



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Boundary Objects in Practice: Business Incubators as Translation Devices

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Abstract

Business incubators have become central organizations within global entrepreneurial ecosystems, and their intermediary position between local entrepreneurs and multinationals calls for closer, more nuanced examination. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Santiago, Chile, this article analyzes how incubators function as boundary objects that translate global entrepreneurial norms into locally situated practices. The article focuses on everyday activities and experiences, such as events, coworking environments, and programming, to study how incubators encourage entrepreneurs to adopt standardized vocabularies, expectations, and views associated with global investment culture. Through these processes, incubators organize participation, highlight specific forms of entrepreneurship, and establish shared frameworks among diverse actors. Rather than treating these dynamics as fixed or unidirectional, this article views them as translation practices that are continually adjusted as entrepreneurs respond to or reinterpret global standards within their own contexts. At the same time, translation operates as an ongoing, negotiated process through which entrepreneurial practices gain meaning across global and local settings.

Keywords

Boundary objects, Entrepreneurship, Incubators, Translation, Business geography.

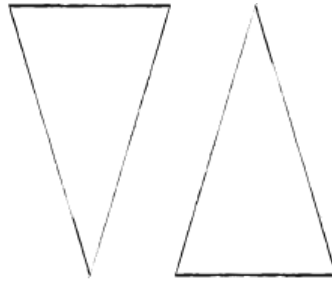
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INTRODUCTION: TRANSLATION AND THE ENTREPRENEURIAL CITY

Each morning, I commute from Estación Central, a working-class neighborhood in western Santiago, along the city's main transit corridor toward the eastern financial core. Passengers chat quietly or sit in silence aboard crowded metro cars, occasionally interrupted by informal vendors moving through the train selling candies, phone chargers, or vitamins. Despite automated announcements discouraging passengers from buying from them, most riders remain indifferent, accustomed to this everyday coexistence of official governance and informality. As the train moves eastward, concrete apartments and corner stores give way to glass towers, polished cafés, and global franchises.

This shift between Santiago's periphery and its financial heart, colloquially known as "Sanhattan," mirrors broader transformations in Chile's political economy. At one end of the metro line, entrepreneurship appears through neighborhood shops, informal vendors, and small-scale livelihood strategies; at the other, it is recast through the global language of innovation, scalability, and investment. Incubators, accelerators, and coworking spaces

operate within this globally oriented entrepreneurial landscape, translating entrepreneurial norms into routines, expectations, and measures of value that make ventures recognizable as credible and investable.

Over the past two decades, incubators have become central institutions within what policymakers and scholars describe as entrepreneurial ecosystems (Isenberg 2010; Novotny et al. 2020). They provide workspace, mentoring, investor access, networking, and symbolic validation. Yet, they also shape the terms of participation by influencing how entrepreneurs describe their ventures, what forms of growth they emphasize, and how they present future value to investors (Van Rijnsoever 2020; Rice and Noyes 2021). In Santiago, incubators operate within a policy environment that has long treated entrepreneurship and innovation as instruments of national development. They serve as both support organizations and sites where global entrepreneurial norms are translated into local routines, performances, and measures of value. This article examines these institutions as boundary objects and translation devices that coordinate diverse actors through shared routines of presentation, mentoring, and evaluation. These practices of presentation, mentoring, and evaluation make cooperation possible, but they are not neutral. They privilege ventures that can be framed in terms of scalability, disruption, and growth, while community-based or necessity-driven forms of entrepreneurship remain less visible.

The concept of translation helps clarify this process analytically. Incubators do not simply connect local entrepreneurs to global capital. They encourage entrepreneurs to narrate themselves and their ventures in terms that can travel across institutional and investment settings. This work is visible in the presentations, routines, and professional behaviors that entrepreneurs are expected to adopt, often through the repeated use of standardized templates, pitch formats, and measures of progress. It is also visible in the spatial organization of Santiago's entrepreneurial ecosystem, where many globally connected programs cluster near the city's affluent eastern districts. Translation operates across two linked registers: a cultural register of language, space, and aesthetics, and an operational register of metrics, templates, and everyday organizational practice.

This article contributes to business anthropology by showing how entrepreneurial infrastructures mediate between local economic life and global investment culture. Previous research has examined how boundary objects

facilitate translation and shared understanding across organizational groups (Gluesing 2018), how state-sponsored entrepreneurship competitions cultivate entrepreneurial hopes and expectations (Liu 2024), and how incubators combine consultation and control (Flanschger, Heinzelmann, and Messner 2023). Building on this scholarship, I examine how incubators function as boundary objects that shape understandings of legitimacy, aspiration, and value. The ethnography shows how translation operates as a form of governance through everyday practices of presentation, mentoring, and evaluation, even as entrepreneurs negotiate and reinterpret institutional expectations. Situating these processes within Santiago's uneven urban geography further demonstrates how class and location influence access to entrepreneurial infrastructure and opportunities for recognition.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I develop the theoretical framework connecting boundary objects, translation, and governance. I then describe the broader multi-sited research project and the Santiago case. The empirical sections examine, first, how incubators translate global entrepreneurship through pitch events, workspace aesthetics, and everyday program routines; second, how Santiago's urban geography shapes access to entrepreneurial infrastructure; and third, how translation becomes a form of governance through metrics, mentoring, and accountability practices. I close by considering what this case suggests for more inclusive models of incubation and for how business anthropology can understand organizations that present themselves as technical support systems while shaping value, legitimacy, and entrepreneurial possibility.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BOUNDARY OBJECTS, TRANSLATION, AND GLOBAL CAPITAL

To understand how incubators translate global entrepreneurial ideals into local practice, I draw on boundary object theory, science and technology studies (STS), and the anthropology of capitalism. Rather than treating efforts by incubators to connect entrepreneurs with investors, mentors, and policy programs as neutral support, I examine how those relationships are organized and whose interests they advance. As organizational forms, they also coordinate power, align expectations, and reproduce moral economies of value.

