Future trends for innovative cities
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What do cities need to be thinking about to be innovative?

Around the world, urbanisation is playing an increasingly important role in what our societies look like.

As the size and significance of cities grow, they can become the sites of increasingly complicated social problems, as well as potential hubs for exploring their possible solutions. While every city is different and faces its own difficulties, what they all have in common is the need for innovative approaches to help solve the challenges we face today.

This collection of essays brings together nine leaders from around the world, and their thoughts on how cities can approach urban challenges and help improve the lives of their inhabitants. These leading thinkers on cities and innovation make up the Mayor of Seoul’s Social Innovation Global Advisory Committee. Established in 2016, the Committee’s expertise provides Mayor Park Won-soon with global perspectives on the challenges facing his city. Here, they share what Seoul can teach other cities, what it can learn and what different cities around the world can tell us about innovative ways to solve today’s problems.

“This publication was made possible with the support of the Seoul Metropolitan Government.”

“One of the reasons why I decided to run for Mayor was to pursue social innovation. Seoul has a population of 10 million, it’s a big metropolitan city and changing the lives of Seoul citizens is only possible not in front of a desk, but within the lives of the citizens. I am moving the Mayor’s office into areas with the highest concentration of needs. I will co-live with the citizens and gain insights through empathy. I will experience the daily commute and share food with local residents. I will co-create alternatives to change the lives of Seoul’s citizens.”

– Mayor Park Won-soon, Seoul Metropolitan Government
Seoul’s Social Innovation Global Advisory Committee

Ezio Manzini

Ezio Manzini is the Founder of the DESIS Network. He is a Distinguished Professor on Design for Social at the Elisava-Design School and Engineering, Barcelona; an Honorary Professor at the Politecnico di Milano; and a Guest Professor at Tongji University (Shanghai) and Jiangnan University (Wuxi).

Geoff Mulgan

Geoff Mulgan is Chief Executive of Nesta, the UK’s National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts. He was previously head of the UK government Strategy Unit, director of the Young Foundation and the founder director of think-tank Demos. He is a senior visiting scholar at Harvard and his most recent book is ‘Big Mind: how collective intelligence can change our world’.

Anil Gupta

Anil Gupta is a Visiting Professor at the Centre for Management in Agriculture, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad and IIT Bombay. He is the Founder of the Honey Bee Network, SRISTI, GIAN and National Innovation Foundation. He is the Coordinator of the Society for Research and Initiative for Sustainable Technologies and Institutions, a CSIR Bhatnagar Fellow and organizer of the ICCIG.

Louise Pulford

Louise Pulford is the Executive Director of SIX, a social innovation exchange built on mutual value, relationships and knowledge. Louise has been responsible for building SIX over the last 6 years. Under her leadership, SIX spun out of the Young Foundation in 2013. Louise has worked on social innovation with the European Commission since 2010.
Peter Ramsden
Peter Ramsden is the Managing Director of Freiss ltd, a niche consultancy focusing on social innovation, urban and local development. He is programme expert for the EU URBACT programme and works with the EU’s Urban Development Network, and OECD local programmes, as well as being a long time supporter of SIX.

Ada Wong
Ada Wong founded the Make A Difference (MaD) initiative, a platform to groom the next generation of innovative changemakers in Asia. She was also the Founder of the Hong Kong Institute of Contemporary Culture (HKICC) and, most recently, The Good Lab - a social innovation hub and do tank in Hong Kong.

Tim Draimin
Tim Draimin is Senior Advisor at the McConnell Foundation in Canada, which supports city building through its Cities For People program. McConnell is also a founding partner of Future Cities Canada, a new national city building network. Tim serves on the boards of Social Innovation Exchange (SIX), Centre for Social Innovation (CSI) and Green Economy Canada.

Gabriella Gómez-Mont
Gabriella Gómez-Mont is the Founder of Laboratorio para la Ciudad, the experimental arm / creative think tank of the Mexico City government, reporting to the Mayor. Gabriella is also a journalist, visual artist, a director of documentary films, as well as a creative advisor to several cities, universities and companies.

Sunit Shrestha
Sunit Shrestha is the Managing Director of ChangeFusion, which works with partners to develop social investment mechanisms. These include Taejai.com; a crowd giving platform that raised over 1.5m USD, and the BKIND mutual fund, the first socially responsible investment fund with built-in philanthropic sub-funds. Sunit is an Ashoka Fellow.
City-making projects have different social and political motivations and implications. That is, they can produce inequalities, segregation and commodification of the urban commons, or move in the opposite direction, reducing inequalities, creating a diversified and vibrant urban fabric. The projects moving in the first direction – that presently is the dominant one – are driven by the interests of who considers the city, in all its aspects, as a marketable good. The second direction is proposed by several cases of transformative social innovation. They are driven by social innovators who see the city as a complex living entity, made of people, communities and places, the existence of which is based on a mesh of collaborative projects.

