually undertaking that task; the Social Labs approach emphasises learning by doing, and learning by prototyping, but this was not possible given the resource and timeframe constraints of the study. As such, this study provides a broad strokes sketch of the overall process, with some specifics on how to get started; it does not provide detailed information on the end-to-end process (but if that were provided it may not be so helpful, since every lab is highly context dependent anyway, so practitioners need to take the principles and find out what specifics work in their context).

Complementary and alternative models of social innovation were briefly explored, but these avenues could be explored much further, given greater scope (again though, which tools and approaches are best is highly context dependent, but hopefully the "leads" provided will be useful avenues of exploration for aspiring practitioners).

As mentioned, which approaches and design options are best depends on the context of the challenge, so while the study talks about what different practitioners are doing in various contexts, without knowing what context, what challenge, the hypothetical Library Social Lab finds itself with, the study can only present a range of tools and options, trusting practitioners to decide which works best for them once they engage with Social Labs practice in their particular context, and use their discernment.

5. Definition of Terms

Defining the terms used in the field of Social Labs, and Social Innovation, is difficult, as this area is relatively new, and there is no commonly agreed definition for many of the terms used. However, some of the terms commonly used will be mentioned here for clarity.

Business as usual(BAU): Hassan Defines Business as Usual (BAU) (2014b, p. 32) as follows:

BAU is what we do normally. It's what we're most used to doing and consists of those activities that we're most comfortable doing. When a new challenge arises, BAU means taking an approach in which we're operating from deep within our comfort zone.

He discusses how in the developmental space, addressing complex social challenges via the "results-based agenda" results in solutions being centrally planned in five year packages(Hassan, 2014b, p. 33), which are inflexibly delivered, and "imposing this neo-Soviet model [of packaging work into inflexible five-year plans] is the norm when it comes to addressing complex social challenges."(Hassan, 2014b, p. 7). Social Labs are defined in contrast to BAU, in terms of using agile management and prototyping instead of the project management paradigm to tackle complex social challenges.

Secretariat/Design Team/Core Team/ Lab Team: Hassan (2015, p. 23) defines the Secretariat thus:

"The role of the lab secretariat is to support the lab team in their work, through providing a range of services, from facilitation to logistical support". The Secretariat is there at the start, and secures the pre-conditions to get the lab started. This team is also sometimes referred to as the Core team, Design team, or Lab team. The terms are used interchangeably in this study as they all refer to essentially the same team/group in the same role.

6. Literature review

The literature on Social Labs is sparse; there is very little available in the form of peer reviewed literature, as the field is quite new. Therefore, other literature has been sourced from websites, generally those of practitioners who have published reports, toolkits, short field books and in the case of Hassan (2014b), a book. There is no literature on Social Labs in libraries as there has never been a Social Lab in a library, but the existing literature on Social Labs generally has provided some data on the principles and considerations required in designing a Social Lab, which has been considered in the light of doing so in a community library, with the aim of empowering the community.

6.1 Stacks

Hassan (2015, p. 25) recommends designing in four “stacks”, a stack being an area of operations for the Social Lab: governance, information, capacity, and innovation. The innovation stack is where the actual problem solving happens, and the other three stacks exist to support it (Hassan, 2014b, p. 136). The governance stack is the stack that includes the management and facilitators of the lab; the people who get it started and who make key decisions about what the lab is about, and how it will work. The information stack is concerned with creating information flow around the lab, across the lab team, down to stakeholders/users, and up to funders and champions (Hassan, 2015, p. 27). The capacity stack is concerned with developing the capacity of the lab participants to work effectively in the lab. In a library context where the lab will be small, governance, information, and capacity layers may all in fact be managed by the same people, the ones who are starting and supporting the lab, but it is useful to understand that these are, according to Hassan, the four functional areas which must be attended to in order to run a successful lab.

6.2 Teams

Hassan (2015, p. 23) describes how there are two core teams in a Social Lab: the lab team, which consists of a diverse set of stakeholders from different sectors of society, and the secretariat, who act in a supporting role. The lab team (the participants in the lab) are the team that is directly working on the challenge. The secretariat is a small team who “provide a range of services from facilitation to logistical support”(Hassan, 2015, p. 23) to the lab team, to enable them to work at tackling the challenge. Once the lab team starts the prototyping work it may split into several teams based around different prototypes. The lab will grow as prototyping teams identify gaps and recruit new members, but Hassan talks about how induction has to be managed carefully, so that new members understand how the lab works; “The risk of not getting these things right is to undo the work of the lab team to date” (Hassan, 2015, p. 24). Hassan talks about how further groups/teams can be developed, such as champions, and formal governance groups, but these can be developed as and when needed.

6.3 Curriculum

Lifhack labs 2014(*Lifhack Labs 2014 – The Report*, 2014, p. 18) followed a five week structure, which moved from developing a purpose, to learning new skills, problem validation, solution development, and “preparing for the world.” They called this structure a “layered learning curriculum”, indicating a strong emphasis on the capacity stack of the lab. Indeed, one of their key findings was that the lab was more about personal development for the participants than building things(*Lifhack Labs 2014 – The Report*, 2014, p. 31). This capacity-centric approach may also be a good model for libraries, which may be introducing Social Labs and social innovation/design processes to people who have widely varying levels of familiarity(and often no familiarity) with them, and may need to learn new ways of thinking and working. First the capacity of the community must be built, and then the community can in turn build the solutions.

6.4 Convening diverse stakeholders

Hassan(2014b, p. 3)talks about the social nature of social labs, which draw together a diverse group of stakeholders from different parts of society. Takuechi et al(2012, p. 9) highlight the importance of diversity of perspectives being brought to the lab: “In a similar sense, overlaying a diversity of seemingly disconnected perspectives lends an otherwise impossible depth and dimension to our collective understanding of a problem or situation.” Torjman (2012, p. 9) agrees: “A major difference with these new Labs, compared to traditional ones, is the focus on diversity of perspectives and skill sets.” These diverse stakeholders make up “a microcosm of the system you are seeking to change” (“Convene your own Social Innovation Lab,” n.d., para. 3) including those who are impacted by the problem, and those who can influence the problem (e.g. funders, front line workers, policy makers, etc.) This method counteracts “groupthink” where homogenous individuals with similar points of view develop solutions based on their understanding of the problem. Methods of managing the diversity of the stakeholders are discussed in the section on facilitation tools.

6.5 U Process as an Innovation Methodology

Rodrigues, Cubista, and Simonsen (2014, p. 25) in their study which included interviews practitioners on lab design and facilitation, note that in terms of tools recommended by lab practitioners “Theory U was mentioned by 6 out of 10 (Tiesinga; Hassan; Pohlman; Nieuwerth, Bojer; Kahane).”

The U process is structured in a U shape because it is made up of five movements which take the group through developing a shared sense of intention(co-initiating), down through progressively deeper levels of communication and perception about the challenge(co-sensing), to the bottom of the U, called presencing, where the group reflects deeply on the challenge (Scharmer, 2007, p. 6), and finally moves up the U into an active phase of co-creation and co-evolving of solutions. More detail about some of the facilitative aspects of the U process will be discussed under facilitation tools.

6.6 Open vs. Closed Convening

Hassan (2014b, p. 116) discusses the technique of “open convening”, which involves broadcasting an invitation across one’s networks to find individuals who are interested in participation. This is discussed in contrast to closed convening, where influential individuals are specifically selected and then sought out. Hassan reflects that open convening is less costly (closed convening generally involves a resource intensive research, selection, and recruitment process), and engages the individuals most interested and motivated to contribute to the lab, which is probably more effective than trying to convince people who are perceived as influential, but are not in fact that keen to contribute.

By contrast, Lifehack Labs in their 2014 programme, used a process that was more closed; applicants were interviewed, and selected for using “tight criteria” (*Lifehack Labs 2014 – The Report*, 2014, p. 35). This makes sense for Lifehack as their strategic direction was to develop the entrepreneurial capacity of a group of promising individuals, so that they might tackle the challenge.

In the library context, open convening is probably more appropriate, given the public, open nature of libraries, and the highly permeable boundaries of a library social lab which will most likely be operating in a public space much of the time. Hassan (2014b, p. 116) discusses how the most important thing is to get a “critical mass” of people with connections to others that they could convince to be involved.

