

FROM THE MAKERS OF THE
CREATIVE BUREAUCRACY FESTIVAL

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SEBASTIAN TURNER (ED.)

CREATIVE BUREAUCRACY

WHERE NEXT & HOW?

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PREFACE

Over the past decade, the Creative Bureaucracy idea has moved from a provocative oxymoron to an acknowledged practice and increasingly, from the margins to the mainstream.

The Creative Bureaucracy Festival has been at the heart of this journey. What began as a space to rethink the potential of public administrations world-wide to serve the wider public interest has grown into a global community of people working to make government more capable, more relevant, more human and more effective. It has highlighted that such a renewal is possible through numerous examples from across the world. This is why we say it is a movement in the making.

On the verge of its 10th anniversary in 2027 the Creative Bureaucracy Festival has begun to reflect on its relevance and impact and how it might need to innovate and move ahead in its next stage. The **Global Report** conceived, curated and edited by Charles Landry brings together voices from across the world and is intended to become an annual review both to reflect on our journey and to act as a catalyst for what comes next.

Three shifts are driving our overall development.

First, the Festival is becoming a **year-round international content platform**, extending its energy beyond a single day into a continuous space for exchange, learning, inspiration and all things to do with rethinking bureaucracies.

Second, it is expanding its global reach—through the Global Forum of Public Service Leaders as well as Creative Bureaucracy Festival Hubs and Townhalls around the world with the hope they evolve into a growing international community connected by shared challenges and ambitions.

Third, our focus is shifting from highlighting promising pilots to innovations that endure and spread. The challenge today is less a shortage of good ideas but as our **demonstration formats** introduced in 2026 will show what is possible and ready to be adapted, adopted and scaled

Together, these ambitions aim to strengthen the capacity of democratic governments not just to imagine change, but to deliver it so that the trust of citizens can be fortified or even regained.

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IMPRINT

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SETTING THE SCENE

Charles Landry

The idea of the creative bureaucracy has travelled remarkably far. What began as a provocation—almost a contradiction in terms—has **evolved into a shared language** for a growing international community of public servants, civic leaders, designers, policy-makers and institutional innovators. Across cities, regions and national administrations, initiatives inspired by this spirit have multiplied: sometimes emerging quietly at the edges of systems, sometimes supported from the centre, but almost always **driven by people working against the grain of established habits**.

Yet this growing movement raises an important question: Are we gaining traction? Are we having an effect?

Public institutions everywhere are **operating under unprecedented pressure**. The problems and challenges they face—technological acceleration, rising inequality, demographic change, climate disruption, geopolitical instability and social fragmentation—are not only larger in scale, but fundamentally different in character. They are interconnected, fast-moving and resistant to the **linear systems of administration designed for another era**.

At the same time, governments face declining trust, rising expectations for participation and transparency, and the disruptive implications of artificial intelligence and digital transformation. The traditional machinery of administration—built for stability, predictability and control—is increasingly **struggling to keep pace** with the world it is attempting to govern.

In this context, becoming a more creative bureaucracy is **no longer a niche concern** or optional extra. It is emerging as a condition for institutional resilience and democratic legitimacy.

This collection is not another manifesto, nor simply a catalogue of best practice. Instead, it is a collective stock-take: **a moment of reflection** by people deeply engaged in the work of public transformation—trying, learning, adapting, sometimes failing, but continuing nonetheless.

The contributors come from different countries, disciplines and institutional cultures. Some work inside government, others alongside it or in critical dialogue with it. What unites them is a shared commitment to making public institutions more capable, humane, imaginative and effective—without abandoning the essential public values of fairness, accountability and legality.

Each contribution is deliberately concise. Together they **form a mosaic** rather than a single argument. Some chapters explore how the state itself may need to evolve—from post-bureaucratic governance to mission-driven institutions, agentic states and new protocol-based systems of coordination. Others focus on practical transformation: strengthening delivery capacity, redesigning public services, building cross-sector capability and improving implementation.

Several contributors explore the city as a **laboratory of possibility**—a place where experimentation, civic imagination and collaboration can reshape how public value is created. Others focus on the human dimension of public innovation: judgement, care, leadership, motivation, discretionary effort and the role of playfulness in institutional culture. Running throughout is a recognition that public innovation is not simply technical. It is deeply social, political and emotional.

Despite their diversity, several **common themes** recur.

One is the growing importance of judgement in an age increasingly dominated by systems, metrics and automation. Another is the need to create space for experimentation and learning without eroding trust or accountability. A third is the recognition that institutional resilience ultimately depends less on structures alone than on people with agency, courage and imagination acting within them.

Underlying many contributions is a broader shift in understanding: that rules, procedures and organisational cultures should not merely constrain behaviour, but **enable public value**. This requires a different mindset—from administration as control towards administration as capability; from rigid silos toward collaboration; from passive management toward active stewardship of the future.

Collectively our ambition is broad. We want to help kickstart an emerging **operating logic for governance in turbulent times**. It requires combining imagination with implementation, experimentation with accountability, and technological capability with human judgement.

The creative bureaucracy is not a destination. It is an ongoing practice of institutional renewal.

Charles Landry invented the Creative Bureaucracy concept and is co-founder of the Festival.

*the need to create space
for experimentation
and learning without eroding
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PART I — RETHINKING THE STATE

New realities,
new logics,
new forms of
governance

*the need for government
has not diminished as
it needs to fix collective
problems...*

STRENGTH WITHOUT WEIGHT: IDEAS FOR A POST-BUREAUCRATIC STATE

Geoff Mulgan

What kind of state do we want in the years ahead? So, how can governments navigate fiscal pressures, fraught geopolitics and complex challenges. Governments remain relatively resistant to change and innovation, particularly in Europe. This is one crucial reason why they are often mistrusted, seen as incompetent and too slow to respond to new technologies and new tasks. In what follows I suggest some of the **elements of a roadmap** to reform and the case for an ethos of 'strength without weight', using lessons from the most innovative and competent governments around the world.

Yet the need for government has not diminished: to protect people from risks they cannot handle alone; to provide order; to fix collective problems; and to support their citizens to survive and thrive. Here I suggest a repertoire of methods that governments need in the late 2020s, summarised in twelve main themes. It's become a cliché that the world is suffering a "polycrisis" (a series of overlapping crises, from finance to ecology and politics to health) that places huge pressure on governments. The pressures may be nothing like as bad as those of world war or depression. But there's no doubt that governments feel more stressed and that as technologies change at breakneck speed they are constantly being left behind, not least because business drives innovation far more than in the past (as one example, in 1960 a single government agency, the US Department of Defense, was responsible for a third of all global R&D: now the figure is around 3 per cent). In an era of social media they can easily lose touch with their own citizens, and many recognise that they are stuck with institutional models that are no longer fit for purpose.

Yet the need for government has not diminished: to protect people from risks they cannot handle alone; to provide order; to fix collective problems; and to support their citizens to survive and thrive. Here I suggest a repertoire of methods that governments need in the late 2020s, summarised in twelve main themes.

1. First, **intelligence and its orchestration** is now central to the design and workings of governments. Governments have always depended on intelligence. But in the past this was primarily thought about in relation to security: intelligence about external and internal threats. Now governments

need to orchestrate intelligence for all their activities, from education and welfare to the environment, and they need to define intelligence broadly to include data, evidence, models, tacit knowledge, foresight, and creativity and innovation—all the means that can help them make better decisions, particularly under conditions of stress and uncertainty. Most of the world's valuable firms are now based around intelligence. Yet in most governments, intelligence is still relatively marginal, divided by functional departments (health, economy, education and others) and with an overlaying division between specialisms (data, evidence, foresight, statistics and science advice). Instead, intelligence should be a core function, orchestrated both at the centres of government and in a distributed way in departments and agencies: sharing data, evidence and more; tapping into the collective intelligence of the public; and mobilising AI that now makes it far easier to scan, synthesise and design.

2. Intelligence then helps to shape and use **clear and comprehensive strategic frameworks** that describe what government is trying to achieve, wherever possible with explicit goals and milestones. This provides a shape for performance management, budget allocation and for accountability to the public. It may include some very focused priority tasks and some which are broader. Without a clear strategic framework governments risk being driven solely by events. With it they can make the most of data about exactly what's happening in schools, hospitals and the economy providing constant feedback about how well government is working and where change is needed.
3. **Rebuilding trust.** Trust roughly correlates with peoples' feeling that they influence decisions. There are now many tools which simultaneously strengthen democracy and the public's feelings of agency. A critical issue is using the right methods for the right tasks—knowing when and how to consult; when variants of citizens assemblies are most useful (and how best to connect into representative politics and bureaucracy); when formal decision-making power can be devolved (as with participatory budgeting); and when shared diagnosis of a problem, and national conversations, are needed well before attending to possible solutions. Giving citizens choice; visibility on where their money goes; and a repertoire of methods for engagement, from neighbourhood decisions on public spaces to big national issues: all are vital to the workings of a modern state.
4. **New structures for coordination and action.** The structures of government are still too often stuck in vertical silos that were essential in the 19th century but much less useful today when so many critical tasks such as net zero, pandemics or prosperity cut across the silos. Governments need to be able to organise horizontally with 'whole of government'

methods that include cross-cutting budgets, roles, teams, strategic clusters and partnerships, platforms and digital infrastructures. These need to be fitted to different tasks (what works for economic prosperity will be very different from what works for health, for example). The traditional model of relying on committees is no longer an adequate response. In the future, governments will look more like matrices, with a mix of vertical and horizontal roles, structures and processes.

