

# **LEARNING WITH CITIES, LEARNING FOR CITIES**

**The Golden Opportunity of the  
Urban Agenda for the EU**

Suzanne Potjer & Maarten Hajer



Suzanne Potjer is a junior researcher and PhD candidate at the Urban Futures Studio. Her research is concerned with 'horizontal city networks'. Through both empirical research and practical interventions, she investigates these networks to gain insight into how they contribute to practices of urban governance.

Maarten Hajer is distinguished professor Urban Futures at the Utrecht University, and director of the Urban Futures Studio. Before that he was also Director of the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL – Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving). He has written extensively about cities, governance and sustainability.

The Urban Futures Studio is a transdisciplinary institute devoted to the study of positive urban futures and of ways to get there. It conducts empirical research on existing practices, but also helps to initiate new experiments. The Studio is convinced that innovative thinking starts in 'crossovers' between distinct disciplines, and in coalitions of new and old agents of change. Find out more at [www.uu.nl/ufs](http://www.uu.nl/ufs)

## **URBAN FUTURES STUDIO**

Heidelberglaan 8

3584 CS Utrecht

The Netherlands

Tel: +31 30 253 15 10 (reception)

[urbanfuturesstudio@uu.nl](mailto:urbanfuturesstudio@uu.nl)



**Utrecht University**

## INTRODUCTION

There are times when politicians cannot agree. While the media often see this as failure, we know that these moments are when true innovations are born. This was the case at the Lisbon European Council in 2000. After debates in which the member states could not agree whether to allow the European Union a greater say in the domain of social policy or not, it was agreed to start a system to 'compare' how countries were trying to achieve their goals. With hindsight, we know that this led to one of the most innovative policy regimes within the EU: the Open Method of Coordination. The lesson? Sometimes true innovation gets smuggled into the system of governance.

When the Pact of Amsterdam was signed on May 30<sup>th</sup> of last year, a similar breakthrough was made for the role of cities. Within the EU, the recognition of the importance of cities had been growing for a long time. With the Pact of Amsterdam, and the *Urban Agenda for the EU* that it brought to life, this recognition entered a new role-redefining phase for cities: one in which cities are no longer only the object of EU policymaking, but now also become part of policymaking itself. In metaphorical terms, a phase in which cities get 'a seat at the table'.

At the same time, the Pact of Amsterdam is also a delicate move. Similar to the dynamic in the field of social policy, the extent to which the EU should be active on urban issues remains a contested issue. Therefore, even though the Urban Agenda for the EU for the first time involves cities in EU policy, it deliberately leaves open what sort of involvement this amounts to: instead of providing formalized structures, the Urban Agenda emphasizes *informal* collaboration and finding out in practice how cities can be involved.

Despite the fact that much is left open, the working method of the Urban Agenda for the EU can be seen as innovative in its set-up. The Urban Agenda organizes 'partnerships' on various themes, in which cities, member states, the European Commission and other stakeholders come together to discuss how EU policy can contribute to urban governance. As we see it, the method is based upon three central principles:

- First, the 'local principle', in which all involved parties recognize that cities are a vital place to address European challenges, and therefore commit themselves to helping cities to do so.
- Second, a 'horizontal principle', in which the involved parties search for shared urban problems and solutions, by starting with the practical experiences of cities to see what can be learnt from them.
- Third and last, a 'vertical principle', in which the involved parties come to conclusions on how barriers to effective governance on the urban level can be resolved on all three levels of government.

One may argue that this is 'policy light': just three open principles, no legally binding agreements. However, even without a binding agreement, these principles together provide an innovative framework that has *the potential* to integrate cities in the policymaking of the EU in a powerful way. There is a strong similarity between this development and developments in the field of social policy in 2000. Similar to the Open Method of Coordination, we see the Urban Agenda as having the features of a policy regime that can work very well in the current complex era in which policies are made. Nevertheless, to what extent the Urban Agenda will realize this potential is still highly uncertain, as much of its method will develop in practice. With the Urban Agenda born only a little over a year ago, this crucial process of development is happening right now.

One year after the Pact of Amsterdam, it is thus too early to come to conclusions on if and how the method of the Urban Agenda for the EU works. It is, however, an opportune moment to monitor the progress that has been made, and to think about what will be crucial to its ongoing development. We contribute to the latter in this essay.