6.7 Designing at Appropriate Scale

The trend in social innovation is for solutions to be scalable, i.e. that they can scale up, for example as discussed in the Open Book of Social Innovation (Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010, p. 9). However, Lifehack Labs (*Lifehack Labs 2014 – The Report*, 2014, p. 31) reflect how not all innovations are scalable, nor should they necessarily be. Hassan (2014b, p. 12) discusses how a social lab can be

created at any scale, and if successful, will produce results at the scale that it was designed at (in the community library context, that is the community-scale). However, he discusses the caveat that the issue that a local social lab tackles may have roots that go beyond the community. He also discusses how successful labs may have impacts beyond the scale that they are designed for, which the researcher reflects may involve scaling across as discussed by Barrington-Bush (2015), where communities of practice share what has worked with each other, adapting learnings appropriately as they move to new settings and contexts.

6.8 Prototyping and Agile Action Cycle

Hassan (2014b, p. 106) recommends using a prototyping approach for the “co-creation” phase of the lab, where groups of lab participants are developing solutions to meet the challenge. In a prototyping approach, the team develops a simple version of their solution to test out in the real world, in order to learn more about how it operates and develop it further. Prototypes are developed in an agile action cycle, where teams create a backlog of everything that needs to be done, and then work in short cycles, taking on a few tasks in a time, and staying flexible in how they manage the work, rather than planning everything exhaustively (the traditional planning approach Hassan describes as “fragile”, and hence not well-suited to complex social challenges which have emergent, evolving features).

6.9 Facilitation

There are many possible facilitation techniques and frameworks that could be reviewed from the well-developed field of literature on facilitation; however the researcher thought it more valuable to look at the methods that can be currently cited in the social labs literature, as these will be “battle-

tested”, in that practitioners have seen that they work in the social labs context and are thus including them in the literature they produce.

6.9.1 U process as a facilitation tool

The U process is simultaneously a tool for structuring the overarching innovation process, and also a facilitation tool which can be used to manage and shift group dynamics from less effective ways of communication and working to more effective ones.

The U process emphasises moving from “downloading” style listening which Scharmer(2007, p. 2) calls “listening by reconfirming habitual judgments”, to factual listening, empathic listening, and finally generative listening, as the social lab moves down the U. Factual listening is “open-minded” or scientific inquiry/curiosity style listening. Empathic listening allows the participants to see from another’s point of view, which is an important part of the process of developing a shared understanding of the problem that the social lab is working on, since Social labs bring together diverse individuals from all parts of a system.

The U process emphasizes a retreat period at the bottom of the U, time to reflect on what has been learned and allow an understanding of the situation and the future state that wants to be expressed. This is what is called “generative listening”; a metaphorical kind of listening to the improved future state that wants to emerge, as well as co-creation and co-evolution processes to develop the solutions, once the challenge is properly understood. This feature is what, in the researcher’s view, distinguishes the U process from some other social innovation models: its emphasis on reaching a deep and shared understanding of the challenge by the team before attempting to develop solutions.

6.9.2 Managing Gaps

Since stakeholders will be diverse, and may well have varying levels of power and influence, it is important to speak to these differences: “Consciously address power and privilege differences in the group you are working with on the lab, making space for many kinds of power, in service of breakthrough on your innovation question” (“Convene your own” n.d., para. 6). Social Innovation lab also talks about the need to close gaps: “acknowledge structural dynamics & cultural beliefs that manifest as persistent gaps in well-being and act in ways that close those gaps” (“Convene your own Social Innovation Lab,” n.d.).

6.9.3 Paired Dialogue Interviews

There are many useful tools in a number of toolkits published by change labs, the predecessors to social labs, and social labs (see an excellent list of resources [here](#) (“Toolkits - Social Labs,” n.d.)), but one particular tool will be highlighted as an example here.

A tool in the Reos Toolkit, paired dialogue interviews can be used at the co-sensing stage of the U process (“Paired Dialogue Interviews,” 2010). During this process, paired lab participants take turns being the interviewer and the interviewee, for 20 minutes each, in order to learn about each other’s perspective and understanding of the challenge the lab is addressing. This serves several functions; to clarify the interviewee’s thinking about the issue, to increase the understanding of the interviewee by the interviewer, and to form strong connections between the pair, as they dialogue and share stories about the topic, and engage in empathic as well as factual listening.

6.10 Summary

A review of the literature has begun to reveal some of the salient aspects of designing a Social Lab. However, the “Social Labs Fieldbook” (Hassan, 2015) which will likely become the principal guide on principles and practices of designing a Social Lab, is an incomplete document. For this reason “The

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Art of Social Labs” course was attended, to obtain better data on the principles and practicalities of design, as well as three other methodologies used, which will be described below.

7. Methodology – Data Collection and Analysis

Four methodologies for data collection were employed: attendance of “The Art of Social Labs”, an online course about social labs, attendance of the “Design for Social Innovation Symposium 2015”, a case study of an existing social lab, and interviews with practitioners of social labs and social innovation experts. Data collection consisted primarily of note taking, recording of conversations, and photographs for each of the four methodologies. For data analysis, Creswell’s (2012, p. 182) Data Analysis Spiral, with its four steps of organisation, perusal, classification, and synthesis, was used to analyse the data and organise it into meaningful themes. Notes taken were organised into categories and subcategories, perused, reflected upon, and then these were synthesised as the report was written. Leedy and Omrod (2013, p. 159) note that taking more than one form of data can mitigate the effect of researcher bias somewhat; the relatively numerous and diverse methods used in this research project should help in this regard.

7.1 “The Art of Social Labs” Course

Attendance of a course on social labs, “The Art of Social Labs”, taught by Zaid Hassan, was used as a methodology of data gathering; this is the only course in existence on social labs to date worldwide, run by possibly the foremost practitioner with many years’ experience in designing and facilitating social labs, and most well-known author on the topic, so it provided a unique opportunity for data gathering on the research questions. Furthermore, as mentioned above the “Social Labs Fieldbook”(Hassan, 2015), which will be the concise guide on the principles and practicalities of designing and running a Social Lab, is incomplete, so the course was attended to obtain the mainstay of data on the Social Labs method, and Social Lab design methodology. Extensive data were gathered on the considerations for design of social labs, through notes taken on lectures by Hassan, and practical exercises done on social lab design.

7.2 Symposium

The researcher attended the “Design for Social Innovation Symposium 2015” which included sessions on Social Labs and social innovation generally, to gain insights on Social Labs and the field of social innovation surrounding it. The researcher attended a “surgery” on Lifehack Lab, where the Lifehack Lab team invited participants to reflect on their practice with them, to learn more about Lifehack’s approach. Some other sessions were also pertinent to the project and they have been discussed in the results.

7.3 Case Study

A case study was conducted to examine the design of a Social Lab, and ground the learnings from the “Art of Social Labs” course in observation of the design process of a Lab Team working in a specific context, namely the Tamaki Mental Health and Wellbeing Lab, which is currently being designed by a core lab team from Auckland District Health Board, in collaboration with community partners from the Tamaki area of Auckland. Tamaki Mental Health and Wellbeing lab was chosen because of its particular focus on the community scale, similar to that which a community library Social Lab would take, and its commitment to codesigning with people from the community. Lifehack lab in Wellington and the Codesign Lab in Manukau were also possibilities, but Tamaki Mental Health and Wellbeing lab was the closest match to the conceived Community Library Social Lab. The Lab’s documentation and website were reviewed to learn about the design of the lab, and the core team was observed in the process of designing the lab. This yielded useful data on designing a lab in a particular context, with certain constraints.

7.4 Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted with practitioners from Lifehack Lab and Codesign Lab, the other two Social Labs in Auckland (It could be argued that Codesign Lab isn't precisely a Social Lab due to only holding a core team onsite without the intention of also convening participants long term, but then all of the labs in New Zealand have various departures from Hassan's Labs practice, so the line between what is and isn't a social lab is blurry), and Billy Matheson, an expert on Social Innovation. Conversations with these individuals with rich experience and in depth knowledge of Social Labs practice and the surrounding sphere of Social Innovation, yielded a wealth of nuance on the design considerations for a Community Library Social Lab.

Amy Cunliffe and Danielle Carter, two advisors from Auckland Libraries, were also interviewed, to get their perspective on how the design of a Social Lab would work in the library context. This conversation focussed particularly on the opportunities and challenges in this context.

A semi-structured approach was used, with questions used as "touchpoints", to come back to, but the interviewer was not constrained by these questions, taking cues from the interviewees and following the conversation to the points they considered most important. In this way important relevant data emerged that the researcher didn't know to look for, thanks to the wider knowledge and experience that the interviewees brought to the table.

The questions used were:

1. What opportunities and challenges can you see with situating a social lab in a library setting?
How would this influence the nature of the lab?