5. **Reforming public finance.** Money drives much of the behaviour of governments. But the methods of public finance are now often misaligned with governments' objectives: ill-suited to spending on people, even though most public spending goes to people, not things; too short-termist, in an era of 100 year lives; and lacking data and intelligence to understand impacts. The next generation methods require much more systematic links between money and impact, using investment models and data to track impacts and enable learning.
6. **Experiment and innovation.** In uncertain times governments need to be willing to experiment. Many leaders in the past made this central to their governing philosophy, like Roosevelt in 1930s USA. That means use of experiments wherever possible to test policies before they go to scale; supporting service and social innovations in fields like welfare and care to discover what works and then share the results in easily accessible formats. We need more trial and error, not error and trial (ie unnecessary mistakes followed by inquiries and blame). Much has been learned about how to do this well: how to organise innovation teams, budgets, procurement and commissioning, but this knowledge is repeatedly forgotten.
7. **Simplicity and efficiency:** A key challenge for any bureaucracy is how to reduce complexity, regularly and ruthlessly. Taxes, processes, protocols, contracts, burdens on citizens and businesses all tend to become more complex over time. Each addition of complexity has good arguments in its favour. But their net effect can be disastrous. One of the lessons of the Internet, which is based on quite simple and highly standardized protocols, is that radical simplicity can make it possible for more complexity to be organized a layer higher. Complexity reduction programmes are usually more effective than cost reduction programmes, though these are needed too. The political right has largely captured the case for efficiency. But every progressive should care about making public services and governments as efficient as possible, rooting out duplication, waste and unnecessary bureaucracy. DOGE in the US was a disaster. But no country can afford not to have some process for constantly cutting waste.

8. **Relational states:** Much of what government does is done for the people. But much has to be done with citizens, particularly in education, health and social policy, with shared responsibility for actions and outcomes. That requires a 'relational state' approach, with intelligence shared between state and citizen, drawing on lived experience and citizen experience, which implies changes to roles, metrics and accountabilities, and often bigger roles for personal coaches, mentors and guides. This relational stance also needs to guide new combinations of entitlements and responsibilities, contributions and rights, since this balance is vital to ensuring that welfare states are legitimate.
9. **A new breed of public institutions and mesh thinking:** Today's public institutions look very similar to their equivalents 50 or 100 years ago. To reimagine their forms they need to learn both from history and from the best available methods of the present. The lack of organisational design creativity in the public sector compared to the private sector (which has seen radical innovation in the last two decades, with leading companies based on algorithms, search engines and platforms) has become a major impediment to action in fields ranging from energy transitions to mental health and AI. New institutions will increasingly put intelligence at their core, as well as much more direct engagement with the public. They will learn from businesses that have moved to much flatter structures; to layers of automated decision-making; and using AI to allow parallel processes in place of the slow, serial ones of traditional government. A key design principle will be to use 'mesh' approaches that connect many tiers of government, business and civil society into formal partnerships, often with compacts setting out the contributions and responsibilities of each player, shared data and knowledge, and mutual accountability.
10. **Digital infrastructures:** Digital technologies underpin much of what governments now do. The key lesson of recent years is that some standardisation allows for much more flexibility and efficiency, with models like Estonia's X-road and India's Digital Public Infrastructures providing common approaches to authentication, data sharing and service design, not just within government but also serving the private sector. These often require central teams to develop and improve underlying modular elements that can be used across the public sector. Platforms can then be used to organise provision of public services as well as cheaper access to commercial goods and services for citizens. One example of what's needed is personal accounts for citizens that make it possible to lend money for skills or mortgages, secured against future tax commitments.

11. **Strategy and synthesis:** The most vital capability of government is the ability to synthesise – to draw on many forms of intelligence to guide action. That will include both risks (scanning for potential timebombs and crises) and potential opportunities. The inputs will range from science and statistics to public opinion and implementation insights. The key is to have strong capabilities – particularly at the centre – to understand these inputs and synthesise to guide action. But many European governments have lost their strategic capability, as has the European Commission. This means that their time horizons have shrunk and that they struggle to think ahead.
12. **Skills and capability:** Finally, governments, like all organisations, need to pay sustained attention to skills and capacity for decision-makers at every level, including both officials and politicians. There are many gaps in skill, knowledge and mindset that seriously impede governments' ability to act. Many governments remain dominated by law and economics, deficient in terms of the skills in science, data and technology needed for many of their key tasks, from pandemics and climate change to growth.

Governing well requires aligning the poetry (the big messages and stories), the prose (policies, programmes and laws) and the plumbing (the practical tools that make states work). All need to be rethought in the difficult climate of the 2020s. Europe is a victim of past success – an extraordinary period of stability and growth has entrenched not just institutions but also mindsets, one symptom of which is far less institutional innovation than in other parts of the world. The greatest risk now is that change will come too little and too late.

Geoff Mulgan has worked in city and national government in the UK, Australia and Europe, and as an adviser to over fifty governments around the world. He is a Professor at University College London (UCL), and his most recent book was *Another World is Possible: how to reignite social and political imagination*. He is a co-founder of TIAL, the Institutional Architecture Lab, which works on the design of new public institutions.

*innovation is no
longer a “nice-to have”;
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institutional survival.*

5X5X5: THE REALITY OF PUBLIC SECTOR INNOVATION

Piret Tonurist

After a decade of building the OECD’s Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI) and working alongside bureaucracies worldwide, the conversation has changed. Innovation is no longer a “nice-to-have” fringe idea; it is a core requirement for institutional survival.

Yet, we face a paradox: our tools are sharper than ever, but our systemic challenges remain stubbornly high. To move forward, we need to take an honest look at where we stand. The following 5x5x5 framework captures the current landscape of public sector innovation, moving from established truths to the obstacles we face and the investments required to overcome them.

5 things we know for certain

We are no longer guessing. A decade of empirical evidence proves that:

- **Culture drives performance:** An “innovation climate” is not about colourful beanbags or office décor; it is a measurable driver of organisational performance.
- **Innovation rebuilds trust** Citizens trust the government more when they see lofty policy promises actually translated into tangible, lived results.
- **Structure is essential:** As evidenced by our innovation capacity assessments without formal processes, innovation remains a series of random lucky breaks rather than a reliable, strategic capability.
- **The whole-system public servant:** Success is not down to one hero. It requires a mix of brave individuals, teams that feel safe to take risks, and behind-the-scenes fixes to outdated hiring and procurement rules.
- **The value is provable:** We can now measure the Return on Investment (ROI) for innovation. The challenge is no longer proof, but systematic application across the whole of government.

While these foundations are solid, we cannot ignore the recurring patterns of failure that stall progress. Recognising these pathologies is the first step toward curing them.



5 persisting failures

Despite what we know, there are five common traps we see manifesting across organisations:

- **The strategy-execution gap:** Governments often retrofit old activities into new labels. This “policy cosplay” prevents actual learning and leaves teams trapped in rigid frameworks without the skills to deliver. Crucially, implementing innovations often requires transforming the underlying governance systems themselves.
- **The implementation gap:** We suffer from goal inflation – where the scope of a transformation grows in narrative but the budget and authority remain static. Vague promises lead to under-funded projects that lack the power to effect change. Faced with mounting problems and no authority, staff become paralysed and “no-go zones” for innovation emerge.
- **Overload:** A fog of strategic documents and constant monitoring creates busy work. Austerity has hollowed out many organisations and roles. Managers often claim everything is “contributing” to a goal without knowing if it is actually making an impact. This friction also means that civil servants simply do not have the cognitive or time bandwidth for innovation.
- **The wrong tools for the job:** We try to fix complex problems with limited options – like using a grant when we need a new regulation or a nudge for behavioural change. This lack of a diversified “policy mix” often results in tackling symptoms rather than root causes.
- **The Catch22 of ambition:** We talk about the need for ambitious ideas, but rarely invest in capacities like strategic anticipation that can identify and deliver them before a crisis hits.

To break this cycle and move from these “persisting failures” toward genuine transformation, we must shift our focus toward five specific levers of change.

5 areas for urgent investment

To move beyond small, isolated wins and achieve systemic impact, we must invest in:

- **Leadership literacy:** We need to move beyond teaching “tools” to practitioners and start teaching managers how to lead innovation. Leadership is currently the biggest bottleneck to execution. Using the OPSI innovation skills model, we can better align the demand and supply for these vital skills.
- **The power of foresight:** We cannot change the system if we are always reacting to the latest crisis. We must invest in the ability to spot shifts before

they become emergencies. If you do not have a strategic foresight system in place, the time to build one is today—our anticipatory governance principles can provide the roadmap.

- **Innovation plumbing:** We need to hardwire innovation into the standard operating procedures of government so it survives political and leadership cycles. A good place to start is auditing your innovation portfolio to identify which structural initiatives to tackle.
- **Reviewing real demand:** Instead of “pushing” innovation onto departments, we should “pull” it in by regularly auditing what departments actually need. This means aligning internal and external audit functions more closely with innovation needs.
- **Mastering the “gritty” reality:** We know how to design big innovative goals (for example, missions); now we need to master the difficult work of deployment. We cannot let lacklustre execution discredit the necessity of the idea.

The horizon: sophisticated delivery

The evolution of many technologies (e.g., like the smartphone) provides a vital lesson for the future of the state. As the underlying technology has become exponentially more complex, the interface has become more intuitive. Government must follow suit.

We do not need “easy fixes” that paper over the cracks of systemic failure. Instead, we need a mature innovation capacity—a robust machinery of plumbing, foresight, and leadership—capable of managing immense complexity behind the scenes. This is especially critical as we navigate the integration of AI and other emerging technologies, where the machinery must be powerful enough to handle ethical and technical challenges, yet the output must remain seamless and human-centric.

The goal is to build a state that is sophisticated in its inner workings, but accessible in its delivery. Ultimately, a creative bureaucracy depends on the identity of the public servant. By investing in the 5x5x5 framework, we move toward a new civil service identity: one where success is no longer measured by blind compliance, but by our ability to solve the most difficult problems of our time alongside the citizens we serve.

Dr. Piret Tonurist leads the work on government transformation at the OECD. She is the co-manager of the OECD Mission Action Lab and has led the development of the anticipatory governance and public sector innovation capacity workstreams over the last decade at the Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI).

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THE AGE OF TRANSITIONS: FROM SMALL TO BIG MISSIONS

Christian Bason

To positively evolve the societies they govern, public institutions must increasingly emphasize missions that aim for true systems change and long-term transition. Ten roles can help.

The past nine years of the Creative Bureaucracy Festival have demonstrated the enduring attraction of an innovative public sector. Yet the context has shifted. When I first entered this field more than two decades ago, the frontier of public innovation was largely about new forms of citizen engagement: understanding people's needs, behaviours and experiences, and co-designing services *with* them rather than for them.

