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# Why are designs for urban governance so often incomplete? A conceptual framework for explaining and harnessing institutional incompleteness

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## Abstract

This article asks why institutional designs for urban governance are so often incomplete and what a critical perspective on incompleteness may offer. We develop a novel conceptual framework distinguishing between incompleteness as description (a deficit to be ‘designed-out’), action (‘good enough’ design to be worked with and around), and prescription (an asset to be ‘designed-in’). An extended worked example of city regional devolution in England illuminates the three types of incompleteness in practice, whilst also identifying hybrid forms and cross-cutting considerations of power, time and space. Perceiving institutional incompleteness as a design logic in its own right, held in tension with completeness, could help augment institutional design repertoires and even enhance democratic values.

## Keywords

Institutional design, incompleteness, urban governance, city regional devolution

## Introduction

Urban governance is replete with examples of institutional blueprints that have gone awry, governance reforms that are never accomplished, and policy regimes that are inadequately specified for implementation in diverse contexts. As one urban governance practitioner put it, witnessing the end of a time-limited area-based regeneration initiative in the early 2000s

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was like ‘rolling a ball half way up a hill’, only to see it roll back down again (Durose and Richardson, 2009). The judgement on such initiatives is often highly normative, and centred on the idea of institutional failure. In this article we ask what a critical perspective on incompleteness may offer to our understanding of institutional design in urban governance – in retrospect and prospect.

A focus on incompleteness illuminates important and often under-acknowledged aspects of institutional design. First, it reveals that much of the conventional discourse on institutional design in urban governance is characterised by an expectation of completeness. Institutions are seen as something to be realised, with reforms to be rolled out or scaled up, and policies to be delivered. However, it is incompleteness rather than completeness that is endemic in the labyrinthine and continually changing landscape of urban governance, where complementary and conflicting intentions and interests are negotiated through multi-level yet locally specific governance institutions (Lowndes, 2005). Second, expectations of completeness may give normative primacy to the perspective of the state, assuming a rational or functionalist approach to institutional design (Goodin, 1998; Pierson, 2000). Incompleteness may serve dominant institutional actors in urban governance or more marginal ones. For example, incompleteness may be either a *de facto* policy choice that serves dominant interests, or serve to open up ‘pre-figurative spaces’ (Cooper, 2017), characterised by the inclusion of non-state actors, democratic contestations (Lowndes and Paxton, 2018) and acknowledgement of local or experiential expertise (Durose and Richardson, 2016) For these reasons, rather than ‘wishing away’ incompleteness, we need to engage in further conceptual work to understand why incompleteness is pervasive in institutional design, how it operates in urban governance and what its effects might be.

We first set out the case for taking seriously the role of incompleteness in institutional design within urban governance. Next, we develop a novel conceptual framework that distinguishes forms of incompleteness. We differentiate between incompleteness as description (a deficit to be ‘designed-out’), action (‘good enough’ design to be worked with and around), and prescription (an asset to be ‘designed-in’). These forms of incompleteness are linked to three distinctive institutional design logics: instrumental, pragmatic and emergent. These conceptual propositions are then elaborated in the context of urban governance, through an extended worked example focusing on the institutional design of city regional devolution in England, specifically post-2010. Our analysis reveals that, in practice, there is interaction between plural logics, producing hybrid outcomes. We show that understanding the dynamics of incompleteness in institutional design also requires an appreciation of the cross-cutting factors of power, time and space. Nevertheless, the design logics framework serves as a useful heuristic for understanding incompleteness in practice, whilst also informing an expanded repertoire of institutional design strategies, and challenging the default to completeness.

## **Why research institutional incompleteness in urban governance?**

Traditional theories of local government relied upon a rational-functionalist view of institutions, collapsing the diverse and dynamic processes affecting urban communities into the working of elected local government. From the 1960s, under pressure from a variety of intellectual currents (pluralist, behaviouralist and Marxist), such certainties were challenged with the emergence of an ‘urban politics’ approach dedicated to taking seriously non-governmental influences - the role of business, new social movements, intergovernmental relations and change within capitalist economies (Judge et al., 1995). From the late 1990s, there was a flourishing of ‘urban governance’ scholarship, focusing on the ‘hollowing out’ of

traditional local government institutions, through privatisation, new public management and greater roles for non-state actors. Whilst some researchers went as far as disavowing the significance of institutions in this context (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006; Harding, 2000), others argued that it was actually the *character* of institutions that had changed (Lowndes, 2001). As processes of urban governance ‘peeled away’ from the single institution of elected local government, the rules and norms that shaped urban politics were becoming increasingly fluid and differentiated. Such variegation has continued across Europe, with the spread of marketisation, partnerships, co-production, digitalisation, ‘upscaling’ (municipal amalgamations) and ‘transcaling’ (inter-municipal cooperation) (Bergstrom et al., 2020). Drawing examples from six continents, Russell (2019) has pointed to more defiant responses to austerity and neoliberalism via a ‘new municipalism’ characterised by the *in-sourcing* of services and new alliances with social movements.

