

CENTRE FOR LONDON

Open Places: Innovation and the Public Realm

**Seminar Summary
17 – 18 October 2017**

**Victoria Pinoncely,
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On 17 and 18 October 2017, Centre for London held a seminar on behalf of the Transatlantic Innovation District Partnership with The Brookings Institution. It brought together experts on innovation and public spaces to develop a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities that the open innovation economy presents to cities.

This write up summarises the main themes, case studies and issues discussed over the two days.

What fosters innovation in places?

First, seminar presentations considered the factors driving innovation in different places. Julie Wagner, Nonresident Senior Fellow from The Brookings Institution presented research on an emerging geography of innovation occurring in most global regions: innovation districts. Its emergence comes from changing economic, demographic and cultural forces, including the extent to which the process of innovation is an increasingly collaborative process. She particularly emphasized a process she described as “convergence,” where disparate sectors and disciplines are now coming together as means to innovate—a process that is particularly pronounced in innovation districts. The innovation ecosystem of innovation districts are place-centered, unlike most innovation ecosystems described globally, which is the intersection of physical assets, networking assets and economic assets. Economic assets include anchor institutions, such as universities, companies, and start-ups. Physical assets include public transportation, a walkable street grid, and quality (and activated) public spaces. Networking assets include relationships between like and unlike-minded people—both of which are critical to idea generation. Brookings is working with cities globally to help them advance their starting assets into such an ecosystem. One observation is the need for innovation districts to advance their work across various scales: the district scale, the nodal scale (e.g., one-two block radius, and the building scale). She highlighted the power at the nodal scale, where a growing number of innovation districts are finding particular success. The rise of innovation districts is raising a number of issues for cities and the people that live there: how to grow innovation in ways that are meaningfully inclusive and how to grow and innovation community while retaining affordability for a range of actors/uses.

Tarek Virani from Queen Mary University of London outlined how universities are driving innovation by challenging tradition and creating “third spaces” operating between government, industry, research, markets, neighbourhoods, and cities. Simon Pitkeathley from Camden Town Unlimited, a Business Improvement District in London, suggested that placemakers need to support SMEs within innovation districts, as they currently have the unfulfilled potential to innovate.

Nate Storing from Project for Public Spaces – who are working with Brookings on innovation districts - delivered a presentation on Jane Jacobs, innovation and urbanism. Jacobs coined many terms, including the idea of a “sidewalk ballet” referring to the mixture of uses and people in public spaces and the way these change at different times of day. Building on this, the lesson from Jacobs is the idea that “human capital accumulation is a social activity, involving groups of people in a way that has no counterpart in the accumulation of physical capital”, as summarised by Robert E. Lucas, an American economist and Nobel Prize winner.

To Storrington, one problem is that most of the data on innovation doesn't capture stories at the micro-scale. For example small enterprises are not bringing advanced technology or patterns, but ingenuity and a new edge in their markets, which could be imitated by others. The best way to understand these small-scale innovators is through ethnography and interviews. Responding, Wagner suggested that we need both top down understanding and analysis, as well as more organically-focused work on the ground.

Max Nathan from the University of Birmingham presented on the theory of economic geography of cities. Alfred Marshall stated as early as 1890 that colocation is important to help us learn from one another. Cities have been considered as productivity machines and sharing, matching, learning economies are increasingly important for cities like London. The paradox of cities however is that connections are becoming more valuable as the cost of long-distance connections falls. Clusters are not a new idea although there have been important extensions to theory recently, for instance on the role of universities and the path dependence of clusters. To support new innovation spaces, we may have to develop intensive packages of support on top of colocation, and understand more about how incubators and accelerator models work and for whom. There is a role for policy in addressing market failures in both cities and clusters, as well as ownership, control and access challenges to tackle, both for urban public spaces and new flexible workspaces in cities.

Oxford Road Partnership, Manchester

Claire Lowe presented the Oxford Road Partnership in Manchester. This was one of the first partnerships of its type in the UK and presents a unique colocation of assets, bringing together two universities, the Manchester Science Partnerships (a science park operator), cultural venues, and the university hospitals. It generates around 20 per cent of the city's economic output, employs over 70,000 people, hosts 70,000 students, and now has enterprise zone status.

