



Innovation News

Excerpts from:

The Rise of Innovation Districts: A New Geography of Innovation in America — Brookings Report, May 2014

“A new complementary urban model is now emerging, giving rise to what we and others are calling “innovation districts.” These districts, by our definition, are geographic areas where leading-edge anchor institutions and companies cluster and connect with start-ups, business incubators, and accelerators. They are also physically compact, transit-accessible, and technically-wired and offer mixed-use housing, office, and retail.”

The St. Louis Innovation District

An “Anchor Plus” Model

The “anchor plus” model, primarily found in the downtowns and mid-towns of central cities, is where large scale mixed-use development is centered around major anchor institutions and a rich base of related firms, entrepreneurs and spin-off companies involved in the commercialization of innovation. “Anchor plus” is best exemplified by Kendall Square in Cambridge (and the explosion of growth around MIT and other nearby institutions like Mass General Hospital), Philadelphia’s University City (anchored by The University of Pennsylvania, Drexel University and the University City Science Center), and St. Louis (flanked by Washington University, Saint Louis University, and Barnes Jewish Hospital).

Networking as a Tool

Districts attempting to cultivate networks are driven by experimentation, creativity, and even a sociological understanding of how networks function.

Networking assets... focus on building new, often cross-sector, relationships. Examples include: networking breakfasts (such as 22@Barcelona’s breakfast where experts and star innovators offer new insights in their fields followed by open time to network), innovation centers (such as Boston’s newly constructed 12,000 square foot District Hall), hack-a-thons across industry clusters such as life sciences and tech (Stockholm), tech-jam start-up classes (found in Boston), and even the choreographed open spaces between highly programmed

buildings (St. Louis). In this last example, St. Louis will be clustering five innovation centers, with the purpose of generating “collision points” between smart people.

Strategies for Growth

Set a vision

A vision for growth provides actionable guidance for how an innovation district should grow and develop in the short-, medium- and long-term along economic, physical, and social dimensions. 22@Barcelona, for example, envisioned and articulated in forward-looking documents, a “new model of a compact city,” replete with innovation activities, green spaces, advanced industries, a strong industrial heritage, subsidized housing, a new mobility model, and revitalized public spaces. St. Louis and Stockholm Life also devoted the necessary time and resources to develop a highly visual, long-term vision for their districts.

As the St. Louis example demonstrates, a city’s or metropolitan area’s distinctive economic strengths helped orient actors to the clusters that have the best chance of success rather than rely on a government’s attempt to pick industry winners. In fact, St. Louis’ strength in plant and life sciences, Philadelphia’s strength in health, computing and informatics, and energy, and Eindhoven’s strength in precision machinery are the very clusters promoted in their innovation districts. As these places have evolved, new, emerging clusters grew out of R&D and smart commercialization or through surprising synergies between two or more clusters, creating an even more dynamic network of clusters.

Re-imagining the physical landscape

In the “anchor plus” model, practitioners have re-drawn existing lines—tearing down walls, fences and other, even more substantial, barriers between anchor institutions and others, creating new mixed-use neighborhoods, making and creating new public spaces, and activating streets to draw people together, and re-designing corridors to make them more pedestrian-friendly. In both Kendall Square near MIT and St. Louis’ Cortex district, city governments (or their designated agents) revised land use conventions and zoning ordinances to affect this change.



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Innovation districts relied on a variety of planning tools as they engaged in this work. 22@Barcelona, Cortex in St. Louis, and Cambridge (MA), for example, developed master plans to address the complexity in physically redeveloping their districts. Under existing state statute, the city of St. Louis designated Cortex West Redevelopment Corporation the master developer of the innovation district. Cortex is also responsible for master planning, oversees development, issues tax abatements, and may use eminent domain.

Attracting, Retaining, and Growing Talent

"It's all about programming: choreographing 'spontaneous' opportunities for smart people to interact with each other. This is what separates us from traditional science parks," shared Dennis Lower of Cortex in St. Louis. On another level, growing talent means developing a feeder system of STEM workers with the general and customized skills necessary for participation in innovative sectors.

Utilizing Local Capital

Practitioners point to early signs that the mixing and leveraging of different sources of local capital is already underway. City governments, for example, are smartly redirecting scarce public resources in ways that garner large private and civic investments. In St. Louis, the city government is using tax increment financing to support infrastructure improvements. The city has also designated Cortex as the master developer for the area, delegating an ample suite of redevelopment powers including the right to exercise eminent domain, abate taxes, and enter into parcel agreements with developers; those decisions have likewise leveraged hundreds of millions of dollars in private and civic sector investment.

In 2003, for example, the Danforth Foundation announced that St. Louis-based plant and life sciences would be a predominant focus of its grant-making. In tandem with the McDonnell Foundation and private corporations, the Danforth Foundation led efforts to establish the BioGenerator, a sophisticated accelerator with a non-profit seed fund. In the last five years, the BioGenerator helped close the funding gaps challenging many local startups, aiding in the successful launch of over 40 new life science enterprises. Further, this accelerator set its eyes on drawing national and regional capital, with its parent organization BioSTL hiring a dedicated person to increase access to national VCs, angel investors, and others.

Use of Tax Incentives

Innovation districts often house properties of historic value, which, if renovated and repurposed, could be a critical component of a district's brand and growth. They also tend to contain land parcels that are still contaminated by prior industrial use and require remediation that costs more than market value can bear. Targeted tax incentives for historic preservation, brown-field remediation, and land assembly have a high return on investment when applied in emerging innovation districts and should be encouraged and expanded. The Cortex district in St. Louis has already taken smart advantage of Missouri tax incentives and is a model in this regard.

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