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# PUBLIC INNOVATION

6 Ways Local Governments  
are Breaking Boundaries



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# INTRODUCTION



When a local newspaper called Boston’s longest-serving mayor, Thomas Menino, an “urban mechanic” in 1994, it wasn’t intended as a compliment. Menino, some said at the time, knew how to keep the city running but didn’t think much beyond clean streets and quality schools – the nuts and bolts of the system. Yet, the “urban mechanic” moniker was a label that Menino considered praise—and one that he used to the city’s advantage when in 2010 he decided to “tinker” with new ideas for the future of the city by opening the Mayor’s Office of New Urban Mechanics (MONUM).

# PUBLIC INNOVATION HAS GROWN EXPONENTIALLY AS CITY HALLS HAVE EMBRACED AND EMBEDDED INNOVATION IN THEIR WORK.

One of the first-ever city-funded innovation units in the United States, MONUM started as a two-person team that former co-chair Nigel Jacobs described as “the front door for anybody who wanted to make Boston better.” It has since thrived across multiple administrations, in part because of its ability to evolve in how it engages with the types of problems that cannot be solved by single city departments: from improving public services through human-centered design to deep, systems thinking for transforming how local government works. In that evolution, MONUM reflects the growth and maturation process across the field of public-sector innovation.

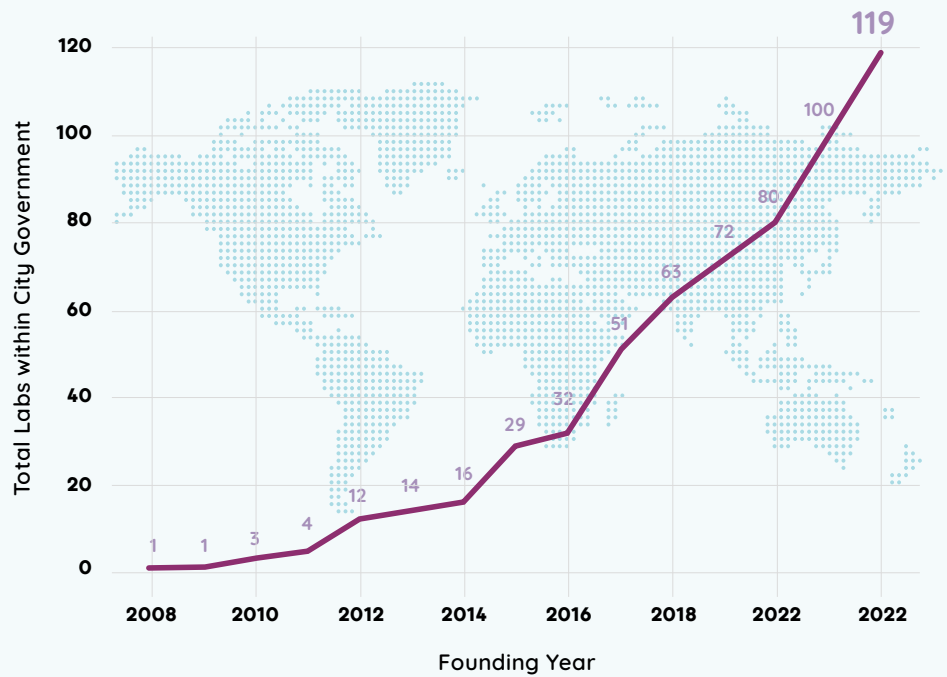
Public innovation has grown exponentially as local governments have embraced and embedded a range of innovation structures, roles, and skills in their work. The proliferation of local government innovation units



# PUBLIC INNOVATION LABS WITHIN CITY GOVERNMENT

## NOTE

The chart above is based on a sampling of 119 innovation units for which reliable start years were identified. The included labs are city-run units that directly support public sector innovation at the local level. The research team continues to actively research start years for other labs.



around the world is a case in point: They grew rapidly from 2010—multiplying by ten from 2010 to 2016 and then more than tripling from 2016 to 2022. Quickly and quietly, forward-thinking governments have established institutional spaces for creative thinking, collaboration, and the delivery of solutions across silos and with multiple stakeholders.

Inspired and intrigued by this exponential growth, the Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation at Johns Hopkins University (the Center) is conducting research to better understand how cities and public servants are building lasting capacity to unlock more innovative public services and engage in more ambitious problem solving. In August and September of 2022, the Center interviewed 37 practitioners who are leading public innovation labs, units, teams and initiatives in various regions of the world. These interviews will continue through the year's end.

These interviews, combined with a review of the latest research and policy literature in the field, show convergence around definitions and descriptions of public-sector innovation teams, their different characteristics, and what they aim to accomplish. We see an evolution, where public-sector innovation practitioners are skillfully navigating the complexity of the challenges faced by government and communities, applying nuanced approaches that are responsive to the times and to local context.

In late 2022, the Center will release a full report that explores with greater depth the public innovation trends bubbling up from local governments worldwide—along with the skills and methods that public servants are employing to deliver more creative and effective results for their communities.



