



# Developing an Innovative Ecosystem for Just Change







## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown us that change in our cities is possible. In Germany and the United States, projects or initiatives intended to deliver social, economic or environmental benefits are too often considered but not always delivered. The reasons may range from lack of funds or absence of political will, to a social and economic environment that stifles growth.

However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, cities have implemented innovative projects from reprioritising streets for cycling, a more generous expansion of outdoor gastronomy and a reallocation of public space, to investments in urban green spaces, supportive housing interventions and beyond. The unexpected disruption to business as usual made new approaches and course corrections possible. A previously unthought-of window of opportunity opened up.

This experience has changed the way we think about urban policy and development. But how can we move away from a dependency on catalytic moments to drive change, and instead harness this capacity within city administrations and the general public? At the core of our proposal and with these considerations, is the idea of the city as an innovative ecosystem.

## Justice in cities today. US and German perspective.

There is a rapidly growing inequality in cities both in Germany and the United States. During our trips we repeatedly observed urban injustices - from the extremely tight housing markets in the cities leading to displacement or homelessness; to the environmental burdens (in terms of pollution or noise pollution) caused by cities that continue to be car-dominated in many places; to the long commutes from bedroom communities to work centers.

Alongside social justice, the pandemic also influenced conversations and thinking around spatial justice in cities. This was most evident in thinking about access to green space, but also in how physical space on streets and in downtown areas could be re-thought to facilitate the recovery of highly-transited streets by allowing social distancing.

Furthermore, inequality meant that certain communities were more exposed to the impacts of the pandemic (and would likely be more exposed to any future crisis) and disproportionately carried its effects. Justice within cities needs to examine citizens' relationships in terms of access to the opportunities the city provides, and the distribution of these opportunities (equity).



## A “just change”-ecosystem

Just change is possible if we develop an ecosystem where innovation is focused on inclusion and equity. Our proposal is that city administrations develop an innovative ecosystem, independently from the momentum conjured during a crisis, that rethinks power structures, allows for new forms of cooperation among a wide range of urban actors and establishes a mindset that allows failures.

The key characteristics of this ecosystem should be:

- **Equity at the core.** Putting equitable outcomes at the forefront of the mission. Engagement is required, aiming for a participatory planning model.
- **Diversification of partnerships.** Consider which actors ought to be included, and how they can help facilitate agency and inclusion.
- **Providing required resources.** Not only about providing space for innovation + meeting; but economic and social support all around.
- **Fund experiments.** Provide financial resources for open-ended processes and projects.
- **Strengthen external impulses.** Actors from academia, civil society and NGOs have extensive expertise in many different fields of urban development. Opportunities that integrate this knowledge more closely should be sought and encouraged.
- **People-centered development.** Rethink who the developers of the cities are. The focus is on the residents with their wishes and requirements, e.g. regarding housing, mobility or participation. Create a sense of ownership among the inhabitants.
- **Keeping an ear on civil society.** Civic action, such as grassroots movements, can raise awareness for certain social issues. Municipalities have structures that can perceive needs and implement tailor-made solutions.
- **From administrator to moderator.** Municipalities have to be able to basically take the role of a moderator in order to balance out all the different interests in the city.
- **City in leadership.** A self-image that is based on the power of decision and the will to shape things. Shaping the city according to one's own interests and those of the residents.
- **Sustainability.** All pillars of the “just change”-ecosystem adhere to the 3p`s of Sustainability: People-Planet-Profit

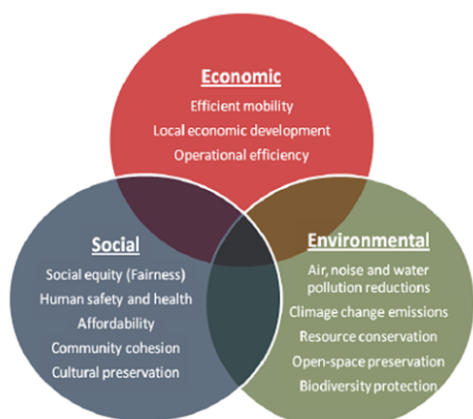
Despite topic-specific challenges and approaches, we still see value in identifying the overarching features that characterize an innovative ecosystem. We assume that the consideration of these characteristics could be transferred to a broad range of urban fields.