Susan L. Star and James R. Griesemer (1989) coined the term “boundary objects” to describe constructs and arrangements that facilitate cooperation across distinct social worlds. Such *objects* or artifacts are flexible enough to adapt to local needs and contexts, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity. Since then, scholars have extended the concept to product development, inter-organizational collaboration, and cross-cultural management (Nicolini, Mengis, and Swan 2012; Gluesing 2018). In global business settings, boundary objects mediate information as well as legitimacy, trust, and belonging. Treating incubators as boundary objects highlights the ways in which these institutions connect public programs, private investors, and entrepreneurs. The physical layout of workspaces, the structure of mentoring programs, the design of selection criteria, and the expectations surrounding pitch events operate as shared reference points that different actors can recognize. A presentation deck, a business model canvas, or a readiness report may carry distinct meanings for an entrepreneur, an incubator manager, or a funder, yet each tool still provides enough common ground to enable collaboration and evaluation. That interpretive flexibility facilitates collaboration while concealing tensions over what constitutes valuable entrepreneurship.

Boundary objects rely on processes of translation to maintain their coherence. In STS, translation refers to the work of enrolling heterogeneous actors into shared projects by reframing their interests and identities so that cooperation becomes possible (Callon 1986; Latour 1987). This work coordinates action while producing and distributing power by shaping who and what becomes aligned within a given network. Bruno Latour’s concept of immutable mobiles helps illustrate how certain standardized models or artifacts can travel across distances without losing their recognizable form, thereby structuring local practices while appearing universally applicable. Maps, standards, and reports are classic examples. Incubators generate analogous standardization in business models, culture, and performance indicators that circulate transnationally. These templates are “immutable” enough to be recognizable from Santiago to Singapore and mobile enough to be implemented in different local settings.

Translation is more than communication across contexts. It is a form of alignment that can reinforce existing hierarchies (Huvila 2011). Within entrepreneurial ecosystems, translation works by converting locally grounded innovations into outcomes that appear measurable and investable to external

audiences. Through training sessions, evaluative procedures, and the routine shaping of participants' stories, incubators guide entrepreneurs toward narrative forms and criteria that resonate with global standards. This work decides which ventures appear legible and which remain peripheral. It privileges actors already fluent in English (a *lingua franca* of Western international business), investor discourse, and technology norms, and it can disadvantage those unwilling or unable to adopt the requisite repertoire.

Throughout this article, I use governance not only to refer to formal regulation or institutional decision making, but to the broader organization of conduct through everyday tools, routines, and evaluative metrics. In this sense, governance includes the ways in which actors are guided to understand what counts as appropriate, valuable, and credible action. This understanding is informed by Foucauldian approaches to power, especially the idea that institutions often shape conduct indirectly by encouraging actors to monitor and discipline themselves (Foucault 1991). Discipline is not separate from governance, but one mechanism through which governance operates. In incubators, this occurs when entrepreneurs learn to evaluate their own projects through the criteria of readiness, market validation, and growth.

One way capitalist expansion proceeds is through infrastructures that make difference governable (Ferguson 2006). In the observed incubator settings, this work appears in the translation of varied entrepreneurial projects into comparable forms of value. Incubators depend on diversity to claim inclusivity and creativity while standardizing behavior to ensure comparability and control. Success rests on finding a balance between openness and uniformity. Analyzing incubators as boundary objects reveals how that balance is achieved and what consequences it entails.

ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT AND METHODS

This article draws on a broader multi-sited ethnographic research project on entrepreneurial ecosystems and business incubation conducted between 2022 and 2025 across cities in the United States, Latin America, and Europe. The larger project examined public, private, university-affiliated, and stand-alone incubators, accelerators, coworking spaces, and entrepreneurial support organizations, including sites in the United States, Chile, Ecuador, and Ger-

many. Within that broader comparative frame, my 2023 fieldwork in Santiago serves as the focused case for this article. Santiago is analytically useful because it combines a strong and visible entrepreneurship policy apparatus with sharp urban inequality, making it a productive site for examining how global entrepreneurial norms are translated into local practice.

Chile's national entrepreneurship infrastructure gives this case broader institutional significance. Since the early 2000s, the Chilean state has treated entrepreneurship and innovation as central development priorities, directing resources through La Corporación de Fomento de la Producción de Chile (CORFO) and programs such as Start-Up Chile (Benavente 2006; Mardones and Zapata 2018). CORFO frames entrepreneurship support as a national development infrastructure, reporting support for more than 900 dynamic ventures nationally each year and more than 80 intermediary institutions annually, including incubators, accelerators, mentor networks, coworking spaces, crowdfunding platforms, global hubs, and early-stage investment funds (ALIDE 2021; CORFO 2025). In 2023, CORFO announced an expansion that would bring its national incubator network to twelve incubators, and its 2022 incubator benchmarking reported 869 ventures served, CLP \$102.872 billion in sales, CLP \$33.244 billion in capital raised, CLP \$7.132 billion in exports, and 1,283 new jobs (CORFO 2023). These figures describe national infrastructure rather than my field sites alone, but they establish the institutional scale within which the Santiago case is situated.