Asking the question, 'How can the Urban Agenda for the EU best enable cities to address urban challenges on a European scale?', we will – from a broad academic perspective - argue what the Urban Agenda for the EU is and should be all about. We will do this in two steps. First, we will reconsider the value of the local, horizontal and vertical principles that make up the Urban Agenda for the EU. Focusing on the notion of experimentation, we will argue why cities play a vital role in addressing European challenges, and why it is essential that they not only collaborate with each other, but also with other levels of government. Based on this, we will frame the Urban Agenda for the EU as a potential *system of experimental learning*. Second, we will argue that this system of experimental learning needs to be *infused with imagination* in order to be able to address today's major challenges. Using one of our own initiatives as an example, we will show how imagination helps to make the radical solutions we need both conceivable and attractive.

## 1. THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF CITIES

The first principle of the Urban Agenda for the EU is the 'local' one: with the Urban Agenda, the European Union recognizes the growing importance of cities in addressing European challenges. In this new appreciation of the city, the EU does not stand alone. In fact, we currently appear to be in an 'urban moment': shortly after the Urban Agenda was established in the EU, a similar recognition came on the global level with the establishment of the *New Urban Agenda* at the UN's Habitat III conference. And, for some years now, the broader debate suggests the idea that cities play a vital role in addressing the world's problems, with hallmark books as Edward Glaeser's *Triumph of the City* (2011) and Benjamin Barber's *If Mayors Rule the World* (2013). Hence the new focus on cities has a broader resonance. But what exactly makes cities so important?

**"In the EU, we have already worked a lot with cities, but in a fragmented way. Everybody in their corner recognized the need to work with cities, and yet, as a whole, the important role of cities was not recognized. With the Urban Agenda process, that recognition is there, which has improved policy coordination and overall awareness of urban issues in the Commission."**

**Judit Torokne**  
European Commission

The Pact of Amsterdam for one answers that question by emphasizing that cities are especially relevant *places* to address European challenges. The Pact states that the European Union is not only "one of the most urbanized areas in the world"<sup>1</sup> (with 70% of Europe's citizens living in cities now, to 80% by 2050<sup>2</sup>), cities are also the "engines of the economy"<sup>3</sup> as well as places where "challenges such as segregation, unemployment and poverty are concentrated".<sup>4</sup> The Pact thus argues that cities have a double potential: they are both places where great challenges *must* be met, and places of great opportunity where challenges can be met.

1 Pact of Amsterdam, p.3

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

We argue, however, that there is more to it: cities are also the locus of *experimentation*. This argument partly relates to that double potential: as places of opportunity, cities are where new technologies are developed and new ideas are found. Cities are inherently serendipitous: places where you find everything that you were not looking for, as Richard Sennett often said. Equally, they are places of confrontation between a wide array of problems – not only social ones but also environmental problems such as pollution and climate change - that all require innovative solutions. Still, there is another vital reason for why cities are excellent places for experimentation: for cities, all these opportunities and problems are fundamentally local. They are happening in their own streets, in the endless and unfinished state that is characteristic for urban society.

This distinctive feature of ‘localness’ forces city governments to be practical in their work. For cities there is no use for abstract principles or sectorial approaches - cities are where the rubber hits the road. Urban governance therefore is very much about operational strategy: it is in cities where migrants arrive and need a house; and where the complex infrastructure of sewage systems, water, glass fiber, electricity, mobility and education need to be constantly updated, renewed and rethought. These situations demand both a practical orientation as well as an integrated and adaptive approach, of findings solutions, again and again, based on the changing perceptions of the problems at hand. In the words of Benjamin Barber, “fixing stuff and delivering solutions is the politics of urban life” (2013:92). This practical attitude together with a concentration of both problems and opportunities creates the perfect breeding ground for experiments.

The unique suitability of cities for experimentation is not just hypothetical. In fact, real experimentation is increasingly taking place in cities. Whether we should call them *urban experiments*, *living labs*, *testbeds*, or whatever else, we are now witnessing an era in which cities are fully discovering their experimental potential. The research of climate action scholars Harriet Bulkeley and Vanesa Cástan Broto attests to this (2013): starting from the observation that there are few examples of comprehensive climate action strategies on the city level, they found an abundance of smaller climate action initiatives and projects. Using an existing database, they eventually studied 637 climate change experiments that took place in 100 cities around the globe, coming to the conclusion that – at least on this issue – urban governance, to a significant extent, takes place through experiments.