This approach, often rooted in service design and embedded in innovation teams, helped organisations better fulfil their core missions. It improved responsiveness, strengthened user experience, and increased efficiency—particularly through digital services. These were, in effect, “**small m**” **missions**: changes that could typically be realised within a single organisation, with limited implications across other sectors, governments, systems or society as a whole

Today, however, we operate in a profoundly different context. Climate breakdown, biodiversity loss, rising inequality, public health pressures, social fragmentation, and the disruptive effects of AI all point to what can be called an **Age of Transitions**. These challenges are systemic, interconnected and deeply uncertain.

In the face of hypercomplex, ambiguous and turbulent problems public organisations must still deliver on their day-to-day responsibilities and continue improving services. But increasingly they are also called to engage with a different order of ambition—“**big M**” **missions**.

Towards “big M” missions

A big “M” mission is understood a tangible long-term societal outcome pursued and achieved collectively across sectors. It's realized through a dynamic portfolio of interventions, evolving through learning, feedback and collaboration.

Over the past decade, mission-oriented innovation has gained traction globally. Influenced by work from the Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose (IIPP), the OECD's Mission Action Lab, and UNDP's portfolio approaches, missions are now being deployed across all governments levels, and increasingly across philanthropy, civic society and business.

Their power lies in providing a coherent framework for effectively tackling complex problems that no single actor can solve alone. Missions are relevant across domains—from health and education to mobility, social inclusion and climate adaptation. What distinguishes them is not only their ambition, but their **distributed nature**: they are collectively designed, collectively governed and collectively delivered.

I have been involved in designing and implementing missions across diverse contexts, from my time as CEO of the Danish Design Center to my current role as co-founder of Transition Collective, advising governments globally. A recent evidence-based report with the World Health Organization on innovation scaling points to a powerful approach: governing missions through clearly defined roles. A role describes how value is created to realise a mission. While the WHO framework identifies seven roles, I believe at least ten are essential. As part of the evolving frontier of societal change—the vanguard of a creative bureaucracy—let us consider these ten roles.

Ten roles to govern and realize missions

1. The direction giver

Articulates long-term purpose and guards the preferred future. This is rarely the job of a single actor; rather, it emerges through co-creation with many organizations. For example, when the Danish Design Center facilitated establishing an EU-funded initiative on sustainable cities more than 150 actors across architecture, design and industry co-developed the mission “Designing an irresistible circular society”.

2. The governance designer

Builds structures and processes that enable legitimate, trust-based decision-making. In Denmark's “Home for All Alliance”, the philanthropy Bikubenfonden co-founded a mission to combat homelessness. Its governance model was established across public and civic actors and has endured for more than a decade.

3. The navigator

Maintains momentum by brokering interests across the ecosystem. Often embodied in a mission secretariat, this role ensures continuity over time. In Esbjerg Municipality, a “backbone” function with a 12-year mandate has helped coordinate efforts to reduce youth exclusion, bringing in new partners, such as NGOs and local philanthropies to increase impact as the mission evolves.

4. The regulator

Adapts rules and frameworks to institutionalize mission driven outcomes. Regulatory change can be decisive and when the Danish “Home for All Alliance” helped shift national funding rules it enabled municipalities to prioritise permanent housing for homeless people, rather than temporary shelters. Its effect has been transformative.

5. The capacity builder

Strengthens the skills, organizational capabilities and infrastructures needed for delivery. The EU-funded New European Bauhaus Academy, for instance, now operates a continent-wide network of training hubs. In effect it is an alliance of actors across the European urban innovation and green transition ecosystem. It is supported by shared quality criteria and standards, a digital one-point entry and comprehensive mapping of training content and providers.

6. The funding enabler

Aligns and helps expand financial resources over the long term. Missions often require blended funding across sectors. The New European Bauhaus has mobilised both public, civic and private contributions and doubled its—so far—400 million EUR budget. Denmark's Green Tripartite agreement to rewild 10% of its nature combined government, the agriculture industry and philanthropic investment at scale. It included Novo Nordisk Foundation's pledge to fund 25%, or 10 billion DKK, of the 10-year mission.

7. The communicator

Shapes a compelling narrative that builds commitment, legitimacy and momentum. An integral part of mission building, it is best grounded in storytelling co-created with stakeholders. The Danish Design Center in collaboration with a leading research foundation established a mission to address stress, anxiety and accelerating psychiatric diagnoses among young people. Its vision for 2050 was a society where young people “thrive”—a narrative developed with young people, local governments, and experts. It stated: “A future where young people thrive has been realized”, and elaborated: “Imagine this; young people in Denmark are doing better than ever before. Even with the historic challenges facing this generation, they have never had greater influence or more opportunities to shape their own future. Collectively, we have taken responsibility for providing a framework for young people to thrive.”

8. The experimenter

Designs and tests interventions close to practice, embracing intelligent failure as learning. This role is often missed as it underestimates the difficulties in envisaging, building and realizing impactful interventions or takes for granted that the actors involved can design and implement meaningful experiments linked to the overall mission portfolio. The Swedish government's innovation fund Vinnova's Impact Innovation initiative has five missions. One is Water Wise Societies, which aims to ensure sustainable water for Sweden towards 2050. It set up a “Transition Arena”

to practically and financially support over 70 organizations to enable their influence, learning and co-creation in pursuing the mission. In the Arena actors convene biannually, attend digital seminars and “learning breakfasts” to empower them in on-the-ground work to find innovative solutions to the country’s water challenges.

9. The learning hub

Ensures continuous adaptation by collecting and feeding back insights. Without structured learning, missions stagnate. Often neglected – how can a mission move forward without a strategy. The Danish Design Centre’s “Decoupling 2030” initiative worked with five partners to build an 8-year mission for sustainable and circular manufacturing. It established a robust learning model with both quantitative and qualitative feedback systems, to enable informed decisions across a large ecosystem of 4000 companies and partners involved in the mission. By feeding insights back into governance, the Board can make informed decisions on the mission portfolio. Data collection and analysis were handled by external evaluation and research partners, while overall responsibility remained with the mission’s management.

10. The market shaper

Engages the private sector to create new pathways for impact. In some cases, missions are initiated by private firms. The Danish company Naturli’ catalysed a plant-based food ecosystem by creating an industry association bringing together competitors, regulators and researchers to shift the entire system. A favorite is Danish food company Naturli’, which develops and produces plant-based alternatives to traditional staples like butter and beef. When CEO Henrik Lund, saw the firm had to accelerate the entire market for plant-based food, it established a new association—*Plantebranchen*. It invited the entire market ecosystem to join, including regulators, research institutions, farmers, and even direct competitors. Why? Because to achieve their mission, Naturli’ needed everyone to take part in shifting the food system towards plant-derived alternatives to build a future market.

Transitioning public services – and the Creative Bureaucracy Festival

Taken together, these ten roles form a **governance architecture for long-term collective action**. Responsibility is distributed, learning is continuous, and the mission—rather than any single institution—remains the focal point.

This reframes the role of public institutions. They are no longer sole providers or controllers, but **participants in a wider ecosystem of change**. In this sense, creative bureaucracies become enabling platforms—facilitating collaboration, shaping conditions, and sustaining long-term transitions.

For public sector organisations seeking to address today’s systemic challenges, mission-oriented approaches are no longer optional. They are increasingly essential.

For the Creative Bureaucracy Festival, this represents a significant opportunity. Continuing to explore, test and refine **big “M” missions**—and the roles that make them possible—can help equip public institutions to navigate the Age of Transitions with imagination, responsibility and impact.

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*faced with a volatile
environment can
we ensure our initiatives
are enduring...*

FASTER, AND NOT FURIOUS: THE TRULY AGENTIC STATE

Giulio Guaggiotto

Governments are competing to announce that they are ditching five year plans and strategies because the world is moving too fast—last in line, Malaysia. At the same time, governments are setting up foresight units and producing long-term visions and frameworks in industrial quantities. Can these two dynamics really be happening simultaneously? And if so, how do we make sense of them?

If there is one thing we learned about creative bureaucracy in the last 10 years is that it requires the **ability to hold tensions** without trying to prematurely resolve them: squaring up the need for results “yesterday” with the acknowledgement that systemic issues require a long time horizon, creating structures that can operate in a top-down and decentralised way depending on the circumstances, **being ambidextrous in both incremental and transformative innovation**, knowing when to deliberately create silos—and when to deliberately challenge them, and the list could go on.

Unfortunately, tensions is not something that the public sector is comfortable with, and even less so in times of increased polarization.

The irreversibility provocation

I encountered this challenge when exploring the concept of “irreversibility” in the public sector with diverse audiences around the world, inspired by the example of the former EduTech unit in the Indonesian government, who developed an irreversibility framework for their initiatives. Faced with a volatile environment, with frequent changes of directions, they asked themselves: how can we ensure our initiatives are not only impactful but also enduring? How can they evolve alongside stakeholders’ needs, withstand changes in the political and external environment, and remain relevant in diverse contexts? This translated into a set of checklists, and most importantly team rituals, fostering a mindset that is comfortable with **holding different logics** at the same time. As the conditions changed, the team needed to constantly work with the system to create new options for itself.

When introducing the concept of irreversibility, I was struck by how it almost instantly elicited a **black and white reaction**. On the one hand, those strongly opposed to the notion seem to equate it with immutability, evoking images of



sclerotic bureaucracies, stagnant societies or white elephants (while at the same time often lamenting the short termism of much government action). On the other hand, those enthusiastically in favour often seemed to back the notion of irreversibility as a way to secure long-term continuity for a particular team or initiative—at times their own! (while at the same time advocating for embracing agility and experimentation).

It was useful to reflect collectively on the tension between, on the one hand, wanting governments to embrace cathedral thinking and the collective frustration with short termism and, on the other, the fear of governments boldly embracing an irreversibility stance.

Creative bureaucracy thrives in these contested spaces. It is the muscle that maintains the curiosity and **courage to embrace polarities** even when a black or white answer might seem more immediately appealing. How to cultivate this muscle and make it politically a winner in a world craving quick fixes and clear-cut answers seems a key question moving forward—most of the groups I talked with would agree.