Public program data also illustrate the selective character of this infrastructure. In 2024, Start-Up Chile selected 50 startups from 868 applications for its BIG 8 generation. Among those selected, 44 percent were foreign startups, 14 percent were Chilean ventures from outside the Metropolitan Region, and 30 percent were women-led projects (CORFO 2024). These figures describe one major public accelerator rather than Santiago's entire incubator ecosystem, but they indicate the selective filters through which globally oriented startup support operates.

My case study in Santiago included participant observation in more than a dozen entrepreneurial settings, including public programs, private accelerators, coworking spaces, university-affiliated entrepreneurship initiatives, and government-sponsored networking events. I conducted semi-structured and informal interviews with entrepreneurs, incubator staff, mentors, university faculty and administrators, government officials, and representa-

tives connected to multinational partners and investors. Interviews and conversations were conducted in Spanish, English, or a mixture of both, depending on the setting and participant. I also collected fieldnotes, organizational documents, promotional materials, public reports, program websites, and observations from events, tours, and everyday interactions in entrepreneurial support spaces.

Together, these materials allowed me to examine how entrepreneurs moved through incubator programs and how staff, mentors, and institutional partners shaped the terms of that movement. This places the actors who ran and staffed these programs at the center of the translation process. Across sites, incubator work was carried out by people positioned at the intersection of entrepreneurship, business development, university programming, public policy, and corporate partnerships. This matters because incubators do not automatically translate global entrepreneurial norms. Translation is performed by those whose role is to move between groups, such as entrepreneurs and investors, universities and corporations, or private firms and public agencies. Through mentoring and careful participant selection, staff and mentors helped convert specific business ideas into forms recognizable to funders and partners. Their authority was usually framed as support, but it also carried evaluative force, helping define which ventures appeared marketable and strategically valuable.

The Santiago case is not treated here as a statistically representative account of all Chilean entrepreneurship or of every incubator in the city. Rather, it is used as a focused ethnographic case for examining how translation operates in practice. Publicly available data on rejection rates, failure rates, graduation outcomes, and participant demographics across Santiago's incubator ecosystem remain uneven. I therefore use CORFO, Start-Up Chile, and socioeconomic data to contextualize the case, while relying on interviews, participant observation, and organizational materials to analyze how translation is enacted in everyday incubation practice.

Direct quotations are attributed by participant role where possible, while observational material is identified by setting. When discussing repeated dynamics across multiple sites or events, I describe them as recurring patterns rather than treating any single interaction as explanatory of the whole ecosystem. All participants, specific sites, and ventures are anonymized. The aim is not to generalize across all Chilean entrepreneurs or global incubator

participants, but to show how specific infrastructures mediate global and local interactions through ordinary practices of mentorship, evaluation, and spatial organization.

TRANSLATING GLOBAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

On a Thursday evening, an incubator's open-plan workspace has been transformed into a temporary stage. It is the pitch event, an evening when entrepreneurs in the program present their ideas to investors and corporate scouts. Many are modeled on well-known television formats such as "Shark Tank" (U.S.) or "Dragons' Den" (U.K.). Folding chairs face a large flatscreen monitor wheeled into place, displaying sponsor logos against a backdrop of Santiago's skyline. Entrepreneurs in blazers and suits rehearse quietly while attendees mingle and chat just beyond the seating area. The style and atmosphere are instantly recognizable to anyone familiar with entrepreneurial ecosystems elsewhere. Each presenter has five minutes. The structure is standardized, comprising a problem, solution, traction, and a projection of growth potential, often depicted by the familiar "hockey-stick" graph. Some entrepreneurs present in Spanish with English slides, while others switch between languages to emphasize technical terms or market metrics. Bilingual rhythm, confident posture, and polished infographics signal global fluency. At times, the audience chuckles, aware that language proficiency is integral to the performance, with two languages offering more opportunities for puns and wordplay. These events make translation visible as a practice rather than a metaphor.

This emphasis on performance and vocabulary also appears in public program materials and in the participants' own descriptions. Start-Up Chile states that it looks for businesses that are technology-based, innovative, scalable, and high-impact, and its application process moves ventures through forms, eligibility review, expert evaluation, team review, interviews when needed, and final committees (Start-Up Chile 2025a, 2025b). Entrepreneurs, therefore, encounter the language of scalability and impact before entering the incubator itself. They describe the application process as requiring detailed written responses, a presentable pitch, product demonstration materials, and interviews focused on whether the venture fits an incubator's expectations or particular model, a pattern also reflected in public accounts from

participating entrepreneurs (GrowthMentor 2025). In these accounts, successful applicants are advised to demonstrate that their ideas are more than hypotheses and that their ventures are feasible and profitable. Translation begins not only at the pitch event, but at the point of application, when ventures must be rendered legible through categories that anticipate investor and program evaluation.