Researchers influenced by ‘new institutionalism’ have sought to theorise these novel and variegated institutional formations both within and alongside elected local government (Lowndes and Lempriere, 2018; Entwistle, 2011; Gardner, 2017). The point is not simply to enumerate different types of institutions; rather, it is about challenging what constitutes institutional design – in actuality and in prospect – and recognising that the institutions of urban governance are not necessarily coherent or complete. As a result of political struggles and compromises, and/or technical logjams, institutional arrangements may remain in transition, or take the form of provisional hybrids made up of old and new elements. To understand the dynamics of incompleteness in institutional design, we need to challenge what Pierson (2000: 475) calls the ‘marked tendency to fall back on implicit or explicit functional accounts’ within public policy. Such accounts are characterised by assumptions that institutions fulfil the social functions assigned to them and are designed via rational, evidence-based processes. Hindmoor and Taylor (2018) argue that rational choice theorists see institutions as subject to intentional design, aimed at solving collective action problems and capturing gains from cooperation via the manipulation of rules and incentives (although scholars like Ostrom, 2005, have developed more nuanced accounts). While rational choice theorists start from individual actions, there is an older tradition in organisation studies that has ‘extolled the virtues of completeness’ (Garud et al., 2008: 351). Herbert Simon’s ([1969] 1996) ‘rational model’ assumes the pre-specification of both problems and alternatives, and the selection of the most optimal design. Garud et al. (2008: 351) argue that: ‘Such a scientific approach to design pervades much of management thinking, education and research’. As Pierson (2000: 477) summarises: ‘a simple vision of institutional design focuses on the intentional and far-sighted choices of purposive, instrumental actors’, in which institutional effects are seen ‘as the intended consequences of their creators’ actions’. Pierson acknowledges that this view may not be expressed in such a blunt form, but argues that it forms the basis of ‘hidden assumptions’ that underpin the analysis of institutions.

However, the plausibility of such accounts depends upon a set of favourable conditions at the design stage or the presence of particularly conducive environments. Hence, such premises should be acknowledged as only one way of understanding institutional design and should be supplemented with other plausible explanations. The critical literature on institutional design points to the shortcomings of ‘functionalist’ (Pierson, 2000), ‘scientific’ (Garud et al., 2008) and ‘rational’ (Goodin, 1998) approaches, all of which see design as a linear and ‘completable’ means-end process. Pierson (2000: 477) argues that evidence suggests actors are neither instrumental nor far-sighted in their behaviour and that institutional effects frequently do not fulfil the functions their designers may have intended. Institutional designs are, in fact, rarely complete or coherent, let alone efficient. Institutions may instead reflect a search for legitimacy (via Meyer and Rowan’s, 1977,

‘rationalized myths’), the limits to innovation derived from path dependency (Pierson, 2000), or more subtle processes of learning and adaptation (Lowndes, 2005). Such brakes on rational and functional design are particularly pertinent in urban governance. Urban policymakers face grave informational challenges (given the range and complexity of the issues they address), competing and vociferous interests (expressed through electoral means and local campaigns), the pull of local traditions (civic, political, social and economic), the need to secure legitimacy in the eyes of both citizens and ‘higher’ levels of governance (from which resources may be derived), and the need to adapt broader public service regimes to fit specific city contexts.

Arguing against the ‘myth of the intentional designer’, Goodin (1998: 28) notes that: ‘Institutions are often the products of intentional activities gone wrong – unwanted by-products, the products of various intentional actions cutting across one another, misdirected intentions, or just plain mistakes’. Rather than seeking to squeeze out or correct such phenomena, Goodin (1998: 29) advises that institutional designers should recognise that institutions develop through ‘lots of localised attempts at partial design cutting across one another’. Indirect and collaborative approaches to institutional design – that harness multiple and serendipitous efforts – may turn out to be more robust and resilient in the longer term. Such approaches may also challenge the power dynamics associated with the typically ‘top-down’ search for completeness (Lawrence and Buchanan, 2017), opening up generative spaces for alternative approaches to urban governance characterised by the inclusion of new actors and new ways of working (Cooper, 2017). In rapidly changing and ‘radically uncertain’ (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003) environments, ‘a design approach that attempts to fix boundaries, goals and purposes is potentially counterproductive’ (Garud et al., 2008: 367). Instead, there may be merit in the blurring of boundaries between designers and users, and allowing design goals to emerge through interaction rather than top-down planning (in the context of ongoing rather than ex-post environment scanning). In short, completeness may have both practical and normative limitations, and incompleteness may be more than a connotation of failure. Despite the many changes in both scholarship and practice since the 1960s, we argue that institutions remain important in urban governance but take varied and messy forms, being in many cases partial, fractured and overlapping. Next, we develop a conceptual framework for researching incompleteness in institutional design in urban governance.

## Conceptualising incompleteness in institutional design

Our conceptual framework distinguishes between different types of institutional incompleteness and the design logics that underpin them. Institutions are understood as set of formal rules and informal conventions that, in Ostrom’s (2005) words, ‘prescribe, proscribe and permit’ certain forms of action. As such, institutions are not always synonymous with formal organisations; institutions may take the form of ‘rules-in-use’ that shape behaviour across a range of organisations. We use the term ‘design logic’ to refer to a specific rationale for the process of institutional design. This refers not to the substantive character of the resultant design, as in the sociological concept of ‘institutional logic’ (Skelcher and Smith, 2015), but to features of the design process itself. The logics have implications for design strategy and design goals, and have distinctive normative connotations when it comes to understanding the role and value of incompleteness. In developing the concept, we follow Goodin’s (1998: 39) advice that, in matters of institutional design, it is advisable to build ‘middle-range’ theory that relates to, and seeks to connect, ‘both empirical and normative realms’.

In summary, we argue that incompleteness can be conceptualised in three alternative ways, reflecting different design logics (see Table 1):

- a. An *instrumental* design logic leads to incompleteness being regarded as a ‘description’, reflecting a foundational or reforming moment within a process of institutional design. Here, an institutional design is ‘incomplete’ on its way to becoming ‘complete’. Moreover, completeness is an implied normative goal.
- b. A *pragmatic* design logic sees incompleteness in terms of ‘action’, aimed at securing ‘good enough’ design. Incompleteness is seen as inevitable, rather than necessarily desirable, because institutional design is necessarily contingent and subject to continuous revision.
- c. An *emergent* design logic understands incompleteness as part of a deliberate and purposive design strategy. The objective of such a strategy is for the design of institutional arrangements to emerge over time and through use. Here, the normative goal is reversed, so incompleteness is understood as a design value in itself.