Experiments, in other words, are becoming central to the way in which cities deal with their urban challenges. But what exactly are experiments, how do they work, and what do they achieve?

**“If we want to achieve concrete results, it is absolutely necessary to integrate different approaches and different policies. We can discuss on the European level for years and years what is an integrated approach, but on the city level it is done by itself. There projects have to be multidimensional. They have to be broad. They have to not only be technical but also include citizens to develop them.”**

**Jan Olbrycht**  
*European Parliament*

We can discern a few defining elements:

1. Experiments are practice-based: they are staged in specific practices with the purpose of - at least in the first place - improving that particular practice.
2. Experiments are centered around a process of 'learning by doing': they find and develop new solutions by trying them out in practice.
3. Experiments also often involve a collaboration of various public and private actors. (This is also demonstrated by the study of Bulkeley and Cástan Broto (2013), who found that a large part of the 637 experiments were undertaken in such collaborations.)

An example of an experiment can be given by the case of 'Buiksloterham'. Buiksloterham is a new neighborhood in the city of Amsterdam where citizens, entrepreneurs, city government and other public organizations together experiment with circular and sustainable area development. As a former industrial and even polluted area, Buiksloterham was left undeveloped for a long time. This changed some years ago when the city of Amsterdam made it into a site for experimental area development: enticed by the early development efforts of creative

(PHOTOS: STADSLAB BUIKSLOTERHAM CIRCULAIR – WWW.BUIKSLOTERHAM.NL)



THE BUIKSLOTERHAM AREA IN THE CITY OF AMSTERDAM.



PEOPLE FROM THE BUIKSLOTERHAM COMMUNITY HAVING A PICNIC IN FRONT OF SELF-BUILD HOMES.

entrepreneurs, the city opted for “organic transformation by means of interactive governance”<sup>5</sup>. It released land to a mix of developers, entrepreneurs and citizens who were all given significant freedom to experiment with circular and sustainable area development. The citizens specifically, were even given the freedom to self-build their homes. Together with city government, these diverse actors now form a local community that aims to create a completely ‘Circular Buiksloterham’ by collaborating and learning from each other. As a result, Buiksloterham has become a vibrant neighborhood that is widely regarded as an exemplary for innovative area development.

The Buiksloterham case demonstrates how through an experimental way of working – by starting from practice, by trying out, by involving various actors - urban experiments develop new solutions that truly ‘work’ in practice. Also, the case shows how through the experimental process, various actors learn to work together in productive ways. Summarizing both outcomes, experiments thus lead to *innovation*, both in terms of urban solutions and in terms of collaborative processes.

***That is why cities should play such an important role: because they have the unique potential to create innovation through experimentation. Cities, due to their local nature, as well as their concentration of both challenges and opportunities, are uniquely positioned to address European challenges in practical and experimental ways.***

However, although the rise of urban experiments is a highly promising development, it is important that their specific nature is taken into account. Due to their practice-based nature, the success of experiments is often deeply contextualized: what works in one context, does not necessarily work in another. Therefore, efforts to simply ‘replicate’ or ‘scale up’ urban experiments often fail (Evans, Karvonen & Raven, 2016). Also, as experiments are all about the value of ‘trying out’, the other side of the coin is that experiments may also not work. And in fact, many experiments fail, stay small, stop after a while, and all in all struggle to achieve lasting success. The reality of ‘governance through experiments’ (Bulkeley & Cástan Broto, 2013) is thus a scattered and fragmented one – some small, some big, some successful, some not. How can such a fragmented approach address the big challenges that cities, and Europe as a whole, face? To answer that question, we must turn to the second principle, the ‘horizontal principle’.

## 2. COLLABORATION BETWEEN CITIES

The second principle of the Urban Agenda for the EU is the ‘horizontal’ one. In the partnerships of the Urban Agenda, city governments are brought together to explore with each other - and with the other partners - how EU policy affects their everyday practice of urban governance. Partners also reach out to cities outside of the partnerships, to find out whether the problems and solutions they come up with are broadly shared. In both these measures, the Urban Agenda draws heavily upon existing city-oriented European organizations and networks. EURO CITIES, CEMR, URBACT, the Committee of the Regions, they are all vital partners to the Urban Agenda: both in the sense that they nominate cities for the partnerships, and provide essential communication channels for the partnerships to share their proposals with cities across the EU.

