



A happy cacophony at the European Fab Lab festival in Toulouse

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AEIDL attended the European gathering of the Fab Labs in Toulouse on 11-14 May 2017 to facilitate a roundtable on 'Fab Labs and rural Europe: state of the art and future options'.



Fabmanagers family portrait in Toulouse, 2017(Photo: Makery)

How to build a wind turbine with recycled material, repair a bicycle, adapt a tool or make your own bionic hand? The answer is at your nearest Fab Lab - digital FABrication LABoratory – a place to turn your ideas into new products and prototypes through a range of advanced digital manufacturing technologies¹.

The idea is to make hi-tech available cheaply and quickly to entrepreneurs, students, artists, small businesses, or anyone who wants to create something new. The Fab Lab network is an open, creative community of makers, artists, scientists, engineers, educators, students, amateurs, professionals, etc. The movement promotes non-formal education and open innovation through local and bottom-up initiatives.

The European gathering of these Fab Labs took place in Toulouse on 11-14 May 2017, and AEIDL was there to facilitate a roundtable on '*Fab Labs and rural Europe: state of the art and future options*'². The movement is spreading rapidly in cities, but Fab Labs are also opening in many rural areas, usually combined with co-working space and other services such as a Repair cafés or IT training rooms.

Fab Labs have a clear branding, supported by a charter, but when combined with other activities, these places are labelled differently: 'Tiers Lieu' in France, 'Living lab' or

¹ The idea was conceived by inventor and scientist Prof. Neil Gershenfeld at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), back in 2009. It has now grown into a Foundation: see <http://www.fabfoundation.org/>

² <http://www.fablabfestival.fr/fablab-day/>

'Maker space' in other countries... The common characteristics are co-creation, active user involvement, a real-life setting, multi-stakeholder participation and multi method approaches³.



View of the 2017 Fab Lab Festival in Toulouse (Photo: Makery)

Some Fab Labs deliver innovative, co-created solutions to social problems identified in their rural areas. For example, since January 2017, the Tiers Lieu in Limoux (Occitanie, France) has been hosting a job integration workshop (in French: *chantier d'insertion*) for six young people, who learn how to become Fab Lab operators through a 350 hours apprenticeship scheme. They curate and maintain 3D printers and other accessories.

The difficulty for rural Fab Labs, and their associated services, is to remain attractive and viable in the long term, and to offer to the local community - children, teenagers and adults – a dynamic ecosystem to stimulate young talents and local innovation. In practice, this translates into the need for flexible opening times, affordable prices and recreational programming.

Common elements in Living Labs



Most participants in the roundtable agreed that the main challenge for sustainable rural Fab Labs is to create economies of scale by pooling resources together, creating a network of trainers and operators who traverse the countryside, from village to village, with demonstration campaigns and training camps for instance⁴.

The Fab Lab movement is still evolving, but it carries forward many positive values (Do it Yourself, upcycling, low-tech solutions, education through making). As the editorial staff of the *Makery*⁵ rightly observe: *'The Fab Lab festival, through its agile technology demos, frugality in innovation, reinvented business models, is learning from the past to imagine the future!'*

³ Source: European Network of Living Labs (Enoll) <http://www.openlivinglabs.eu/node/1429>

⁴ This is the case for 'Manche Lab' in Normandy (France), a mobile fab lab travelling to schools and village halls with a fully equipped caravan (laser cutting machine, CNC milling machines, 3D printer, etc.)

⁵ The dedicated media for labs see <http://www.makery.info/en/>

Stijn De Mil, who founded 'Fab Lab Brussels' in 2011 (a Fab Lab jointly operated by the Free University of Brussels and the Erasmus University College of Brussels), also founded the rural Fab Lab at Erpe-Mere in 2014, reaching around 1,500 kids every year. During the roundtable, he suggested that the next generation of Fab Labs should be renamed 'Fab Libs', taking over the role of public libraries for sharing knowledge closest to the needs of local communities.

Let's see if a European network of Fab Libs will exist by the time of the next international FAB14 conference, hosted by the city of Paris (France) in 2018...

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