The conceptual framework is discussed in more detail below and illustrated through an extended worked example of institutional incompleteness in urban governance, specifically that of English city regional devolution. A ‘worked example’ is best understood as ‘a step-by-step demonstration of...how to solve a problem’ (Clark et al., 2006: 190). A worked example is different from a case study, which provides a detailed analysis of an empirical phenomenon based on primary research. In this paper, the worked example provides ‘scaffolding’ for addressing the puzzle of institutional incompleteness, step-by-step. The example is worked through a series of boxes, based on secondary research, which explore different aspects of incompleteness using the three analytical lenses identified in our framework.

Table 2 provides the background for our example, listing key events in the turn to city regional governance in England from the mid-1990s. We have used dotted lines between the rows of the table in order to soften the initial impression of a linear movement between distinct phases. Moreover, when we examine the contents of the table, it is clear that city regional policies have been elaborated, shelved and yet re-emerged. Initiatives have been launched with great fanfare but remained unfinished, stumbling to a standstill or remaining as lonely pilots. Such a pattern has persisted for more than twenty years, despite changes in governments, individual champions, and external environments. Harrison (2012) compares city regionalism with a fireworks display, noting that each initiative is launched ‘with a

**Table 1.** A conceptual framework for incompleteness in institutional design.

Incompleteness as...	Design logic	Design strategy	Design goal	Normative
Description	Instrumental	Plan	To be completed i.e., ‘designed out’	Deficit i.e., unfinished, abandoned, stalled; not scaled up or rolled out; failed, compromised, co-opted or thwarted.
Action	Pragmatic	Bricolage	To work with/ around incompleteness i.e., ‘designing’	Good enough i.e., contextually sensitive, embedded agency
Prescription	Emergent	Process	To remain incomplete i.e., ‘designed-in’	Asset i.e., open, creative, contestable

**Table 2.** Institutional incompleteness of city-regional devolution over time.

Period/Government	Key policy developments
1997–2004 Early New Labour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separate 'urban' and 'regional' policies initially pursued.</li> <li>• Urban policy focused on revitalization of core cities suffering deindustrialization and disadvantage, alongside wider policies of democratic renewal, citizenship and community involvement.</li> <li>• Constitutional reform agenda promised devolution at regional level, and led to creation of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) in 1998, and restoration of an elected assembly for Greater London in 2000.</li> <li>• Regional devolution for England abandoned, following rejection of an elected assembly for the North East in 2004 referendum.</li> <li>• City-regional agenda emerging, promoted by Core Cities Group (created in 1995) and think tank New Local Government Network, and reflected in 2003 Sustainable Communities Plan.</li> </ul>
2004–2010 Late New Labour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City regional agenda further established, with new growth plans, including the 2004 Northern Way, which required local authorities to work together.</li> <li>• Limited institutional capacity at city regional level beyond City Development Companies (CDCs) and Multi-Area Agreements (MLAs).</li> <li>• At regional level, RDAs remained but without elected members or community engagement.</li> <li>• City-regional agenda waned towards the end of New Labour period, with departure of key advocates, such as Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott.</li> </ul>
2010–2015 Coalition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abolished regional-level RDAs, creating space for city regional agenda.</li> <li>• Business-led Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) created at city regional level in 2011.</li> <li>• Slow recovery from 2008 financial crisis shifted emphasis to city regions as potential engines for economic growth and for rebalancing an economy dominated by London and South-East.</li> <li>• Northern Powerhouse and Midlands Engines initiatives.</li> <li>• Institutional capacity established at city regional level via new Combined Authorities (CAs) - voluntary collaborations of local authorities with a directly elected metro mayor.</li> <li>• Devolution deals devolved powers and resources from central government to CAs in some parts of England (but also some upwards shift of local authority functions to CAs).</li> <li>• Bespoke arrangements within each deal, mostly involving economic development but also devolution of health budgets in leading CA, Greater Manchester Combined Authority (2016).</li> <li>• Powerful advocates for city regions in government, notably Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, and in the Conservative party, including Michael Heseltine.</li> </ul>
2015–2020 Conservative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 2016 Brexit referendum result prompted departure of Conservative city regional policy champions, subsequent focus on Brexit reduced interest in furthering city regional devolution.</li> <li>• Existing devolution deals completed with CAs, but less variety in powers and resources.</li> <li>• Additional devolution deals to existing CAs (e.g. Greater Manchester and West Midlands).</li> <li>• Lack of drive to cover more of England, with only 10 deals by 2020 (listed in Sandford, 2020).</li> <li>• Political re-alignment in the 2019 General Election re-focused attention on 'levelling up' across English city-regions.</li> <li>• Pandemic secured public visibility and reputation of metro mayors in Northern England, particularly in fight for resources with Whitehall to compensate businesses affected by shut-downs and other mitigations.</li> <li>• Potential for some 'repatriated' powers and resources from European Unions to go to CAs.</li> </ul>

crescendo of noise, only to sparkle for a short time, before appearing to fizzle out and fall slowly back to earth' (p. 1255). Referencing the ongoing incompleteness of city regional devolution, Lord (2009) notes that each policy draws upon 'the flotsam and jetsam of past policy experimentation' (p. 78).