Participating entrepreneurs and incubator staff also framed English-language programming as a practical advantage. In both incubator marketing materials and conversations with staff, it was noted that activities conducted in English reduced barriers for non-Spanish-speaking participants while allowing them to experience Chile as a regional innovation hub for international business (GrowthMentor 2025). Yet this accessibility worked through a specifically global business idiom. English made the program easier to navigate for some foreign and internationally oriented entrepreneurs, but it also marked the incubator as a space where entrepreneurial legitimacy depended on fluency in transnational startup culture.

At a university-affiliated incubator program, a young engineering student from Santiago presents an application designed to monitor air quality, an issue with which Santiago is very familiar. An investor quickly asks: “What is your scalability model?” The entrepreneur describes a plan to extend the system to municipal institutions, including local schools. The investor follows up: “Could this be made viable beyond Chile?” The exchange made one expectation clear: Legitimacy was strengthened when the venture could be narrated through the promise of transnational expansion. A tool developed in response to a local environmental concern is reframed as a measure of global reach, in which immediate social value must also demonstrate potential for replication and rapid growth. The contrast becomes more evident when the next presenter, a Brazilian engineer, steps forward. Accustomed to working across national settings, he introduces his venture in multinational terms from the outset, aligning his pitch more closely with the expectations circulating in the room. Both entrepreneurs may be pursuing ideas with real promise, yet one speaks more fluidly within a global evaluative framework, gaining the advantage.

Mentorship and training sessions amplify these expectations in subtle but consistent ways. In workshops on storytelling for investors and brand development, facilitators emphasize the need for concise narratives, emotional

hooks, and a carefully practiced delivery. Participants are encouraged to emulate the style of corporate leaders by maintaining steady eye contact, speaking with measured confidence, and presenting themselves as already poised for growth. Passion, in this context, serves as a performative tool that signals both commitment and flexibility. I often hear mentors and participants recall names such as Steve Jobs (Apple) and Satya Nadella (Microsoft) for their ability to present. Their passion was expressed as confidence and a willingness to think bigger. Such performance is central rather than supplemental. Entrepreneurship programs influence people not by issuing direct orders, but by training them to see the world through the criteria that officials and investors use to evaluate them (Liu 2024). Across these settings, participants are encouraged to anticipate these expectations and adjust their presentations, narratives, and business models accordingly.

This dynamic is visible in Santiago and beyond. Entrepreneurs learn to translate and anticipate the desires of investors and, in return, adjust their own approach through translation, including speech, gestures, and business models, to fit the global template of scalability, innovation, and disruption. From the entrepreneur's perspective, the incubator was not experienced only through high-stakes evaluation. Participants also described ordinary program life through mentorship sessions, workshops, and peer interaction. Participants emphasized that being surrounded by other entrepreneurs and startups was valuable because they were navigating similar problems of fundraising, product development, and market entry. This everyday social environment mattered because translation repeatedly occurred through advice from mentors, comparison with peers, and gradual adjustment to what counted as progress.

Design reinforces these scripts. In a financial district incubator, glass-walled rooms and open common areas are lined with mostly English slogans such as "Think Global" and "Prove What's Possible." Corporate partners like Amazon (AWS) and Microsoft are featured throughout the branding and training materials. These aesthetic choices create an atmosphere where constant novelty is treated as proof of progress and modernity, a pattern identified in many contemporary innovation settings (Wilf 2020). The décor signals alignment with global corporate culture and sets an aspirational tone for participants.

These aesthetic choices are not incidental background details. They are part of the ritual organization of entrepreneurial legitimacy. Sponsored social events, branded lounges, and open coworking areas create recurring settings in which entrepreneurs learn what credible innovation is expected to look, sound, and feel like. The ritual structure of the pitch, with its timed presentation, slide deck, and evaluating panel of experts, gives entrepreneurial judgment a familiar and repeatable form. Likewise, the visual language of glass rooms, English slogans, sponsor logos, specialty coffee, and flexible workspaces translates global startup culture into an everyday environment. These details echo the way innovation hubs operate as physical, social, and symbolic spaces where innovation is organized and made recognizable (Jiménez and Zheng 2021). These spaces do not simply host entrepreneurial activity; they stage it, making select performances of innovation appear natural, professional, and investable while leaving others less legible.

Boundary objects take shape in the templates and tools that structure incubator activities. Pitch decks, canvases, and selection rubrics help different actors coordinate even when there is no full agreement. Investors treat the deck as a decision tool; managers use it as evidence of program effectiveness; entrepreneurs use it to pitch their idea. However, this flexibility also narrows the scope of what projects can look like. Ideas that do not match the usual categories of problem, solution, market, and growth often appear incoherent or incomplete. Entrepreneurs working on community-based efforts are often encouraged to pivot toward subscription platforms or other measurable outcomes. One entrepreneur developing an educational program for low-income students learned to describe it as an “ed-tech platform” to remain competitive and avoid being dismissed for having a narrowly defined community focus. Another working on recycling initiatives in peripheral neighborhoods incorporated terms like “circular economy” and “marketable impacts” into her pitch, even as she prioritized local employment and community relationships. “You learn to talk their talk,” one explained, “but you don’t lose sight of your own goals.” These forms of strategic bilingualism and boundary work can expand access to funding and visibility, although only to a certain extent. The evaluative criteria that dominate these settings still center on scalability and monetization, leaving projects with weak growth prospects at the margins.

