

INSIGHT

Learning Launch: Testing Urban Solutions in the Real World



A design thinking approach to urban development can bring about innovative ideas to make cities more livable and oriented toward people's aspirations. Photo credit: ADB.

Rapid and low-risk prototyping of solutions to problems promotes innovative and cost-effective approaches to urban development.

Introduction

“Nothing in this world is more simple and cheaper than making cities that provide better for people.” This statement from Jan Gehl, the Danish architect whose global reputation in urban planning is built on emphasizing the human scale in cities, is rather bold given how growing urbanization can seem like a downward spiral, forcing policymakers to play catch-up in delivering infrastructure that supports population growth.

While large infrastructure investments are an absolute need to meet the demands of a growing, aging, and more urbanized population in Asia, these projects can take years to be designed and implemented. At the same time, innovative ideas are emerging from local entrepreneurs trying to solve the challenges they face daily in the health, environment, transport, energy, urban planning, food system, and housing sectors. These innovations can provide momentum for bigger-scale projects or, on the contrary, provide a better alternative than a traditional approach and render a big investment redundant.

Urban Experiments through Learning Launch

In design thinking, there is no perfect algorithm to achieve innovation; it is rather an iteration of design processes that enable innovation to happen. The learning launch principle is one of the most important tools of design thinking for innovation. This principle consists in doing small experiments to test an idea in the real market. It is a fast, low-cost way to verify the innovator's hypothesis.

This approach is a test on key customers to figure out which unarticulated, deep need must be addressed and, if needed, allows changes to the initial idea. It enables an innovator to avoid cognitive blindness by observing how the idea is perceived on the ground in real time. Using the learning launch principle to test urban innovations ensures that solutions are oriented toward the people who live there. This process does not necessarily prove that the initial idea is perfect; instead, it enables an innovator to identify how the idea can be improved or if it should be discarded.

Less Is More Approach

A "less is more" approach to infrastructure can be considered to make cities more efficient and more enjoyable. It is developed around three key urban areas: mobility (transportation, urban planning, housing), consumption (energy, food, water) and waste (solid waste, wastewater, drainage). The idea is for each key area to reduce unnecessary investments and improve the quality of necessary investments. Because the sectors covered by these key areas are large contributors to pollution and health issues in cities, innovation in these areas will have a positive impact on the environment and on public health.

If local businesses are developed and digital solutions made available to everyday issues, neighborhoods can be revitalized, the need to commute can be reduced, and therefore transport investments can be optimized. If waste is reduced or recycled, less investments for waste management are needed and this can mean a positive environmental and economic impact for the city. If buildings are made more energy-efficient even just by changing user behavior, then less energy will be needed, resources can be saved, and the heat island effect can be reduced. If bigger spaces can be reclaimed for nature or leisure in the city, the city design can be reoriented toward people.

Rediscovering Superpowers

In the past few months, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has been stress-testing cities, magnifying their assets and problems. It is interesting to see how many cities are rethinking their urban planning post-lockdown. The imperative for making cities more resilient, green, and inclusive is now more than ever on the agendas of policymakers. Pop-up bicycle lanes in Germany, extra-wide footpaths in New Zealand, and 650 kilometers of extra bicycle lanes in France are a few of the initiatives taken post-lockdown.

Using pedal or foot power offers much more than physical wellbeing. According to neuroscientist and professor of experimental brain research Shane O'Mara, "one of the great overlooked superpowers we have is that, when we get up and walk, our senses are sharpened. Rhythms that were quiet suddenly come to life, and the way our brain interacts with our body changes."

He stresses the impact of walking not only on physical and mental health but also on cognitive abilities.

Innovation can improve the quality of urban life by reorienting city design toward people—by improving the pedestrian environment, connecting with the surroundings, connecting work and play, and revitalizing districts. For example, experimenting with quick-build improvements (e.g., semi-permanent materials to extend sidewalks, creating pedestrian plazas) can help reduce barriers to walking (i.e., traffic, ill-designed sidewalks, pollution, heat island effect, uninteresting districts) and change perceptions and behaviors. Innovation is a path to making the healthiest choice become the easiest, cheapest, and most enjoyable option.

Next Steps

Tracking and supporting innovations that optimize the existing infrastructure in cities complement the development of long-term projects. This can range from a pop-up design that will promote something as simple as walking or cycling, to more innovative solutions, such as those that transform waste into a valuable material or digitalize a service to avoid the need for heavy infrastructure. Supporting learning launches of such initiatives is a fast, low-risk, and cheap way for organizations like the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to support innovation in future projects and sow the seeds of a healthier urban future.

ADB is currently engaging with a startup incubator to carry out a learning launch experience on selected innovative business ideas. Feedback from these ideas will be shared in the next 6 months with ADB in a report and a webinar to present the lessons learnt.

Resources

Asian Development Bank. [ADB's Focus on Urban Development](#).

Coursera. [Design Thinking for Innovation](#). A course offered by the University of Virginia.



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Marie-Helene Sibille is primarily responsible for applying cross-sector knowledge (transport, energy, environment, water, and urban sectors) to support an integrated approach to livable and sustainable cities in ADB projects. Prior to ADB, she worked as a project manager in the Ministry for an Ecological and Inclusive Transition in France and as a social business consultant in a startup incubator in Haiti. She holds a MSc in Environmental Engineering from Imperial College London.



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Asian Development Bank (ADB)

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