As a matter of fact, in the past decades, bottom up initiatives have been paralleled by top-down ones and new coalitions have been created (between local administrations, active citizens, civil society associations, social and market-oriented enterprises, research centres and universities). These include new food networks (to create direct links between cities and the countryside); intelligent mobility systems (to promote public transport and innovative solutions); collaborative services for prevention and health care (to involve directly interested users in the solution), urban and regional development programmes (to enhance local economies and new forms of community);
and distributed power generation systems (to optimise the use of diffuse and renewable energies). They give us practical examples of how regenerative, sustainable city making processes should be. Looking at them, some guidelines (to orient new projects) and criteria (to evaluate existing ones) can be outlined. They are:

**Collaborating: producing results and social values**

Moving in this direction means to regenerate the city by developing collaborative projects. That is, by projects driven by collaboration between citizens, and between them and other social actors (as public administration, companies, non-profit enterprises, associations, universities). It implies different forms of collaborations (blending horizontal and vertical collaborations), different motivations (blending economic and cultural motivations), and different positions in the innovation trajectory (from initial activism to different forms of normality).

Collaborating (i.e. producing at the same time practical results and social value) gives life to unprecedented economic and organizational models. At the same time, and for the same reasons, collaborating is a strategy to build the power for systemic changes, and to produce and re-generate social commons.

**Bridging: connecting diversities**

Moving in this direction means to cultivate and connect diversities. That is, to develop projects capable to bridge elderly and young people; residents and migrants; rich and poor. These projects should also be capable of integrating working and living spaces (residences, schools, offices, factories and workshops, farming and gardening, commerce, entertainment, sport, and meeting spaces) creating more diverse and dynamic activities.

Bridging (i.e. connecting diversities) is an antidote to the ongoing trend towards gentrification, segregation and the creation of communication bubbles. And, positively, it is a way to improve the social and environmental resilience of the city.

**Commoning: weaving people and places**

Moving in this direction means creating spaces cared for by communities. That is, to produce “third spaces”, between the private and the public ones. It also means regenerating social commons, as mutual trust, empathy, collaboration and shared knowledge and expertise. All of them can be the result of renewed traditions, or of unprecedented collaborative projects.

Commoning (i.e. the process of building commons) is an antidote to the main trends of city commodification and marketization. It implies to keep in account the different nature of commons and of the commoning processes.

**Democratizing: supporting active participation**

Moving in this direction means to develop a project-centred democracy. That is, an environment where individuals and communities can best develop their life projects: an enabling ecosystem that is also a democratic ecosystem where citizens can take decisions and make them real.

Democratizing (i.e. the process of improving the participative ecosystem) is an antidote to the ongoing crisis of participative democracy (and of democracy in general). It implies a power shift towards citizens and communities.

In conclusion, in connecting different experiences of social innovation in the city, what appears is a new scenario: the Scenario of the Collaborative City. That is, the scenario of a city where, promoting and cultivating different forms of collaboration, collective intelligence thrives and becomes collective design capability.

To enhance this scenario, a virtuous circle has to be established between urban commons and collaborative services: more collaborative services generate the conditions for new urban commons where collaborative design capabilities spread creating, in turn, a favourable ground for a new generation of collaborative services to come to life. That, as it has been said, is the precondition for producing new commons. And so on.

To make this happen, of course, a favourable sociotechnical and normative environment must be established. Or better, the same city should be seen as a rich enabling ecosystem where this variety of mutually sustaining initiatives, of different natures and scales, have more probability to emerge and thrive.
The city as collective intelligence

Geoff Mulgan

We all roughly know how our brains work. But what would a city look like that could truly think and act? What if it could be fully aware of all of its citizens experiences; able to remember and create; and then to act and learn?

This might once have been a fantasy. But it is coming closer. Cities can see in new ways – with citizen generated data on everything from the prevalence of floods to the quality of food in restaurants. Cities can create in new ways, through open challenges that mobilise public creativity. And they can decide in new ways, as cities like Madrid and Barcelona have done with online platforms that let citizens propose policies and then deliberate.

Some of this is helped by technology. Our mobile phones collect data on a vast scale, and that’s now matched by sensors and the smart chips in our cars, buildings and trains. But the best examples combine machine intelligence with human intelligence: this is the promise of collective intelligence, and it has obvious relevance to a city like Seoul with millions of smart citizens, fantastic infrastructures and very capable institutions, from government to universities, NGOs to business.

Over the last few years, many experiments have shown how thousands of people can collaborate online analysing data or solving problems, and there’s been an explosion of new technologies to sense, analyse and predict. We can see some of the results in things like Wikipedia; the spread of citizen science in which millions of people help to spot new stars in the galaxy.
There are new business models like Duolingo, which mobilises volunteers to improve its service providing language teaching, and collective intelligence examples in health, where patients band together to design new technologies or share data.

I’m interested in how we can use these new kinds of collective intelligence to solve problems like climate change or disease, and am convinced that every organisation and every city can work more successfully if it taps into a bigger mind – mobilising more brains and computers to help it.

Doing that requires careful design, curation and orchestration. It’s not enough just to mobilise the crowd. Crowds are all too capable of being foolish, prejudiced and malignant. Nor is it enough just to hope that brilliant ideas will emerge naturally. Thought requires work – to observe, analyse, create, remember and judge and to avoid the many pitfalls of delusion and deliberate misinformation.

But the emerging field of collective intelligence now offers many ways for cities to organise themselves in new ways.

Take air quality as an example. A city using collective intelligence methods will bring together many different kinds of data to understand what’s happening to air, and the often complex patterns of particulates. Some of this will come from its own sensors, and some data can be generated by citizens. Artificial intelligence tools can then be trained to predict how it may change, for example because of a shift in the weather. The next stage then is to mobilise citizens and experts to investigate the options to improve air quality looking in detail at which roads have the worst levels or which buildings are emitting the most, and what changes would have most impact. And finally cities can open up the process of learning, seeing what’s working and what’s not.