In the following, we present three selected topics (mobility, housing and civic engagement) where there is an urgent need for action and at the same time where we see ideas and approaches that are defined by the characteristics of an innovative ecosystem.

### Just change towards: Sustainable mobility through micro mobility

Sustainable mobility is key to achieving economic and social justice in urban environments. It allows individuals and societies to safely and equitably move in and around an area without compromising health or environmental outcomes.

Sustainable mobility, by definition, is affordable, operates efficiently, offers choice of transport mode, and supports a vibrant economy. It limits emissions and waste within the planet's ability to absorb them, minimizes consumption of non-renewable resources, limits consumption of renewable resources to the sustainable yield level, reuses and recycles its components, and minimizes the use of land and the production of noise.



The definition (Gilbert et al. 2003) above is used e.g. by the European Council of Ministers of Transport as it is comprehensive and points out the required balance between environment, society and economy, which follows the idea of the “Our Common Future” Report (Brundtland Definition). This approach is also known as the triple bottom line approach or triple p approach – people, planet, profit. (Source: Victoria Transport Policy Institute (2018))

### Does micro mobility serve sustainable and just cities?

There are various means of micro mobility: scooters, kick-scooters(steps), bicycles, electric bicycles, cargo bikes or even electric skateboards as well as different operational systems like free-floating vs. station-based approaches. Micro mobility has potential to play a key role in creating a sustainable city.

However, micro mobility is often seen critically both by the public and in research: inhabitants are annoyed by the clutter of wrongly parked kick-scooters or free-floating devices on the sidewalk; and researchers are worried about the short life-cycle of kick-scooters and the small distances kick-scooters are used for, which mostly replaces walks, not car trips (DLR 03.2021). Accordingly, many micro mobility offers do not currently meet the targets of sustainable mobility and violate the targets of the environmental pillar (planet).





Also from the social perspective (people) many unregulated micro mobility services do not offer access for all parts of the society - neither financially nor locations-wise. A big task at hand is introducing micro mobility such as cargo bikes that are capable of completing more functions and thereby replacing cars.

### **Cities need to take leadership to leverage the potential of micro mobility**

Despite challenges, cities have the opportunity to leverage the potential of micro-mobility through a regulatory framework and funding which benefits people, planet and profit. One city which recently took leadership and developed through its Department of Transportation a regulated micro mobility sharing scheme is the city of Chicago.

### **Rethink micro mobility: The example of Chicago**

Chicago's Department of Transportation developed and financed a tender for micro mobility which not only aims to increase accessibility but also should avoid clutter through a network of fixed stations instead of a totally free-floating approach which is causing clutter in many cities around the world. The tender was won by the company Livvy with its micro mobility daughter Divvy bikes.

The scheme is called "Divvy for Everyone (D4E)", funded through government programs designed to reduce road traffic, lessen pollution, and simultaneously improve air quality (Illinois Institute of Technology, 06.2022). As the city took leadership, the city was also able to regulate the sharing program in a way which makes the scheme more sustainable through:

- **Financial Accessibility (people)** → The Divvy for Everyone (D4E) program provides low-income Chicago residents an affordable and accessible Divvy membership option. D4E is available to income and location -qualifying Chicago residents age 16 with a \$5 annual membership fee for the first year of unlimited 45-minute rides.
- **Fixed locations (people, planet)** → by providing a dense network of fixed stations, the city reduces the risk of clutter through wrongly parked bikes and kick-scooters.
- **City-wide distribution of stations (people)** → The tender the city created, demands from the provider to also provide stations in parts of the city where usage might be lower than in the densely populated centre of the city.
- **Funding (profit)** → By giving shared mobility providers financial incentives in combination with regulation, cities can assure that business models are viable but also serve all parts of the city.