### *An instrumental design logic: Incompleteness as description*

In conceptualising institutional design as a description, we are referring to a specific moment in the design process that could be described as 'incomplete'. This moment may be foundational: the design process is incomplete because it has just started. But, it may also be a reforming moment: it is incomplete due to a change in direction or because prior institutions prove tenacious. Incompleteness may arise because of gaps between 'old' and 'new' institutions – where new rules and practices are introduced but traditional arrangements persist, either existing alongside as a parallel rule set, or incorporating or undermining new rules (Lowndes, 2005; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). What ties these moments together is that institutional design has the goal and indeed expectation of completeness. Incompleteness is not an end state but something to be 'designed out' on the way to completing the institutional design.

The normative expectation in this case is completeness, where benefit is assumed to flow from the completing of incomplete processes. Completeness is perceived to allow in advance for not only the specification of a problem, but the possible alternatives and the selection of the optimal solution (Garud et al., 2008). Planning is the dominant design strategy, existing within an instrumental or technocratic logic. Incompleteness may reflect a situation in which institutional design has stalled, failed or been abandoned, or there has been a lack of attention to the enforcement of institutional rules. In a condition of incompleteness, institutional design is regarded as 'unfinished business'. For rational choice theorists, remedying incompleteness is generally associated with tweaking incentives, information flows and pay-offs in order to deliver the 'right' framework for collective action (Hindmoor and Taylor, 2018); for technocrats it is about perfecting the plan, identifying more comprehensively inputs, throughputs and outputs (Boyte, 2005). An instrumental approach, which sets out and seeks to realise a given plan, aims to mitigate against the over-design of the 'congested state' (Skelcher, 2000), and instead promote legibility, transparency, accountability and coherence. Box 1 returns to the example of English city regional devolution to illustrate this instrumental logic of incompleteness in practice. Here, the institutional design of English city regional devolution is situated within the prevailing central-local settlement.

### *A pragmatic design logic: Incompleteness as action*

The second conceptualisation of incompleteness is based upon an acceptance of the practical limitations of traditional rational models of institutional design. Attention is drawn to the necessarily partial and incomplete access to information experienced by designers, their limited cognitive capacity to model and undertake cost-benefit analysis of all possible alternatives, and the stickiness or path dependencies of existing institutions (Pierson, 2000). This conceptualisation is not an assertion that institutional incompleteness is a good or bad thing in itself, but rather that it is an intrinsic property of institutional design.

Charles Lindblom (1959) famously analysed the predominance of pragmatic approaches – the 'incremental method' and a 'science of muddling through' – within US public administration. Hennessy (1996) explains the historical robustness of the unwritten (in effect, incomplete) British constitution as the outcome of 'intelligent muddling through'. Simon (1996) observes in matters of institutional design, a practice of 'satisficing' – a combination of



**Box 1** Incompleteness as description in English city regional devolution.

Research on central-local relations in the UK emphasises the long-standing imposition of standardising or centralising norms by central government on the institutions of urban governance (Hambleton, 2017; Leach et al., 2017; Richards and Smith, 2015), reflecting a broader argument that governance continues to operate in the shadow of government (Jessop, 2002). For theorists of state rescaling, analytical attention has increasingly been given to how state power may be maintained and realised through the institutional design of decentralisation (Marsh et al., 2003) or the 'governance of governance' (Jessop, 2016). Such arguments caution against confusing the 'hollowing' of state form with the hollowing of state power (MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999).

These analyses have been applied to understand how the 2010 Conservative-led Coalition government sought to shape the 'rules of the game' for English city regional devolution. In the absence of any formal constitutional settlement or protection for the principle of local self-government, central-local relations have long been conditioned by 'earned autonomy' whereby local government is granted additional powers and resources contingent upon actual or promised performance (Downe and Martin, 2006). The broader context of austerity, where local government has borne the brunt of unprecedented cuts in central funding, has also meant that pursuing a devolution deal was one of the only options for local and city regional actors.

The Coalition government was keen to move quickly in implementing its devolution agenda, and 'had a clear view on the structures through which it wanted this to happen' (Prosser et al., 2017: 264). As evident in previous 'city deals' and local agreements (Ward, 2018a, 2018b), city regional devolution has been shaped by a combination of formal rules and 'hands off' tools (Ayres and Pearce, 2013; O'Brien and Pike, 2015). This design approach was used both to sustain the dynamics of central-local relations and embed the interests of central government in intra-local relations (Bailey and Wood, 2017). The discursive framing and fiscal conditioning of the devolution deals have consolidated a focus on economic growth within the institutional design (Bailey and Wood, 2017). Business actors have been empowered through network shaping and the privileging of Local Enterprise Partnerships.

These tools have been used alongside the requirement for specific governance arrangements, such as elected mayors, despite clear local disquiet (Lowndes and Lempriere, 2018; Gains, 2015). Indeed, Sandford (2017) has compared the devolution deals to a contractual process, whereby central government sets the terms for 'outsourc[ing]' of particular schemes or projects to local government, and makes their response conditional upon specific arrangements for implementation, evaluation and future-working. From this perspective, city regional devolution can be seen as part of an institutional design for devolution that would continue over time towards completion.

Local actors in these city regional debates may also be seen to be assuming a move to completeness. In the first-mover city region, Greater Manchester, a long-standing cadre of leaders – the so-called 'Manchester Men' (Peck and Tickell, 1995) – saw city regional devolution as an opportunity to address historic central-local conflict. Their 'long-game' of promoting collaboration between individual local authorities across the city region was working towards the realisation of a vision for the city region (Lowndes and Lempriere, 2018). Similarly, a commitment to adopting the directly elected mayor model was seen as opening future doors to a more 'complete' devolution, involving the maximum delegation of powers and resources, for example on health and transport as well as economic development. Incompleteness was seen as a description of a situation that would be rectified via future, more ambitious deals. Whilst not fetishizing the precise institutional form of city regional devolution, the institutional design of devolution is conditioned for completeness within these debates. From this instrumental perspective, incompleteness is to be 'designed out'.