---

5 Website City of Amsterdam: <https://www.amsterdam.nl/projecten/buiksloterham/about-buiksloterham/#h578825c4-6d01-48f8-bf31-724f2acbbf57>

The Urban Agenda for the EU thus explicitly starts from the practical experiences of cities, and seeks to make sure that these experiences are broadly shared by tapping into existing collaborations between European cities. But why are the shared experiences of cities so important? And what is the value of intercity collaboration?

To answer these questions, it is helpful to look at those practices of intercity collaboration that the Urban Agenda connects with. These practices have a long history: in Europe, for example, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) was founded already in 1951, in a post-war effort to foster peace and understanding between European cities. Nonetheless, a great surge of intercity collaboration came in the 1980's, when a variety of city *networks* emerged. These networks were different from what existed before in the sense that they were outward-looking: they helped cities to organize themselves around particular issues, so that together they could have a significant impact on a European or global scale.

Even when looking at Europe alone, there is a multifold of city networks existing today. An example of an early pioneer is *EUROCITIES*, which was founded in 1986 by six European cities as a network through which cities could share knowledge and influence EU policymakers. Other examples are the climate-oriented networks of *Energy Cities* and *Climate Alliance* that began in the 1990s, when local climate action became an important issue for many European cities. A recent example is the *European Network of Living Labs* that brings together the many living labs that are currently emerging throughout Europe. Finally, also the EU itself raised several city networks, of which *URBACT* is a prominent example. These examples of European city networks, together with many others, create a dense web of connections between cities in Europe. But what is it that all of these networks do, and what do they achieve?

A first answer is that these networks are all about sharing knowledge and experience. They are built upon the idea that although cities have their own specific contexts, there is also much that they share: they all deal with traffic congestion and related pollution issues, they all deal with the need to create affordable housing, they all deal with the influx of migrants and refugees. For all of these issues, innovative solutions in one city are highly relevant for another – they make it that cities do not have to 're-invent the wheel' for themselves.

**“You look at each other’s practices. People visit us from Antwerpen and Gent to learn about how we organized our low emission zones. Our people go to Gent and Bremen to learn about car sharing. The goal is always to learn to do something you cannot yet do.”**

**Lot van Hooijdonk**  
City of Utrecht

In order to facilitate cities learning from one another, these networks organize a wide array of activities and measures, ranging from conferences, working groups and study visits, to guides, management tools and online platforms. Some networks also take it one step further: they organize collaborative projects in which cities directly work together to find innovative solutions in practice. An example of this is EU Climate-KIC's *Smart Sustainable Districts* that experiments with sustainable city districts in multiple EU cities.

Sharing knowledge and experience is not all these networks do. Another important part of their work is concerned with inspiring and motivating cities to take action. An excellent example is the *Covenant of Mayors*, an initiative through which mayors of



European cities voluntarily commit themselves to implementing EU climate and energy objectives in their cities<sup>6</sup>, which is run by a consortium of various European city networks (as well as other actors).

City networks thus have a dual aim: they enable cities to take innovative action through knowledge sharing, as well as inspire and motivate them to take that action by creating collective commitment. Through both aims, one overarching result is achieved: by interacting and collaborating with each other, cities are able to catalyze urban action in their cities and consequently increase their collective impact.

**That is why collaboration between cities is so important: because it catalyzes urban action into having significant impact on a European and even a global scale. Through city networks, cities learn from each other's innovative practices, and become motivated to take up innovative action themselves.**

City networks also have a wider effect: with the emergence of city networks, the growing commitment of cities to meet European and global goals, and the widespread proliferation of all sorts of innovative projects on the urban level, the role of cities is changing. As a consequence, cities are now also positioning themselves differently vis-à-vis higher levels of government: in their new role, they are no longer simply listening. An ironic example of this occurred recently in June 2017, when American President Trump pulled out of the Paris Climate Agreement saying "I was elected by voters of Pittsburg, not Paris." To this, the Mayor of Pittsburg resolutely responded on Twitter "I can assure you that we will follow the guidelines of the Paris Agreement for our people,

our economy and our future." This is yet another illustration of the fact that the old 'matryoshka doll' system of governance, according to which cities fit in nations that fit in the European Union or the United Nations, each with their own judicial spheres, is no longer a good representation of reality (Hajer, 2003).