These practices of mediation demonstrate how incubators transform heterogeneous ideas into standardized forms legible to investors and policy-

makers. Templates, aesthetics, and rituals coordinate action across social worlds. At the same time, they privilege particular ways of seeing value. Incubators thus enable cooperation and enact control, connecting local innovation to global circuits through the everyday labor of translation.

SPATIAL INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION: GEOGRAPHIES OF ENTREPRENEURIAL CAPITAL

A thirty-minute metro ride along the main east–west corridor, known locally as La Alameda, traverses some of Santiago’s sharpest socioeconomic gradients (Jirón and Mansilla 2014). In the western neighborhoods, street vendors, industrial areas, and dense apartment housing dominate, and even large billboards appear torn or empty, signaling low private investment and uneven infrastructure maintenance. Approaching Santiago Centro, the city transitions into its historic and political core, with museums, parks, and La Moneda (seat of the Chilean president), where tourists, office workers, and government officials share public space with service workers, laborers, and even unhoused residents. Traveling farther east, the socioeconomic profile and built environment rise, culminating in mirrored glass towers and international corporate logos that mark entry into Sanhattan, the financial district where incubators, accelerators, and venture capital offices cluster. Beyond this, as the city stretches into the hills and affluent northeastern neighborhoods, major public transit discontinues, reinforcing the social and infrastructural boundary between Santiago’s western and eastern sectors.

The commute described here is not meant to serve as a representative commuting statistic. It is an ethnographic entry into a documented urban gradient. Using the *comuna*, Chile’s smallest municipal administrative unit, as the unit of analysis, Santiago has been described as highly unequal and socio-spatially segregated, with the wealthiest *comunas* clustered in the northeast cone, including Vitacura, Las Condes, and Lo Barnechea, while poorer areas extend to the south and west (Aquino and Gainza 2014). This analysis also shows that the wealthiest *comunas* attract almost 70 percent of commuting trips, while average work-trip times in large peripheral *comunas* such as Maipú, San Bernardo, and La Florida exceed 40 minutes, more than double the average commute time in wealthier *comunas*. This broader spatial pattern helps explain why entrepreneurial support located along Santiago’s affluent

eastern corridor can appear formally accessible while remaining unevenly available in practice.

Concentration and segregation are not simply matters of convenience. In Santiago, spatial organization reflects and reinforces economic hierarchy, shaping which entrepreneurs can regularly access the spaces where visibility, mentorship, and investment circulate (Otero, Volker, and Rozer 2022). Incubators are anchored in a landscape that encourages them to appear visibly global while remaining unevenly accessible. A tight cluster of opportunity forms in the east, while western working-class zones remain more weakly connected to this investment. Although policy and program staff often invoked inclusion, participation still required navigating spatial, linguistic, and cultural boundaries that many individuals could not easily cross. This divide was visible not only among entrepreneurs but also among workers and small-business actors near incubator spaces. “Going to those neighborhoods in Las Condes feels like entering another country,” an owner of a small restaurant in Centro said. She commuted daily from a western neighborhood and was unaware of the multinational businesses occupying the floors above, nor was she likely to venture higher than her street-level Peruvian restaurant. Her food was popular among nearby incubator participants and visitors, yet she and the incubator remained worlds apart.

Proximity becomes another tool of gatekeeping, as an entrepreneur who spends long hours commuting is less likely to attend events or participate in the informal interactions that shape opportunities. Virtual mentoring continues to exist, but in-person contact remains central to visibility and investment. “Business happens in the hallway,” one entrepreneur told me, adding that networking and constant presence made sustained participation worthwhile. Entrepreneurs and staff repeatedly emphasized that formal workshops could be scheduled, streamed, or joined remotely, but hallway conversations, follow-up meetings over drinks, and unplanned encounters with mentors or visiting investors were harder to access from a distance. For entrepreneurs traveling from less-connected districts, the issue was therefore not only whether they could attend an event. It was whether they could remain present long enough to participate in the informal interactions through which credibility and opportunity circulated.

This pattern extended beyond individual events to the broader geography of Santiago’s entrepreneurship infrastructure. Universities with entre-

preneurship centers, venture firms, and technology parks cluster along the same eastward axis of the city, while the most exclusive private institutions sit even farther east or rise higher in the skyline of Sanhattan. During the pandemic, digital tools temporarily expanded access and made remote participation more acceptable. Once restrictions eased, however, in-person expectations quickly reasserted the earlier hierarchy. Physical presence, embodied performance, and proximity to elite networks remained key currencies of visibility.