Knowledge Quarter, London

Jodie Eastwood introduced the Knowledge Quarter, based around King's Cross, which brings together a diverse range of institutions (from 35 partners in 2014 to 88 partners in 2017) with a vision to create a world-class knowledge and business hub for the 21st century. The creation and sharing of knowledge is at the heart of what the Knowledge Quarter does, but it also focuses on community engagement, advocacy and communications, and sustainability and the environment. Activities towards this include a knowledge bank online platform, community walks, and a public realm audit and charrette. A key characteristic of the Knowledge Quarter is its density – all institutions are within a one mile radius.

The George Town experience

Hamdan Majeed from ThinkCity Penang presented on George Town in Penang, Malaysia. It used to be a global manufacturing hub and is now a place of innovation. Majeed suggested that such places were becoming increasingly important, as competition now takes place between cities rather than nations, and people choose their cities, rather than their jobs.

Innovation and the built environment

Further presentations brought to light how some built environment characteristics can encourage innovation. Future Cities Catapult, who hosted the seminar, has a mission to advance urban innovation, to grow business and to make cities better. Scott Cain, their Chief Business Officer, outlined that places that enable innovation tend to be open and permeable, with period buildings, a good public realm and ease of connection. Future Cities Catapult are also looking at how digital innovation, in return, can make planning more inclusive and speed up decision-making processes on quality of place.

However, there is still a lack of empirical research on the relationship between the provision and design of public open space and innovation. Darryl Chen from Hawkins\Brown presented research that developed a typology of innovation districts, building on a study of factors including spatial integration of the site within surroundings and concentration of knowledge economy workers on seven sites in London. For instance, the “Promenade of Light” near Old Street roundabout is a more organic space that pre-existed tech innovations with varied uses and interaction within the neighbourhood, while Pancras Square and Sheldon Square are more recent, intentionally designed spaces surrounded by dense developments. Here East, in East London, used branding to assert its position as an innovation centre, which can compensate for locational disadvantage or spatial insularity.

Publica’s work on ground floor land use in 75 neighbourhoods, presented by Lucy Musgrave, highlighted the variety of land uses in London. Publica did work for West End Partnership on renovating Hanover Square, which has been dominated by traffic, with wide carriageways, low quality pedestrian space and a general lack of a coherent public realm. Publica’s approach aims to reconfigure the gardens in the centre of the square, and the public realm around it. This will help to ensure that the space can accommodate the large increase in pedestrian movement expected with the opening of the Crossrail station, and deliver better physical and visual connections between the square and its surrounding environment.

Alan Penn from The Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment at University College London also demonstrated how spatial layout drives communication and innovation at work. London is the knowledge capital of the world and is a world leader in both the number of academic publications, as well as the number of collaborative publications. At a larger scale, the spatial configuration of a city is correlated with movement. Opening up the central Trafalgar Square staircase brought local people and tourists together.

But Trafalgar Square, which was built as an open public square, is an exception, as most London squares emerged as garden squares, destined for private enjoyment. London isn't a city of public squares, like Paris, Madrid or Rome. Quoting a UN Habitat report that looked at streets as public spaces and drivers of urban prosperity, Matthew Carmona from The Bartlett showed that high streets capture the dynamism, variety, and contrasts of cities, but are largely ignored in academic literature. While some high streets thrive, others seem to suffer and UCL undertook a London-wide study to develop a better understanding and insight into how high streets function. The study found that London's high streets bind the city together and don't just include retail uses, but also office and industrial uses, especially in their immediate hinterland. They include many small businesses that innovate, employ local people and have untapped potential. Mayoral investment in high streets (£70 million) has been negligible compared to private sector investment in shopping centres at Westfield (£11.6 billion) and One New Change (£500 million). Carmona said a holistic view is needed to prioritise investment.

Urban design and innovation in Barcelona

Mar Santamaria-Varas from Barcelona Tech introduced research on geographies of innovation in the metropolitan area of Barcelona, which aimed to determine which urban indicators help develop the innovation economy in the region and why innovative activity flourishes in some places. The research data showed that the denser the areas were, the more diverse the companies in the area were. It demonstrated a correlation between urban indicators - such as built density, proportion of productive land use and connectivity to public transportation - and the creation of innovation activities.