2. I'm envisaging a social lab in a library may include a core team of a librarian and one or two key community partners, with participants being mostly voluntary and only able to commit part time. What are the implications of this for how the lab will work?
3. Participants may have little or no previous experience of social innovation tools and processes, what implications does this have for coaching, facilitation, and capacity building?
4. How might those interested in Social Labs, but not ready to fully commit to starting a lab, experiment with social lab approaches, to "dip their toes in", build capacity, and understand the value of the approach?
5. What are important considerations for facilitating a social lab? What techniques and tools work well?

The interviews were recorded, but not transcribed. Rather, notes were taken directly after the interview, and then added to using recordings to review the dialogue. The data extracted were then organised into key themes.

7.5 Ethical Considerations

Of the four main categories of ethical considerations identified by Leedy and Ormrod (2013, p. 104) the main two of concern regarding this research were voluntary and informed participation, and right to privacy.

Voluntary and informed participation were managed in the case study and the interviews by the use of information sheets which told the participants the purpose of the research and what data they would be asked to share, and consent forms that the participants signed to indicate their voluntary participation. Data from "The Art of Social Labs", and the "Design for Social Innovation Symposium 2015" were considered to be collected from public presentations, and therefore considered to be fair game.

Right to privacy wasn't a major concern as there was neither personally sensitive information included in the data to be collected, nor was there commercially or organisationally sensitive information that needed to be excluded from the report. The interviews focussed on the hypothetical situation of a Social Lab in a library, so the information given by interviewees was low-stakes and didn't involve privacy concerns. The case study of Tamaki Mental Health and Wellbeing Lab looked at how the lab works, and the Lab has indicated that it would like to share this information freely.

7.5 Summary

The "Art of Social Labs" course provided rich data on the principles underpinning Social Labs, as well as practical considerations. The case study provided a "real life" example of Social Lab design, and an opportunity to see how the constraints of a particular context are worked with in the design process. The symposium and interviews were used to explore Social Lab design further, in the examples of Lifehack Lab and Co-Design Lab, as well as the Social Innovation sphere which the Social Labs method sits within, and which it draws tools and methods from, and overlaps with, as well as many of the considerations specific to the context of Social Labs in community libraries, or at the community scale. Together these methods produced a deep and broad answer to the research question.

8. Results

Results from the four data collection methodologies will be discussed below. The training course produced data on the principles of Social Labs, as well as design considerations. The Symposium produced data including reflections from the field from Lifehack Labs, design tools such as “Theory of Change”, and considerations from the wider Social Innovation sphere. The interviews yielded rich data from Lifehack and Co-Design Lab practitioners on design considerations, as well as considerations on the community library context from Library Advisors. Finally, the case study on Tamaki Mental Health and Wellbeing Lab produced data on design considerations from a Social Lab design team working in a community context.

8.1 “The Art of Social Labs” Course

The training course was delivered online, and structured into three sections: on preconditions for a social lab, which focussed on how to establish the basic ingredients necessary to get a lab started, lab design, which focussed on how to design a lab, and considerations for design, and finally prototyping, which focussed on how the team setting up a lab could use an “agile” approach to structure that process, and thus learn how agile works and be able to facilitate the participants using the agile approach in the prototyping phase of the lab.

Plenary sessions were followed by practical sessions in regional cohorts, applying the knowledge learnt in plenary sessions, and the researcher was in a cohort made up of a number of members of the Co-Design Lab team and him. Some notes from these sessions are also included in the data.

Questions were occasionally asked directly of Hassan by the researcher on topics pertinent to the study, and the answers are noted below in relevant sections.

The data collected from the course are often general in nature; they set out the basic principles and design considerations for Social Labs, but where possible, considerations regarding the community

library context have been added. More data on library context specific considerations were collected using the other methods, particularly the interviews and case study.

8.1.1 Nature of Social Labs

The course contained some discussion of what the basic nature of Social Labs is, what their purpose is, and what their fundamental mechanisms and assumptions are.

8.1.1.1 *Finite vs. Infinite games*

Philosophically, Social Labs can be thought of as “infinite games”, as discussed by Hassan (2014a). This means that social lab practitioners are not “playing to win”, for example to “win the war on poverty”, because there is an understanding that complex social challenges can’t be neatly or finally solved. Instead they are playing to bring more people into the “game”; to shift more people to pay attention to the issue, and to build societal will, attention, capacity, transforming society into one that collectively takes action on the complex social challenges. This “infinite games” approach fits well with community empowerment, since the Library Social Lab will draw the community together, and empower them to solve the challenge that is facing them, and the library’s “bridging”, social capital building qualities will fit well into this process.

8.1.1.2 *Platform not Project*

It was clarified by Hassan (2015, p. 17) that Social Labs are not projects, in that they do not have a set beginning and end date (in this sense they differ from conventional “Business as Usual”, planning based approaches to complex social problems, which require clearly defined outcomes with tightly defined timeframes on delivery of return on investment). Instead, Social Labs operate as platforms, which create a new institutional space where a portfolio of prototypes for interventions can be developed over time (in this sense they are analogous to traditional labs, e.g. labs studying a cure for cancer hence the name “Social Labs”, which are meant to be a new application of the old idea of the research lab).

8.1.1.3 Circular investment of Capitals

The outputs of a social lab are thought of as a number of “capitals”, for example social capital, intellectual capital (new ideas, knowledge, and concepts), natural capital, and so on. Capitals generated by the lab are circularly reinvested back into the lab where they can be recycled to increase the potential impact that the lab can have (Fig. 1). For example social capital developed by the lab, the strong connections of understanding and cooperation between previously disparate participants allows the lab in further iterations to have smoother, more efficient workflows (some of the hard, high-friction work of reaching a shared perspective and understanding of the problem, having started from diverse perspectives, being already done).

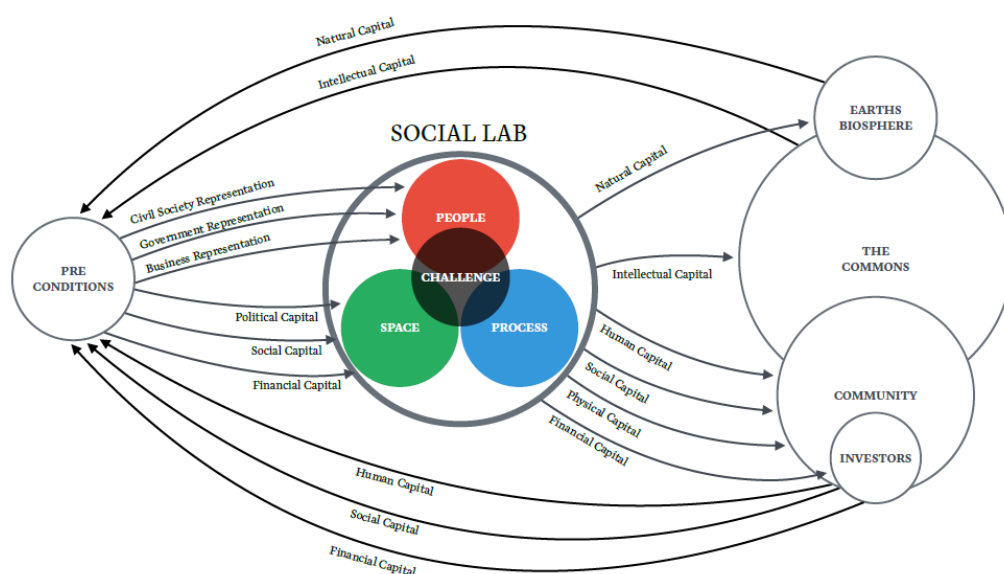


Figure 1. Social Labs cycle of capitals. Reprinted from *The Social Labs Fieldbook* by Hassan, Z. (2015), Graphic by Craig, Z. Reprinted with permission under [creative commons attribution licence](#).

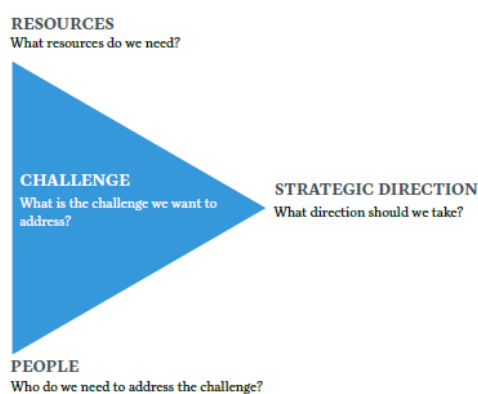
8.1.1.4 Institutional Space

One of the important functions of a Social Lab is to create an institutional and cultural space which is optimally conducive to developing innovative interventions on complex social challenges. This means developing an organisational culture within a social lab which has enough freedom, flexibility, and agility to respond innovatively to the emergent nature of complex social challenges. Therefore, situating a lab within one organisation carries with it the danger of the lab inheriting the parent

organisation's organisational practices and culture, indeed its rules and taboos. This can be constrictive and therefore uncondusive to effective innovation.

