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Innovation Districts Create New Urban Spaces for Creativity and Growth.

Cities incubate creativity and serve as labs for innovative ideas and policies. One such idea arising more and more is the innovation district. These districts are creative, energy-laden ecosystems with a focus on building partnerships across sectors. Innovation districts attract entrepreneurs, established companies, and leaders in all walks of life, and provide them with the space to create unexpected relationships and find transformative solutions.

Innovation district growth in cities as far afield as Boston, Las Vegas, and Barcelona belies their success in reflecting our ever-more complex world, which demands increased collaboration to understand the latest trends, let alone address problems with solutions that are more and more frequently found at the boundaries between different fields. In short, Innovation Districts are places designed to bridge gaps between fields and make unusual collaboration more likely to happen.

Bruce Katz of the Brookings Metropolitan Center has been exploring the growth of these districts and the increasing impact they are having on wider metropolitan economies: "This new model — the Innovation District — clusters leading-edge anchor institutions and cutting-edge innovative firms, connecting them with supporting and spin-off companies, business incubators, mixed-use housing, office, retail and 21st century urban amenities."

In the American Institute of Architects report I co-authored while with the AIA, *Cities as a Lab: Designing the Innovation Economy*, we examined the key role that innovation districts are beginning to play in cities. Design, ideas, and proximity are being used as significant assets in turning our cities into "innovation labs," transforming spaces and fostering connections in imaginative new ways. These high performance districts can animate a brighter future and attract funding and investment, enterprises and entrepreneurs, all while serving as a platform for rapid change.

A key example of this can be seen in Boston. Boston's Innovation District demonstrates what can happen with strong civic leadership, long-range planning, and pioneering designers collaborating toward a shared vision. The once derelict wharves along the Boston waterfront have been transformed into a multidisciplinary hub for innovation and manufacturing, attracting 200 companies and over 4,000 jobs.

Boston's former Mayor Thomas Menino launched the Boston Innovation District (I/D) with his 2010 inaugural address, and captured the impetus for its creation when he said, "Our mandate to all will be to invent a 21st Century district that meets the needs of the innovators who live and work in Boston—to create a job magnet, an urban lab on our shore, and to harvest its lessons for the city."

Now here we are in 2014, and his vision is transforming 1,000 acres of the South Boston waterfront into a unique live-work-play innovation community. Over ten million square feet of space has already been developed in the district, with 20 million more square feet planned.

Having first written about this project back in late 2012 it is astounding to see how it has taken off to the point where the ongoing success of the I/D is now leading to rapidly increasing rents that are

pushing some of the early companies out. Rents have soared to near parity with the Back Bay, the most expensive office district in Boston, rising 43 percent in just a few short years.

Within this district a new innovation infrastructure has been created, which includes numerous accelerators and co-working facilities, new types of housing, and America's first public innovation center in a connected urban community, District Hall. This recently opened 12,000-square-foot, experimental community hub supports events, exhibitions, and meetings that have no niche elsewhere in the innovation market.

Among the companies that have located in the Innovation District, 40% share offices in co-working spaces and incubators, 25 percent have 10 employees or less, and 11 percent are in the education and non-profit sectors. Of the jobs created, 30 percent of the recent expansion comes from technology companies, 21 percent are in creative industries like advertising and design, and 16 percent come from green technology and life sciences.

Translating best practices from cities like Boston to other places throughout the country is imperative. The Michigan Municipal League is doing just this by examining the importance of innovation districts as targeted hyper-local placemaking. Looking at districts in Pittsburgh, Boston, Portland, Toronto, and Barcelona they have identified key best practices that successful districts consistently demonstrate.

There must be a catalyst, generally in the form of a mayor or other local champion, like former Mayor Menino in Boston. The inclusion of entrepreneurs as well as strong partnerships with universities and the philanthropic community are paramount. Infrastructure development, public investment, and distinct financing tools, as well as housing options and open space round out the key features that help define innovation district success.

Through incubating ideas, working collaboratively across sectors, and thinking beyond physical boundaries, innovation districts are thriving and creating ongoing opportunities for cities. By no means is it an easy process, but these districts help pave the way for future experimentation in cities across the country by creating the eco-systems that attract talent and help our cities thrive.

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