In this way the city becomes more like a living brain – observing itself, and mobilising its own creativity to solve its problems. Labour markets are another example. We now have a chance to gather far more data than ever before on what jobs are available in a city and what skills they need; we can make predictions about which jobs are likely to grow and which will shrink; and we can use that data to create tools to help teenagers, job-seekers or adults make choices about their future skills and careers. Again, the city becomes more like a brain in this way, able to think and act more smartly.

So how is this different from artificial intelligence? Artificial intelligence is going through another boom, embedded in everyday things like mobile phones and achieving remarkable breakthroughs in medicine or games. But for most things that really matter we need human intelligence as well as AI, and an overreliance on algorithms alone can have horrible effects, whether in financial markets or in politics.

Although there’s huge investment in artificial intelligence there’s been much less investment in collective intelligence. That is one reason why we have also seen little progress in how intelligently our most important systems work – democracy and politics, business and the economy. You can see this in the most everyday aspect of collective intelligence – how we organise meetings, which ignores almost everything that’s known about how to make meetings effective and how they can make the most of the collective intelligence of the people in the room. You can see it in many political systems too, where leaderships are a lot less smart than the societies they claim to lead. Martin Luther King spoke of ‘guided missiles but misguided men’ and we are surrounded by institutions packed with individual intelligence that nevertheless often display collective stupidity.

Not all of this is new. Many of the examples of successful collective intelligence are quite old – like the emergence of an international community of scientists in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Oxford English Dictionary which mobilised tens of thousands of volunteers in the 19th century, or NASA’s Apollo programme, which at its height employed over half a million people in more than 20,000 organisations. But the tools at our disposal now are radically different – and more powerful than ever before.

It’s easy to be depressed by the many examples of collective stupidity around us. But I believe we should be optimistic that we’ll figure out how to make the smart machines we’ve created serve us well and that we could be on the cusp of a dramatic enhancement of our shared intelligence. That’s a pretty exciting prospect with fundamental implications for almost everything governments do, and it’s likely to be in cities like Seoul that the most important advances will come.
Inclusive cities of the future: creative commons, compassionate connectivity

Anil Gupta

Communities of thought, practice, and forecasting the future shape our individual aspirations and value system. If these communities spur the conversation about the future generation, forge rituals for remembering their share in our current consumption, they foster different kinds of lifestyle and institutions than when we ignore such conversations. Similarly, when communities invoke in us a duty to nurture habitats of birds, ants, squirrels and spiders for instance, in our life, we become responsible for nature, both within and without.

How do these communities emerge which spur, spawn and sustain the spirit of compassion, creativity and connectivity across spaces, sectors, skills, seasons and social groups? Whenever people come together around common parks, workspaces, playgrounds, open art installation spaces, flea markets, farmers markets, Sunday bazaars etc., they get in each other’s way, then they evolve rules of social and cultural engagement. That’s how different kinds of communities evolve.

When rural inhabitants migrate to the city, they bring their stories, culture, values and knowledge, but city administration seldom leverages that. I would like to discuss next how knowledge, technology, culture, values, and institutions can be evolved or shaped so that margins of a city don’t become slums but crucibles of creative crafts, frugal innovations and caring and sharing centers.

The rate of erosion of the knowledge of elders was never so high in the history of human
civilization, as it is now. How do we track, map, catalogue and revitalize it for contemporary and future strategies of coping with risk, climate change, and fluctuations and an increasing loss of self-identity? We can use the traditional knowledge of migrants as well as natives for developing sustainable, frugal and affordable solutions for the not-so-privileged people.

We can create connections between grassroots knowledge banks and the formal scientific and technological institutions to create sustainable, frugal and inclusive products and services, a la the work of the Honey Bee Network for over 30 years. SRISTI’s natural product lab has tried to do this over the last 25 years, and GIAN has developed a platform over the last 20 years to reduce ex ante and ex post transaction costs of innovators, entrepreneurs and investors in urban and rural areas.

Special policies and institutional arrangements must be created by city councils to pursue the following knowledge, spatial, skill, and sectoral commons:

a. Awards and prizes can be announced for sharing knowledge, innovations, and practices in open source which enrich community life, help poor people get access to various services and products, and encourage social innovations and enterprises. The database of such ideas will encourage formal and informal institutions to create many more open source knowledge commons. This may also target migrants’ communities to share their knowledge and ideas for common good.

b. Challenge awards for solving unmet social urban needs: how to cool a top floor room in summer without using an air conditioner, for instance; how to segregate, recycle, repurpose and rejuvenate waste so that sanitation and livelihoods are connected in a circular economy space.

c. How do we make urban common space attractive for artists to showcase their art, installations, sculptures and all other creative forms to share with society? Such spaces are needed all over the city. Art and culture define the civility of a society. Unless we provide free, open and engaging spaces for such displays and if possible stable installations, how will dialogue about dissent, diversity and democracy take place?

d. Community food kitchen labs (see GIAN, 2016 at the Sattvik-Tradition food festival), where elders can come and share with the younger generation about traditional and organic food and how to keep families happy and healthy. City councils can encourage Sattvik festivals to connect urban communities with rural organic and traditional food communities.

e. Educational inequality is a very serious discriminator among children and youth in many urban communities around the world. Open source content, reading and study rooms for children from families which can’t provide a peaceful place for children to study. Public libraries with software, apps collections, mobile phones, tablets on hire, besides books are needed on an unprecedented scale. This will help trigger entrepreneurship and overcome job inequalities.

f. Children’s creativity has not been given enough attention. Children are often treated as a sink of advice and assistance rather than a source of new ideas. Children creativity workshops and idea contests during shodhyatras - learning walks - have a great potential of molding the mind and hearts of future leaders of our society, by connecting them to society and nature.

g. Mobile libraries, wi-fi hotspots in common co-working spaces, playgrounds, gardens, and walking stretches, can overcome some income and opportunity inequalities.

h. Risk funds/micro venture funds to help citizens convert their ideas about overcoming problems of disadvantaged communities are needed to encourage social innovations and entrepreneurship.