Therefore, a social lab that is brought together by a small number of key stakeholder organisations, who co-construct the institutional space and culture of the lab, will be more effective. So although a social lab might be physically situated within a library, it would probably be highly beneficial for the library to partner with some highly motivated key stakeholders in the area of the challenge the lab will address. The secretariat that design the lab and secure the preconditions will contain members from all of the stakeholder organisations. Highly successful social labs have, in some cases, for example the [Sustainable Food Laboratory](#) ("Home," n.d.), become organisations in themselves, and this can be a highly sustainable way for a social lab to develop. A social lab that is instigated by a library, in partnership with other stakeholder organisations around a challenge, could also become an independent but strongly affiliated small organisation, which the library works in partnership with. Such an organisation would not be owned by local government/the library, but would continue to exist in a new co-constructed institutional space.

8.1.2 Preconditions



*Figure 2. Preconditions. Reprinted from *The Social Labs Fieldbook* by Hassan, Z. (2015), Graphic by Craig, Z. Reprinted with permission under [creative commons attribution licence](#).*

The first phase of work in getting a lab started is securing the preconditions. There are four types of preconditions that need to be established (Fig. 2). While all preconditions do in a sense need to be solved as a set of “simultaneous equations”, there is also an order in which they can be initially considered:

- 1. Challenge:** A Social Lab’s goal is to create successful interventions which have a positive impact on one complex social challenge. The challenge shouldn’t use jargon, and should be briefly enough described to be “elevator pitchable”, so that it can easily be understood by those one is explaining it to. The challenge should be one that is a “burning issue” for the community, one that desperately needs solving, and that will also attract individuals that are highly motivated to find solutions for the challenge. The challenge can be established in conversation with the community, by conducting dialogue interviews with a variety of people and getting an understanding of what the “burning issues” might be.

The challenge needs to be clearly defined. An easy way to define the scale of the challenge is by geography; will the problem be addressed at the scale of the neighbourhood, the city, or the country (in the community library case, the community that the library serves is a likely scale, but on the other hand, if the problem doesn’t fit well in this scale, perhaps it could be a collaboration between several libraries for a larger scale challenge). How many people does the problem effect? For example if it’s youth unemployment, how many youth are unemployed in the geographic area selected? This will start to give a sense of the commensurate level of resources required to tackle the problem. The challenge should also be time-bound, based on the needs of the situation; what needs to happen by when to avoid severe negative consequences being caused by the problem? Hassan advocates for picking the scale that one is working at, and then sticking to that scale, rather than worrying about a scaling strategy.

The Social Labs method is highly ambitious in that it aims to address the problem in its entirety at a given scale. But Social Labs, for example Lifehack Lab (*Lifehack Labs 2014 – The Report*, 2014), focus first on building the people to meet the challenge, because without the people who have the capacity, the challenge cannot be approached. A library Social Lab will also focus initially on building capacity, both in the secretariat, and the participants.

2. **Strategic Direction:** Strategic direction broadly defines the class of approach that the lab will take, without getting into what kind of “tactics” (the specific actions that will be taken in the short term to move towards the strategic direction) will be involved in implementing this. According to Hassan (2015, p. 17) “Making a decision about strategic direction requires domain knowledge. If working on youth unemployment, then it requires an understanding of what strategies are currently being tried, what’s working and what’s not working.” Therefore, the secretariat will need to have some individuals with strong domain knowledge in the field of the challenge. If the librarians who are working on the challenge don’t have this knowledge then knowledgeable individuals should be sought from partner organisations to join the secretariat.

One has to define the challenge and strategic direction to some degree from the outset, in order to have something to describe to people when having conversations about the proposed lab, but they will be refined through conversations with various stakeholders in the process of securing the various preconditions.

The Co-design Lab team were concerned that early framing of the challenge and strategic direction without stakeholder and community input would narrow the approach, and pre-define the strategic space of the lab too much. Hassan also discussed how narrowing the

strategic direction too much can shut out interest from a lot of parties, if they disagree with the strategic direction that is described when they are invited to participate in the lab.

3. Resources: The three forms of resources are political, social, and financial. Political resources are support for the lab and its work from important leaders in the challenge space; in the community context this might be a local councillor or local board members. It's important to note that this means political support for the Social Labs approach rather than particular prototypes that emerge from it, which may have various political implications depending on their nature. Library managers might wonder how the library can therefore stay non-political while hosting the lab and this is important as community libraries are often a service delivery function of local government. The answer is that the library is creating the container setting in the lab to facilitate social innovation, and as such remains neutral; it's the lab participants creating the prototypes. Also, as mentioned above, the institutional space should be in between the library and partner organisations, so that the lab doesn't inherit the library institutional baggage, including library concerns around non-politicization. "Social resources" means support from people, both commitment from participants and from the wider community. "Financial resources" means monetary resource to support the work of the lab. What levels of resources are needed for a library social lab will depend heavily on the context of the challenge, but the researcher hypothesises that it will be possible to address a challenge using a "resource light" approach. In local government environments where there community empowerment is a priority, library social labs could make a case for additional funding given that they can be enabling the local government to achieve its desired outcomes in this area.

4. **People:** people are a special subset of resources, the most important resource. As Hassan (2015, p. 16) says, two dimensions need to be considered: representation and capacity. Representation means getting people that represent all parts of the system which the problem lives in; a diverse set of individuals with a variety of perspectives is required. Hassan mentioned that not having people that are from the part(s) of the system that are creating the system is problematic; if you don't have their cooperation then they be able to block progress. Capacity means getting people that have the necessary skills and capacities to address the issue. However, in the library context, the researcher hypothesises that an important goal of the lab will be actually building the capacity of the participants, making it a learning space as much as a problem solving space (this is true of all social labs, but especially in the library social lab). This also could mean that there may be more leeway for focussing on representation (although it must be conceded that capacity can only be developed so much, participants must have a reasonable level of capacity initially).

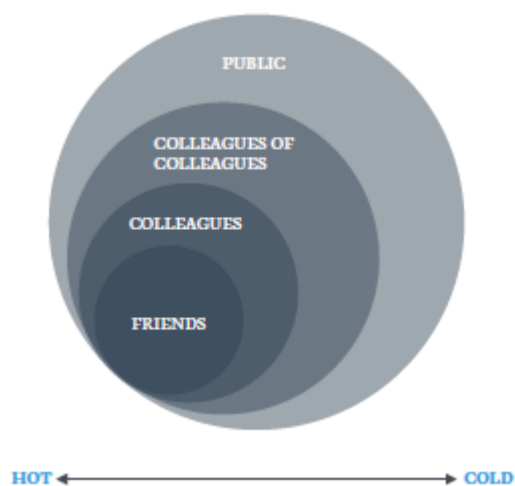


Figure 3. Hot to Cold stakeholders. Reprinted from *The Social Labs Fieldbook* by Hassan, Z. (2015), Graphic by Craig, Z. Reprinted with permission under [creative commons attribution licence](#).

When recruiting, Hassan suggests starting with “hot” or close people such as friends, and then move out to people one knows less and less well (Fig. 3); first look for collaborators, then look for participants. During this process one should gauge interest in the individuals they are talking to; it will be easier to work with those with strong interest in the challenge, and motivation to solve it, rather than trying to “convert” those who are uninterested (but at the same time it is necessary to secure commitment of diverse individuals from across the system). Recruiting is done in tandem with refining the challenge and strategic approach, as these are pitched to the recruits and feedback is received.

The number of people suggested for a social lab is less than 36. The researcher asked if a number as small as 12 would work, Hassan thought not, as there is usually an attrition rate of 10-15%, which would leave too few people, and also it would be difficult to reflect the diversity of perspectives on the problem with too few people.

Hassan emphasised that who goes into the team makes or breaks the success of the lab. The individuals who go into the lab must have a willingness to do things differently from previous “Business as Usual” methodologies (i.e. exhaustively planned, lockstep process). The team doesn’t have to have all the capacities or skills from the outset, but must have a willingness to learn and evolve; if this isn’t present then no amount of technique or skill on the part of the facilitators and secretariat will fix it. What the ideal capacities are is still an open question, which Hassan said he didn’t know the answer to; he did mention that it was important for the team to be extremely flexible, and able to radically alter tactics and structures based on the understandings that emerge.