The example shows well how cities could lever the potential of micro mobility to contribute to more sustainable cities. The fact that other similarly-sized cities, like Philadelphia, are currently exploring the implementation of this model points out the fact that cities need to invest in human and financial resources to shape micro mobility schemes in a way which serves people, planet and profit.

### **5 To do's for cities to leverage the potential of micro mobility to contribute to more sustainable cities & just cities:**

1. **Fixed locations:** fixed stations for shared micro mobility devices to avoid clutter
2. **Redistribution of Space - Push & Pull:** redistribution of former parking lots to micro mobility spaces to ease the usage of micro mobility and make car reduce the need of car trips
3. **Dense Networks:** dense networks of shared micro mobility hubs for high user acceptance
4. **Funding Schemes based on Sustainability Assessments:** funding schemes based on a sustainability assessments (people, planet, profit), which gives incentives to providers to serve all pillars of sustainability like financial and spatial accessibility
5. **Mass Integration:** one stop shop solutions enable the usage of a single platform to use all means of public transport and micro-mobility

### **Just change towards: Affordable Housing**

Housing is a basic human need and in the US and Germany, it is deemed part of the state's provision of public services. The place of residence determines access and proximity to educational institutions, cultural opportunities, employment opportunities as well as facilities for daily needs. Equitable urban development should therefore aim to create safe, affordable and sustainable housing throughout the areas where people have already chosen to live.

Housing in the US is at the core of social and economic inequalities. Housing, has been the object of longtime discriminating practices and caused great differences in wealth and health between white and black populations in the US. Although there have been several attempts to “fix” and reduce the generations-long gap in wealth and socioeconomic opportunity for people of color, housing, as an asset, is still more than 3 times less attainable for a well qualified applicant of color than it is for a badly qualified white applicant. In Denver, we witnessed the issue of housing insecurity. Several civil society organizations shared with us how they provide temporary housing for people experiencing homelessness, however the problem of housing affordability is outside of their scope of operations.





Many American and German cities have experienced immense immigration in recent years, putting significant pressure on housing markets and public resources; resulting in tight housing markets, high rents, and displacement. These effects have a particular impact on low-income households, thus increasing economic and social segregation in cities that every day move further from the vision formulated above.

During our walk through a neighborhood in the district of Kreuzberg, in Berlin, Julie Richier (member of the Bündnis 90/Die Grünen party) explained both how rent increases and displacement processes have changed an otherwise stable neighborhood over the years, but also how the district is trying to preserve the existing affordable housing in the area.

Creating living space means taking into account the needs of many different groups of residents. One example is the neighborhood around Kottbusser Tor in Berlin - a neighborhood where historically a large Turkish immigrant community has settled and there is a large number of social housing units. The "Kotti Coop" initiative is campaigning for better participation of local residents in local planning processes.

To provide affordable housing, cities need to find appropriate, long-term and sustainable funding as well as coordination between municipalities,

the private sector and civil society initiatives. Moreover, close cooperation with current and future residents, will enable localities to meet the challenges of the housing market.

## I. Policies Outlining New Forms of Cooperation

**Berlin:** In 2016, the city of Berlin signed into law the cooperation agreement "Affordable Rents, New Housing Construction and Social Housing Supply" with six municipal housing companies, aiming to keep the rents in the existing stock affordable and creating additional housing. The measures relate to new housing construction and a socially oriented policy for existing housing, socially acceptable rents, sustainable and ecological construction, and resident participation.

**Hamburg:** Since 2011, Hamburg has had the "Alliance for Housing" - an agreement between the Senate, housing industry associations and SAGA with the participation of tenants' associations. The agreement includes concrete measures and goals for an active and socially acceptable development of Hamburg's housing market. New construction activity in Hamburg has increased significantly since then.