Beyond distance, spatial exclusion also operates through aesthetic and organizational design. More community-oriented incubators and coworking spaces are often located in renovated historic buildings in trendy neighborhoods that project a youthful, creative atmosphere. At the same time, tall office towers with glass façades and minimalist interiors cater to larger global players. Access to these high-end spaces typically requires a badge, security clearance, and business attire. Architecture appears to communicate openness and transparency, yet quietly enforces separation. Networking events on rooftop terraces, in private restaurants, or in elite university auditoriums help determine who fits in. This selective inclusivity reflects a broader innovation culture in which new ideas and disruptions are increasingly treated as inherently valuable and as markers of distinction (Godin 2015). Staff and mentors often described their work as empowerment. In practice, this empowerment frequently meant teaching entrepreneurs to emulate global models. “We help them professionalize their ideas and increase their visibility,” one manager explained. Professionalization involved English-language branding, polished slide decks designed for investors, and the adoption of standardized growth metrics. These expectations tend to benefit entrepreneurs who already have access to higher education or international experience, or whose ventures can at least be framed as having low-risk or multinational potential. At a broader urban scale, the concentration of incubators and related infrastructures in the east supports Santiago’s rebranding as an innovation hub (Valenzuela Blejer and Blanco Moya 2010). Real estate developers market luxury apartments and coworking spaces for digital nomads and rising entrepreneurs near these districts.

These transformations echo global patterns in which creativity and technology play active roles in reshaping urban space and gentrification (Mariotti, Pacchi, and Di Vita 2017; Kayanan 2022). The language of innovation

can soften or obscure the displacement and privatization that accompany these shifts, presenting them as natural byproducts of progress. Even so, resistance and adaptation continue to surface, where entrepreneurs and community actors work to protect alternative priorities and local commitments. Some colleges and public incubators in less affluent districts or smaller communities offer subsidized and community-driven coworking spaces and training programs, although they often operate with limited resources and low visibility (Knapp and Sawy 2021; Primo and Paiva 2024). I have seen them occasionally highlighted on innovation tours organized for visiting delegations, such as groups from the Organization of American States (OAS) or the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA). The tours often juxtapose community-based incubators focused on social entrepreneurship with the more extravagant university or private-sector facilities that attract international investment. While the community context elicits narratives of social impact and local empowerment, larger private operations dominate policy attention because they promise greater, more measurable economic returns.

Incubators, in this formulation, operate as spatial instruments that shape who gains access to mobility, recognition, and a sense of belonging. Their recognizable form across global cities creates the impression of a shared transnational culture. It offers investors a familiar environment, even though the opportunities they promise are unevenly distributed, echoing historical patterns such as the rise of science parks during the Dot-Com period, when spatial planning simultaneously reflected and reinforced existing hierarchies (Massey, Quintas, and Wield 1992). In this landscape, the entrepreneurial city becomes a geography of translation, where proximity to global networks largely determines which actors can position themselves within particular futures and which remain at the margins.

THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION: BOUNDARY OBJECTS AS GOVERNANCE INFRASTRUCTURE

If translation enables communication among entrepreneurs, incubator staff, and investors from around the world, it also operates as a form of governance. Governance here operates less through direct command than through the repeated organization of entrepreneurial conduct: selection criteria, mentoring protocols, reporting templates, pitch formats, and success metrics. Formal

evaluation does more than track progress; it constitutes accountability infrastructures that align local actors with transnational expectations (Huising and Silbey 2021). Staff often described their programs to me by pointing to metrics such as milestones reached, external funding secured, and growth potential achieved. CORFO's own benchmarking illustrates this logic by translating incubation success into measurable outcomes. The indicators reported in its 2022 incubator benchmarking, including ventures served, capital raised, and jobs created, demonstrate how entrepreneurial support is held accountable across categories of growth, private investment, and national economic performance (CORFO 2023).

These metrics do not remain confined to reports. They circulate through public agencies, marketing materials, and the built environment of incubators themselves. In one incubator, a large wall in the lobby displayed ventures that had graduated from the program, continued expanding, or been acquired by larger corporations. The display served as a visual reminder of what defined success and which outcomes were valued by funders and agencies. This is translation in action, where local activities are rendered into standardized formats that can satisfy distant actors and authorities. Social entrepreneurship and community-based ventures rarely fit these templates. When they do appear in official narratives, they are often used to signal inclusion or social impact, while the measures that define program success continue to emphasize aggregate indicators of economic performance as proxies for broader social well-being (Clark and Brennan 2012; Pacheco, Braekkan, and Albaum 2021).

In the incubator settings, high-productivity entrepreneurship depended in part on emotional discipline and performative training cultivated through mentoring, presentation practice, and repeated feedback. Participants were encouraged to rehearse key phrases, refine narratives, and adopt the vocabulary of global entrepreneurship. "Do not describe it as small, say scalable or describe the growth potential [...] Show confidence. If you hesitate, they will assume your market will too," one mentor instructed, referring to popular quotes of famed negotiating experts and CEOs. These sessions do more than improve presentation skills. They gradually teach participants how to feel, sound, and perform like the kinds of entrepreneurs that investors already imagine as promising (Flanschger, Heinzelmann, and Messner 2023). Performance becomes a form of self-discipline, and governance becomes self-

governance as entrepreneurs internalize evaluative frameworks and begin anticipating investor expectations before they are ever voiced. Incubators train entrepreneurs to see themselves as accountable, data-driven, and competitive, and the repetition of these practices shapes what participants come to understand as legitimate work, progress, and value. The process is subtle, but, over time, entrepreneurs discipline not only their decisions and narratives but also their emotional orientation toward uncertainty, ambition, and risk. What appears as individual professionalism can be understood as partly produced through organizational routines that align personal aspirations with the norms of global capital.