'satisfy' and 'suffice' – as a practical alternative to the rational (but unfeasible) pursuit of 'maximising'. In this vein, institutional designs are not expected to be 'complete' but rather 'good enough'. Considering institutional design in the context of developing countries, Grindle (2004: 545) argues in favour of a strategy of 'good enough governance', noting

that institutional reforms inevitably take place ‘in the midst of conflict, confusion, cross-purposes, inefficiencies, and learning-by-doing’.

Lanzara (1998: 27) draws attention to the role of ‘institutional bricolage’, tinkering or patching-together, in contrast to the formulation of grand plans: ‘Seldom are institutions created from scratch. Most often they are the outcomes of the recombination and reshuffling of pre-existing components or other institutional materials that... can serve new purposes’. Bricolage may offer an opportunity for institutional innovation in the face of path dependency, and in a broader context of resource constraint, risk aversion and lack of trust. The notion of bricolage also resonates with that of ‘street level bureaucracy’, which recognises that front-line actors in urban governance have to interpret institutional designs on an ongoing basis, using discretion and improvisation to fit cases to rules and resources, in changing environments (Durose, 2011; Lipsky, 1980). Even in legal matters, Sunstein (1995: 1736) has drawn attention to the role of ‘incompletely theorized agreements’ as a means of securing settlements within conditions of social pluralism, providing ‘an important source of social stability and an important way for diverse people to demonstrate mutual respect’. The focus is on securing relative agreement on particulars rather than complete agreement on abstract principles. In a similar vein, reviewing theories of democratic design, Hendriks (2011: 59) criticises a relentless pursuit of ‘purity’, pointing instead to the potential benefits of ‘pollution’ whereby different democratic variants are mixed in response to real-life contexts. Hendriks argues that: ‘purity means vulnerability in the real world of democracy; hybridity means vitality’.

Design here is a verb rather than a noun, connoting an ongoing and contingent process of *designing*. The outcome is likely to be what Crouch (2005) refers to as ‘recombinant’ institutions, which represent an inevitably unfinished (and probably temporary) ‘institutional fix’ enabling collective action in specific temporal and spatial contexts. Box 2 offers a different take on English city regional devolution, elaborating a pragmatic design logic for incompleteness. Here, the institutional design of English city regional devolution is understood as contingent, with a more fluid and differentiated relationship between the centre and localities.

### *An emergent design logic: Incompleteness as prescription*

Our third conceptualisation sees incompleteness as a prescription, indicating that institutional design can be incomplete as a deliberate and purposive strategy. Rather than something to be ‘designed-out’, incompleteness is ‘designed-in’, with the intention that design should necessarily remain incomplete. Here, incompleteness represents a critique of instrumental institutional design. This logic challenges the ‘common sense’ view of incompleteness as implying that something is missing from an institutional design or indeed that we are failing to focus on the achievement of tangible goals, privileging means over ends. In this conceptualisation, incomplete design is underpinned by a belief that it can improve upon traditional institutional designs by being adaptable to a dynamic wider environment (Garud et al., 2008). Acknowledging and celebrating incompleteness as a normative design value in and of itself resonates with concepts of postmodernity (contrasting with modernist assumptions of progress toward completeness). Here, we are invited to embrace the uncertainty of incompleteness for both its practical benefits and its democratic values of inclusion, participation and contestability (Lowndes and Paxton 2018; Griggs et al., 2014; Moon, 2013).

There is substantial research on failing institutions that raises questions as to whether coherence and completeness are assets or curses (Jas and Skelcher, 2005). Goffman’s (1961) work on ‘total institutions’, and indeed Foucault’s (1982), alerts us to potential links between institutional design and domination. Such critiques of rational institutional design see the goal of completeness as enabling a technocratic logic to dominate, which

**Box 2** Incompleteness as action in English city regional devolution.

Referring to the challenges of constructing a combined authority and negotiating a devolution agreement, one local authority chief executive has reflected on a ‘space where hyperbole often clashes with the brutal reality of what needs to happen on the ground’ (Reeves, 2016). This comment aligns with a broader recognition of the state’s condition of continuous change and transformation, in which a plurality of possible strategies and scalar fixes are possible, and where the outcome is always subject to challenge and struggle (MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999). Heterogeneity in local intentions and capacities for reform may also shape the implementation and impact of central reforms in diverse ways (Lowndes and Lempriere 2018; Taylor, 2007). From this perspective, institutional arrangements for central-local relations are therefore, in a constant state of flux, and never ‘complete’.

City regional devolution has been lauded as embodying an innovative institutional design strategy that values central-local negotiation, rather than the imposition of a design blueprint, and recognises the importance of local choice and distinctiveness (Local Government Association, 2016). In contrast to previous attempts to introduce regional governance in England, city regional devolution deals have been negotiated on a bespoke basis, with some going further than others in respect to public service reform. Not all parts of the country are covered by the new institutional arrangements and, where combined authorities do exist, their governance, powers and responsibility vary significantly – both in scale and scope. These negotiated settlements have been characterised as purposefully informal, aiming to generate space for a more dynamic and variegated central-local interplay (Ayres et al., 2017).