However, despite their new role and changing attitude towards higher levels of government, the fact remains that cities are still in a dependent position. Decades of austerity measures have eroded the capacity of cities to organize their own professional bureaucracies. Moreover, the city level of government remains fundamentally dependent on higher levels of government for both resources and regulation. In terms of urban action, this means multiple things. First, the resources received play a vital role in determining the level of ambition for city governments: do they have sufficient means to take up innovative projects? Secondly, the regulation that is imposed on cities has a significant effect on the ability of city governments to find innovative solutions: do they have sufficient space and flexibility to experiment?

These are issues that cities, and also networks of cities cannot solve for themselves. Instead they must look for collaboration with other levels of government. This brings us to the third principle of the Urban Agenda for the EU, the 'vertical principle'.

<sup>6</sup> This covenant has recently joined forces with the *Compact of Mayors to become the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy* that brings together 7,450 cities worldwide who commit themselves to climate action.

**"Where in the beginning we were knocking on everybody's doors, now, if we sit here, people come knocking on our doors. 'We have problems with implementation, can we work with you? Can you get a group of cities together?' This would not have happened ten years ago."**

**Dorthe Nielsen**  
*Eurocities*

### 3. CITIES IN MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE

The third principle of the Urban Agenda for the EU is the ‘vertical’ one: with the Urban Agenda, cities get ‘a seat at the table’ with the European and national level of government, enabling them to directly influence EU policy. For cities, this is a big first. Of course, they had some influence before: for instance, through the Committee of the Regions, through the Cohesion Policy, and, last but not least, through the extensive lobby that cities – like so many other public and private interests – have set up for themselves in Brussels. However, with the Urban Agenda, cities become part of the EU structure of policymaking, even if in a non-binding way. Why is it so important that this new form of multi-level collaboration takes place?

We have argued so far that the potential of cities to have impact on the European level lies in their special ability to find innovative urban solutions through experimentation and to catalyze urban action through intercity collaboration. Consequently, a vertical principle must be flexible enough to fit with these particular local and horizontal dynamics. To explore what this principle may be, we cannot look to other

examples of city-member state-EU collaboration – in that respect, the Urban Agenda for the EU is the first in its kind, or in EU speak, an institutional practice *sui generis*. Nevertheless, if we look at other policy domains, we do have an example of a similar system that already exists for some time and that has some important lessons to teach: the *Open Method of Coordination* (OMC).

The OMC is a method, often described as a form of ‘soft law’, that aims to structure collaboration between EU member states, without resulting in binding EU legislative measures, nor requiring that EU countries change their own legislation. It officially became an EU governance instrument during the Lisbon Summit of 2000, and has mainly been applied in EU social policy. In this policy area, there was an ongoing debate between proponents of further EU-integration who argued that substantial EU policy was vital to reduce disparities between regions, and member states who were reluctant to give up their national autonomy. The OMC struck a balance between the two desires, and has had considerable success since. These days, the OMC is often regarded as one of the most innovative multi-level governance practices within the European Union. But how does it work?

The OMC weaves together three elements that make a ‘recursive’ cycle of coordination: first, on the EU level, the objectives of a particular policy are jointly defined, as well as the instruments to measure the progress. In the second step, on the national level, member states receive considerable autonomy to implement the policy at their own discretion. Their implementation is then, in a third step, periodically monitored and evaluated, while simultaneously peer review is organized to create a process of mutual learning. The lessons learned finally provide the input for periodic revisions of the goals and metrics of the policy on the EU-level, returning to step one of the cycle.

**“This is the first attempt to bring together on equal footing countries, cities, other urban partners, the Commission– with no leader, just people who are experts on the topic – to let them discuss what are the biggest challenges on a given topic and try to come up with a vision on how to approach those challenges.”**

**Elena Szolgayová**  
Country of Slovakia

The OMC has striking similarities to the Urban Agenda for the EU. Like the Urban Agenda, the OMC entails a local, horizontal and vertical principle: locally, national governments can act according to the needs of their specific national contexts; horizontally, implementation practices are constantly compared with the purpose of learning; vertically, the EU level of government sets the policy framework, but also revises that framework based on experiences coming from practice.

According to Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin (2008) – two academic scholars who have been investigating practices of EU governance for decades – the OMC is not the only EU practice that works in such a way. They

argue that similar processes can also be observed in other areas of EU governance: for instance, in the way in which the EU gives considerable discretionary space to various national regulatory agencies, or in the way in which some EU agencies extensively organize their processes around input of national experts. Sabel and Zeitlin summarize these various practices by calling them forms of ‘experimentalist governance’.