The issue of encouraging investment in public spaces for innovation was discussed. Carmona suggested that London "needs to invest in itself". London has a long story of neglect - Oxford Street is a classic example of underinvestment - although with some improvements in the past years. The private sector can help but the process needs to be led by the Mayor of London, and private companies need to be accountable for what they create. In addition, there are mechanisms that can encourage businesses to invest in their local high streets and emerging models of how to sustain creative, affordable spaces in areas with high property values. The US may boast more public spaces directly supported by philanthropy, but Musgrave suggested that London is actually a very good case study of the private sector supporting the public sector to create space that is not for commercialisation.

In her presentation, Juliette Morgan from British Land said that developers take a long view of places and at a broader city level, rather than in specific places. Spaces that are more open and social attract innovation but also make good business sense for developers - rents in King's Cross and Paddington are much higher than initially expected. Another trend that follows is that many tech companies are becoming developers themselves.

Who is innovation for? Innovation districts and communities

Many of London's most successful clusters and innovation districts are located in areas with relatively high levels of deprivation, and low levels of skills and employment. However innovation districts can define and implement a vision for inclusive growth, including training opportunities to local people, providing shared facilities, and creating a high quality public realm ([Hanna, 2016](#)).

Capturing benefits for local people

Tim Rettner from the Greater London Authority introduced City Hall's work to create positive and successful places, including high streets, places of work, places of learning and the public realm. London's rapid population growth presents challenges and the GLA regeneration team is working on shop renovation, understanding high streets and supporting crowdfunding for place improvements, building on the Mayor's City for All Londoners strategy.

Indy Johar from 00 Architects said we need to create places that allow people to be their "full embodied selves". What would policies like universal basic income do to the economic geography of places? To capture the benefits of common assets for people, he introduced the notion of a "future commons". This means thinking about places beyond real estate - housing is technically a physically depreciating asset. The rise in value is actually a common goods value, captured by private interests. Therefore, we need to establish a form of land value capture for the common good, including through reforming taxation. New commons infrastructure could allow the sharing of surplus property value and uplift of adjacent properties, driving new commons investment and the reduction in future social liabilities (obesity, isolation, air pollution, etc.). Digitising and tokenising land rights and smart contracting could allow the value created by new public infrastructure to be automatically linked to common infrastructure funding. Finally, new public commons could be held in a trust mechanism with local, accountable governance able to make collective agreement, standards and rules.

Community engagement

Ethan Kent from Project for Public Spaces started by saying that open places are not necessarily fair, accessible or equitable, and in some cases open shared collaborative spaces might be driving inequality. In addition, places can be overdesigned and not meet local needs - we need to make sure they work for people (in William H. Whyte's words, "It is difficult to create a space that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished."). Placemaking in this sense is a "collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm in order to maximize shared value and strengthen the connection between people and the places they share." How you should measure success is not through how the place is improved, but whether there is improved social capital.

Kent said that community-based processes are essential ways of empowering and engaging with local people, as they will understand their places best, although we also need to galvanise people, who can sometimes be passive consumers, into co-creating places. Johar gave the example of

Birmingham, where the public notion to create city is not only driven by the council but also by involving people, so there is a sense of a social contract for the future.

Daisy Froud showed how communities have been included (or excluded) in placemaking and the planning process. In the 20th century, belief in the benefits of engagement, for projects, places and society, increased. The 1947 Town and Country Planning Act in the UK aimed to engage public opinion in planning, and since then policy has evolved towards a greater focus on localism. People are doing great work for their specific places but what hasn't changed is the way power is held and managed, with a top down approach, and inclusion not really about rebalancing wealth. Communities can have cynicism that those in government are not representing their interests. Terms matter: we should talk about invention rather than innovation (which suggests commercialisation), and social knowledge rather than the knowledge economy. Good examples of this include Community Land Trusts and Brixton Energy, which creates a cooperatively owned renewable energy programme whose financial revenues stay in the community.

Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park

Emma Frost from the London Legacy Development Corporation explained that the biggest transformation in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park wasn't the decontaminated land and new sport venues, but rather the increased social capital and improved networks of local people. The Park is aimed at encouraging mixing and "friendly friction" with other people. The LLDC has been working on turning the Park into a cultural and education district, and created Echo, a bottom-up approach connecting community members with SMEs and larger firms in the area.