**PUBLIC INNOVATION HAS  
BEEN RESILIENT, AND  
IS EMBEDDING ACROSS  
LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN  
DIFFERENT WAYS.**



# A decade since cities launched the earliest labs, it's clear that public innovation is here to stay. Innovation teams have proliferated, been able to survive political transitions and, in some places, become integral to the functioning of local government.

The designation of a director or Chief Innovation Officer—a critical c-suite role in many major city halls today—is a key signifier of credibility, embedding public innovation and its accompanying values into the decision-making process.

Likely contributing to this success is that, across different contexts, innovation capacity and experience is showing up in different ways. In some cities, mayors or other strong elected officials have been instrumental in embedding public innovation into formal governance structures through executive-level action: allocating budget, empowering teams, and signaling the importance of the work. A case in point is Mexico City's Agencia Digital de Innovación Pública (Digital Agency for Public Innovation). This powerful, consolidated agency, which has a mandate to digitize government services, responds directly to a mayor who is deeply supportive and understands the agency's value in improving the lives of residents most reliant on public services.

Yet it's also clear that an executive-led mandate leaves the practice subject to politics and changes in administrations. Some teams have been insulated by strategically employing departmental title changes and placements outside the executive office. In Long Beach, the innovation team operates through an in-house consulting model that city departments hire (and pay for) to deliver on organizational priorities, applying human-centered design and a data-driven approach to work with departments as varied as the police on diversity hiring, the airport on customer experience, and vaccination equity and transitional housing during the pandemic.

In other places, like Syracuse, Denver, Los Angeles, and La 27e Région, innovation units spread capacity among staff in city departments to create change within their own agencies by applying public-innovation methods. At the field level, we see that as practitioners ascend in seniority or move on to new roles and organizations, they are diffusing the practice of innovation beyond originally designated teams and roles. And in some cases, innovation teams have “spun off” into non-profit entities outside of local government, working with a broader set of stakeholders and engaging more purposefully with communities. In this way, Innovate Memphis serves as a partner for both city government and community organizations to try new ideas, take data-informed risks, and advocate for change.



**INNOVATION  
UNITS ARE NOW  
GO-TO TEAMS IN  
MOMENTS OF CRISIS  
AND DISRUPTION,  
DEMONSTRATING A  
CAPACITY TO PIVOT  
AND RESPOND IN  
REAL TIME.**

# The speed and agility of the local government response to the COVID-19 pandemic offers important new evidence for the value of investing in innovation and data capacities.

In cities around the world, elected officials and senior staff called on and called up their innovation teams or innovation officers to lead and help them respond to the most significant and comprehensive government-wide emergency in decades.

They responded decisively. Trained for agile problem identification and solutions testing, and plugged into global peer networks where new ideas spread, they worked across the traditional structures of government on rapid tactics and vital resources in a way that was suited to the complexity and pace of the unfolding public-health and economic crises.

Many innovation units were responsible for deploying coordinated systems for virus testing and vaccinations in neighborhoods and communities most in need; building data dashboards to facilitate decision-making and public communications; digitizing public services for continuity while offices were closed; leading comprehensive efforts to transition entire city governments to virtual work while maintaining services; and even redesigning city streets for safer travel and commerce. Innovation units were well equipped for this challenge, leveraging community listening, people-centered program design, rapid experimentation and evaluation, and data-driven implementation. For example, in 2020, the mayor of Renca, Chile, turned to his just-inaugurated innovation lab, La Fábrica (The Factory), for a rapid pandemic response. It became the intermediary between private donations and public need, and developed Chile's first testing and contact-tracing system.

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**INNOVATION UNITS  
HAVE CATAPULTED  
DESIGN INTO CITY  
HALLS.**

While human-centered and service design were novel concepts to local government when the first labs were set up in city halls, it is now becoming mainstream, with design skills and roles both on central teams and established in agencies working on the policy-making frontlines.

For those problems that do not fall neatly into the organizational silos or divisions of the city administration, design approaches have proven valuable in generating ideas, translating them into experiments through prototypes, and then scaling for project implementation. Design practices have “managed to swim into the system” of government, according to Hanna Harris, the first Chief Design Officer of Helsinki, where today, design teams are situated across nearly all departments to deploy design and co-creation processes in areas as seemingly disparate as administrative operations and infrastructure provision.

Increasingly, design is being used in support of co-creation with communities, digital transformation, and systems thinking to increase the equity and accessibility of government services, consciously moving from a “for the people” to a “with the people” mentality. This includes those innovation teams working in resource-constrained settings, where methodologies for ideation, piloting, and delivery of public services are modified to be low-cost, involve shorter timeframes, and be easy to run, in line with the Lean Governance Innovation Design approach that the MIT Governance Lab is developing with partners in African cities like Freetown.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> MIT GovLab <https://mitgovlab.org/projects/governance-innovation>, accessed September 10, 2022



**INNOVATION IS  
MOVING FROM  
DISCRETE,  
PROJECT-BASED  
EFFORTS TO MORE  
SYSTEMS-ORIENTED  
WORK.**



As the world has become more complex—and as residents’ expectations and needs increase—innovation units have exhibited more range, developed more robust partnerships, and drawn from a variety of methods that allow them to demonstrate value in numerous ways.