8.1.3 Lab Design

8.1.3.1 Stacks

As discussed in the literature review, Hassan recommends designing in four stacks, which are outlined in the literature review. During the course Hassan discussed the stacks, and considerations for their design, in further depth and detail; governance and information are discussed here.

8.1.3.1.1 Governance

Hassan talked about how governance defines who is to be included in the lab, who can't be included in the lab, what the process is for getting into the lab team, exiting the lab team, and so on; he discussed how the more protocols are designed to manage processes which will be needed, the less confusion will occur (exit protocol in particular was highlighted; poor or non-existing protocol in this area can lead to messy endings when someone wants to leave. Exits may also involve an unresolvable conflict that has occurred, so Hassan said that the governance team also has to have the people skills and empathy to be able to manage this).

Decision making modalities need to be decided; will decisions need to be made democratically in the governance group? Do decisions need to be agreed on unanimously? How will funders and investors be involved in the decision making process? Hassan discussed that although funders may be included in the governance team, they should be kept in balance with others. Governance will probably be made up of the early supporters of the lab, those that are passionate and can see the vision of what the lab aims to achieve. Lack of governance, or poor governance, tends to be dominated by personality politics, which will fill the vacuum left by lack of good protocol.

Governance also needs to think about the physical space in which the lab operates; flexible spaces are required so that the lab can work in different ways.

Hassan discussed how there are always some decisions made in the lab that are undemocratic, e.g. defining the challenge in the first instance (although it's interesting to see how Tamaki Mental Health and Wellness Lab [co-designed their initial vision with the community](#), however the lab team probably had a non-formalised idea of the challenge prior to that). But, this initial version of the challenge will be refined by the process of talking to stakeholders anyway.

8.1.3.1.2 Information

Hassan talked about information as the nutrition of the social lab; the information stack is responsible for making information flow to different parts of the lab, to keep the lab system healthy. Information must flow up to funders and champions, down to stakeholders, and across the lab, to all of the participants (Fig. 4). Information should be accessible by multiple actors for multiple purposes.

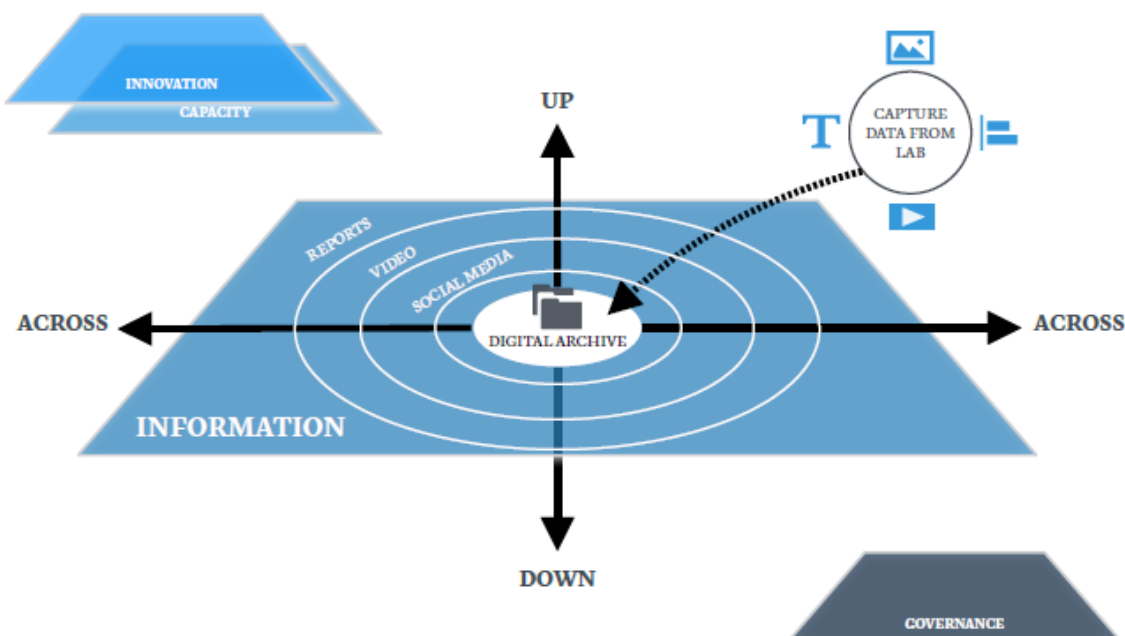


Figure 4. The Information Stack in a Social Lab. Reprinted from *The Social Labs Fieldbook* by Hassan, Z. (2015), Graphic by Craig, Z. Reprinted with permission under [creative commons attribution licence](#).

In the group work with the Co-Design Lab, the design of the information stack was discussed. This included making available walk-throughs to showcase the discovery work to stakeholders and users,

and physical events to engage users with prototypes that have been created, when the lab is at the prototyping stage. These methods would also act as a way of gathering feedback from the wider community to guide development, and to generate interest and engagement with the prototypes, and show the community what is being created. The researcher reflects that this may also contribute to Hassan's "infinite games", drawing more community members into the lab work and empowering them to participate in the process.

8.1.3.2 Prototyping

Hassan talked about how prototyping requires a shift in mind-set for many lab participants, away from the traditional BAU model of having a "perfect", fully developed end-product to release, to developing a "minimum viable product" or MVP as soon as possible, which can be taken and tested with users, to start getting feedback to adjust development. "The Reos Change Lab" ("The Reos Change Lab," 2013, p. 37) discusses how like Picasso, one needs to be ready to "paint over the bull's head", destroying or greatly altering the prototype that has been developed in order to create something that better matches the needs of the challenge, based on emerging understandings. "It is this willingness to see and to go irreversibly beyond the current boundaries and mindsets of the group, always in the interest of the whole, that makes serious innovation possible".

Hassan distinguished two prototypes, which usually follow each other: the first is a representative model of the idea, made with simple materials e.g. lego, cardboard, or similar. This can be tested with lab participants in other prototype groups, to get early feedback (they shouldn't have been part of the design process for that prototype, hence having some impartiality).

The second prototype is a functional prototype which can be tested with "warm" people (see Hassan's ["hot to cold" people model](#) in preconditions) which actually functions to do the job that it was designed to do, and starts delivering value to users. This stage is called "live prototyping" in that the prototyping team is starting to do something in the "real world". Hassan gave the example of a

prototyped community hub that was actually set up in an empty space, and tested with users from the community. They found that everyone wanted to use the printer, but it kept breaking down, which created frustration; a good piece of feedback for further development. Warm users will go through the frustration of early issues and teething problems, but since they are warm they will have more patience for this. Even though there are “users” in the lab team, people who will be directly impacted by the solution, unexpected requirements will probably surface that no one could see, neither “designers” nor “users”; this is the value of testing a prototype.

8.1.3.3 Tools and Processes

Hassan uses the metaphor of cooking to describe the role of tools and processes in Social Labs. Social Labs are a practice, like cooking. The specific tools and processes involved in cooking depend on the dishes that are being made; one dish may require baking, another roasting, and these processes will require particular tools.

During question and answer I asked Hassan about where we could find resources that describe tools and processes, and he directed me to the Social Labs [toolkits page](#), which contains many useful resources. However, it would really depend on the context of the social lab as to what tools would be most appropriate. I have mentioned [dialogue interviewing](#) in the literature review as one tool which is advocated by Hassan.

8.2 Symposium

While the Art of Social Labs course was useful to gather in depth data on Social Labs, the symposium provided the broad data aspect to a “T-shaped” answer to the Social Lab Design question. The Lifehack Labs Surgery was useful because the lab team could be observed deliberating on design considerations.

8.2.1 Lifehack Labs Surgery

Lifehack discussed their strategic direction, which was centred on catalysing entrepreneurship by building the skills of the participants. They were reflecting on this approach and questioning whether it was the most effective; one of the questions on their minds was whether one can teach entrepreneurship, or whether it is more an innate way of thinking that some individuals have. The researcher reflected that catalysing people is tricky; perhaps opportunities for genuine catalysis are few and far between; few individuals are probably “near tipping point”, most are either not ready to be catalysed or already on their way anyway. Library Social Labs that wish to enable entrepreneurs as a strategic direction should keep this in mind.

8.2.2 Presentation by Ingrid Burkett

Burkett discussed the nature of Social Innovation, and the importance of “knitting” together many disparate points of service provision; the researcher contrasted this to creating even more points of service provision in an already overcrowded system, and that this may be an important aspect of Social Labs: rather than always creating something brand new, a social lab prototype may be a mashup or remix of existing services, which does the job of knitting together disparate points of service provision. In this sense a Social Lab can take on aspects of the Collective Impact or Community Asset Mapping models. Burkett also discussed how sometimes the nature of social innovation, rather than radical redesign, can actually just be a series of tweaks to existing services. The Social Labs approach seems to point more to radical redesign, but in fact there is probably a

continuum, from tweak to redesign, and prototypes that emerge from Social Labs may sit at different points on this continuum.