What can we learn from this experimentalist governance? For some part, it tells us what we already know: that experimentation is a local practice (whether that may be

on the city level or the national level) that should also entail a process of horizontal learning. But it also tells us something new: that experimentation may benefit from a coordinating authority that stands ‘outside’ the experiments, and makes sure that experiments learn from each other and together reach overarching goals. Also, it shows us how this coordination can be done in a flexible way: not by top-down instructions, but by organizing a two-way interaction in which experiments pursue policy goals and policy takes into account practical experience.

**“It makes a big difference whether you are talking to the European Commission from a lobby position, or from a creative opportunity to think of solutions that can help improve the situation of cities within Europe.”**

**Nico Beets**  
Dutch Urban Envoy

***That is why it is so important that cities collaborate with other levels of government: because this collaboration can help bring about the institutionalization of an experimental way of working. If the coordination mechanism in place is flexible enough, the European and national level of government can provide the right conditions for cities to experiment.***

The perspective of ‘experimentalist governance’ not only informs our thinking on the Urban Agenda, the Urban Agenda may also add fresh ideas to the idea of ‘experimentalist governance’. Thus far the term ‘experimentalist’ mostly refers to a process of having member states retain their autonomy, while providing an EU-level structure for learning and collaboration, as seen in the OMC example. But in cities, experimentation also refers to actual sites of experimentation, to material experiments in which actors try to find innovative solutions to concrete problems. With the Urban Agenda for the EU, the European Union can thus capitalize on these *real* experiments that occur in cities, thereby unleashing the full potential of an experimental way of working. Of course, to some extent, the EU is already doing this: in its *Urban Innovative Actions* program, it provides cities with the resources to experiment with new and innovative solutions to urban challenges. With the Urban Agenda for the EU, however, the EU can now make such experiments part of a systematized way of working involving all three levels of government. What would such a system look like? For this, we turn to our proposal of a *system of experimental learning*.

## 4. EXPERIMENTAL LEARNING THROUGH THE URBAN AGENDA FOR THE EU

With the Urban Agenda for the EU, a big step forward has been taken in giving cities a role on the EU level. Through the informal, multi-level, collaborative method of the Urban Agenda's 'partnerships', cities now sit at the table with the Commission, member states and other stakeholders to discuss how EU policy can best contribute to urban governance. However, because much is left open in the method, this new involvement of cities remains an open-ended process: what new role it will lead to for cities, will ultimately depend on developments 'on the ground'. To explore what will be crucial to this development, we asked the question 'How can the Urban Agenda for the EU best enable cities to address urban challenges on a European scale?' In this first part of our answer, we propose that the Urban Agenda needs to incorporate a *system of experimental learning*.

### A system of experimental learning

To fully utilize the three fundamental principles that the Urban Agenda for the EU is built on, we argue that all three must contribute to an experimental way of working. So, what would that look like?

**ON THE LOCAL LEVEL**, an experimental way of working entails that city governments emphasize experiments as a way to find innovative solutions to urban problems. In collaboration with other public and private actors, they initiate and/or support experiments in concrete settings. Because these urban experiments are about trying things out in practice, they will not always have success, and if they do, that success will often have key contextual factors. For that reason, experiments above all need a rich learning environment, in which experiments can constantly learn and draw inspiration from each other.

**ON THE HORIZONTAL LEVEL**, an experimental way of working entails that city governments actively collaborate with each other and thereby provide a rich learning environment through a variety of networks. Cities will learn from each other's practices, and inspire and motivate each other to take action. Through collaboration, cities can together make a bigger impact and consequently have a stronger voice vis-à-vis higher levels of government. Nevertheless, they also remain dependent upon these higher levels of government. Therefore, it is vital that cities actively collaborate with them.

**ON THE VERTICAL LEVEL**, an experimental way of working entails multi-level collaboration and coordination. In this collaboration, higher levels of government set the right conditions for experimentation to take place on the city level. They provide city governments with sufficient resources, space and flexibility for experimentation, as well as facilitate processes of intercity learning. But, as coordinating authorities, they also formulate the overarching goals for city governments to meet, so that cities together are able to address urban challenges on a European scale. To make sure that this still relates to the practical needs on the city level, they periodically review the overarching framework and goals based on experience coming from practice.