There can be many more ways in which we can revitalize cities and help shape the future of frugal and compassionate spaces for fulfilling the aspirations of common people. The key driver is revitalizing urban commons.
Why getting out of City Hall really matters

Louise Pulford

There are very few Mayors around the world that would move into a shack with no air conditioning in the middle of a particularly hot summer, so that he can experience how other people live. Mayor Park Won-soon is an exception. And this is one of the many reasons that Seoul city excites me.

By spending a month in Samyang-dong, a dilapidated neighbourhood on the northern fringes of Seoul, Mayor Park was able to learn first-hand about the difficulties that Seoul’s poorer residents face. Whilst mainstream media has referred to this as a ‘stunt’, for those of us who work in social innovation, it is not unusual to put yourself in the shoes of others, to try to understand and develop empathy for the people we are designing services for. Before becoming Mayor of Seoul, Mr Park was an activist and innovator, so trying to develop a deep understanding of the citizens he has been elected to serve may not feel unusual, or like a stunt to him. Mayor Park, the social innovation Mayor, was simply practicing what he preaches.

Whilst learning first hand is not unusual to a social innovator, what is unusual is that the Mayor took this action. For cities to really be innovative, this should not be unusual. Everyone in a city should be getting out of the office, and getting closer to practice. This is not to say that civil servants aren’t doing good and important work. This also applies to policy makers and the civil servants in City Halls around the world, as much as it does to anyone in a big bureaucratic organisation with a public purpose.
There are several ways to recreate the Mayor’s actions, for civil servants to get out of the office and practice social innovation, without locating 50,000 of them to live in a shack for a month.

Embracing social innovation doesn’t just mean setting up 20 social innovation labs, or developing dedicated innovation teams - it requires a deeper cultural change across an organisation. Asking teams to do social innovation means we are asking people to be inquisitive, agile, reflective, and to use new tools and technologies. In the context of a city administration, we are asking civil servants to be comfortable with uncertainty, and to support projects where the results are unpredictable. We may also be asking people to stop doing some things, and to look at issues in a new way.

Part of the challenge of this work is developing the right skills. Nesta’s States of Change is one example of a training programme building innovation skills. The programme supports public servants to adopt innovation mindsets and habits that help them become more effective change agents, and to sustain an innovation culture in government. But building basic capabilities and skills is only part of the challenge. These skills need to be put into practice. They are only useful if they are refined through new experiences, new conversations and new perspectives. We must find opportunities to get civil servants out of the office and put their skills into practice, then provide support for reflection, learning and adaptation.

One municipality, Amersfoort, in the Netherlands has been supporting its civil servants to get closer to practice by doing their jobs outside, on the ground, in the city and close to citizens, rather than remaining at their desk. They call themselves ‘free range civil servants’.

And if you can’t become a ‘street soldier’, as the Amersfoort civil servants also call themselves, city governments can also partner with other institutions to increase their capacity and impact. Universities are one resource that are often overlooked. Universities can provide deep insights on local challenges, use students to design new solutions, be testbeds for new approaches, and they can provide space and technology resources. At SIX, we have been working with a group of universities in Latin America and South East Asia who see themselves as more than academic ivory towers, and are beginning to recognise themselves as part of the social fabric of the city.

Cities should also use other cities more effectively. Many cities are part of networks, but it is often not much more than a branding exercise. True exchange between civil servants in cities, should occur both within countries but also transnationally. The European Commission funded URBACT programme is one of the best, most established transnational city exchange programmes. Running for 15 years, URBACT enables cities to work together and develop integrated solutions to common urban challenges, by networking, learning from one another’s experiences, drawing lessons and identifying good practices to improve urban policies. The programmes involve practitioners, city managers, elected representatives and stakeholders from other public agencies, the private sector and civil society.

Exchanges between civil servants globally is also a way to get civil servants closer to practice. Cities often participate in learning visits or secondments to other countries, but they rarely focus on social innovation, and they are rarely directly connected to their jobs or current challenges. These kinds of exchange are only effective when those who participate are given enough space to reflect on the experience, and when the learning is embedded into their organisations when they return.

We are living in great times of change. The challenges facing society are increasing in scale and complexity, and traditional institutions, from banks to universities, to INGOs have started to review their roles and the way they are organised. At the same time, citizens are equipped with tools to enhance their power, and the way they organise themselves. Our cities, and the institutions that govern them need to respond. Rethinking the role of public servants, collaborating internationally, and getting them out of the office, is one small way to do that.
Snakes and ladders in participation

Peter Ramsden

It is half a century since Sherry Arnstein published her influential paper in which she posited a linear model of citizen participation in the form of a ladder. The ladder of participation starts at the bottom rung with manipulation and climbs through eight steps to citizen control. Arnstein grouped the rungs in three categories, going from non-participation through tokenism to citizen power (see figure 1 below).