She also used the metaphor of an escalator that ends in the ceiling to describe the ceiling that can be hit in the process of social innovation; this is in the form of a layer of gate keepers in organisations, those in charge of resources who may block attempts to change the status quo. Burkett emphasised the importance of codesigning solutions with these people; this is echoed by Hassan who says it's problematic to convene a Social Lab without individuals who represent parts of the system which may be causing the problem.

8.2.3 Theory of Change

The researcher attended a session discussing the need for social innovation designers to develop a theory of change which “defines all building blocks required to bring about a given long-term goal” by creating a “pathway of change”, which may be developed using a combination of different existing theories and one's own knowledge and perspective of the challenge context. This can be a useful tool for mapping out the strategic direction for a social lab, in broad strokes. More information can be found [here](#) (“What is Theory of Change?,” n.d.).

8.2.4 The Challenge of Diversity

In one plenary, an example was raised of a community where different partisan groups were working on a challenge, but were so mutually antagonistic towards each other, due to a history of grievances, that they could not be brought into the same room to discuss the problem. And yet this is precisely what the Social Labs method would have us do. This seems like a pertinent point for Social Labs design: can the diverse actors that represent all parts of the problem in fact be successfully convened to work together? Perhaps an answer is that convening doesn't have to be perfect in the first instance, and probably never will be; just get it started and then draw more people in as the lab progresses.

8.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

The challenges that exist in instantiating Hassan's Social Labs method in a community library, with limited human and financial resources are obvious. But what emerged from conversations with lab practitioners and social innovation experts was the variety of options available to take the spirit and the ethos of the social labs method, and adapt it to the situational requirements. It was also pointed out that the Social Labs method is just that, a means to an end, and it shouldn't be taken as an end goal, but used, potentially in combination with other methods, in service of empowering the community and solving problems.

8.3.1 Alternative/complimentary approaches

The point was made that depending on the situation that is discovered when exploring the community, the Social Labs approach may not be the most appropriate approach to use. Indeed with alternative approaches in the social innovation/development space, such as community asset mapping, the focus is not on a problem or deficit, but on the strengths of the community that can be developed, creating a virtuous cycle. However, this seems to the researcher to be a balancing act; focussing on a balance of strengths and weaknesses, threats/challenges and opportunities, would seem to make sense. So perhaps a synthesis of strength-based approaches with challenge-based approaches such as the Social Labs method could yield something more balanced.

If the social labs method is used, then other approaches could be useful tools to use within the Labs process. The cooking analogy for Social Labs has been discussed above, and all of the other methods in this analogy can be like kitchen tools which enable practitioners to complete parts of the process. Some of the other methodologies are outlined below:

8.3.1.1 Community Asset Mapping

The aim of Community Asset Mapping according to Dorfman (1998, p. iii) is to “understand how to approach what we do from a positive, creative, productive perspective – a perspective that builds from strengths, resources, and assets”. This is done by mapping assets, both material and immaterial, of the community, finding the links between them, and improving access to them by community members; this is in contrast to the traditional approach of mapping community needs, which is seen as mapping deficiencies.

Community Asset Mapping could be useful for gaining an understanding of what assets exist in the community and which stakeholders they belong to, along with how those stakeholders could contribute to the Lab’s activities, as participants, or peripheral supporters.

8.3.1.2 Open Space Technology

[Open space technology](#) is a methodology of convening a meeting which is distinctive for its initial lack of an agenda (“Open Space Technology,” 2015, para. 4)

The approach is characterized by a few basic mechanisms (“Open Space Technology,” 2015, para. 3):

1. a broad, open invitation which articulates the purpose of the meeting;
2. participants' chairs arranged in a circle;
3. a "bulletin board" of issues and opportunities posted by participants;
4. a "marketplace" with many break-out spaces that participants move freely between, learning and contributing as they "shop" for information and ideas;
5. a "breathing" or "pulsation" pattern of flow, between plenary and small-group breakout sessions.

Open Space sessions could be useful both for the initial exploration phase, where the library is exploring which challenge would be appropriate with the community and other organisations, or to structure sessions within the Social Lab.

8.3.1.3 Design thinking

Thinking like a designer can transform the way organizations develop products, services, processes, and strategy. This approach, which IDEO calls design thinking, brings together what is desirable from a human point of view with what is technologically feasible and economically viable. It also allows people who aren't trained as designers to use creative tools to address a vast range of challenges.

("About IDEO | IDEO," n.d., para. 6)

Design thinking, particularly its "human-centred" approach, is linked closely to Social Labs practice; both the Tamaki Mental Health and Wellbeing team and Lifehack Lab advocated for a human-centred design approach. There is a lot of overlap between human-centred empathic interviewing, for example in the [understand mixtape](#) ("understand mixtape," n.d.), and dialogue interviewing advocated by Hassan; both seek to understand the issue from the user's perspective.

8.3.1.4 Codesign/Participatory Design

According to Zebeko and Tan, (2010, p. 582) "Co-design is a creative approach that supports and facilitates the democratic involvement of people in addressing social challenges", which values all stakeholder's perspectives on an issue. Creative methods are used to enable participants to effectively contribute to codesign. This [UX mag article](#) ("Creativity-based Research," n.d.) provides a useful step by step guide to scaffolding participants.

Codesign is particularly significant in that it gives facilitators a useful method to induct diverse participants with no prior knowledge into design processes, building their capacity and enabling

them to contribute to codesign. Hassan talked about the polar tension between capacity and representation, but if codesign can be used to develop the capacity of diverse individuals, this increases scope for representation of diversity. As discussed further below, Lifehack Labs also use it as a proxy for convening a large diverse group, by increasing the individuals in their fellowship to each be able to facilitate codesign with diverse participants.

8.3.1.5 Comments

It was observed that social innovation practitioners do not rigidly stick to one methodology, but build their toolkit of a number of methodologies, and mix and match to suit the situation. For example, Lifehack, which labels itself a social lab, doesn't exhibit strong vertical diversity in that its participants tend to be young social entrepreneurs, and the resources aren't available to convene large groups for long periods of time, but this is compensated for by building the capacity of the participants in design thinking and codesign, so that they can individually engage with the diversity of stakeholders as they design with their communities. This is quite different from Hassan's social labs model, but it's a good example of how practitioners "break the rules beautifully" as Hassan would say, in order to achieve what they want to within the constraints present. This is an important learning for libraries who want to try social labs, as there would obviously be considerable resource constraints which would need to be worked with creatively.

8.3.2 Opportunities and Challenges of situating a Social Lab in a Community Library

The library was discussed by multiple interviewees as a double edged sword: on the one hand it can be seen as a relatively neutral space which a social lab needs to be in order to convene diverse stakeholders, but on the other hand, as discussed at length in the community led libraries toolkit

("Community-Led Libraries Toolkit," n.d., p. 10) libraries do privilege middle class western cultural norms which can unintentionally exclude diverse groups from participating. This raises the question of whether a library is in fact the best space for a lab to be in; other options could be to have the lab in the library part of the time and in other spaces part of the time, or to have it entirely in other space(s), and just have a librarian working as part of the secretariat, and/or as a convenor or facilitator (and librarians are increasingly working in community spaces outside library buildings, as in embedded librarianship). It was mentioned how it is beneficial to have the lab as physically close to the problem as possible, so if the library is far away from where the problem is impacting people, it may not be the best space.

On the other hand, the public nature of the library setting has a number of advantages to it: being a community space it has high visibility to many members of the community, and thus lab activities will gain profile, and possibly more buy in for the community if they can see good things happening. Having large numbers of place-based stakeholders and end users available to potentially interview and test prototypes out on could also be useful.

Capacity and skills of librarians were seen as another challenge; indeed, Hassan discusses the 10,000 hour rule whereby it takes 10,000 hours to master anything, and there are a range of skills required for Social Lab work. Hiring social innovation or social labs experts is an option, if funding is available, and from the researcher's experience in library makerspaces, if adaptable librarians work with outside experts they can start developing their own skills too, and eventually have enough capability in-house to do it themselves without hired experts. Another route is to start off by getting used to tools and smaller social innovation components by trying them out and seeing how they work, and this would also serve the purpose of building interest and community around the challenge. This could be done for quite some time, gradually gathering momentum and frontloading the community towards the formation of a social lab, while developing librarians' skillsets; This is explored further

below in “First Steps”. A motivated library manager could also hire for appropriate skills and aptitude.

