

> Morgan Poulizac

Social experimentation in cities

Time for action - and
not only declarations

Abstract

Reflecting on cities' ambitions to become smarter, Morgan Poulizac discusses the role of experimentation as a tool for social innovation. He argues that successful smart cities rely on a combination of new technological solutions and people's creativity, but that they also must be driven by clear methods, and most importantly, a willingness to innovate at metropolitan scale.

Our times seem to experiment with a vibrant enthusiasm for innovation. Everything would be transformed under the effect of 'digitalisation', of 'the power of big data', by the impulse of 'social innovation'. Cities themselves are engaged in a mad race to be "smart" - the nowadays ultimate competitive advantage. So innovation thrives, but often at micro scale (the smart sensor or a local grass roots initiative) and cannot (or barely) reinvent an urban design process, which is largely considered ill-adapted to the needs of the contemporary city, or even illegitimate or counterproductive. For addressing the growing urban inequalities, and tackling some urgent climate challenges while reinforcing a collective impact enabled by new technologies, one needs to find new ways to plan and organise cities, something more open

and relevant, more innovative. But there is a requirement: experimentation.

There is not one innovation but many innovations, some incremental, which simply propose to improve, at the margins, a technology already present (like the people behind the mobile phone "with an apple on it" perfectly understood). Others (rarer) are more "radical" or "disruptive". They claim to change models, markets or consumption patterns¹. Whether technological or social, they, however, all require experimentation, otherwise they will not find the conditions of its generalisation or, worse, they might fall into the large basin of what is presumed to be innovation, whereas no one clearly knows what the added value of it is, and some even suspect that it is nothing more but the revamp

of and old solution. Cities have always been the vector of technical innovation, they now need to produce some social as well.

> A method for social innovation

Social innovation was conceptualised in the 1990s, but its emergence can be traced back to the 1970s. It proposes to bring new solutions to social problems that are addressed either unsatisfactorily or insufficiently by the current responses. It does this by imagining devices or products that are both more effective and more efficient (in the end, this does not mean the exclusion of startup investment). It does this through a creative process combining new stakeholders, starting with the end users, not only in the design phase but also in the animation phase. It is realised through prototypes and experiments. It is finally part of a reflection on how to better address social needs while transforming public action. It must, in order to do so, “act locally” but think globally throughout the design process. It must include the conditions of its generalisation and its financial sustainability. Some of these are pretty well known in the field of urban policies. Let’s just mention one: ‘vélib’ is a bike sharing system implemented in Paris in the early 2000s. Designed as a partnership between the city of Paris and a private company, JCDecaux, it can be described as a social innovation, except probably for the fact that it didn’t address a social need, but an environmental one. Hence, from the beginning it had no ambition to assist the mobility of the poorest, and while it should have been tested in the first place where mobility is an issue (in the poorest suburban areas of Paris, for example), the effort has been largely concentrated on the city centre.

The definition is theoretical, but nevertheless it marks a break with the way we conceive of the urban fabric. It first draws the consequences of the failure by our public policies to organise orderly innovation for addressing emerging social needs. Why? Because urban policies are largely built on a principle that could be called ‘social engineering’. Public authorities plan, finance, adopt standards and norms, and

launch projects with the hope that “the people in the street” will follow. The result is binding policies, views “from above”, fixed models, guidelines, which are rather deceptive, when one would need space to adapt solutions to local situations, to actual behaviour. Public bodies do not lack ideas, they are just unable to experiment.

> Three conditions: ideation, experimentation, evaluation

It is often said that innovation exists everywhere, that it would be enough to ‘liberate’ it. We mention numerous initiatives by associations, groups of users, communities. No month passes without a public body or a foundation launching a prize to reward ‘social innovations’. But let’s face it: it is clear that these initiatives, even carriers of progress, rarely manage to organise their scaling. They are local, driven by an exceptional individual or a group. Their effectiveness is often questionable (which does not mean zero) because it is not proven.

Innovation needs a framework and a methodology to exist, and both of these are largely missing today in our urban policies. This method is organised in three phases: ideation, experimentation and generalisation.

Ideation, i.e. the design phase, is about grasping a problem to build alternatives. It is often a particularly critical phase in the innovation process because it must be able to open up the source of ideas, formulate them, mould them into prototypes. Organisations that are considered the most creative in the design of services, such as IDEO company, often involve experts, end users, designers, sociologists, and economists. They are brought together in elaborate exercises known as ‘user experience’ or ‘rapid prototyping’. It’s not about discussing issues or listening to recognised experts (always the same group of people); it is also not about fake collective exercises, like the one we often experience as urban planners, where the public authority invites dozens of architects and developers to share their views about a development project.

It is about confronting views, experiences, and sensibilities regarding a specific social issue with people you are not used to work with, and producing out of it not only facts but objects, concrete proposals, that are to be subjected to the test of reality. In this phase, what is needed is radicalism and novelty, not the repetition we see in so many public circles.