Eventually, we landed on a **working definition of irreversibility** that hinges on creativity: the ability of a social system (not only the public sector, but a society at large) to continuously create options for its renewal in the face of frequently changing external circumstances and growing complexity (other have used the phrase “radical optionality”). Or, as in the motto of Japanese non-profit Crossfields, “a world where social issues continue to get solved”. *Defined this way, irreversibility is the opposite of immutability (ie. the preservation of the status quo). It is also, importantly, the opposite of inevitability (which is often used as a rhetorical device to preclude the exploration of alternative options).* It preserves a sense of agency and **celebrates the ability to create alternatives** in the long-term pursuit of a north star even in the face of strong pressure to conform to a dominant paradigm.

Go where tensions are embraced

A creative bureaucracy is also one that embraces the “work with what you have” mantra (as per Yuen Yuen Ang): it embraces existing assets and is curious about the edges, positive deviants and liminal spaces. It is often where existing systems break or collide that the seeds of future systems are likely to be prototyped.

In that spirit, **a tour of the future of creative bureaucracies** might well start in those places that are opposing premature convergence or popular shortcuts to openly embrace tensions. Learning from these experiences can help accelerate the transition to a public sector that is comfortable with polarities.

Unsurprisingly, these days, such a tour is likely to take us to many places in the majority world: like Kabaokoo Labs in Mali. They are rejecting the formal vs informal economy, high tech vs frugal tech polarity to create “an upskilling engine designed for the 95% operating in hybrid contexts, that youth jobs programs don’t usually address”. Or the Data Science Law Lab in Pretoria, who are exploring innovative ways of licensing African datasets that go beyond the open/close dichotomy to promote the equitable development of AI. “If you’re not designing systems, you’re just decorating problems” is Fatou Kiné Dieye’s motto as she delves into the tension between local knowledge and global “best practices” to reimagine housing in Rwanda – and beyond. A defining characteristic of these initiatives is their porous boundaries: recognising that tackling systemic issues requires going beyond siloed interventions and openly embracing the tension that comes with it.

In the Dominican Republic, the Center for Public Intelligence is openly declaring its ambition to build the “next generation of complex institutions”, while in Argentina (and beyond), the Red de Innovacion Local has managed to create a virtuous cycle of accelerated learning among hundreds of local governments in an effort to improve public management. Meanwhile, in Lagos, Urbanbetter is creating new “infrastructures of hope” to tackle the climate-health nexus, experimenting with a new, global institutional architecture connecting citizens, governments and the diaspora. Birmingham is home to the ever inspiring Civic Square initiative that is creating street-based systemic demonstration of social and economic transitions. While different in aims, all these “liminal” organisations are openly embracing the tensions that are inherent in emergent processes of collective intelligence: finding ways to marry the predictability so dear to public institutions with being open to unexpected outcomes and dynamics.

Arguably the **rigid separation of planning and implementation** functions is at the core of what makes public sector institutions struggle with complex challenges and agility. Those looking at the future of creative bureaucracies might be curious about initiatives that, in very different ways, are openly challenging this dichotomy: from Catalonia’s Shared Agendas for place based transformations (who, unsurprisingly, are making of embracing polarities their motto), to Australia’s prototypes for a digital policy twin, to the Dutch Institute of Public Work whose work is predicated on a paradox—making exceptions the norm in the public sector. But also, why not, unorthodox experiences that completely reimagine implementation, like Hefei’s bold (and controversial) local government as venture capitalist model.



The truly agentic state?

A close observation of these experiences – but the list is no doubt much longer (see e.g. MBRCGI's [Edge 50](#))—might give us a glimpse of the mindsets, tools and institutional capacity that is needed to openly embrace tensions and strive for irreversibility: a world where social issues continue to get solved. At a time where the AI-enabled agentic state is capturing all the attention, we might find out that the truly agentic state is the one that preserves the capacity to constantly create new options for its citizens in the face of rapid change. Welcome, irreversibility.

Giulio Quaggiotto, Innovation Advisor. Mohammed Bin Rashid Centre for Government Innovation, UAE and former head of Strategic Innovation at UNDP.

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*it's not that bureaucracy failed,
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BEYOND THE BUREAUCRATIC STATE: PROTOCOLS, OPTIONALITY AND THE COMPUTATIONAL STATE

Indy Johar

The bureaucratic state was one of modernity's great institutional achievements. It should not be dismissed as a historical error because its limits have become visible. Bureaucracy replaced arbitrary authority with procedure, patronage with impersonality, discretionary favour with due process, and fragmented rule with durable administrative capacity. It made taxation, welfare, public health, planning, regulation, redistribution, inspection and accountability possible at scale. It gave democratic societies a machinery through which collective commitments could be administered beyond the personal will of rulers or patrons.

The issue, then, is not that bureaucracy failed. It is that the conditions for which bureaucracy was designed are being exceeded. Bureaucracy works by categorising, routing, processing, reviewing and determining. It depends on relatively stable domains, identifiable cases, separable responsibilities, departmental mandates and sequential procedures. Its basic assumption is that a matter can enter an institution, be translated into a category, processed according to rules, reviewed through evidence and decided within a defined administrative frame. **Under stable conditions, this produces consistency, fairness and accountability.** Under volatility, systemic recoupling and cascading interdependence, the same logic produces latency, fragmentation and misrecognition.

The deeper problem is that the object of governance is changing. The bureaucratic state was designed to govern cases, claims, licences, permits, files, sectors, assets and administrative categories. The world ahead increasingly presents itself as **interaction fields, threshold conditions, feedback loops and coupled systems.** A heatwave is not only a weather event; it is a public health crisis, labour shock, energy stressor, infrastructure test, housing justice issue and legitimacy challenge. A retrofit is not only a construction intervention; it entangles carbon, tenancy, vulnerability, grid capacity, finance, insurance, skills, materials, maintenance and stewardship.

This is the structural mismatch. Bureaucracy decomposes complex problems into administrable parts, while contemporary risk arises through the recombination of those parts. Departments can process housing files,

energy grants, health interventions or planning approvals, but lived problems cross these boundaries. The task is no longer simply to administer discrete interventions; it is to coordinate across interdependencies. The state therefore requires a new unit of governance: one capable not only of processing decisions, but of composing relations between actors, conditions, rights, thresholds, obligations, capabilities and pathways. That unit is the protocol.

A protocol is not simply a rule, standard, instruction or platform. A rule applies a norm; a standard defines conformity; a platform hosts interaction. **A protocol composes the grammar of interaction** itself. It specifies who can participate, what counts as evidence, what rights constrain action, which thresholds trigger intervention, what discretion remains, how exceptions are handled, and how the system learns. Its unit is not the command but the conditional field: the structured situation in which multiple actors can coordinate, adapt, contest and act together under shared public conditions.

The protocol state is therefore **not government by algorithm**. It is not the replacement of democratic judgement by automation. It is not merely digital government, nor the application of artificial intelligence to legacy administration. It names a deeper institutional shift: from a state organised primarily around departments, cases and procedures to one capable of authoring, maintaining and democratically governing the public grammars through which distributed action becomes legitimate, accountable and possible.

The bureaucratic state asks: how do we process this case fairly? The protocol state asks a prior question: how do we **structure the conditions through which many actors can act responsibly**, contextually and accountably, without every action requiring discretionary permission, retrospective correction or institutional bottlenecking? This is not a shift from law to code. It is a shift from administering bounded cases to governing conditional fields.

This is why protocol authorship is constitutional work at the level of interaction. Protocols are institutional ontologies. They define what exists for the system: which persons, claims, risks, obligations, harms, values and futures become visible and actionable. They are also political instruments: they allocate burdens, distribute risks, make some behaviours easier and others harder, and determine which forms of life, labour, care and value remain informal, invisible or excluded. Protocols do not transcend politics. They relocate politics into architecture.

The computational dimension intensifies this shift. **The computational protocol state is not a state that automates bureaucracy**. It governs through parametric, contingent and learning-oriented protocols. These can hold

changing conditions in relation: risk, vulnerability, place, time, ecological state, fiscal exposure, institutional capacity, system stress, rights constraints and public-purpose outcomes. They can vary support, obligations, permissions, thresholds and pathways according to the configuration of a situation.

A bureaucratic rule often says: if X, then Y. A computational protocol can say: under these conditions, with these actors, capacities, risks, rights, obligations and thresholds, these pathways become available; supports are triggered; responsibilities intensify; coordination is enabled; escalation routes open; and revision mechanisms activate. This is the move from fixed rule application to parametric governance.

In a parametric governance model, the state does not treat all contexts as identical. It can vary support according to vulnerability, obligations according to power or systemic responsibility, thresholds when risks combine, and pathways across places. It can recognise **when an intervention produces several forms of public value at once** without collapsing changing conditions into a single administrative category. This is not consumer personalisation. It is contingent public governance: action made more responsive to condition, context, capacity and consequence.

This is essential in a world of cascading risk. Cascading risks do not remain in their original category. A climate shock becomes a health, housing, energy, labour, fiscal and political shock. A food-system failure becomes a public health, cost-of-living, trade, land-use, welfare and security problem. A care crisis becomes a labour-market, gender-equity, housing, fiscal, mental-health and legitimacy crisis. **The state cannot respond adequately through isolated programmes**. It needs the capacity to govern interactions, not merely objects.

This is where multi-solving becomes central. The future state cannot solve one problem at a time. It must design interventions that **address multiple systemic conditions simultaneously**. A retrofit programme should reduce carbon, bills, hospital pressure, grid stress and insurance exposure, while improving health, skills, housing quality, circularity and neighbourhood resilience. A food resilience programme should strengthen supply, nutrition, local economies, soils, biodiversity, logistics and regional security. A care programme should reshape household resilience, labour participation, community capability, public health, intergenerational solidarity and local economic life.

This is **the difference between single-solving and multi-solving**. Bureaucracy tends to create programmes around administratively bounded objectives. Multi-solving requires protocols capable of holding multiple objectives, actors and values together without collapsing into incoherence. It requires a state that can coordinate across the boundaries its own institutions have inherited.

The computational protocol state matters because it can support this kind of multi-solving. It can define public-purpose conditions under which multiple pathways become legitimate. It can allow different actors to act differently while remaining coordinated around shared outcomes, rights, thresholds and learning systems. It can enable household-led, neighbourhood-led, municipal, cooperative, utility-enabled, insurer-supported or public-finance-backed **pathways to coexist within a shared governance grammar**. It shifts the state from prescribing one universal solution to authoring the conditions under which multiple situated solutions can emerge, compare, learn and scale.