Arnstein was writing about the USA’s federal Model Cities initiative – part of President Johnson’s Great Society – in which 150 cities were supported to regenerate deprived, mostly black neighbourhoods. The programme called for ‘maximum feasible participation’ of the poor. Arnstein was an experienced HUD policy maker who had seen tokenism in action on numerous advisory committees and panels. Her central argument in the paper is that real participation is ultimately about levels of citizen control. In modern parlance this means co-design, coproduction and co-management (aka co-everything).

Participation is also about more than partnership. Partnerships contain relevant departments and agencies in horizontal and vertical chains, but bring in relatively few civil society organisations and even fewer directly involve citizens themselves. Participation is about how you engage not just with the willing, but with people who are closest to the problems of the area.

Perhaps not surprisingly it continues to be in deprived neighbourhoods that participation is most often backed by local government. In these areas the city is either only just managing or in the worst case has lost control. At the limit,
crime, drugs and riots have been the trigger for making cities think about how to engage the citizens to deal with the problems.

Seoul Metropolitan Government is now looking at how it can extend long-standing examples in a few mostly deprived neighbourhoods to bring the city’s management closer to the citizen.

In Europe, the most respected and long standing approaches to deprived neighbourhoods have been in cities like Berlin. There, the city has experimented for 20 years with a form of neighbourhood budgeting in 34 neighbourhoods defined by rich sets of indicators available at granular level. More than half of the districts are in inner city neighbourhoods, which play host to significant numbers of migrants from Turkey and other Mediterranean countries. The rest focus on large peripheral system-built housing estates which are less multi-ethnic but have specific problems of poverty, isolation and lack of cohesion. Each area has a neighbourhood council created by an informal system of local voting and by a minority of co-options of local actors, such as junior school headteachers and social workers. Each year calls for projects are organised and those living and working in the neighbourhood can respond. Small projects can be decided by the local committee, larger ones have more oversight from the local districts and Berlin senate. A wide range of projects are supported, from pocket parks and small environmental works, to support for projects on gender violence and for job creation. Despite running for more than 20 years and in that time spending more than 50m USD, the budget has never exceeded 1% of Berlin’s total spending. The additional governance arrangements and finance only apply in these neighbourhoods which make up about a third of the total city population.

Since 2010, Lisbon has developed a programme called BIP/ZIP aimed at 67 of its most deprived areas. Each year organisations from these areas are invited to bid for resources to back a project with up to 50k EUR (60K USD) in an annual edition. Every bid must be from a minimum of two organisations, but this allows informal associations to partner with more established bodies. BIP/ZIP has now been through eight editions and the city has found that as well as the direct benefits of the approximately 130 projects that are funded across the city each year, the programme brings decision makers closer to the citizens. Each project must be completed in 12 months and have a legacy for a further 12 months. When more intensive urban regeneration programmes are being developed, the city helps local people to establish GABIPs which are local neighbourhood councils, which in turn influence the way that larger funds are spent. Areas such as Mouraria, a historic dense neighbourhood near to the centre have been transformed over the past decade through a combination of a range of initiatives at local level.

There are many more examples and also a spread from the Northern countries of the EU (e.g. Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, France and UK) to examples in Southern Europe, and to a lesser extent in the newer members of the EU from Central and Eastern Europe. Programmes such as the EU’s Urban Innovative Actions are incentivising participative approaches by offering grants of up to 5m EUR to about 20 cities each year, which produce an innovative idea which is nearly always based on deep forms of participation. Athens is a good example with a refugee support project linked to its Bloomberg backed participation platform Synathina.

The tools are also improving, so that methods of working with and in communities have come on rapidly since the 1960s. These methods are increasingly well documented and shared through numerous case studies and websites. However, in many countries both in Europe and elsewhere, deeper forms of participation are still the exception rather than the rule. When the city wants to do major redevelopments of deprived neighbourhoods, and especially when it backs market based gentrification as the solution to the problems local communities face; money talks and real participation goes out of the window. From Guangjhou to London there are examples not of ladders but of snakes. Examples of what Ivan Tosics has called ‘rough urban regeneration’ in which the dispersal of local communities is orchestrated by developers and local government to make way for gentrification and gleaming towers. In these situations, the community is once again a small voice. Equalising the power of financial investors and local communities requires that our attitude to land values and community interests are reframed. It requires that citizens of a neighbourhood or housing estate have legal rights to participate. Only when cities ensure that community interests are treated seriously and equally will we get near the top of Sherry Arnstein’s ladder.
Social Labs: how cities facilitate and enable citizens to co-create and co-design innovations

Ada Wong

Mr Park Won-soon is Asia’s first social innovation Mayor. In his role as Mayor, he has introduced social innovation policies to facilitate social change, bringing government closer to citizens through collaborative governance. In the last few years I have seen how the Seoul Metropolitan Government became facilitator and catalyst, giving the people of Seoul opportunities to share their views (as in participatory budgeting) and enabling social innovations to be tested (as in allowing government car parks for sharing economy and car share initiatives).

Short of having a visionary innovator as Mayor, how might cities in Asia facilitate its citizens to participate and influence policy making? Could a small innovation that originates from people in the community become city-wide policy? Are there ways to build trust between government and civil society?

That was the starting point of my enthusiasm towards the idea of social labs. Social Labs are laboratories where one experiments with finding small, local solutions to (big) social problems. There are all kinds of social labs in the global landscape. Some call themselves design labs, change labs, digital labs or living labs, but whatever they are called, they are incubators for new solutions.