**Buffalo:** A successful example of a creative approach in housing is community land trusts, like the Fruit Belt Community Land Trust in Buffalo, NY.



Community Land trusts are non-governmental organizations that hold land on behalf of a place-based community. Their members and community decide where and how the land is to be used and it is forbidden to sell. Residents enter a comprehensive agreement on the common living and housing conditions. When the resident leaves the property, another resident from the community takes over the unit and lives in it, often without exchange of funds or ownership.

The messy realities of collaboration mean that frustration and antagonism will always be part of the participatory process. However, implementing clear and efficient structures — ones that crucially can withstand changes in the political landscape — can help foster a culture where diverging ideas, needs and interests can be negotiated fairly.

## **II. Co-production with civil society**

**Berlin:** To prevent the sale of the Haus der Statistik to investors and the associated demolition of the building, an art action was staged at the Haus der Statistik in September 2015. After the action, a civil society initiative was formed with the goal of building a place for social and cultural institutions and associations, artists, foundations and societies in the Haus der Statistik building. The concept idea was almost unanimously endorsed by the district politicians. Since 2018, Koop5, the initiative's alliance with the Berlin Senate Administration, a state-owned

housing company and the Berlin Real Estate Management, have been jointly developing the property for the common good.

## **III. Living together, empowerment and ownership**

**Wuppertal:** The non-profit association "Aufbruch am Arrenberg" is committed to a new beginning in a Wuppertal neighborhood. They strive to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals at neighborhood level. The initiative has designated the neighborhood as a "climate quarter" and is thus pursuing the goal of making life on the Arrenberg climate-neutral by 2030. On the one hand, the association relies on cooperation with small and medium-sized enterprises in the neighborhood to implement projects, and on the other hand, it aims to awaken and promote the residents' self-determination.

**Augsburg:** The Grandhotel Cosmopolis is a housing project for refugees in Augsburg. It was developed against the backdrop of the influx of refugees, especially since 2015. The project sets accents for peaceful coexistence in the modern diverse urban society. In addition to the shared accommodation for asylum seekers, this location also houses studios, workshops and a hotel. In this project, the urgent accommodation of asylum seekers is linked with cultural diversity and participation.





## **Just change towards: Meaningful citizen engagement and Participatory planning processes**

Public participation is at the core of any democratic government. Yet, in the 21st century, it's important to leverage the opportunities to better engage citizens to shape our cities. What should just community engagement and participatory planning look like?

Our site-visits in the United States and Germany provided insights about how city administrators are thinking about the role and future of citizen engagement. In particular, conversations about the extent to which elected officials' engagement with constituents are sufficient or insufficient were considered. A key challenge in the United States and Germany is that too many communities do not see their interests reflected by their political representatives. The rise of populism in cities in the United States and Germany speaks to this unfortunate reality and highlights the challenge that increasing social division has on social cohesion and the community fiber.

Yet, engaged communities can support systems change and help identify necessary policy updates that can lead to opportunities, social mobility and general improvements to well-being and the community fabric - values that are important to achieve the vision of a just and sustainable city. A systematic approach to citizen engagement, as

opposed to one-off consultations, can furthermore facilitate data-driven decision-making. For city government, it is important to be responsive and act timely to leverage opportunities.

While broadening participation to reach disadvantaged communities is important, community engagement should create a bridge to enable participatory planning - a process where communities are empowered to prioritise and develop change that impacts them.

Fundamentally, the mission of any engagement solution needs to be targeted at bridging the inequalities present within society. Simply providing new ways for advantaged communities to engage in the urban planning and decision-making process is insufficient.