8.3.3 First Steps

Initiating a Social Lab has great potential for community empowerment, but is also a large and ambitious undertaking. Life Hack lab discussed how they had done several years of work with various social innovation tools, which could be used in a social lab, and this gave them an understanding of component parts which they could then draw together to make a social lab. This could be a useful model for a library (in collaboration with community partners) wishing to get started on empowering its community. It’s also worth noting that working with these tools in the community can have bite sized empowerment outcomes in and of themselves, and after all the success criteria is community empowerment, not creating a social lab.

Lifhack Lab provided several examples of tools that could be used to start engaging the community:

[D.School Mixtapes](#) (“Chart a New Course,” n.d.): there are three mixtapes: understand, experiment, and ideate, which have been created to “help you immediately bring design thinking into your real-life challenges. Each mixtape will guide you through half a day of design thinking work. Plan to advance your project more in this half day than you might in a typical week.” (“Chart a New Course,” n.d.). For example, the understand mixtape “will lead you through interviewing and observing users, and then synthesizing your findings to discover meaningful needs and insights.”

[The Course for Human-Centered Design](#) (“Design Kit,” n.d.): delivered by Acumen and IDEO in partnership, this is a seven week course, taking a commitment of 4-5 hours a week, to be undertaken by a design team of 2-6 people. Each week the team will “explore the main human-centered design concepts through readings, case studies, and short videos. Then you’ll be expected

to meet in-person with your design team to get your hands dirty practicing the relevant human-centered design methods.” (“Design Kit,” n.d.)

[The Art of Hosting](#) (“Art of Hosting,” n.d.): focussed on “conversation design”, to design conversations to have the productive outcomes which they were intended to have (“What is the Art of Hosting?,” n.d.), The Art of Hosting has a collection of resources such as the reading list and videos which the team could use to develop its capacity to convene effective conversations around the challenge.

8.3.4 The (human) resource commitment issue, and solutions

An obvious challenge with a social lab in the community scale context would be resourcing; given that it would be difficult to resource a full social lab as it was originally conceived, with 30 people working full time for an extended period on the challenge, the issues around part time commitment to a community social lab were explored.

The point was made that it would be hard to achieve the “pressure cooker” effect of the social labs method, where tensions between diverse perspectives in the problem space are negotiated, with low intensity, part time approaches, for example if the lab were to run half a day per week on an ongoing basis. A couple of solutions discussed were to have a high intensity, continuous session of “co-sensing” (to use U theory terminology (Scharmer, 2007, p. 6) where the group does the hard work of reaching a co-negotiated understanding, followed by a lower intensity prototyping period where teams meet regularly and can develop prototypes at their own pace. Another solution is discussed in the following section.

8.3.5 Fast Thinking, Slow Thinking

Lifehack lab is currently running the [Flourishing Fellowship programme](#) (“Launching the Lifehack,” n.d.), consisting of three three-day hui over several months, with participants working on projects in

between, regular design challenges delivered to them, and some participants only working on their projects part time. “Thinking, Fast and Slow”(Kahneman, 2011) was referred to when discussing how community scale labs may need times of high pressure and times of low pressure. A tactic that Lifehack is using in lieu of having extensive funding to enable them to convene “the whole system in the room” for an extended period of time is to give its participants robust codesign skills, so that participants, who are located all over the country, can go back to their communities and codesign with a diverse range of end users directly. As noted in [8.3.1.5](#), Lifehack Lab does not take Hassan’s model of a Social Lab as a prescription, but has designed their lab based on the needs and constraints that they find themselves with, while keeping in mind the principles of Social Labs. Another participant pointed out that “every lab is different”, in that while there are some commonalities to their approach, the design context, and constraints, of each are massively different, meaning that lab teams need to be highly creative and hold principles lightly when designing a lab.

8.3.6 Open vs. Closed Convening

As discussed in the [literature review](#), Hassan advocates for open convening, whereby a broadcast is put out calling for participants, over closed convening, where participants are selectively recruited, but the point was made that an advantage of recruiting is being able to design a set of individuals that represent the diversity of perspectives on the issue well, and create the necessary tension that comes from diverse perspectives, so as to avoid “groupthink”.

The researcher reflects that if the convenors use an open convening technique, but the networks through which they put out the broadcast contain a selection bias simply based on who they know, then the resulting group of participants may be homogenous, rather than diverse. However, again perhaps this is actually a balancing act rather than a binary; a broadcast can be used, but convenors can also be mindful to make sure that diversity is recruited and take steps to remedy this if it is not.

8.3.7 Facilitation

A variety of data was gathered about facilitation. At Co-Design Lab, a range of techniques were being used that could prove useful in other labs. A Behavioural expectations wall (Fig. 5) was co-developed by the team to clarify what the team shared as a culture of how they work. This is an interesting protocol to establish the institutional space of the lab, as [discussed by Hassan](#) in “The Art of Social Labs”.

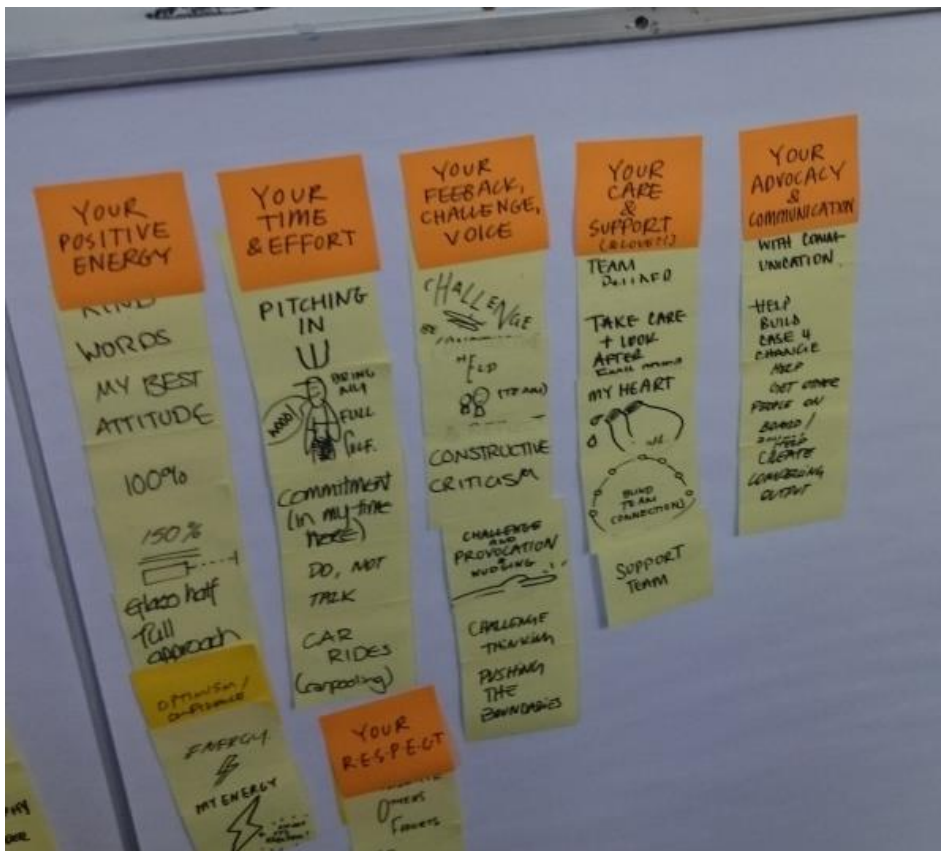


Figure 5. Behavioural Expectations Wall at Co-Design Lab.

Regular “Ako-sessions” give the team opportunities to learn skills from each other, whether on codesign, design thinking, or even fun topics like a ukulele lesson, which can help to “change the energy” in the work space. This also relates to the “capacity stack” in a social lab, as team members can build each other’s capacity.

8.3.8 Theory of Change

The Codesign lab had a theory of change that was in a state of constant development, with assumptions being tested for validation. They had a map which included what the outcomes of the lab should look like after four months, one year, and ten years (Fig. 7). The researcher reflected that this is interesting; since the Codesign lab is a proof of concept, it probably won't carry on for ten years, but what is probably more important is that the team is thinking in the ten year term; this is important for labs aiming at systemic change, and in a similar vein to Lifehack Lab's goal: 100% of young Kiwis flourishing by 2050.



Figure 7. Theory of Change wall at Co-Design Lab.