In 2016, the non-profit Make A Difference (MaD) Institute decided to form a community-driven public sector innovation lab with a grant from the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust. Three years later, we have knocked on the doors of three government departments
and completed three labs (on innovations for better public libraries, parks and public space, and more walkable and healthier streets), and preparing for the fourth one (on modernization of markets). These Social Labs are anchored in neighbourhoods with real people, real stories and real issues.

At each Social Lab, the lab team works with citizens closely to find out where challenges lie and experiment with alternative scenarios, and to come up with services and policy recommendations. As the MaD Social Lab is not steered from within government, insights gained and recommendations need more advocacy before adoption. On the other hand, the MaD Social Lab has been more successful as a platform for citizen-government collaborations where small scale prototypes could be experimented on. While social labs around the world might have more immediate outcomes and policy change, the MaD Social Lab could be seen as a process innovator, enabling citizens to co-create and co-design new services and policies with government to respond to different challenges.

As a prototype before the launch of the MaD Social Lab, we experimented with a one-week “Lab Sprint” in 2015 with Kennisland, an Amsterdam-based think-and-do-tank which runs social labs in the Netherlands, as our lab partner. We explored issues faced by the homeless and elderly communities in a grassroots community in Hong Kong. We openly recruited our lab team of 30+ young people and the feedback was overwhelming - it was over-subscribed within a few days by young people from diverse backgrounds, all eager for new ways to contribute and be engaged. During the one-week Lab Sprint, lab team members worked day and night, made interesting discoveries and prototyped workable community initiatives. We felt there was thirst for platforms that encourage participation and empathy.

Our next surprise was the enthusiasm of participating civil servants during the three Social Labs. I witnessed how the social lab experience gradually changed them from being reluctant team members (as they were being identified by their seniors to join the Social Lab) to appreciating the story collection and prototyping process of a social lab. One senior librarian remarked, “I have been working in libraries for a long time, and at work I talk directly with the public all the time. But those communications tend to be formal and direct, with many complaints. In contrast, Social Lab collects in-depth stories. I got to sit and talk with neighbourhood folks, and take the initiative to understand their inner thoughts and feelings about the library. That was very different from our usual form of engaging with readers.”

Most social labs, including ours, prioritize people’s stories over dry statistical data to better sense the urgency for action and reinstate an empathetic dimension to policy-making. We see this as a big takeaway for civil servants to see beyond data.

Public sector innovation is often seen as daunting and not easy to sustain. Social labs offer one way of overcoming the innovation barrier as they provide a ‘safe space’ for experimentation and for failure. This safe environment is a co-created hybrid space, so when the prototypes did not work well, there is also a safe distance between the failed experiment and the relevant government office.

In the short space here, I would not be able to tell you more about the methodologies of the MaD Social Lab. Rather, I would like to reiterate that innovative cities need innovative ways for sustainable collaborative governance, like what Mayor Park has done for Seoul. Social labs are by nature pro-innovation; they are also temporary and will dissolve after a short lab period. Perhaps it is the limited time and space on this platform that has enabled more trust to develop, for citizens and civil servants to work, learn and experiment together.
The 21st century heralds the arrival of cities. For the first time they are home to over half the world’s population. By 2050 it is estimated that 70% of the world’s population will be city-dwellers. Cities are where it is at.

The good news is that cities unlock the ability to deploy human and physical capital in ways in which a city’s positive attributes scale superlinearly, according to Geoffrey West.

The bad news is that urban ills also scale; think persistent inequality, mental illness, unsustainable consumption patterns or social isolation.

Since cities are now home to the bulk of the planet’s wicked problems, we need to dramatically grow their social innovation prowess. In my view, the biggest gap on cities’ innovation horizon is the lack of dedicated on-ramps for multi-stakeholder solutions platforms.

Many cities boast an enviable innovation track record in supporting and accelerating the development and scaling of individual innovations, whether technological, business or social. We all know examples of cities offering individual entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs new funding programs, educational accelerators, and hands-on innovation incubators.

Where cities have stalled is with the creation and support for dedicated on-ramps for convening key actors together from civil society, business, universities and the public sector to enable the startup of new collaborations collectively addressing complex local challenges. Tough problems eclipse the ability of individual organizations and siloed sectors to solve them. Increasingly we require the capabilities, assets, collective intelligence and collaborative zeal from many disciplines, people and organizations that need to come together in creative ways to generate scaled social impact. This is described variously as collective impact, big teaming, or collaborative boundary-spanning problem solving. It is tough to knit these collaborations together and dedicated on-ramps doing the convening and incubation are essential ecosystem assets.

Our goal over the next decade is to ensure that every city boasts an ecosystem of solutions curators and backbones that enable multi-sector, multi-stakeholder collaborations deploying targeted problem solving initiatives.

Next for city innovation: creating backbones for enabling multi-stakeholder solutions

Tim Draimin
This shift is part of a larger change in local and national innovation systems ensuring societal resources are aligned around solving big societal challenges.

Toronto, my hometown, is privileged to have had local civic leaders identify this need nearly two decades ago. This led to the creation of a solutions incubator, CivicAction. With a small staff of about 15 people and an annual budget of C$1.7 million, CivicAction runs a series of programs supporting a four-year cycle running from challenge identification through to building scaled solutions. Every four years CivicAction re-loads the process by convening a major summit with about 1,000 citybuilders, drawn from across all sectors: community, business, academic, local-regional-national government, the arts, etc.