This is where optionality becomes the democratic purpose of the protocol state. **Optionality is not vagueness, deregulation or arbitrary choice**. It is bounded plurality under shared public conditions. A protocol expands optionality when it increases the number of legitimate ways a society can respond to risk while preserving public value, accountability and common rights. Flexibility allows a system to bend. Optionality allows a system to generate alternative pathways.

The bureaucratic state seeks consistency through uniform process. **The protocol state seeks coherence through shared conditions**. The computational protocol state adds the capacity to vary pathways while maintaining a common public frame. This matters because climate adaptation, care, housing, health, energy, migration and food resilience will need plural pathways. Different places, actors and risks will combine in different ways. The task of the state is not to prescribe one solution everywhere, but to define the conditions under which situated solutions become legitimate, supportable, comparable, accountable and capable of learning from one another.

This gives the state a different temporal orientation. The bureaucratic state is often retrospective: it processes applications, reviews evidence, inspects compliance, responds to failure and handles appeals. The **computational protocol state can become more anticipatory**. It can use sensing, modelling, simulation, pattern recognition and feedback loops to identify emerging stresses, test interventions, compare pathways, detect burdens, learn from exceptions and revise protocols over time.

None of this removes the hard institutional questions that follow. A computational protocol state would need serious work on verification systems, human-in-the-loop models, protocol legitimacy, model auditing, recognition theory, public stack design, rights to opacity, dispute mechanisms and institutional authorship. These are not secondary details. They are the constitutional and operational conditions through which protocolised governance could remain democratic rather than becoming technocratic

infrastructure. But they are downstream of the first structural claim: that a world of cascading risks and multi-solving requirements demands a state capable of governing conditional fields, not only administering bounded cases.

The test of this future is not whether it is more efficient. That is too small an ambition. **The real test is whether it expands legitimate response capacity**. Does it enable more actors to act? Does it allow more pathways to be recognised? Does it support multi-solving rather than single-output delivery? Does it preserve common rights while helping society respond earlier to cascading risk? Does it increase the ability of the whole system to learn?

The protocol state is the next step beyond bureaucracy because it shifts governance from processing cases to structuring conditional fields. The computational protocol state extends this by making those fields parametric, contingent and learning-oriented. Its purpose is not automation. **Its purpose is to expand society's legitimate capacity to respond**.

The central question of governance is therefore changing. It is no longer only how we administer decisions fairly. It is how we author the protocols through which society can act well together under conditions of volatility.

In an age of cascading risks and multi-solving requirements, this may become one of the defining questions of statecraft: **how can the state coordinate complexity without centralising control**, enable plurality without producing incoherence, and learn from reality without surrendering judgement to the machine? Its highest democratic test is whether it expands, rather than contracts, our collective capacity to respond.

Indy Johar, co-founder Dark Matter Labs | Expanding Civilizational Optionality. The Lab is focused on building the institutional infrastructures for radical civic societies, cities, regions and towns across the world.

PART II — IMAGINING OTHERWISE

Cities as Laboratories of Possibility

*cities are where vulnerabilities
are most acute and where
innovations emerge
most rapidly...*

RESTORING PUBLIC-SECTOR CAPACITY WHERE IT COUNTS

Mariana Mazzucato and Rainer Kattel

Cities are where tomorrow's opportunities will be seized and where today's crises, from climate change to inequality, hit hardest. Strengthening city governments is therefore a strategic imperative that requires significant investment, sustained coordination, and continuous learning.

After years of underinvestment, governments around the world are **struggling to keep pace with growing demands**. The consequences are now widely evident, as underfunded and unprepared public agencies falter whenever crises strike. The **problem is not “slimming” government down**, but rather rendering it more capable, strategic, outcomes-oriented, and a good partner in solving the greatest problems of our time: providing adequate housing for all, strengthening climate resilience, and ensuring that technology makes our lives better, not just a few “bros” richer.

Nowhere is this more evident than in cities. Once seen mainly as centres of service delivery, they are now at **the front lines of modern governance**. They are also where vulnerabilities are most acute: where climate shocks hit first, where inequality is concentrated, where jobs are created or lost, where democracy is either fortified or allowed to erode, and where innovation emerges most rapidly. As they expand, diversify, and gain political significance, municipal governments must therefore enhance their capacity to anticipate challenges, embrace diverse perspectives, and act swiftly.

Yet investment in city governance is often treated as less important than investing in infrastructure, security, or new technologies. That is a mistake. **Strengthening municipal governments is not a bureaucratic exercise**; it is a strategic imperative for addressing urgent problems and bolstering democratic resilience. To achieve this, public-sector capabilities must be well-defined, measurable, and able to withstand shocks.

We created the [Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose](#) at University College London in 2018 to learn from such examples at the city, regional, and national level. Key to the transformation is changing how civil servants are trained—allowing them **to see themselves as value creators** and market shapers, not just redistributors, market fixers, and de-riskers. This means rethinking value, purpose, and creativity, and encouraging design thinking within public institutions—the key pillars of our popular [Master of Public Administration and applied-learning programs](#).



Through our engagement with governments globally, we have learned that the old economics of correcting market failure leaves governments reactive, fragmented, and risk-averse. Today's intertwined crises demand a new public-sector economics that regards **the state as a proactive market shaper, co-creating innovation**, public services, and socio-technical systems for inclusive, sustainable, and resilient futures. We have also learned that the way to transform governments legitimately is not by wielding chainsaws, Elon Musk-style, but by building trust and aligning with citizen needs.

At the national level, we have collaborated with Brazil to reassess the use of its tools in support of a green transition. In a 2024 policy report, [State Transformation in Brazil](#), we focused on the need to redesign procurement, state-owned enterprises, and digital public infrastructure. Procurement is often 30-40% of a government's budget, and state-owned enterprises can be part of the bureaucratic inefficiency problem, or they can be part of the solution by helping to fund green infrastructure and develop green supply chains that allow smaller companies to have markets.

Much public-sector innovation happens at the local level, partly because it is easier to experiment with new tools and new collaborations there. To learn from such hubs of experimentation we have been working for the last two years, in [partnership](#) with the Bloomberg Philanthropies' Government Innovation program, on developing a [Public Sector Capabilities Index](#)—a global effort to assess how effectively cities learn, adapt, and solve complex problems over time. The [Index](#) focuses on practical questions: Can city governments innovate consistently? Can they coordinate across departments, engage communities, and manage uncertainty? And perhaps most importantly, can they build trust and deliver real value to residents?

These are not abstract concerns. On the contrary, they determine whether cities can confront today's crises while preparing for tomorrow's challenges and opportunities. We have worked with more than 200 municipal officials in 45 cities and more than 20 countries to explore how these capabilities can be cultivated and measured. Our research shows that dynamic, adaptive governments do not happen by chance. They are a product of deliberate investment, sustained coordination, and continuous learning.

We already have examples of cities that anticipate change and stay ahead of emerging challenges. In Helsinki, the city's Strategy Team uses real-time data to identify trends and model potential outcomes, enabling policymakers to adjust priorities, shift resources, and plan responses before problems escalate into crises.

In Cape Town, officials track what matters most to residents through an annual customer satisfaction survey. By comparing results over time, they can see which services are improving and which require more attention. This enables the municipality to recalibrate priorities, focus on residents' changing needs, and improve underperforming services.

Collaboration is another essential capability. In Madinah, Saudi Arabia, the municipality employs a franchise model to unite diverse actors around shared goals. Cross-departmental teams and external partners co-develop solutions, bringing fresh energy, insights, and resources to complex challenges.

Experimentation and evidence-based learning are equally vital. In Durham, North Carolina, the city's Innovation Team, [one of the many](#) supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies, issues open calls for staff ideas, surveys residents, and monitors peer cities to spot opportunities for testing and refining services. This approach ensures improvements are grounded in real-world impact rather than theory.

Public capabilities are not just about processes. They are about people. Bogotá's city council has created flexible teams, such as the Public Sector Innovation Lab and the Delivery Unit, that empower staff to act quickly and adapt as challenges evolve. By fostering a culture that values experimentation, collaboration, and responsiveness, and building organizational structures to match, the municipality enables officials to innovate, move decisively, and deliver meaningful results for ordinary people.

Will we equip our cities to meet the challenges ahead, or will we allow underprepared governments to keep struggling as pressures intensify? **The longer we delay, the higher the price** our cities and their residents will pay.

Read the latest Public Sector Capabilities Index report, [Assessing Dynamic Capabilities in City Governments: Creating a Public Sector Capabilities Index](#).

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*the impulse to shape one's
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themselves...*

TACTICAL URBANISM: SHORT-TERM ACTION, FOR LONG-TERM CHANGE

Mike Lydon

Tactical Urbanism is the application of low-cost, short-term actions intended **to catalyze long-term change** in our neighborhoods. Project goals often include making streets safer, vacant lots vibrant, or build community gathering spaces where there are none. The term was inspired by witnessing everyday people take it upon themselves to physically improve their surroundings, eschewing the lengthy public consultation processes that often leads to a lot of plans but little actual measurable progress. Many of the early initiatives we documented in the late aughts were then adopted by city leaders and led to lasting transformation. Today, Tactical Urbanism has matured into a coherent *show-not-tell* methodology for speeding up the delivery of sustainable, human-scale environments on a global scale. It wasn't always this way.

The impulse to shape one's immediate environment for the better is as old as cities themselves. However, Tactical Urbanism emerged from the depths of the Global Financial Crisis, as everyday citizens, nonprofits, advocates, planners, and designers pushed forward with addressing a changing climate, growing political polarization, and increased social isolation. Into the municipal budget breach came parklets, painted plazas, guerilla bike lanes, and pop-up retail activations that **breathed new life** into streets, vacant lots, and underused land. Such immediate transformations were quickly documented on burgeoning social media channels and spread across the globe. Given diminished resources, some leading cities even began to advance projects with a range of "cheap and cheerful" materials.

