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Kloosterman, R.C.

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Creating conditions for green Innovations in the built environment

By Robert C. Kloosterman, Professor of Economic Geography and Planning, University of Amsterdam February 21, 2024



Visiting the annual Dutch Design Week in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, is an uplifting experience. Large, former Philips factory halls are filled with a wide range of innovative solutions -from nest hubs for gulls to be placed on roofs of buildings in urban settings and bricks made from contaminated soil, to new designs for whole neighborhoods with ample room for green spaces. Not so long ago, the design presented there was first and foremost about aesthetic qualities. Nowadays, the focus is much more on promoting wider societal goals such as sustainability, biodiversity, dealing with climate change, livability and social inclusion at different spatial scales. The innovations presented are, typically, the result of intense multi-disciplinary collaborations of, notably, industrial design engineers, architects, urban planners, and ecologists reflecting the broadening of the knowledge basis and the division of labor in contemporary (and future) processes of construction.

These innovations are, of course, inevitably selective, and some may prove to be more useful than others. Still, this highly fragmented design laboratory conjures up a panorama of concrete images of how innovative construction can contribute to a brave new built environment. Urban policymakers across the globe confronted with multiple, interrelated crises are urgently in need of new ideas and they may benefit from these exercises in new ways of looking, which subsequently might be translated in effective interventions in the urban environments. This raises a set of questions. First, how can we promote such laboratories? Second, how can innovations generated by such laboratories be translated into actual policies?

These highly relevant questions, in my view, hinge on the *embeddedness* of the construction sector in wider society. The construction sector does not operate in a vacuum, but instead in place- and time specific contexts with their own rules, regulations, attitudes and practices. To encourage multi-disciplinary innovations as well as their eventual implementation, hence, means looking at these contexts. Given the fact that such contexts are highly variable and differ from country to country and even from city to city, I can only point at more general observations; first at the level of the key actors involved and then at the institutional aspects of the context.

A necessary condition for creating a climate for green innovations is that key actors have to be driven by a strong intrinsic motivation, which is primarily focused on improving the built environment and not on financial gain. Many of these actors – architects, industrial designers, urban planners, ecologists – tend to be driven more by societal goals than just making money. A second condition is that they have to be open-minded, and be willing and able to tap into knowledge of other disciplines. Contemporary complex urban issues require multifaceted approaches which benefit from cross pollination in diverse project-based teams.

Stimulating a culture of collaborative innovation processes in which the key players can distinguish themselves by contributing societal useful ideas, consequently, makes a lot of sense. This, however, is clearly not enough. These urban designers and their project-based teams do not function in an institutional void, but are, inevitably, part and parcel of a world where other actors – such as real-estate developers, investors, landowners – are very powerful. These, often corporate, actors are typically driven by profit maximization. This has increased in many countries in the past decades, with (national) policies aimed at enlarging the role of the market at the expense of the state and accelerated with processes of financialization with which essential components of the built environment (buildings, infrastructure and even public spaces) have become investment vehicles. There is, then, obviously a tension between the societal needs and the potential responses of urban designers, on the one hand, and vested corporate interests on the other. How could this be solved and make built environments more livable and greener by introducing new ways of building, as well as organizing flows and using spaces?

A set of targeted national policies – for example by subsidizing urban laboratories and by introducing stricter environmental rules – would be useful. In absence of this, however, there are two approaches which would foster both the generation of ideas and their eventual implementation. The first one is sector-based and the second departs from the local.

As states, urban designers from all stripes are generally driven by more than just making money. They opted to become an architect, an industrial designer or an urban planner to create something worthwhile. Organizing this usually fragmented field and using collective action to promote their cause would help to increase their power vis-à-vis other actors in the construction sector. This is also about forms of soft power as developers and investors may be, so to say, seduced by imaginaries of greener and more livable cities. Architects can play a pivotal role in this. Their profession is certified which also means that they already have, by law, an organizational basis. They are also present almost everywhere – from large cities to villages.

The second approach is local. Cities are not footloose and constitute a vast investment in hardware (the built environment) and software (the citizens). Investors have a lot to lose when the social fabric and the ecological balance is unravelling. Urban policymakers can use this to bend policies in rather different direction than relentless commodification and profit maximization. They can setup competitions to come up with new ideas and they can come up with local, bespoke arrangements to implement them. They can force investors and developers to change tack, but they can frequently also appeal to local civic pride and chauvinism to improve their city.

Whichever combination materializes, making cities greener and more livable thus necessitates forms of embeddedness that keeps the market at bay and strengthens the capability to protect the built environment from being seen as just a money-making machine, where buildings are mere investment vehicles and profit-seeking trumps other aims. The unorthodox projects of the Dutch Design Week may serve as source of inspiration.

Robert C. Kloosterman
Em. Professor of Economic Geography and Planning
Centre for Urban Studies – Department of GPIO
University of Amsterdam