The uneven and conditional nature of reforms around city regional devolution suggests less of a master plan than an exercise in institutional bricolage. For example, Lowndes (2005) has pointed to the role of ‘remembering’ past institutional arrangements and putting them to new uses (as in England’s rehabilitation of a strong mayor model), and ‘borrowing’ institutional elements from neighbouring institutional arenas of civil society and business (as in the crafting of public-private partnerships and co-production arrangements). The very brevity of the formal devolution agreements, and their provisional tone, introduces further contingency into the institutional design of city regional devolution, as seen in the devolution deals for Greater Manchester, Sheffield City Region and the West Midlands (HM Treasury and GMCA, 2014; HM Treasury and SCR, 2015; HM Treasury and WMCA, 2015). This lack of closure can be seen as linked to a pragmatic design logic insofar as it reflects political expediency on the part of key actors at the central, city region and local levels.

As the devolution agreements only go so far in agreeing a political settlement between central government and the city regions, they allow for a careful balancing of potentially competing political constituencies to be maintained and to keep open the possibility to (re)claim power (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). For example, the Greater Manchester agreement states that: ‘The government will also work with local government and NHS England to give greater certainty about health and care funding settlements’ (HM Treasury and GMCA, 2014: 10–11). The document, in effect, accepts that arrangements for city region devolution only need to be ‘good enough’ (Grindle, 2004), with actors expected to work with and around incompleteness. Similarly, the deal in the West Midlands, signed in the absence of a clear sub-regional consensus and under considerable time constraint (in advance of the 2015 spending review), left areas of incompleteness to be ‘worked around’ once the deal was signed. In both agreements there was evidence of the need to continue ‘designing’, as evidenced by ongoing negotiations on transport, infrastructure and regulation. Incompleteness can be seen here as a manifestation of what Hill and Hupe (2007) call the ‘action imperative’ in public policy, and resonates with Goodin’s (1998) plea to recognise the multiplicity of design efforts.

Following the 2019 General Election, there has been potential for a new phase in the ongoing contingent process of English city regional devolution. The Conservative government has new political allegiances in the English regions, based in no small part on promises to ‘level up’ economic opportunity across the country. Labour’s loss of parliamentary seats in its traditional heartlands of the North and Midlands has also re-focused its attention on devolution, with the potential to capitalise on Labour mayoralties in key city regions.

privileges certain imperatives and specific forms of expertise (Durose and Richardson 2016). The goal of completeness, where the optimal solution has already been determined prior to implementation is seen to enforce rigidity, restrict options and exclude more diverse forms of expertise from the design process. In the quest for completeness, we may also be ‘designing out’ opportunities for experimentation, learning and adaptation. Its technocratic assumptions are also likely to underestimate the inevitability of actors contesting institutional arrangements that do not favour their interests or reflect their identities, creating a further source of instability. An instrumental logic therefore runs the risk of designing ‘brittle’ institutions that are not able to withstand changing demands and environments.

In contrast, incompleteness may be seen to be driven by an imperative to allow institutional design to remain open to being shaped by those using and affected by it, thus reflecting a broader democratic logic (Fung, 2001). An institutional design is incomplete in that the design allows ongoing iteration and amendment (Burns et al., 2006: 21, 26). As such, incompleteness reflects a positive, normative connotation of an open institutional design. The associated design strategy is to view design as a process, in contrast to a pre-determined plan. The purpose of the design is revealed through the process itself. This perspective is understood to offer several advantages, not only in encouraging improvisation and challenge but the potential to catalyse action, and to develop the design in perhaps unforeseen or innovative ways (Durose and Richardson, 2016; Garud et al., 2008). This notion of deliberately incomplete design resonates with a celebration in the institutionalist literature of concepts of ambiguity (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010), heterogeneity (Schneiberg and Clemens, 2006), redundancy (Crouch, 2005) and emergence (Lowndes, 2005), all of which challenge traditional rationalist thinking. In her work on ‘common pool’ resources, Ostrom (2005: 283) argues for polycentricity in institutional design, arguing that multiple and overlapping governing authorities at different scales will better facilitate the adaptation of institutional designs to local circumstances and the sharing of learning from such experimentation. Mahoney and Thelen (2010) show how ambiguities in design reflect compromises built into institutions at foundational moments (reflecting power dynamics between different interests), which can later become resources for institutional adaptation (especially in the context of changing institutional environments). By this logic, being incomplete can enhance the sustainability of institutions over time.

Indeed, we can also acknowledge incompleteness as a means to enhance democratic values and practice in urban governance. In a context of deep cultural pluralism and interdependence and where trust in politicians is eroding, the traditional primacy of technocratic expertise is open to challenge (Durose and Richardson, 2016; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003). Incompleteness in institutional design may here be allied with an agonistic perspective that values democratic contestation and seeks to realise it through an institutional design process imbued with the principles of contestation, contingency and interdependence (Lowndes and Paxton, 2018). This view prioritises diverse and inclusive participation in the process of institutional design, thus enabling space for generating alternatives (Cooper, 2017) and harnessing perspectives on problem-solving that are closer to those affected (Ostrom, 2005). Hence, an incomplete process of institutional design also has the potential to enhance democratic values, providing a means of building the legitimacy of governance institutions, enhancing their effectiveness, and advancing justice (Fung, 2006). Box 3 offers a further perspective on the design logics underlying on English city regional devolution, elaborating an emergent design logic for incompleteness, with positive implications for innovation and inclusion.