Understanding a broader trend at play, we aggregated a range of disparate initiatives and defined Tactical Urbanism in 2010, positioning the concept for global dissemination within a **free-to-download manifesto** of sorts that we made available online in 2011. Beyond the project themselves, we were inspired by the optimism of the fast-growing tech sector, where we found a relevance in the Lean Start-Up mentality of quick, iterative moves and translated that thinking to the interdisciplinary, never ending task that is city building.

Tactical Urbanism was certainly a reflection of the era, but we soon learned it also **held immense promise** in pushing cities forward whereby the government

and citizens could co-create the future. Our 2015 book, *Tactical Urbanism: Short-Term Action for Long-Term Change*, sought to further memorialize what we were learning from our practice of not only studying but also applying the methodology.

Since then, tactical projects have increased in size, ambition, and duration. Accordingly, government participation has grown *substantially*. What was **once a fringe idea is now increasingly mainstream** across the many disciplines engaged with building more sustainable towns and cities. For example, the US federal government's \$5 billion Safe Streets and Roads for All program explicitly funds municipal traffic safety initiatives that include "Quick-Build" pilot projects.

The Tactical Urbanism methodology is a weigh-station for how interested and ready a community is for sustained change at scale. The power of Tactical Urbanism is that it still can be deployed by those with or without access to the levers of power who are looking to show what's possible and **enact change fast, with less bureaucratic process** or an overly risky political or financial commitment. While the term is known to turn some off, we've been delighted to discover that the core ideas appeal as much to liberals as it does to fiscal conservatives.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated Tactical Urbanism efforts **at an unprecedented scale**. Overnight, cities were forced to physically adapt to ensure a semblance of society could continue. Those cities with an applied familiarity with the methodology acted the most decisively by removing parking lanes for outdoor dining, taking over vehicle-clogged thoroughfares for miles of pedestrian 'open streets', and lined sidewalks or parking lots with vaccination infrastructure for the masses. For many, these rapid, tactical changes to the cityscape were the only good thing to come out of the pandemic, leaving behind car-free streets, miles of new bike lanes, permanent outdoor dining, and a broader understanding of how important parks are to our mental and physical health.

At a deeper level, the pandemic response proved how rapidly and effectively **government bureaucracy can act when the normal cocktail of well-intended rules, regulations, and fees are suspended**. While no one expected that to outlive the pandemic, it did underscore that the biggest barriers to building more inclusive, livable cities isn't technological, financial, or even spatial; it's us.

Looking towards the future, it's clear that the widespread adoption of Tactical Urbanism **has moved beyond a passing fad**; it represents a paradigm shift in how we improve cities. The pandemic served as a lesson and as a catalyst,

illuminating the potential for swift, meaningful change when city government and citizens work (imperfectly) together to tackle short-term shocks and long-term stresses. As we continue to navigate the complexities of 21st century urban living, let us commit to nurturing a spirit of collaboration, innovation, and adaptability. Our shared future depends on a collective will to envision neighborhoods that prioritize people over vehicles, community over isolation, and sustainability over convenience.

Mike Lydon is a Principal and Co-Founder of Street Plans. He is an award winning internationally recognized planner, writer, speaker, and advocate for livable cities credited with inventing the term tactical urbanism.

*in this rapidly
changing world, we will need
to reimagine collective
life within cities.*

IMAGINARIES & EXPERIMENTAL CITIES: AN ANTIDOTE TO NEOLIBERALISM

Gabriella Gómez-Mont

“The catalogue of forms is endless: until every shape has found its city, new cities will continue to be born. When the forms exhaust their variety and come apart, the end of cities begins.” Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

Our future is urban. More than half of humanity already lives in cities, rising to nearly 70% by 2050. This makes the question “What is a city for?” first and foremost a question for the imagination—a deeply cultural, social, political question, with planetary implications—rather than a merely technocratic one.

Because the stories we tell about cities matter. If we frame them as engines of productivity, we will continue to build them that way. But if we engage more consciously with urban imaginaries we open different possibilities. And in this rapidly changing world, we will need to reimagine collective life within cities. This will require novel, **transdisciplinary approaches**, where arts and humanities play a central role alongside economics and planning; where **democracy itself becomes a creative practice**.

So could our urban imaginaries (and their subsequent policies and projects) centre ideas such as care, collective well-being or play as alternatives to dominant neoliberal paradigms? And how might cities enable multiple ways of living, being and belonging, rather than reproducing bland, standardised urban forms?

Alongside this philosophical inquiry we must also explore the accompanying creative bureaucracies. To rethink the rules, procedures and regulatory cultures that shape what is possible within its boundaries. To place purpose before procedure. To create the conditions (within and without government walls) in which **alternative futures can be collectively rehearsed**.

This matters because of **what has been lost**. Libraries, playgrounds and public schools were once radical inventions. Food forests, community kitchens and maker spaces followed. Yet the repertoire has not expanded nearly enough. Over recent decades, politics has been increasingly reduced to management: prioritising efficiency, metrics and service delivery over vision and collective

meaning. City centres that were once symbolic and civic hearts often become homogeneous landscapes of commerce, even as social divisions deepen.

Yet at the same time, **cities are re-emerging as brave spaces of possibility**. We are beginning to remember that the city is not a machine to be optimised, but a fundamentally political and plural entity. As national politics falters, many cities are becoming sites of experimentation—exploring new questions, new pathways, new forms of solidarity that do not depend on sameness.

There are some (unfinished) examples of this in action. Bogotá has restructured neighbourhoods around economies of care. Vienna has redesigned public space through a gendered lens. New York is exploring a renewed social democratic agenda. Seoul made a bet on its urban commons. And when Mexico City crowdsourced its constitution, we discovered something striking: when asked to imagine their future, 31,000 people across 1,400 neighbourhoods largely produced dystopian visions. This made us rethink some of our policies, strategies and tactics, as we moved from constitutional law into translating said law (one of the most progressive legal frameworks in the world) into the daily life of a city.

Because cities exist twice: once in brick and concrete, and once in the collective imagination—in the mesh of perceptions, memories and shared meanings that residents and visitors carry with them. That second city, the imagined one, is far more than a reflection of the real. Urban imaginaries actively shape cities, often as powerfully as any masterplan.

So beyond improving services, we must return to first principles: how do we want to live together? What does belonging mean, and for whom? What stories are we telling ourselves about who we are, individually and collectively? Before the policy brief, before the prototype, there is a more fundamental exploration of how we might answer these questions together. **Governments rarely make space** for this inquiry—even those with creative bureaucrats in their midst. But these are the questions that must shape the cities to come; and the types of challenges that public administrations must address.

Urban imaginaries matter. Political imagination matters. Not as communication or branding, but as infrastructure. The challenge is not only to have imaginative individuals, but to embed imagination institutionally: in how rules are written, how risks are taken, and how possibilities are legitimised. We cannot inhabit what we cannot first imagine. There should be an invitational quality to city making, where politics is fascinating enough that we feel called and compelled to participate in whole society approaches.

The experimenting city is both a collective orientation and a collective practice. It sees itself as a **living cultural artefact**: always partial, always evolving, always open to surprise. Urban imaginaries—when vivid enough—travel widely. Ideas move from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, from city to city, mutating and cross-pollinating. The experimenting city recognises this and builds for it: treating gaps and uncertainties as invitations, signalling space for new possibilities. What might a care city look like? A playful city? A more-than-human city? And what becomes possible when arts and humanities are treated not as sectors, but as foundational ways of knowing that help shape everything else?

I strongly believe our urban futures are not only to be envisioned, but to be rehearsed. That is why we need experimenting cities: where political imagination meets institutional courage and social creativity, expanding the repertoire of possibilities, reshaping the urban DNA.

And in that process, transform how bureaucracies work—and for what, and for who.

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CITIES AS DRIVERS OF PUBLIC INNOVATION

Melanie Kunzmann

Cities, are both formations of space and administrative and structural entities or both a mirror and a projection surface. They are **places of encounter** for civil society, citizens, politics, administration, business and academia. You experience directly social change within them. Beyond that they're in principle a catalyst offering opportunities for co-creation and community as they bring together actors from a diversity of sectors. What they do collectively shapes their future ability to innovate. What role, then, do city administrations themselves play within this complex system? And how do cities become active drivers of innovation?

The **capacities and competences** of public administrations is fundamental to a city's ability to develop alongside their physical and digital infrastructures. They have in their power key instruments to influence and to connect diverse actors and create incentives aligned with city-wide goals, such as economic development agencies, integrated urban development strategies, approval processes and digital public services. A decisive factor for innovation, therefore, is the administration's ability to cooperate across sectors and interests and to make participation a guiding principle. This is true across the world, although some countries are better than others.

It is not only cooperation between the public and private sectors that is necessary, but also between departments within the administration itself. The complex challenges cities face—exacerbated by financial and economic crises, structural transitions and external shocks—cannot be solved within isolated departmental boundaries. Experience from numerous projects shows that the success or failure of innovation is often determined at the interfaces between departments, or between the administration and external partners.

The growing collaborative imperative highlights too the multiple roles administrations must fulfil. Partly they act as **initiators and pioneers** and on the other, they serve as **crucial connectors** between stakeholders.

To fulfil these roles effectively, political and administrative mandates must provide a **robust and binding decision-making framework** without overly restricting the room for manoeuvre. This requires a cultural shift: innovation can only emerge if the path to a goal is not rigidly prescribed and there is **early agreement on intended outcomes** with room for flexibility.

At the same time, cooperation and participation must not be misused to pursue narrow individual interests. Participation processes in particular can become unwieldy if actors lack a **shared sense of responsibility**. Here again, a clear vision and common understanding of desired outcomes are essential.

If these principles are upheld, cities offer an ideal environment for innovation across sectors. Key success factors include strong cooperative capacity, clear political mandates, sufficient administrative autonomy, and a deliberate shift from process-oriented to outcome-oriented thinking.

There is an additional dimension that can help to increase cities' capacity to innovate, which the **Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM)** addresses namely the relationship between the national state and cities where it sees cities as innovation labs and national states as enablers. Here cities can generate tested solutions; whereby nation-states **enable scaling** of what works, remove regulatory barriers and provide funding frameworks.