**LOCAL  
LEVEL**



**VERTICAL  
LEVEL**



**HORIZONTAL  
LEVEL**

PRINCIPLE	URBAN AGENDA FOR THE EU	SYSTEM OF EXPERIMENTAL LEARNING
 Local	Recognition of cities as playing a vital role in addressing European challenges.	Through experimentation, cities create innovation.
 Horizontal	Starting from the practical experiences of cities and see what can be learnt from them.	Through intercity collaboration, cities together catalyze urban action.
 Vertical	Finding out how barriers to effective governance on the urban level can be resolved at all three levels of government.	Through multi-level collaboration, city, national and European levels of government together institutionalize experiments and an experimental way of working.

Why is applying this system of experimental learning so important for the Urban Agenda for the EU?

With the Urban Agenda as it is now, cities get a 'seat at the table' and, for the first time, become able to directly influence EU policy. But that influence can take many forms. If the new involvement of cities merely leads up to an extended opportunity for cities to lobby, then the Urban Agenda will likely not realize its true potential. Then, cities will come to the table with individual 'wish lists' of things that they would like to change for their own cities, and the Commission and member states will likely find reasons for why those particular changes cannot be made. Therefore, the Urban Agenda for the EU must not be about what cities can get from the European Union, but about what they can *add to it*. Through our proposed system of experimental learning, cities are able to add their unique ability to experiment and find innovative solutions. The system moreover cultivates that unique ability of cities by providing it with horizontal and vertical mechanisms of learning. Thus, if the Urban Agenda implements this system, parties will come to the table to *learn with cities, for cities*; to enable the experimental potential of cities, so that cities together can better address European challenges.

**So, to conclude, if the Urban Agenda for the EU can foster the experimental potential of cities, and set in place a system of experimental learning, then it will indeed enable cities to have a significant impact on the European scale.**

Nevertheless, this is still not enough. Having a significant impact does not necessarily equal having a *desirable* impact. In this day and age, Europe is facing major challenges that not only require the European Union to do more, but also to do things *radically* different. Climate change, the influx of migrants and refugees, the instability of the European Community due to events like Brexit, they are all major challenges that simply cannot be solved by doing more of the same. Although an experimental way of working with a focus on cities will help the EU to find new solutions, there is still the question: will these new solutions be radical enough? In this last part of the essay, we argue that they can be, but only if they are *infused with imagination*.

## 5. INFUSING LEARNING WITH IMAGINATION

How can we learn to tackle the major challenges of our time? This is a fundamental question, to which there are no easy answers. In human kind's never ending search for solutions, people constantly think of new ideas and

constantly develop new technologies. Yet, reality tells us that all this innovation in itself is not sufficient. After all, we have known for decades that climate change is a tremendous threat, but we are still incapable of responding to it. Even in the current day and age, in which renewable energy technologies have become highly accessible, there is still reluctance to undergo a full energy transition. What this shows, is that having the solution does not always convince us to act. For that, we also need something else.



As the Urban Futures Studio, we are interested in the role that *imagination* plays in making radical solutions both conceivable and attractive. Particularly, we are interested in what happens when people experience so-called 'imaginaries', or collectively held images of the future. In our research, we have found that creating imaginaries, as well as joint experiences of those imaginaries, can have a profound influence on improving the learning capacity of actors and institutions. We will illustrate how this works through an example of one of our initiatives.

In February 2016, the Urban Futures Studio, together with landscape designer Dirk Sijmons, organised a staged meeting for a group of 60 high-ranking European officials, CEOs and Directors of NGOs and knowledge institutions. It was deliberately staged in a darkened hall at the huge Shell Laboratory in Amsterdam. Lighting up the floor before us was an imaginary of how the Netherlands could potentially achieve the 2-degree Celsius target; '2050 – An Energetic Odyssey'. In a film of little over 13 minutes, a post-fossil fuel future was revealed. It became an imaginary that assisted the assembled guests in their reorientation.<sup>8</sup>

The example of the Odyssey illustrates the power of imagination. The suggestion here is by no means that this intervention suddenly changed the world. But what did happen was this: the intervention resulted in what we call 'ontological expansion' (Tuomi, 2012). The Odyssey not only made a new future conceivable to the stakeholders present, it also made it attractive to them. Years of meetings were held on the subject of the North Sea: high-ranking officials were endlessly travelling to meetings at strip lit offices in Brussels. And now, on this evening, the very same officials were gathered somewhat awkwardly around a vision of the future. Two months later, they enthusiastically presented the vision to their political superiors in the muted surroundings of the five-star hotel, The