This conditioning is reinforced by the artifacts that organize everyday work. Decks, dashboards, and business plans serve as boundary objects that help entrepreneurs, administrators, and investors align their interpretations by providing shared representations that enable collaboration (Gluesing 2018). Such artifacts support cooperation among heterogeneous groups by providing a common framework for interpreting complex situations. They enable participants to speak in a shared vocabulary, yet they also supply the interpretive grid through which ventures are judged and futures envisioned. Entrepreneurs come to shape their ideas around these templates, producing business plans with predefined goals, stylized revenue projections, and measurable indicators that resonate with investor expectations even when their projects do not naturally fit these formats. As more incubators base the metrics of success on dashboards and tightly rehearsed pitches, they cultivate evaluative habits that align with the priorities of multinational capital. Over time, entrepreneurs begin to anticipate the logic built into these tools and adjust their trajectories well before any formal review occurs. While most of my interviews felt natural, when I asked a participant about their venture, most would recite highly rehearsed elevator pitches with key buzzwords and practiced hooks, then return to a normal conversation. Rather than operating simply as communicative aids, these boundary objects help standardize entrepreneurial practice and identity, prioritizing viability and competitiveness.

Accounts from incubator participants also show how entrepreneurs come to narrate their own progress through institutional metrics. Participants described milestones such as expansion into new markets, process optimization, and sales goals. These achievements are not merely neutral indicators of progress. They are the kinds of outcomes that can be reported upward to

program marketers, corporate sponsors, and public agencies as evidence of incubator success. Thus, entrepreneurs learn not only to pursue their ventures but also to narrate them in forms that can circulate as institutional proof.

Corporate partnerships strengthen and extend this governance system. Multinational sponsors such as AWS, Google, and Microsoft provide cloud credits, technical training, and branded templates that circulate through public programs and, in some cases, even help fund or design the incubators themselves (Nordling et al. 2020). Their presence is visible in rooms named the “Microsoft Lounge” or the “Amazon Café.” This blending of public programs with corporate services is not incidental. Across development initiatives, private-sector expertise has long shaped how problems are defined and how solutions are implemented, often more than the public agencies that sponsor them (McEwan et al. 2017). The pattern reappears in incubators when government programs adopt corporate templates, training materials, and evaluation tools as markers of best practice. As a result, corporate logics increasingly define what counts as legitimate entrepreneurship and how success should be measured within these programs. Incubators are encouraged to maintain a flexible identity that attracts legitimacy from both public and private actors. However, this same flexibility also diffuses responsibility. Failures are often framed as unfortunate but expected outcomes of entrepreneurship, while successes become shared achievements claimed by multiple institutions.

Gatekeeping is most apparent when incubators or investors decide which entrepreneurs to support. Criteria such as market potential or team composition seem objective, yet they often conceal cultural preferences. It was rare to see an entrepreneur admitted into the larger incubator programs without first developing the idea elsewhere or securing some form of outside funding. Many participants had already cycled through incubators in countries such as Brazil or Colombia. They came to Santiago seeking access to larger markets, often motivated by the same narratives of success that I had encountered in my own work abroad. Entry decisions depended as much on style and idiom as on business fundamentals. Consultants assisted entrepreneurs in refining their language, presentation style, and slide decks to convey the aesthetic of Silicon Valley professionalism.

In the interactions I observed, the burden of translation fell most heavily on entrepreneurs and local program actors, who were expected to make

their ventures legible to investors, corporate partners, and program evaluators. Adaptation usually moved toward the language of global investment rather than the other way around, reinforcing hierarchies embedded in transnational business networks. Mentorship structures further institutionalize these expectations by creating routines of guidance and accountability. Mentors operate as both advisors and evaluators, shaping decisions through feedback that is formally nonbinding yet often carries significant weight. One manager explained the dynamic succinctly: “When entrepreneurs do not follow guidance, they may be perceived as less aligned with the program’s expectations, which in turn means they are not aligned with those of the investors.” When an entrepreneur does not obtain investment or advance into broader capital networks, incubators and funding agencies lose the performance indicators they need to justify their programs and secure future funding. Authority is framed as support, yet the coordination that follows often functions more like quality control, shaping how entrepreneurs are expected to think, present, and develop their ventures. Boundary objects facilitate cooperation while embedding hierarchy.

Narratives extend governance outward by shaping how entrepreneurial activity is publicly understood. Program administrators highlight stories of participants who secured funding, forged partnerships, or expanded into international markets, and these accounts circulate through media outlets, policy documents, and investor materials. Their repetition helps stabilize cooperation by providing shared reference points, which are essential to the creation of boundary objects (Star and Griesemer 1989). What tends to fall away in these narratives are the alternative trajectories that do not map neatly onto dominant storylines of global expansion. Exits prompted by financial strain, burnout, or strategic withdrawal rarely appear in official narratives or my fieldwork. Audit culture converts creativity into metrics that can be tracked, compared, and justified to funders (Shore and Wright 2015), making such omissions even more consequential. This absence may stem from the gatekeeping and filtering practices described earlier, which ensure that those admitted already carry lower risk and more promising statistics. It may also reflect the quiet removal of such cases from public view. Aggregate numbers then travel globally as evidence of progress. These data points function as immutable mobiles, detached from the complexities of local experience, and a handful of exemplary ventures become proxies for the entire ecosystem.