This relationship is not hierarchical but **complementary and co-productive**. The key idea is a **rebalancing of roles**, grounded in pragmatic subsidiarity and shared responsibility. Cities, they argue, are where the real challenges—and solutions—are. Global issues like climate change, migration, inequality, public health, economic transformation are experienced most directly in cities. As a result, cities are often **first responders and practical problem-solvers**, even when the causes lie beyond their jurisdiction. To optimize the potential cities should not just be implementers of national policy, but instead be **co-designers of solutions**, especially in complex fields like climate, migration or housing. In short the subsidiarity principle in action where decisions sit **where they can be most effectively acted upon** with cities delivering, experimenting and doing real-world problem-solving. The national level provides the legal frameworks, the redistribution, resources to scale. This is not decentralising for its own sake, but a **functional allocation of responsibility**.

Melanie Kunzmann, Member of the Executive Board, PD. She is an expert in urban development, sustainable building, cooperation, financing, and lifecycle approaches in the public sector. She combines a deep knowledge of administrative and decision-making processes with forward-thinking project approaches.

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HOW DOES BUREAUCRATIC CREATIVITY AND POLITICAL MYOPIA COEXIST?

Edgar Pieterse

I am reflecting on the question of bureaucratic creativity based on Cape Town a city I know intimately, have studied and where I live and work. It highlights some of the central dilemmas and challenges of our times: Bureaucratic innovation versus good old-fashioned justice. Cape Town is increasingly becoming a **leading African example of public sector innovation** as evidenced in numerous awards and the rising international profile of city's youthful mayor, Geordhin Hill-Lewis. Earlier in 2026, the Mayor was acknowledged by winning one of the awards of the global Bloomberg Mayor's Challenge 2025, securing a \$1 million prize for funding towards community co-designed waste management solutions in informal settlements. This follows on the heels of the 2024 Earthshot Prize Finalist status awarded to the City for its environmental initiatives. On the economic front, Cape Town won the Time Out magazine Best City prize in 2025 after achieving second place in 2024. Underpinning these accolades is indeed an **impressive bureaucratic operation** replete with sophisticated adaptive management systems to ensure the effective performance of the civil servants corps of 26,000 staff servicing a city of nearly five million people.

Apart from legally required planning and budgetary frameworks, the city invests heavily in sophisticated data management tools to ensure evidence-based decision-making, cross-departmental alignment, and long-term outcomes thinking as evidence in the Cape Town 2050 long-term plan published in 2025. The city government is also determined to address **historical socio-economic imbalances** that stem from the Apartheid era through a determined focus on basic service provision, heavily subsidized in poor neighbourhoods. In all these senses the City of Cape Town metropolitan government will be at home in any of the Creative Bureaucracy Festival rooms, perhaps even an exemplar.

Yet, as a researcher, interlocutor and provocateur, I am **deeply puzzled** and conflicted about the capacity of the bureaucracy for continuous modernization and embracing innovation, yet a number of extremely obvious radical actions that are needed to confront the city's spatial inequality are simply not within the realm of the possible for both politicians and senior bureaucrats. **How does bureaucratic creativity and political myopia coexist?**

A few **examples might illuminate** my puzzlement. An uncanny consequence of racialized Apartheid spatial planning dogma is the fact that Cape Town has low densities (outside of informal settlements) and, concomitantly, **large swathes of publicly owned land** parcels are available to be assembled and strategically deployed for inclusionary housing at scale to advance mixed-income and mixed-use residential and commercial neighbourhoods. Yet, this does not happen, nor is there a convincing road map about how this will be effected. Achieving this potential would **require a political desire to intervene** in and steer land markets in the city—perhaps the starkest residue of racial inequality. Instead, the city is determined to move incrementally within a market-based model of land release and provide less than a 1000 affordable housing opportunities per annum in well located parts of the city. This is in the face of an official housing backlog in excess of 450,000 units. Relatedly, the few working class neighbourhoods that are and will be experiencing the exclusionary pressures of gentrification, e.g. Maitland Garden Village, are not being attended to with innovative forms of regulation that can ensure appropriate rent and rates control to allow working class families not to be displaced.

A final example points to an urgent need for innovation and creating new infrastructure path dependencies in the **domain of public transport**. The state stopped investing in bus and rail infrastructures from the late 1980s onwards as neoliberal reforms started to bite. An informal system emerged—minibus vans that could carry between 14-18 passengers—that operated outside of regulatory provisions and over the past forty years this system had become the de facto public transport mode of use. Due to the capital-intensity of the sector and the **grey zone of legality** that it expanded in, its operating model became very hierarchical and authoritarian, with a propensity for violent forms of enforcement and competition between associations. Despite these negative dynamics the minibus taxi industry proved immensely successful in carrying most working people to and from places of work and learning. Minibus taxi centrality became even more entrenched when the rail system all but collapsed due to endemic corruption in the national rail commuter agency between 2010-2020. However, in the run up to South Africa hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2010, the major cities embraced the introduction of bus rapid-transit (BRT) systems—dedicated lanes and specialized buses, **mimicking** the most sophisticated examples from Latin America and Europe. This is a very expensive technological solution especially in cities with low densities, unable to ensure sufficient ridership to make the service financially viable.

One of Cape Town most important priorities for the next decade is to continue to expand the BRT infrastructure and service even though the first few phases are clearly financially unviable due to the spatial form of the city. An **obvious innovation** in the South African context would be catalytic by keeping the dedicated public transit lanes but allow the semi-formal minibus taxis to use it to optimize their efficiencies. Crucially, making this public investment could be used as a leverage to persuade the industry to move away from cash economies, install better safety technology through sensors, and progressively transition to electric engines as part of a larger decarbonization effort of the mobility system. To be sure, prevailing legal and subsidy instruments make this innovation extremely difficult, if not impossible, but the **true frontier of transformative innovation** lies here. In my reading, there is simply no political scope to reverse course from a classic BRT solution to one that is adapted to the history and context of South African cities, even in an enlightened metropolitan government like Cape Town. My hunch is that the alignment between interests to maintain the status quo that ensure Cape Town is the “best city in the world”, à la Time Out and western ideals of bureaucratic modernisation/innovation displaces the political imperative of spatial justice, restitution and radical inclusion.

Edgar Pieterse is an urban researcher, writer and curator and professor at the University of Cape Town, he is founder and director of the African Centre for Cities (ACC) and professor at the School of Architecture and Planning.

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is a delicate balance of enabling
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HOBBIES AND BUREAUCRACY: REALLY?

Tommi Laitio

*“Did you say hobbies? You mean hobbies is
a city-level priority?”*

The **question caught me off guard**. As someone who had done their career in Finnish bureaucracy it seemed completely natural that we all understood how birdwatching, needlepointing, soccer or contemporary dance are critical for making a great city.

I have spent my entire career working on hobbies. I joined government from youth organizations and the arts and oversaw Helsinki’s hobby work as the Director of Youth Affairs. Over the last decades I have learned that **most people intuitively understand** that children need hobbies. The argument usually goes along these lines: hobbies are valuable as they **build socio-emotional skills, reduce crime**, increase the number of safe adults in children’s lives and, especially in the United States, give you extra credit when applying for college.

It is true that those are the benefits of hobbies. But just like in the arts or in science, we don’t get to those instrumental benefits by focusing on them. **We get those benefits by fostering curiosity.**

Also, hobbies don’t just happen. **They need infrastructure**. We need changing rooms and football fields, swimming pools and tennis rackets, dance studios and conservatories, volunteer parents and trained staff, philanthropic support and public grant making. Building a hobby ecosystem is a delicate balance of enabling personal choice, removing obstacles from participation, letting new things flourish and inventing better incentives. Public funders need to introduce metrics and reporting to understand performance and impact and to build confidence in political decisionmakers that limited funds are disbursed wisely. But exerting too much control or **trying to predict the winners destroys the hobby infrastructure**. Fostering an ecosystem is an act of creative bureaucracy.

In Finland, it has taken **decades of creative bureaucracy** to make hobbies the kind of cross-party policy priority that it is today. Municipalities have a legal responsibility to build infrastructure, support nonprofits and enrich the offering provided mostly by nonprofit organizations. National funding is used to provide free-of-charge hobbies at the end of the school day across the country. Regular national surveys help the field to understand whether children and teens would want more basketball, skateboarding or dance classes.

All this results in 85-90 percent of children reporting that they have at least one weekly hobby in the happiest country in the world. When it comes to hobbies, it is not the role of the government to decide what hobbies people should choose but to **lower the threshold for experimentation** and increase curiosity and access. I used to say that it is OK to hate pole vaults but that opinion should be grounded in experience.

Over the last years, with the support of The Gambrell Foundation, I have taken groups of American public, private and civic leaders to Finland to experience and learn **what are the components of happiness**. Hobbies have been the standout discovery on every visit. As one of the leaders pointed out: it is so simple and it speaks to everyone. She said that without seeing in practice, she would not have taken hobbies seriously. By experiencing it with her own eyes and with peers from other organizations, she felt confident advocating for hobbies as she got home to Charlotte, North Carolina.

As a result of the expeditions, **we are building a hobby ecosystem** for Charlotte. It will take creative bureaucracy. The design choices will need to be different than in Helsinki. We have decided to start this work by going first to children and youth. For the first time in an American city, we are conducting a county-wide hobby survey on what teenagers want to do, asking teenagers rather than their parents what would bring their joy and purpose. We are then hiring highschoolers to enrich the survey data and using small grants to find local talents to share their hobbies. Based on this experimentation, we will be organizing larger hobby events and doing placemaking projects in parks and libraries.

We are doing all of this within one year. The goal is to build evidence and confidence for others to join the movement and shorten the distance between data-based insights and action. Ideally, in a couple of years, Charlotte will be known as the leading city for hobbies in America.

What I have learned in this work is that the **most powerful policy goals are often the ones that sound the least serious**. Saying that the goal is for every child to have a hobby—not to reduce crime, not to improve grades, but simply for everyone to have something that makes their eyes light up—requires bureaucratic courage. That is what creative bureaucracy is to me: **the willingness to defend joyful goals in rooms that prefer complexity**.

Tommi Laitio is the Principal of Studio Laitio, an urban consultancy developing pragmatic yet inspiring solutions to urban friction with cities, foundations and civic institutions. The work builds on Laitio's experience as the Director of Youth Affairs and the first Executive Director of Culture and Leisure for the City of Helsinki and as the inaugural Bloomberg Public Innovation Fellow at Johns Hopkins University.