7 The example of 'An Energetic Odyssey' draws heavily on the account given in M.A.Hajer (2017) *The Power of Imagination*, Inaugural Address, Utrecht University: [https://www.uu.nl/sites/default/files/hajer\\_oratie\\_eng\\_0.pdf](https://www.uu.nl/sites/default/files/hajer_oratie_eng_0.pdf)

8 Maarten Hajer initiated '2050: An Energetic Odyssey' as head curator of the IABR 2016. Commissioned by the IABR, the Odyssey was created by landscape architect Dirk Sijmons (H+N+S Landscape Architects) and media agency Tungsten, based on calculations completed by Ecofys and various workshops with experts. The Odyssey can be viewed on the IABR website: [www.iabr.nl](http://www.iabr.nl).



Grand. And again two months after that, the ministers even signed a political declaration to accelerate work on the project. Dutch Minister for Economic Affairs Henk Kamp quite literally said: 'It is possible. We have stood around it'.<sup>9</sup> Broad legitimacy for thinking big had been created.

The Odyssey came into being in the context of the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam (IABR). The interesting thing is that we used the 'soft space' of a biennale to bring together a group of actors that *together* could change the future of the North Sea, yet were not able to tap into that transformative power in the confines of the usual types of meetings. Through the soft space of the biennale and the collective experience of the imaginary, they became able to see a joint perspective. What we describe here, is a different type of learning. It is learning that is infused with imagination.

How can learning in the Urban Agenda for the EU, and its proposed system of experimental learning, be infused with imagination? As we see it, this can be done by making all three of its levels of learning *imaginative*. On the local level, this means that the Urban Agenda needs *imaginative* experiments; experiments that do not just test new technologies and solutions, but create new visions for the city and give people a sense of what the future city could be like. On the horizontal level, the Urban Agenda needs *imaginative* knowledge exchange; exchange that is not just about providing information, but about being able to truly experience the innovations of others. On the vertical level, the Urban Agenda needs *imaginative* coordination. This entails that, like in the case of the Odyssey, different actors not just negotiate outcomes from their own perspective, but together create collectively held images of the future that can inform their joint actions. Together, these imaginative practices can help the Urban Agenda for the EU to bring about radical solutions that are still deemed conceivable and attractive.

So, will the Urban Agenda for the EU seize its golden opportunity? Will it foster an experimental way of working, infuse its learning processes with imagination, and overall help cities to create a positive impact on a European scale? We cannot say for sure. Partly, it will depend on the vital work that the Urban Agenda's partnerships are doing right now; partly, it will depend on how the method gets shaped further on the European level. But if it does, we believe that the Urban Agenda for the EU can develop into a powerful instrument, both for cities and for Europe as a whole, that may help define how the European Union deals with its challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## LITERATURE

Barber, B. R. (2013). *If mayors ruled the world: Dysfunctional nations, rising cities*. Yale University Press.

Bulkeley, H., & Castán Broto, V. (2013). Government by experiment? Global cities and the governing of climate change. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 38(3), 361-375.

Evans, J., Karvonen, A., & Raven, R. (Eds.). (2016). *The Experimental City*. Routledge.

Glaeser, E. (2011). *Triumph of the city: How our greatest invention makes us richer, smarter, greener, healthier, and happier*. Penguin.

Hajer, M. (2003). Policy without polity? Policy analysis and the institutional void. *Policy sciences*, 36(2), 175-195.

Sabel, C. F., & Zeitlin, J. (2008). Learning from difference: the new architecture of experimentalist governance in the EU. *European Law Journal*, 14(3), 271-327.

Tuomi, I. (2012), *Foresight in an unpredictable world, Technology Analysis & Strategic Management*, 24 (8), pp 735-751.

---

9 NOS (2016, 6 June), 'Noordzeelanden' gaan samen windmolens bouwen ('North Sea countries' to collaborate on construction of wind turbines). Available at: <http://nos.nl/artikel/2109364-noordzeelanden-gaan-samen-windmolens-bouwen.html> (consulted on 16 February 2017).

# URBAN FUTURES STUDIO



Utrecht University