Each summit’s goal is to develop an action plan to tackle the priority issues meeting 5 criteria:

- an intractable or emerging challenge that would get worse if not addressed;
- requiring a multi-sectoral, collaborative approach;
- strong potential for high impact;
- lacking any other appropriate home to address them;
- ability to capture the passion and energy of the leadership to take them up.

Since its inception CivicAction has incubated numerous successful initiatives, such as:

The Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council: TRIEC takes on the challenge of an immigrant-receiving city to help immigrants connect to employment that fully leverages their skills and talents;

The Strong Neighbourhoods Taskforce: it took a “place-based” approach to policy recommendations tackling neighbourhood decline and concentrated poverty in the inner suburbs that led to over 1,200 initiatives over 6 years across 13 priority neighbourhoods;

MindsMatter: a new program providing an online assessment tool designed to help companies assess their organizational abilities to support their people’s mental health and how to better support them;

Race to Reduce, one of the largest regional energy challenges in the world, engaged owners and tenants of commercial properties across Toronto, responsible for 20% of the region’s carbon emissions, to increase energy efficiency over 4 years achieving a 12% reduction of GHGs.

As well as its many discrete projects, programs and spun-out organizations, CivicAction strengthens a social impact solutions culture in Toronto, harkening back to a frontier “barn-raising” spirit that relies on cross-sector collaboration. CivicAction has become a leadership pipeline for newly elected officials. Both the current Mayor and the province’s Minister of Environment are former Chairs of CivicAction.

CivicAction is but one of many successful models for growing the global solutions ecosystem. Many such platforms are codifying and open-source-sharing their “social technology” for building high impact collaborations. Here are a few of the global leaders that we can learn from:

- Global Development Incubator, which incubates partnerships to spark collective change in the international development sector, published a guide entitled More than the Sum of its Parts: Making Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives Work;
- The consultancy FSG, in partnership with others, has created the knowledge hub The Collective Impact Forum sharing best practices and lessons learned;
- Living Cities is a US city network working with cross-sector leaders building a new urban practice dramatically improving the economic well-being of low-income people.

Cities need to think about architectural innovation: how do they proactively design, set-up and combine the missing features of their innovation ecosystems in order to catalyze big teams solving problems originating between the silos? A short term priority is supporting how cities, their allies and partners build the critical on-ramp for unlocking their communities’ collective intelligence to solve their most complex challenges.
There is a palpable tension between the world that we have been handed over and the world to come: a battle between protecting the status quo and the realization that we can no longer let things go on as they are. In this state of affairs, it becomes important to remember that our urban futures are not only to be predicted, but to be created, to be rehearsed. So rather than trying to protect things as they are it is best to reimagine them as they could be.

That is why we need cities for the imagination. Cities rehearsing out loud what they could become.

The creative capacity of a society is perhaps one of it’s most intangible and undervalued assets. Much has been spoken about “creative cities” but little has been done to collectively and systemically augment, articulate and unleash this creative ethos into the city itself, unbound from the spheres of arts, culture, academia, business; reaching other social micro-territories, beyond the usual suspects. But cities in and of themselves can and should function as the great traveling surfaces for ideas, provoke new possibilities and become a prompt for experimentation and for heterotopias to be seeded, in the form of social R&D, and as an inherent part of their urban DNA... Instead of this homogeneous “cityness” we have been generating, still under the hypnotic spell of modernist values. So how can we rethink the role of social and political inventiveness for our urban futures? Can we reframe the role of both government and citizens under this context, and come up with new social articulations - beyond even deliberative and direct democracy, and into creative governance? Could we possibly come up with a league of cities for the imagination?

These are some of the provocations that have kept me up at night for the last five years heading Laboratorio para la Ciudad: the experimental arm of the Mexico City
government, reporting to the Mayor. The Lab is a place to reflect about all things city and to explore other social scripts and urban futures for the largest megalopolis in the western hemisphere, working across diverse areas, such as culture, mobility, governance, civic tech, public space, spatial justice etc. In addition, the Lab searches to create links between civil society and government, constantly shifting shape to accommodate multidisciplinary collaborations, insisting on the importance of political and public imagination in the execution of its experiments. And hence highlighting certain dynamics of humanities, cultural and artistic practices, at their constant encounter with other fields of knowledge. Which is why at the Lab we have artists working hand in hand with political scientists, urban geographers, architects, designers, internationalists, writers, activists, lawyers.

Why bring back the artists and creatives deep into the heart of government and policy? Not everything is about efficiency, productivity, velocity. Evolving and complex realities entail the need for a blending of unconventional and multidisciplinary and hybrid practices that can both take into account the objective realities of our cities, as well as the subjective way we relate to everything around us; how we make individual and collective meaning. Experimental practices are understanding that we need better ways of making other social and urban realities come to life.

Experimenting cities. Cities where the place of politics is to help fuel collective visions full of vitality and to continuously replenish the urban commons; where governments also have the capacity to identify and articulate social energy with political will and resources. Moving even beyond representative democracy and into creative governance - where the place of citizen participation can be more about helping create the cities and social realities that we want. The ultimate right to the city: a place to be collectively imagined and brought to life. New urban typologies, new forms of citizenship, new social practices.