Throughout our travels in the United States and Germany, we were presented with a range of solutions and initiatives to facilitate better engagement with communities and empower communities to shape the administration's work. Taking a transatlantic approach, the below recommendations considers the best practice approaches:

### **I. Build a Hub for Engagement and Participation**

Amy Liu from the Brookings Institute wrote (on the topic of local post Covid-19 recovery strategies):



*"If cities, regions, and states rely primarily on traditional civic institutions to carry out local recovery strategies, they will sacrifice credibility with a diverse new generation of stakeholders and are likely to end up with the same underwhelming results" (Brookings).*

The same logic can be applied to community engagement and the role of developing a space for stakeholders to come together to collaborate on urban change. Initiatives such as CityLab Berlin, an urban innovation lab that merges urban development, data and citizen participation, can present an example of how this home for urban innovation can be presented. Providing a space for digital, citizen-driven initiatives, a city-focused innovation lab offers a testbed to support and trial initiatives, share knowledge and facilitate communication with the city administration.

There are benefits to an external City Hub: it is often more accessible; it bridges the gap between civil society, government and private sector, and serves as an incubator for ideas, pilot schemes and innovative policy solutions. A City Lab can provide a formal mechanism to track progress and hold administrations and partners accountable.

While these case studies spoke to how digital tools can support one-off, special initiatives, it also shows that participation at this level is project-specific and may not represent the full

scale of local government work (some topics may receive more engagement than others). It is important to also consider how innovative approaches to public participation can facilitate the systematic collection of feedback, ideas and identify opportunities to do better.

## **II. Put Agency and Inclusion at the Forefront**

The innovative ecosystem prioritises equity and agency. In particular, it gives disadvantaged communities agency as well as identify and support locally generated solutions that don't just have the buy-in from the community, but are co-designed with the community. The vision of a just city should go beyond equal opportunities, to ensure equitable access to opportunities - otherwise the benefits of increased participation may not be felt.

Innovative participation needs to take into account differing needs of communities, to ensure that the process and engagement is inclusive and effective. Here, the question of which stakeholders shape the CityLab is critical. Considerations about diverse outcomes should not solely focus on communities, but extend to considerations about project partners and the procurement process. This is particularly relevant to ensure that any development does not result on displacement. Some administrations have adopted equity-focused teams (e.g. Austin's Equity Office or Denver's Neighborhood Equity and Stabilization



Office) to regulate the market, which can lead to unjust outcomes - this is a responsibility which could be embedded within the CityLab.

### **III. Provide the Tools to Deliver Change**

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown that moments of crisis can act as agents of change. It has also highlighted the opportunities within cities to be more equitable in investment patterns and how the benefits of investment are distributed across urban communities. Place-based strategies and solutions can drive just change by working with communities and targeting investment where it is most needed.

An innovative environment for participatory planning needs to be given legitimacy by having the financial resources to deliver impact. The United States has a long history of philanthropic giving to support economic and social development. In Germany, place-based philanthropic initiatives are less developed, although initiatives like [betterplace.org](https://betterplace.org) speak to the opportunity to trial place-based giving.

For instance, in Denver, the Collaborative Impact Fund aims to facilitate private-public partnerships and support non-profit led community projects. In Chicago, the Corporate Coalition, a business-led organisation focused on solving inequality through investing in place, offers another example of this type of model.

### **Conclusion**

The aforementioned strategies for mobility justice, housing justice and meaningful citizen engagement are just the start of the road to a more just and equitable society that has to start within cities with strong leadership. These strategies will cement the direction of any future city administration towards the goals of justice, equality and sustainability for its people and for the planet; and will set an example for neighboring cities and communities across the country and on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Covid-19 pandemic showed that change is achievable, even if only in small increments. Just change is a candid nudge to city leaders to not delay in starting the above strategies and in doing so, fostering an innovative ecosystem that can catalyze just change for years to come.

Just change.

## About the Project

New Urban Progress (NUP) is a transatlantic dialogue on how urban areas can be more innovative, democratic, and sustainable. By exchanging best practices and collaborating on bold solutions, young urban leaders from Germany and the United States worked on how to deliver social and economic progress while renewing the transatlantic partnership at the city level. The project covered three years (2019-2022), including two delegation trips, and 20 transatlantic fellows.

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