Santiago's innovation districts can then circulate internationally as spaces of success, while the inequalities that make such spaces selective remain pushed into the background.

Participants are not passive within this system. Some entrepreneurs responded to demands for traction statistics by counting free trials, temporary users, or early sign-ups as evidence of growth, even when these figures did not yet represent stable revenue or sustained demand. Others reframe failures as pivots to maintain eligibility for programs. These tactics reveal both the power and the limits of governance by translation. Agency persists, but within a framework that remains firmly in place. Overall, incubators govern through translation. Templates, protocols, and curated stories align diverse actors while normalizing particular ways of seeing and measuring entrepreneurship. They determine what counts as legitimate and who qualifies as an innovator. Through classification and presentation, incubators convert locally grounded uncertainty into standardized evidence that travels across policy arenas and investment circuits. The result is a tighter linkage between entrepreneurial practice and transnational capital.

Taken together, these practices reveal how translation operates as a mode of governance within Santiago's entrepreneurial ecosystem. Incubators do more than facilitate communication among entrepreneurs, staff, and investors; they coordinate action through templates, protocols, narratives, and evaluative tools that make diverse actors legible to one another. These mechanisms define which forms of innovation are recognized and supported, and they set the terms on which entrepreneurs must present themselves to qualify as investable. Even when entrepreneurs resist or adapt to these expectations, their efforts occur within a structure that continues to privilege particular languages, behaviors, and growth-oriented metrics. Through translation, incubators convert local uncertainty into standardized evidence that can circulate across public agencies, corporate partners, and transnational networks. In doing so, they function as governance infrastructures that extend the reach of global capital while shaping the possibilities available to local entrepreneurs.

CONCLUSION: BOUNDARY OBJECTS IN PRACTICE

Santiago's incubators function as infrastructures of translation, aligning locally grounded entrepreneurial practices with the logics of global investment. As boundary objects, they offer shared frameworks that make collaboration among heterogeneous actors possible while anchoring standardized models of entrepreneurship. Through presentation styles, mentoring routines, workspace design, and success metrics, they translate ideals of scalability and innovation into everyday practices of evaluation, performance, and organizational belonging.

Translation is not neutral. It shapes who becomes visible, where innovation is recognized, and which ventures are positioned as legitimate. In Santiago, the concentration of incubators along the eastern corridor turns geography into an advantage, while entrepreneurs in peripheral districts face longer commutes, unfamiliar idioms, and less consistent access to larger networks. Those who advance are often able to move within global entrepreneurial language while maintaining some connection to local commitments. Yet alongside this alignment, there are also moments of adaptation and quiet resistance. Some entrepreneurs use global rhetoric strategically, presenting investor-friendly narratives while continuing to pursue community priorities that sit outside dominant models of value. Translation thus becomes a space for agency, but that agency remains unevenly distributed.

Incubators sit at the intersection of organizational practice, political economy, and global business culture. For this reason, business anthropology, informed by boundary object theory, offers a productive way to explain how these infrastructures mediate competing policy agendas, corporate investment strategies, and entrepreneurial activity by translating local practices for transnational audiences. Translation is a political process that aligns actors through shared tools and scripts rather than as a neutral transfer of meaning. The spatial and emotional rhythms of incubator life show how geography, aspiration, and everyday performance can reproduce inequality while appearing practical, professional, and fair. Mentoring sessions, evaluation systems, and the encouraged entrepreneurial culture all highlight how the moral and political dimensions of innovation emerge through activities that seem strictly tech-

nical. This also points toward incubation models that could be more inclusive by recognizing a broader range of values and entrepreneurial practices.

For practitioners, meaningful inclusion requires more than training underrepresented entrepreneurs to conform to global norms. It requires questioning the criteria used to define value in the first place. Incubators could create multiple evaluation pathways that acknowledge community benefit and social sustainability alongside profitability, and they could decentralize events, provide bilingual materials, and build mentorship structures rooted in local forms of expertise. Much of the entrepreneurship literature still relies on simplified categories and assumptions that collapse very different entrepreneurial goals, practices, and motivations into a single model, which obscures the diverse realities that shape how people actually create businesses (Lidow 2017). Recognizing this diversity strengthens the case for support structures that accommodate multiple entrepreneurial pathways, allowing incubators to function as genuinely plural boundary objects rather than instruments of standardization.

Returning to the metro commute described in my introduction, each stop marks a shift in the social and economic conditions through which entrepreneurship becomes visible. Incubators situated along this route operate less as neutral bridges than as filters, shaping which entrepreneurial practices can move into globally recognized forms of legitimacy. As boundary objects, they make visible the dependency of global capital on everyday acts of mediation and the quiet labor involved in aligning divergent expectations. What circulates is not only capital but cultural legitimacy, which helps produce a moral landscape in which innovation becomes evidence of worth. From a business anthropology perspective, organizations that present themselves as technical or managerial support are also cultural and moral institutions. Recognizing the paradoxes embedded in these infrastructures, where openness coexists with standardization and gestures toward inclusion accompany persistent hierarchy, does not diminish the possibility of greater equity. Rather, it clarifies the situated work required to pursue it. For entrepreneurs, incubator staff, policymakers, and investors in Santiago and other global cities, the challenge is to translate differently and to create boundary objects that broaden, rather than narrow, the possibilities for economic life.

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