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SOCIAL INNOVATION & THE CITY:

What is the connection between Social Innovation & Urban Innovation...and Why Does it Matter?

Martin Stewart-Weeks



How we build and live in cities will come to shape the discourse on sustainability and ecologically-sound thinking for the future. Martin Stewart-Weeks examines why urban innovation holds the key to this debate.



Martin Stewart-Weeks

Martin Stewart-Weeks is Chair of the Australian Social Innovation Exchange and Director of the Public Sector (Asia-Pacific), Internet Business Solutions Group, Cisco Systems. He has over twenty years' experience in organisational management and consulting in the corporate and public sectors and with a wide range of nonprofit organisations.

We need to connect a growing global community of social innovation thinkers and practitioners to clarify the link between social and urban innovation, to discover and, where necessary, to invent new tools and methods that can put that thinking to work and to empower people in cities around the world so that they will experiment, take action and share their innovations with people from across the world.

Urban innovation is a rapidly rising priority for countries everywhere, with nearly 60 per cent of the world's population living in urbanised areas. Cities will undoubtedly come to play a central role in achieving sustainability, economic resilience and social cohesion. A critical, but often over-looked dimension in the way we design and manage our cities is the way they work, or often fail to work, as successful social entities. There are gradual improvements in approaches to urban design and economic issues, planning hard infrastructure and confronting the urgent environmental challenges in the city. However, we are less adept at dealing with some of the social dimensions of urban practice, or, better still, pre-empting and reversing its detrimental impact on people and urban communities.

At the same time, social innovation, as a distinct practice and set of tools to tackle complex, often intractable social problems in new and unexpected ways, is beginning to make a mark in how we design and inhabit cities.

Connecting social innovation to the larger endeavour of creating sustainable cities brings with it two challenges. One is to think of ways to design and run cities so that social innovation can emerge and thrive. What are the conditions under which a more deliberate and explicit approach to social innovation can flourish within cities or, just as importantly, what are the obstacles that cities can sometimes throw in the way of a thriving social innovation community?

The second challenge is to infect the practice of urban design and management with an ethic and practice of social innovation so that, right from the start, the social dimension of cities takes its rightful place at the heart of the urban innovation and sustainability agenda.

Meeting that challenge can be articulated in simple terms, but it will be harder to accomplish in practice. We need to connect a growing global community of social innovation thinkers and practitioners to clarify the link between social and urban innovation, to discover and, where necessary, to invent new tools and methods that can put that thinking to work and to empower people in cities around the world so that they will experiment, take action and share their innovations with people globally. The growing interest in urban agriculture is one area in which cities can encourage people and businesses to think differently about how to use existing or new spaces – community gardens for food growing, the top of their buildings as green spaces, empty lots that are currently run down or derelict – to improve the quality of life in city neighbourhoods.

This effort will engage people from across the spectrum – government, business, academia, entrepreneurs and informal networks of innovators and activists – as well as the more formal non-government sector of community organisations and associations.

Social and urban innovation strategies are possibly more closely connected than one might initially realise. Something about what each is trying to create should and can play a part in what the other can achieve. But the question remains whether there is something distinctive about the methods, instincts and practices of social innovation that could become a useful part of the toolkit of those charged with designing and managing more sustainable, connected and livable cities. For example, could the idea of a social innovation 'camp' be used to bring together designers, citizens, property developers and policy makers to brainstorm some practical new ways to make a neighbourhood safer or more friendly? By the same token, are there things that city designers and managers could do that would make it easier



That challenge is beginning to attract a growing community of innovators and entrepreneurs already working on projects which focus on different aspects of living in cities – jobs and skills; mobility; new patterns and models of working; transport; improving conditions and opportunities for low-income individuals and families; diversity and livability; arts; recreation; culture and so on.

(or harder) for a culture and practice of social innovation to thrive in a city as well? An example might be to change building regulations to create more flexible spaces in certain buildings that can allow different types of community groups and associations to meet and work – perhaps an art group for older people or a space for small community groups to hold their meetings.

Another example is schools and learning spaces in the community. Some educators are already running schools, or learning spaces in shopping centres or empty council buildings. That means making sure planning regulations are in place to allow those kinds of flexible uses. City planners need to explore those options and ensure the flexibility is built in to the basic planning regime.

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Urban planners - together with designers, architects and engineers and others involved in the business of making cities - are also going to be part of the endeavour. Designers who bring a fresh instinct to the task of re-thinking products, services, spaces and processes from the perspective of users and citizens will also be influential, as will investors (public, private and civil society) who have money and other assets that will be needed to support and extend innovation.

The Young Foundation in the UK is pushing forward on exactly this challenge with its Urban Ideas Bakery. The Bakery is “a set of methods designed to help cities mobilise their creativity to better solve – together – the major challenges they face, from the recession to crime, high carbon emissions to poor education.”¹ The goal is to “cultivate a shared understanding about the contribution creativity, entrepreneurship and innovation can make in securing the long-term economic, cultural and social prosperity of cities across Europe.”²

We will also need to engage policy makers and analysts who can infuse the ‘sustainable city’ agenda with new thinking and practice that directly impacts their policy



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goals – lower greenhouse gases, decongesting clogged city roads and streets, creating attractive and livable ‘people centred’ urban spaces and places, bringing in new investment and creating more jobs and forming new regional governance institutions and processes. A final, but equally critical player in this arena is the very communities living in the cities. Citizens are increasingly willing and able to translate their day-to-day experience into ideas, preferences and insights that can become powerful resources for innovation.

The goal is to shift the thinking and practice of urban management and innovation so that, gradually, our cities begin to look and feel different because they are influenced by, and seek to nurture, the practice and culture of social innovation.

It’s a worthy goal and it’s an increasingly urgent one as cities take the lead in the global search for a more sustainable and economically stable future.

¹ The Urban Ideas Bakery. <http://youngfoundation.org/our-qork/research/themes/advancing-innovation/cities-and-social-innovation/the-urban-ideas-bakery>.

² Ibid.