Related to their capacity to adapt to complex needs, they are also open and flexible enough to tackle both specific and systemic problems. Innovation units have developed the confidence, experience, trust, and capacity to both deliver project-based work and engage in more complex and systems-oriented approaches. We now see these units leading the charge on the most disruptive and complex problems facing cities today.

This has been the case for the Auckland Co-Design Lab, which focuses on equity and intergenerational wellbeing, particularly for Māori families and communities that experience inequities most directly. The Lab has moved its orientation from working on discrete projects and prototypes that can be “scaled out” toward strategies that “scale deep” in connecting to place, culture, and history and reconfigure foundational practices, assumptions, and ways of working in the public sector. Similarly, the Vancouver Solutions Lab (SLab) is working with a community advisory group and the city’s Sustainability Department to craft the city’s first-ever Climate Justice Charter. Through an approach of transformative learning, the SLab brings people together to think and act systematically in creative and experimental processes to develop transformative solutions to social and ecological justice challenges.

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the confidence, experience, trust, and capacity to both deliver project-based work and engage in more complex and systems-oriented approaches.



**THE ENABLING  
ECOSYSTEM FOR  
PUBLIC INNOVATION IS  
GROWING, AND GIVING  
RISE TO INSPIRING  
NEW MODELS FOR  
PARTNERSHIP.**



We also note the emergence of a supportive ecosystem beginning with the creation of communities of practice, where members with shared interests commit to learning together.

For example, SoCO is a cohort of a dozen Southern municipalities in the United States that serves as a learning and collaboration network. This demand for peer exchange has driven the establishment of more structured learning partners such as States of Change, a nonprofit learning accelerator originally established by the United Kingdom’s innovation agency Nesta—and the Center, marrying best practice and research to build innovation capacity among public servants that was launched in 2021 in partnership with Bloomberg Philanthropies.

Just as exciting is the rise of unorthodox collaborations to support local governments to think differently and challenge the status quo. One such institution is La 27e Région, a network of 45 subnational governments from across France, each of which is a member, funder, and/or participant in the programs, services, collaborations, strategy development, and decision-making work of the organization. One of their programs, La Transfo, partners with local government teams over a one- to two-year term to learn, practice, and build these capacities together and nest them into government in an ongoing way, with regular action research, sharing and learning happening across La Transfo teams.

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## This demand

for peer exchange has driven the establishment of more structured learning partners.



**PUBLIC INNOVATION  
IS COALESCING INTO A  
SET OF APPROACHES  
THAT SERVE A BROAD  
RANGE OF NEEDS AND  
PURPOSES.**

# While recognizing its inherent dynamism, it is clear that public innovation has matured as a field of practice and gained coherence in purpose, method, and form from its early days.

However, we are still missing voices and experiences, particularly from the Global South, that will be important and exciting to represent and understand moving forward.

Today, we see some emerging archetypes for local government innovation units, reflecting commonalities but also the multiple postures and pathways to unlock risk taking, incubate ideas, build capacities, and meaningfully engage communities to solve problems.<sup>2</sup>

The upcoming report will thoroughly outline these archetypes, which include: the “Problem Solver:” local government units that deliver on political or senior management priorities through innovation processes and methodologies, co-creating solutions to specific problems by leading the charge with staff across departments, subject matter experts, and outside stakeholders; the “Transformative Learner:” teams that undertake the deeper work of transformation by growing capacities of individuals, relationships, and the system to hold complexity, and by looking beyond discrete time-bound problems toward longer-term shifts in purpose, problem reframing, and impacts; and the “Mission-Oriented Convener:” groups that collaborate with multiple stakeholders to apply innovation methods to grand, shared challenges such as climate change or inequality, working toward concrete, time-bound goals and outcomes that capture public value and purpose.

Yet, like the field itself, innovation initiatives are not locked into any specific categories; they are constantly adapting, evolving, and iterating in response to local needs and shifting opportunities.

This research recognizes that an innovation unit, or team, or lab, no longer means the same thing to all of us doing the work. We are enthusiastic about this opportunity to generate a more nuanced perspective to support practitioners with understanding, comparing, and strategically employing different approaches to public innovation in local governments.

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<sup>2</sup> Guided by various studies produced within the last decade, we give recognition to those practitioners and scholars who have reflected and recorded their experiences and insights. The archetypes come from Cole (2021) and draw upon earlier work by Carstensen and Bason (2012), Blomkamp (2021), Hassan (2014), and Zivkovic (2018). The transformative learner approach was articulated by Cole and Hagen (2022). The mission oriented approach is from policy briefs by the UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose and the Collective Impact Forum.

# WHAT'S NEXT? ACCESS THE FULL REPORT

Sign up to receive the full report with the QR code below. Aimed at practitioners, this study will serve as a resource to explore the breadth of purpose, strategy, method, and ambition of public innovation in cities as the field matures into its second decade.



**Thank you to the global network of innovation practitioners for their contributions to this report and tireless work to improve local communities and the lives of residents.**