Can we deliver truly public, distinctive places?

Kent suggested that a future where every place looks the same is the opposite of place attachment, and the seminar included a dedicated session on whether like-minded communities mean like-minded places. Charles Leadbeater, chairing the session, suggested that private space is increasingly modelled on public space (for instance More London). Conversely, there are spaces that are public but only designed for a certain type of people, because of social stigma or affordability. What can we realistically do to make sure that private stewardship means public responsibilities?

To Anna Minton, writer, journalist and Reader at the University of East London, we are facing an increasingly privatised city and developers are not cultivating places that are distinctive from each other. Privately-owned places tend to adopt the same, homogenous template for regeneration following the Canary Wharf model - including Cardinal Place in Victoria or Liverpool One. Places are also privately managed – for example through Business Improvement Districts. This stems from a different idea of the city and of places as products rather than as democratic spaces where you could demonstrate for instance.

Minton outlined that in too many cases there are restrictions on behaviour and access - forbidding skateboarding, rollerblading, cycling, or even eating and drinking in some places. The fear of crime and smart monitoring technologies have implications for us as citizens - trust between people is being eroded by high security environments. By contrast, distinctive places tend to be more diverse - Windrush Square in Brixton is a great public space where strangers can mingle, with steps to sit, and no private security.

Other sessions during the seminar touched on the issue of public and private spaces. Carmona suggested that design does matter, but social outcomes can't be guaranteed through design, although they are more likely to happen. The tendency to over-design is not helpful however; rather what cities need are functioning, flexible spaces. Carmona argued that the privatisation of public spaces is not the issue; what is happening instead is an increasingly public use of private spaces. This does not mean it is always right, and the planning system needs to be cleverer at guaranteeing public rights. Chen outlined that the Hawkins\Brown study didn't measure permissiveness of behaviour in the case studies (six are privately owned and managed, with specific management regimes dictating what can and cannot be done). He noted the emergence of "intermediary spaces" that are not purely public or purely private, for instance office lobbies where anyone can work. However there is no evidence yet to suggest that attractiveness to knowledge economy workers correlates with spatial or social integration. Musgrave suggested that people have always used private spaces (eg graveyards) and that lots of green spaces in London are not public; so we need a more sophisticated debate, including on the pace of change.

Finally, the policies that the public sector can implement to democratise the benefits of innovation was highlighted as an issue. For example, the Hoxton West ward community has been virtually untouched by changes in the tech economy around "Silicon Roundabout". What is challenging is that some tech startups are quite economically fragile and as such, have a short term focus rather than a long term one that considers community engagement. To Jack Sallabank from the Future Places Studio, London is facing serious challenges, and other cities may reap the benefits soon if London doesn't improve. Developers are good at complex capital projects but they struggle to define what placemaking means, which leads them to be issues for local authorities to solve. Kat Hanna, formerly at Centre for London and now at Cushman and Wakefield, showed that local authorities can do more on programming - including apprenticeships, shared areas or street markets - in planning negotiations and conditions. As developers do more in cities, local authorities need to be more equipped to challenge them, although Minton said that this could present its own challenge as local authorities have no means to invest. The task is to balance public interest and the provision of future goods. The trickle-down model of development does not seem to work, so we need to ring fence money specifically for communities and apply more scrutiny to new developments.

Google's HQ in Pancras Square

David Skelton delivered a presentation outlining Google's objectives for their new headquarters in Pancras Square. Google have 4,000 employees in the UK and have just received planning permission for a large campus. This is important as tech has an important role to play in ensuring that London remains a thriving city. 43 per cent of Europe's unicorns - i.e. startups valued at over \$1billion - are based in UK

and there are as many artificial intelligence startups in the UK as in the rest of Europe. As an employer Google places emphasis on making sure local people have skills to make the most of growth, engaging with the local community, and mentoring. Google see themselves as active members of the community creating a sense of place for everyone who lives there, not just people who work in their office.

Areas for further research

Ben Rogers at Centre for London concluded the seminar by reflecting back on the discussion with questions for further research, including whether the knowledge economy will increasingly want to be part of inclusive neighbourhoods; whether we can improve discussions around the future and cohesion of an area through engagement around the public realm; and the potential for innovation districts in Outer London around high streets and growing residential and employment areas.

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