There is an even larger conversation to be had: the underlying construct of society from which all else stems must also be rethought. Rampant neoliberal agendas have shown its ugly and ungenerous edges. The need for new models and visions is pressing. But we cannot be caught in the urgency of the present. We must risk, experiment, make cities not only for the human body but for the human imagination.
How can a city empower its youth to create their own global future? Lessons from Seoul

Sunit Shrestha

Seoul city has inspired the world with its collective cultural geniuses, from K-POP and K-Drama to the recent Candlelight Revolution that gave the world a beacon of hope in an ever darkening age of global democratic uncertainty.

Now it has a chance to lead the world in another area, a movement of how young people could create a new and desirable social economic future globally. A future where social and economic benefits are not a trade-off but rather self-reinforcing each other, a world where social innovations are not bounded by national borders but driven by a strong sense of global citizenship. This is not a far away dream but already an emerging reality in Seoul, with its strong social economy ecosystem, particularly in social enterprises and their incubators, accelerators and social investors.

The city can become a place where young people can create their own desirable global futures, by celebrating the success cases of change makers and social entrepreneurs. This will encourage and inspire them to take risks in pursuing their entrepreneurial path. Then, connecting them to the global impact community, from social innovators to impact investors, allows them to learn and imagine a vision with the reach and support of the global community.

Hong Kong, through its multi-stakeholder partnerships, has been organising the Asia Social Innovation Award annually as well as the MaD (Make a Difference) conference, exposing its young change makers to international inspirations and opportunities. The Taiwanese government, in collaboration with social enterprise ecosystem builders, organised city-level youth-focused events that compliment well with private-led social enterprise development initiatives. As a result of this, a large group of aspiring social entrepreneurs are connected with both the regional and the global social entrepreneurship scene. Taichung
city government went even further to provide the facility to host and support a global NPO organisation that want to move their regional headquarters into Taiwan.

Seoul has done many similar initiatives in the past. As a foreign observer who has been to Seoul more than twenty times over many years, most of my trips are spent with social entrepreneurs and ecosystem players. I believe it is beyond reasonable doubt that the city has surpassed all other Asian cities in making a new form of social economy a reality for its citizens. Mayor Park Won-soon’s policies on social economy and youth participation have provided a base for the social entrepreneurship ecosystem to grow successfully in Seoul city. From the Social Innovation Park, that converted government space to become a hub for social innovators, to Blockchain-based Social Impact Bond initiatives, as well as multiple support programs for young social entrepreneurs. Policies such as these have transformed Seoul into one of the most social entrepreneurship-friendly cities in the world.

On the private front, we are seeing an emergence of youthful social entrepreneurs creating a collective of radically different futures that could also inspire the world. From the Terreno Spanish Restaurant, under Oyori Asia, that trains and supports migrant and disadvantaged people and also happens to be on the Michelin Guide, to the massively popular Marymond that creates lifestyle products such as phone cases, notebooks and accessories with a social justice concept. Treeplanet creates mobile games and runs a crowdfunding platform looking to plant half a million trees in over 10 countries. We are witnessing growing supporters with unique models such as HEYGROUN, a wholesome building that provides shared office and event spaces for dozens of social entrepreneurs with linkages to various social enterprise shops around nearby locations. D-Well provides co-living, co-housing space for social entrepreneurs. Crevisse Partners and its supported social ventures create in-house talent ecosystems, where team members with different specialisations are shared among multiple social ventures in order to effectively grow their social ventures as a group.

Many are beginning to take Seoul’s social innovations to the world. Oyori Asia has expanded its social ventures to Nepal, setting up multiple cafes successfully with similar models of training and providing job opportunities to disadvantaged youth. Marymond is exploring international opportunities. Crevisse Partners and MYSC, a social innovation development company, are partnering with KOICA and local incubators in Indonesia and Vietnam to accelerate social enterprises in those ASEAN countries. The D-Well co-living model is also being replicated in Las Vegas in the United States. Cdot, a social innovation connecting and convening company, with a few partners, are bringing to Seoul a famous Vietnamese social enterprise “KOTO” that trains disadvantaged youth for job opportunities. ChangeFusion, a social enterprise support organisation from Thailand, is exploring opportunities to bring HEYGROUN and other innovative Korean social enterprises to Thailand.

Suddenly Seoul is rapidly becoming a new “hub of social entrepreneurship (SE)” with linkages to the whole world. Perhaps, after K-POP and K-DRAMA comes “K-SE”.

So what can Seoul city do to capitalise on this emerging movement of young change makers linking Seoul with the desirable global future?

It could celebrate, connect, facilitate and support these cross-border youthful social entrepreneurs and intermediaries that are already working on this. Perhaps it could run a program that explores systematically cross-border social innovation/social enterprise opportunities, that could put Seoul as a hub for this new wave of Asian-led social entrepreneurship. This could be done by inviting successful Seoul-based social entrepreneurs and intermediaries to share their work with the rest of the world. This would help develop credible cross-border impact scaling plans, and find them local partners in different countries. Similarly, the city can also screen, invite, connect and support social entrepreneurs who want to expand their impact to South Korea and host them in Seoul. We are seeing such approaches in New Zealand by the Edmund Hillary Fellowship, which invites international social entrepreneurs that ‘want to change from down under’ and even provides them with a ‘global impact visa’. There is already a strong link between Seoul’s social entrepreneurship ecosystem and its counterparts across Asia, especially in ASEAN countries. The city could start with capitalising on this initial linkage.

By capitalising on these initiatives, one day these cross-border youthful social entrepreneurs can change the world, with Seoul as their global hub.