**Box 3** Incompleteness as prescription in English city regional devolution.

The bespoke and under-specified nature of the devolution deals could be understood as allowing for greater responsiveness to local needs and aspirations. The Sheffield City Region (SCR) deal, for example, included the right to re-open negotiations if subsequent devolution deals in other areas delivered freedoms or powers sought by SCR (HM Treasury and SCR, 2015). Yet such negotiations have largely taken place behind closed doors, involving only political elites (Pike et al., 2016). Whilst civil society groups and political parties were a noted part of a diverse coalition driving English city regional devolution in the early 2010s (Bailey and Wood, 2017), the negotiation of the devolution deals has faced wide-ranging criticism for the absence of public engagement (Lowndes and Lempriere, 2018; Randall and Casebourne, 2016). This is symptomatic of what Brenner (2004) calls 'the active politics of scale', whereby the territorial organisations of the state, and its implications, are necessarily contested. 'Unhealthily limited' public involvement and consultation is likely to have a negative impact on the 'functioning, sustainability and legitimacy of new devolved structures' (Prosser et al., 2017: 2,64,253). Indeed, the collapse of multiple deals, for example in the North-East (Lempriere and Lowndes, 2019), and subsequently in Norfolk/Suffolk and Greater Lincolnshire, suggests that limited consultation may be starting to 'impinge on the effectiveness of English devolution' (Prosser et al., 2017: 265). In contrast, Prosser et al. (2017) highlighted examples in Sheffield and Southampton where deliberative 'mini-publics' were held. Here citizens deliberated on options for local and regional governance in their area, bringing to the table important and under-recognised principles for institutional design, for example relating to local identities and democratic accountability.

Urban governance demonstrates a distinctive capacity to generate institutional innovation (Dryzek, 1996). In the UK, many institutional reforms have their origins at the urban level – for example, service outsourcing, public-private partnerships and co-production. Within the English city regions, there is growing recognition that the process of institutional design within city regional devolution does not end with signing the deal with central government. The People's Powerhouse (2019) movement began from a reflection about the absence of women's participation in the Northern Powerhouse negotiations, and now seeks to ensure a greater diversity of voice and expertise in the devolution process and that devolution centres people rather than economic growth. In Greater Manchester, an Accord has been brokered between the voluntary community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the Greater Manchester Mayor. The Accord establishes a principle of co-ownership of the Greater Manchester Strategy, where the VCSE are given equal footing with the public and private sector, in order to better reflect the diverse communities of locality, interest and identity across the city region (GMCA, 2017). These 'thicker' forms of participation (Nabatchi and Leighninger, 2015), and more open institutional designs, can offer the means for wider inclusion and promote the legitimacy and effectiveness of urban governance (Fung, 2006; Innes and Booher, 2004). In this sense, England's devolution deals can be seen as 'temporary standoffs in a perpetual transformative sociospatial power struggle' (Swyngedouw, 1997).

## Informing institutional design through incompleteness: Plurality and hybridity

The elaboration of our conceptual framework through the extended worked example of English city regional devolution has demonstrated how different types of incompleteness, and associated design logics, are in play concurrently. Surfacing the often hidden and implicit instrumental logic of completeness allows us to recognise its limits. In this section of the article, we consider whether alternative logics can be intentionally put to work in institutional design. How can pragmatic and emergent logics be deployed by those engaged in the design of urban governance, as alternatives or in combination with an instrumental logic?

**Box 4** Plural and hybrid logics of incompleteness in English city regional devolution.

In taking a pioneering and *instrumental* approach to city regional devolution, Greater Manchester is less likely to face the accusations made to other combined authorities that devolution has stalled or been abandoned. Yet, there were clear risks for Greater Manchester, for example, in accepting a directly elected 'metro mayor', when the resources and responsibilities that might be devolved over time to that mayor were left open. By combining *instrumental* and *emergent* design logics in this way, central government recognised the potential to disrupt local government power bases. But, incompleteness also opens up space for political contestation. Once the principle of devolution had caught hold, Greater Manchester was able to make use of a more *pragmatic* logic to seize opportunities for expanding the range of devolved powers, for example looking beyond economic growth to health and social care, and transport. Expanding the devolution agenda has shown how different logics may also be 'compartmentalised' (Skelcher and Smith, 2015) that is effectively kept separate and understood as relating to different constituencies, as in the example of adopting an *instrumental* logic in relation to core economic development aspects of devolution and a *pragmatic* logic with respect to public services like health and social care. However, this *instrumental-pragmatic* approach from GMCA has the potential to engender greater demands for a more *emergent* approach, for example amongst those interests who feel excluded from the process so far, as movements like People's Powerhouse illustrate.

For localities, such as Sheffield City Region or the West Midlands where more *pragmatic* and *emergent* approaches to institutional design have predominated, devolution settlements may become increasingly fragile, or stagnated. Conversely, leaving these new settlements open-ended and moving forward according to different, locally-specific trajectories, could also be seen as a way of attempting to keep different stakeholders on board. Such design logics may over the longer term hold open spaces for action foster innovation, and build resilience.

Theories of hybridity draw our attention to opportunities presented in surfacing plural design logics and acknowledging the role of incompleteness in institutional design (Hargrave and van der Ven, 2009). As Skelcher and Smith (2015) argue, institutional designers are themselves 'situated agents' who work in the context of multiple, and not necessarily compatible, frames of meaning. Designers (at both the central and local level) may find potential advantages in accepting contradiction and friction, rather than seeking closure and completion. Box 4 points to the likely advantages and limitations of each design logic in the climate of continued uncertainty surrounding English city regional devolution, and the opportunities posed by plural and hybrid logics of incompleteness.