Then comes the experimentation phase. This is the most crucial part, because it requires three qualities: the availability to try, i.e. possibly to fail and consider that the failure of a policy has lessons to be drawn; an authority to take risks and to test solutions that can, at first, not be entirely consensual; and an ability to evaluate, to make an impact measure of an attempted solution, all in a continuous process of test-adjust-test evaluation.

Some people argue that we should not or simply cannot experiment at the scale of an urban project, that the political and economic risks are too high. One might try a technical innovation, for example a smart grid, but not something involving social issues: we don't experiment with social behaviour. But why don't we also try new forms of city use? The best part of our knowledge about city development comes from radical experimentation: the eco project in Vauban, the mixed-use project in Almere, the eco city of Mazdar... Some of these are failures (Mazdar), some are large successes (Almere), others need a more balanced judgement (Vauban), but all of them bring something new to our understanding of urban issues. In a globalised urban world, knowledge comes from everywhere, and solutions can be found everywhere. What is at stake is our ability to analyse the reasons behind failure and success, in other words to evaluate.

The assessment/evaluation should not be seen in its scientific version only, by way of comparison (which might be a bit difficult at the scale of a city), but it should imply at least the setting of some objectives for the measurement. We should also look at the sustainability and the generality of its potential. Since objectification produces generalisable lessons, one needs to describe "the facts" and measure their impact.

Are these three conditions now in place in the development of urban policies and projects?

> Urgent need for urban social experimentation

In France, the production of urban policy and the urban fabric is largely regulated by administrative authorities. The role of urban designers is often reduced to choosing the colour of the facades. Experiments are rare in cities because there is little space for discussing innovative models within the framework of public policy making. First, because the people in charge of making the city, the mayors in the case of France, have no incentive to take risks. They barely need to be more innovative than their neighbours not to transform the way cities are planned or designed. Then, municipal authorities have no means to organise and monitor the innovation process described above. Most of the time, they rely on architects, who lost most of their political ambitions in the 1980s only to focus more on conceptual and formal issues. As a result, the negotiations between municipalities are focused on normative problems; the designers try to impose aesthetic choices; and the developers are more concerned by their financial results. The consequence is that it is not possible to collectively discuss the best or most innovative solution, the only issue is to produce the least bad...

Some initiatives have been taken by local authorities in recent years to renew this approach. One might mention the 'Atelier international du Grand Paris' and the more recent 'Reinventer Paris' competitions. The latter is quite emblematic. The municipality has identified some land it owns and agreed to put them on tender. Instead of deciding which programmes the site should carry, the city has allowed teams of developers and architects to offer their programme and thus to decide the types of use that could take place on these sites.

Unusually, the city of Paris seemed to organise the conditions for experimentation of all kinds to emerge. And indeed, the ideas

were numerous, even if different in quality and intensity. Unfortunately, this project, despite its intellectual interest, quickly encountered two brutal realities. First, very quickly, the city has made it clear that its interest will first be to sell to the highest bidder, not to the most innovative. Then, throughout the exercise, the city was the judge and not a partner in the project. But social innovations require public authorities to be part of the solution, otherwise we miss part of its potential impact.

To innovate, we miss two instruments today: municipalities need to develop a real ability to animate urban innovations, and French cities should look at what other cities and countries have done: the 'centre for economic opportunity' in New York, the Nesta in Britain, or the Mindlab in Denmark. Innovation often requires an initial investment, and it would help if the cities nationwide, but even at European level, could fund the realisations of urban prototypes subjected to strict evaluation.

But more importantly, the city, more than any other policy, requires projects to transform. And if the state and public housing landlords were important social and technical innovation vectors throughout the 20th century, they seem to have turned away from experimenting with the same aversion as if it were the worst of ills. French cities have lost the taste for daring and prefer to copy only ("I want my eco district!"). Or worse still, that of communicating innovation ("gardens on every rooftops"). It is nevertheless useful to just wander abroad to discover a creativity reflecting new uses of the city to its public (we think especially of Japan or of the way Seoul manages its public spaces). Innovation requires risk-taking, of which we hardly see a trace in the French cities (probably with some exceptions).

Evaluation, which we know is the weakest link in France, takes a tragic turn in urban affairs, the latter ranging from the simple measurement of the profitability of an urban project to the equally hopeless sociological description of a more or less questionable state (the famous territorial diagnosis). Here,

more than anywhere else, much has to be done in the field of urban policies, but given the stakes in them, it is hardly acceptable to have to wait for ten years for a terse report by the Cour des comptes to find out about the failure of a policy.

Finally, as regards the ability to organise the scaling requirements of the most relevant innovations, the history of some social policies, starting probably with the minimum income (RSA), demonstrates the expertise of public authorities in organising this rise towards generality if and only if it has been thought through since the very beginning.

Only a few times in human history have urban transformations had such an impact on the future of the city and societies. Their tremendous expansion in the emerging countries, with their necessary adaptation in rich countries, offers a huge opportunity to reinvent the modes of production in the city. While one should not expect everything from technical solutions, and although we doubt the ability of governments to steer these processes alone, it is important to make full use of the new technological tools and of people's creativity. But this cannot go without method and without daring to innovate at metropolitan scale.

End notes

1. See Clayton Christensen (1997), *The innovator's dilemma : When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.