8.4 Case Study

Tamaki Mental Health and Wellbeing Lab is Social Lab whose challenge is framed around a community of place, initiated by a small team from Auckland District Health Board, who “opened conversations with the Tamaki community in late 2013 about how we might re-design mental health support in the area.” (“Tamaki Wellbeing Project” n.d., para. 1). As such findings from this Lab are highly relevant to the study, considering the place-based approach taken.

8.4.1 Co-design

They emphasised co-design in their practice, having a co-designed vision which was developed through workshops with the community, 100+ engagements to identify themes, a second round of co-design workshops around idea generation which created 700+ ideas, and 32 high level project proposals. This indicates a strong commitment to empowering the community in the redesign of services which impact them. The co-design of a vision contrasts somewhat from Hassan’s model of defining, within the core team, the challenge that the lab will tackle, and then refining this challenge as stakeholders and potential lab participants are engaged in discussion during the preconditions phase. This “co-design from the outset” distinguishes the Tamaki Lab from Hassan’s model to some degree; community are empowered to co-design the framing of the challenge from the very beginning. It echoes the Co-Design Lab team’s concern that a rich diversity of stakeholders be involved very early in the framing of the challenge.

8.4.2 Challenges

The team described how it was difficult to make progress with only a small core team of three people, and NGO’s they were working with only able to commit staff for a few hours a week; the core team were struggling to find a physical space to locate the lab, and described how with partner

staff only able to commit a few hours, and a half of those hours often going into a regular meeting, it was a resource drain keeping everyone updated on developments and on the same page, and few hours were available to actually work on the initiatives (this seems poignant as this was quite close to the resource basis on which the researcher had envisioned the library social lab functioning, and sounds like a struggle in reality). For this reason they had decided to secure more extensive financial resources in order to initiate a more intensive lab for a four month period in the near future, where the core team and the participants would be collocated in a physical space to work together intensively on a full time basis.

By contrast, Lifehack's "fellowship" programme has geographically diverse participants from all over New Zealand, who come together only for three three-day hui, with a couple of months between each hui, participants who are going back from hui to codesign initiatives with their community, and some only able to work on their projects part time. Lifehack's approach is to equip participants with strong codesign skills so that they can do good co-design with their communities of origin. However the timeframes and outcomes of these two programmes are probably quite different. Lifehack lab talks about taking the spirit and principles of Hassan's social labs, and designing their own social lab according to the needs and constraints of the situation. But it seems like the Tamaki Lab team are struggling with the constraints and are therefore looking to secure more resources to do a more intensive lab.

What would work for a library social lab? That would really depend on the context and constraints that the library lab finds itself in once the challenge has been decided. If a local government decided that the library was the place to facilitate community empowerment, and the Social Labs approach was the way to do that, then perhaps considerable financial resources could be secured to enable intensive onsite participation. Or resources might be secured by a Lab team working in partnership with the library, as seen [below](#).

8.4.3 Developing Local Solutions

An interesting aspect of the Tamaki Mental Health and Wellbeing lab is its focus on local solutions. The team recognise that solutions need to be tailored to localities which have individual characteristics. When they were talking about what learnings they would take from the lab work, they emphasised how they can learn approaches to designing solutions for communities which are transferrable, but they can't develop a one-size-fits-all "model" which can be scaled or exported directly to other communities; this would deny the unique characteristics of each community that need to be tailored to and ultimately create a blunt instrument.

This ties in well with the theme of "empowering communities", in that one sense of empowering communities can be in terms of giving them opportunities to participate in the redesign, through codesign methodology, of the services that they use to best meet their needs; the community can design "radically local" services, so as not to be trapped by "diseconomies of scale" as discussed by O'Donovan and Rubbra (n.d.), where large, one-size-fits-all government services fail to cater to the specific needs of any particular community well.

8.4.4 Working with local libraries

The team had found from community feedback and observation that local libraries were "the best place for social connection in Tamaki", and were keen to involve them in the community engagement and co-design process. We discussed an interesting and previously unforeseen possibility: lab teams wanting to engage local communities could partner with local community libraries to activate them as community co-design spaces for design challenges which would impact that community. The team reflected on the potential to get constant feedback from the community as the lab operated in the library space. This finding is echoed with the Co-Design Lab team, who are

exploring ways to work with the local library and use the space to engage the community with co-design on their challenges.

The library could therefore operate as a co-design space for lab teams and communities of place such as in the Tamaki case. This would help lab teams to achieve desired community engagement, and also build capacity in the community to engage in co-design of services that impact them, as well as capacity of library staff that work with the lab team and community, and position the library as a community empowerment space.

9. Conclusion

The principles underpinning Social Labs, and some practical design considerations, mostly based on the experience of Hassan's design and implementation of social labs, were gathered from "The Art of Social Labs" course. Hassan's view of Social Labs was then contrasted with the experiences of the Lab teams in New Zealand, who each were working in a different context, with a different challenge, and had adopted and adapted various approaches to suit. While Tamaki Mental Health and Wellbeing Lab Team were starting to build towards a full scale "pure Social Lab" which they felt was necessary to achieve the results they wanted for their challenge, Lifehack were choosing to develop a small group of entrepreneurs from all over New Zealand, using more artistic licence in their interpretation of the Social Labs approach. Co-design Lab was different again, keeping a small core team onsite and co-designing with diverse stakeholders from the local community of place, as well as from communities of interest in the challenge domain.

As one practitioner said "every lab is different"; the challenge, the constraints, the strengths and values of the team, are always different. It has been interesting to see how different teams in different contexts, influenced by Hassan's ideas, have interpreted the Social Labs approach differently, and gone about tackling their challenges in different ways. A community library social lab would be different again, given the potential [challenges and opportunities identified](#). Two possible pathways emerged from the data for libraries to develop Social Labs which can empower their communities to tackle complex social challenges.

9.1 Two pathways to Social Labs in Community Libraries for Community Empowerment

One of the biggest issues that Social Labs face is that of resourcing, being a new way of working, and requiring considerable resources: for a Social Lab as advocated by Hassan, 30+ participants need to be convened for an extended period of time. Lifehack lab describes how even running a five week

lab in 2014 with fewer participants is a huge amount of work requiring considerable resources. A library social lab as advocated by Hassan would face similar resourcing challenges. However two main pathways have emerged from the results.

9.1.1 Gradual ground-up development

The library could begin by using a process of dialogue interviews and human centred design techniques (for example the understand mixtape described above in [first steps](#)) to understand community challenges from the perspective of community members, community organisations and local government organisations or departments. An appropriate challenge may emerge, as well as civil sector and government partners, and community leaders and members who'd be willing to collaborate on bite-sized design challenges (perhaps again using one or more mixtapes). These small actions would begin to build interest and will around the challenge, and begin to produce some micro-results that could be used in resourcing and recruitment conversations to start building the community of practice which could eventually launch a social lab. This gradual approach could happen over a period of years, building the pre-conditions to support the lab, and eventually launching a lab when the time is right.

9.1.2 Library as Design Platform

The Tamaki Mental Health and Wellbeing lab sees great potential in the local library as a design space, which lab teams, and other types of design teams, can utilize in order to engage the community in codesign of services which impact them: "We are finding, from community feedback and observation, that the libraries are the best place for social connection in Tamaki. Lots of potential for these to be sites for quality connection with community." This approach would position the library as a community empowerment space, without the library having to develop a resource and capacity base from the ground up. The Co-Design Lab was also interested in, and in discussion with their local library about partnering in this way. The number of social labs and co-design teams

seems to be increasing, so as they increase in number, and those of them that have a community or regional focus want to engage communities, libraries may have an increasing number of opportunities for partnerships to enable community empowerment in this way.

9.2 Don't use a Social Lab as a Proxy for Success

One of the interviewees strongly emphasised that creating a social lab in a community library is one means to the goal of community empowerment, and that it is important not to confuse ends with means. Indeed, the thrust of the study is to explore how community libraries can enable community empowerment. The Social Labs approach was explored as one possible method to achieve this, but what emerged is that other methods may be just as effective, or more so, depending on the context, which, in the study, has always remained undefined. If the community is presented more urgently with an opportunity than a challenge, then a strength/opportunity-focussed method, such as Community Asset Mapping may be more appropriate. But as mentioned in the limitations, without starting to explore the context of the community, it remains undefined, so which particular tools, or design options, are better or worse, will depend on the context that practitioners find themselves in, once they begin to engage in facilitating community empowerment.

9.3 Recommendations: Learn by Doing

The part that comes after this study is possibly more interesting than the study itself: when practitioners pick up the tools and start experimenting with community empowerment through Social Innovation in libraries, by means of a Social Lab or otherwise. This study will hopefully be useful to provide some starting points, but as the Social Lab approach, and the interviewees emphasised, the real learning will come with the doing.

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