### **Mediating incompleteness in institutional design: Power, time and space**

Analysis of incompleteness in institutional design has also revealed the importance of cross-cutting factors of power (incomplete for whom?), time (incomplete when?) and space (incomplete where?). As we have seen, debates on institutional design inevitably take place against the backdrop of prevailing power relations. A focus on incompleteness may allow us to discern the contours of how power is maintained through institutional design, both in terms of formal rules and resource allocation, but also agenda-setting and network-shaping. It may also help to illuminate how institutional design opens up space for contestation, where 'soft' power and influence become crucial, and actors can engage critically with existing power settlements (for example through mobilising different stakeholders). The

question of actors' time horizons is also a central issue for analysts of institutional design (Lowndes, 2005; Pierson, 2000). Policymakers' limited attention spans and timescales for credible commitment, along with the appeal of the new, have tended to shape a continuous and restless search for the appropriate scale and intervention to tackle what Swilling and Annecke (2012) call the 'urban polycrisis'. Spatial factors are also important in understanding the dynamics of incompleteness in institutional design, which can be due to a failure to scale-up or roll-out new arrangements, resulting in a disorganised or discontinuous institutional landscape. Conversely, as well as spatial constraint, where institutional designs are only partially fulfilled, incompleteness may also arise from spatial promiscuity where, as the demands of scale change, institutional design may be stretched too far. Box 5 shows how the mediating factors of power, time and space have shaped English city regional devolution.

**Box 5** Power, time and space as mediators of incompleteness in English city regional devolution.

There are advantages and disadvantages for both central and local actors in securing elements of completeness and incompleteness. The 'unfinished business' of various policy reforms and initiatives in English urban governance may be understood as representing a lack of *power*, authority or political will on the part of the designers, or as connoting effective resistance on the part of those actors who see institutional change as challenging their interests. Yet, it is also clear that 'incompleteness' may be in 'the eye of the beholder', where for one set of actors or interests, the work of institutional design may be complete, whereas for another it may be radically incomplete, in the sense of not satisfying their goals, or not conforming with original intentions. Defining completeness may, therefore, be an act of power. The conditionality written into the post-2010 city regional devolution deals reflects established power inequities and hierarchical relationship between central and local government in England. That an asymmetrical and partial mosaic of devolution arrangements persists at the city regional and local levels, suggests a more complex set of power dynamics.

English city regional devolution has clearly been influenced by the *time* horizons of the critical actors. Longer-term conditioning through 'earned autonomy' and austerity, and the sense of extended neglect for the regions outside London and South East, shaped central government's approach but also consolidated the embrace of devolution by the city regions themselves. Greater Manchester's first mover status was enabled through fostering collaboration across individual local authorities in the city region, for example through the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities, which has been credited as vital in meeting the requisite conditions for city regional devolution (Lowndes and Lempriere, 2018; Kenealy, 2016). Yet, austerity and perceived neglect by political elites may have also exacerbated mistrust from the public, which could continue to have consequences over the longer-term.

Whilst a sense of urgency from both central and city regional actors informed the lack of detail in the original devolution deals, the short-term horizons of central government champions of city region devolution, and their hurried exit in the wake of the 2016 Brexit referendum, undermined the coherence and sustainability of the policy to set up new institutional arrangements across England (Lempriere and Lowndes, 2018). Such political upheavals could present an opportunity for city regional actors to press for further devolution, and a further round of institutional design may emerge from this incompleteness.

The relevance or legitimacy of an institution may be lost as it is extended geographically into new *spaces*, for example taking city region devolution into predominantly rural areas, as in the failed North East Combined Authority (Lempriere and Lowndes, 2019). A wider process may also mean that resources become too thinly spread to support a wider process, as shown in the more limited resources and standardised deals as devolution has been rolled out more widely (Lowndes and Lempriere, 2018). For example, Sheffield City Region initially resisted the imposition of a directly-elected mayor, against the will of central government, but later fell into line as it was made clear that powers and resources would be constrained if the model was not accepted.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have demonstrated how a design logics approach can advance analytical understanding of incompleteness in urban governance, orienting our attention to the limits of a functionalist approach to institutional design and the associated default to notions of completeness. It has also opened up alternative theorisations of incompleteness, and the institutional design process itself. Our analysis has highlighted not only the inevitability of incompleteness in institutional design - even where an instrumental design logic is pursued - but also its potential benefits within urban governance, which are expressed via alternative design logics of emergence and pragmatism. The argument is not that outcome specifications for institutions should be abandoned, but rather that pre-set or prescribed solutions are not necessarily the most effective or even efficient way to achieve them. A focus on incompleteness acknowledges not only the need to respond to complex and dynamic contexts within urban governance, but also the opportunity to create institutional designs that facilitate the ongoing negotiation of such contexts, including by actively creating and maintaining spaces of incompleteness. Such spaces can facilitate the engagement of new actors and enable 'good enough' design to emerge in-use.

Theoretically, the article has served to deepen our understanding of incompleteness in institutional design through the development of the three-fold framework. We used an extended worked example of English city regional devolution to test the concepts in practice and leverage further analytical insight into the sources and dynamics of incompleteness in institutional design. The analytical generalisations that emerge could form a basis for future research on incompleteness in a broader range of reforms in English urban governance or a comparison with institutional innovations in other countries.

We also show that the concept of institutional incompleteness can be useful in explaining the outcomes of power struggles in ambiguous and uncertain institutional contexts. In urban governance, the institutional landscape of devolution has many constituent elements, and a variety of means by which these elements might be designed-in, designed-out or left open. Furthermore, our analysis demonstrates that incompleteness opens up space for political contestation, offering an opportunity to engage beyond the political elites by opening up pre-figurative spaces in which new actors may be engaged in the design process in new ways. Each of our three ways of understanding incompleteness – instrumental, emergent and pragmatic – contains its own limits. Yet, perceiving institutional incompleteness as a goal in its own right, held in tension with ideas of completeness, could help in managing expectations across the urban governance landscape, developing new design strategies and enhancing democratic values.

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