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USING THE PLAYFUL TO UNLOCK THE SERIOUS

Robyn Bennett

“**Prove Kafka wrong**” was the Creative Bureaucracy Festival’s slogan in 2024, the centenary of Franz Kafka’s death. A person wandered the halls in a full cockroach costume, stopping delegates to ask: *what have you done to prove Kafka wrong?*

Kafka gave us Gregor Samsa, the man who wakes one morning transformed into a cockroach, trapped inside a system that cannot see him. Watching people’s faces as the cockroach approached (the flicker of confusion, then delight) it struck me as a precise image of what the Festival had learned to do: use the playful and unexpected to unlock the serious.

I spent five years helping to build the Creative Bureaucracy Festival, and what that work taught me, above all, is that the conditions under which people are willing to **take creative risk is profoundly psychological and relational** – and almost nobody is designing for them deliberately. People do not reform institutions because they have read the right report. They do it because something in them feels recognised, accompanied and safe enough to act.

What I kept witnessing, across cities and cultures and levels of government, was how differently people behaved when the container shifted. Hierarchy asserts itself in formal settings. But in a space designed to hold people differently, it loosens. Someone once described the Festival as “**oxygen for public servants**”. What I heard in that was not about the event itself. It was a deeper deprivation: a lack of possibility, of solidarity, of being seen as **a creative agent rather than a delivery mechanism**.

Restoring play and wonder to conversations about reform is not a luxury. It is the work. A playful attitude functions as a method: it opens space for reframing problems, for seeing sideways, for testing without fear of failure. It loosens the grip of rigid procedures and invites curiosity, enabling practitioners to discover solutions they could not have anticipated in advance. In that sense, **play is not the opposite of seriousness but a pathway to it**. Through experimentation, imagination, and a willingness to suspend the obvious, bureaucracy can shift from a system of constraint to a platform for invention—quietly, persistently, and often in ways Kafka himself might not have believed possible.

Frameworks and mandates matter as they create the enabling conditions and signal what is sanctioned. But alone they are never sufficient. What carries change through an institution is something more like what biologists call the interstitium: the fluid connective tissue between the named structures, only recently recognised as an organ in its own right. Trust. Discretionary effort. The willingness to carry the reform when the formal programme has moved on. None of that can be mandated into existence. It **can only be cultivated**, which requires sustained attention to the informal architectures that institutions consistently undervalue: the corridor conversations, the cross-city peer relationships, the spaces where people recover their sense of possibility. Institutionalise these and you risk killing what made them alive. Leave them informal and they remain fragile and unscaled. The **dance between structure and aliveness** is not a problem to solve once, but a tension to be continuously worked.

So when I ask where next, my honest answer is not a policy lever or a governance model. It is a reorientation of attention, and an honest reckoning with **how deeply the current system is broken**. Not underperforming. Fundamentally out of step with the complexity of what is coming. In that gap, something dangerous is being built: the **slow narrowing of options**, the capture of institutions by concentrated power, the incremental narrowing of futures we might otherwise have chosen.

What keeps our futures open? The answer I keep returning to is the deliberate construction of new system infrastructures—ones that can harness collective agency and connect it into the wider machinery of governance and finance. Not patches on what exists, but new forms **built for the complexity we are actually in**, and for the people who still believe we can navigate it together. Public servants are among the essential builders of these forms, not despite their institutional roles, but because of what they can uniquely enable from inside them: the permissions, the connections, the resources, the legitimacy that no one outside can provide.

The creative bureaucracy was never just about making government more imaginative. At its most serious, it was always about **keeping the future negotiable**. That is what is at stake now.

Robyn Bennett helped build the Creative Bureaucracy Festival as International Programme & Partnerships Lead from 2020-2024. She now works for Dark Matter Labs, co-leading an emerging body of work focused on expanding civilizational optionality.

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PART III — DELIVERY, CAPABILITY AND TRANSFORMATION

How change happens
in practice

*transformation happens
when leaders decide
they must stake their
leadership on it...*

THE CREATIVE BUREAUCRACY AND THE POLITICS OF CONSEQUENCE

James Anderson

The head of Mexico City's innovation agency years ago said something to me I've never forgotten: **how dare we**, as people given the chance to improve the lives of millions, play with pilots? What self-indulgence.

Building the global government innovation program at Bloomberg Philanthropies, for more than fifteen years, I've worked alongside mayors and city teams trying to **change how government works**.

In the earliest years, the priority was protection. **Labs, teams, and offices** were carved out inside municipalities so innovators could test new ways of working without being shut down by standard operating procedure or politics as usual. **Distance from core operations was deliberate and important.**

But insulation had a half-life.

Innovation too often became **a special place rather than a core part** of effective governance as these teams refined their craft. The work was admired and showcased, yet separated from budgets, procurement, staffing decisions, and the political commitments that determine what grows and endures. The distance that once protected the ambition to work differently became **a barrier to at-scale impact**.

The lesson is this: In the public sector, **major change does not happen at the margins**. It happens when innovation aligns with power.

Whole-of-city digital transformation does not occur without executive championship. Entrenched systems of care **do not shift without political cover** and sustained backing. Procurement, budgeting, and service delivery are not transformed through technical expertise alone. They change when leaders decide they must—and are willing to stake their leadership on it.

Nesta defines **innovation** as the process by which new ideas turn into practical value in the world. The test is in the *turning*. Public innovation cannot end with a terrific systems map, a breathtaking prototype, or a radical idea that never lifts off. It **must produce value at scale**—and that requires implementation, delivery, and political alignment.

The Mexico City challenge reminds us that public innovation **cannot be limited to novelty**. It must be defined by consequence. If we work inside institutions

that wield immense power to improve lives, then **playing safely at the edges is not enough**. Ambition in government innovation isn't about more ideas. It's about designing for implementation and scale from the start. How an idea moves **from prototype to scale** must become as central to innovation practice as how an idea better meets the needs of residents.

Fifteen years on, a **new professional class of public innovators** has emerged in municipalities worldwide. They have mastered insights, ideation, prototyping, and new forms of stakeholder engagement. The **next stage** requires political maturity: applying those tools to the agendas voters have authorized and doing the internal work—budget, coalition-building, and hard trade-offs—to use the innovation toolkit to help elected leaders deliver more ambitious, more people-centered results than traditional governing alone would produce. That means **moving out of innovation's safe corners** and into the center of mayoral priorities, where success is measured not by creativity alone but by whether governing promises are kept.

The creative bureaucracies of tomorrow will matter not for the elegance or abundance of their ideas, but for whether they **turn public power into progress** people can feel.

James Anderson leads the Government Innovation program at Bloomberg Philanthropies. An expert in public sector innovation, strategic communications, and urban transformation, he advises mayors around the globe on new ways to solve critical urban challenges.

*its means moving
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*the crisis of trust
presents both a responsibility
and an opportunity
to renew...*

DELIVER OR DECLINE: THREE LEVERS TO MODERNISE THE GERMAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Philip von Haehling

Modernising Germany's public administration must be understood as a **strategic imperative** rather than merely a technical project. To summarize three levers can do this: first, repositioning the state as an active process orchestrator, standardising repeatable tasks and using interoperable data; second, redesigning reforms around real service delivery chains—prioritising outcomes and eliminating duplication through shared digital infrastructure; and third, rebalancing responsibilities across federal levels by relieving municipalities, strengthening federal states as hubs that standardise, and letting the federal level lead where scale and digitalisation offer the greatest leverage.

Germany's ability to deliver reliably has become a **core competitiveness factor**, yet public trust in its capacity is eroding. The government's ability to deliver has become an essential location factor for Germany as a whole. It determines whether investments succeed, whether transformation can be organised, and whether social stability is maintained. This depends on a public administration setting clear priorities, managing programmes effectively and delivering services reliably.

In Germany, however, there are **growing doubts** about this capability. Large parts of the population think the administration is inflexible and overstretched. This crisis of trust presents both a responsibility and an opportunity to renew. Modernising the public administration is not just a technical exercise. It is a strategic task that must make government actions clearer, more effective and more reliable.

What is needed is **not another collection of isolated measures**, but a new logic of public service delivery. Instead of fragmented federal solutions, micromanaged responsibilities and superficially digitalising broken processes, federal, state and local governments need to do three things: standardise and bundle processes, create robust data interoperability, and to manage their key tasks and services as a portfolio.

Three levers are particularly important:

- First, the state must manage tasks, data and responsibilities more strategically.
- Second, reforms must be more closely aligned with the real needs of citizens and businesses.
- Third, a new division of labour is needed between federal, state and local levels that combines quality, service and scalability.

Lever 1: The state as process orchestrator

Germany faces a growing concentration of responsibilities decisive for its future which the government mostly needs to deliver: affordable housing, strong infrastructure, reliable energy supply, digital sovereignty, skilled labour and the protection of its critical infrastructures, like cybersecurity. These are interconnected challenges and shape the country's competitiveness and its resilience.

Crucially, in this context, government is **no longer just a rule-maker**. It is increasingly also an investor, operator and process orchestrator. The public administration no longer just delivers services, but steers a network of internal units, public partners and external providers. Its promise is no longer only legal certainty, but an ability to deliver under time pressure, with clear priorities and minimal friction.

Other sectors show that high performance does not mean every unit does everything itself. Effective organisations separate front and back offices, aggregate routine tasks, standardise processes and use data systematically to align services with user needs. These principles can **equally be applied to government**, where legal and constitutional requirements allow.

A modern administration must more clearly distinguish between what must be tailored to a specific context and what can be standardised, bundled or digitalised. Where tasks are rule-based and repeatable, the state should rely on shared process architectures, clear standards and interoperable data. This is not a retreat from responsibility, but a condition for exercising it effectively.

Lever 2: Reforming along real value chains

To improve delivery, reform must **follow real user journeys**—the actual pathways through which citizens and businesses access services. Today, these often cut across departments, levels and authorities, creating friction, duplication and unclear accountability.

Reform should therefore **begin not with existing structures**, but with the services themselves. Which tasks require local knowledge and discretion? Which can be standardised, automated or centralised? Where possible, solutions should reduce workload while improving both quality and speed.

Information, advice or applying for services can often be organised through digital platforms, hotlines, chatbots or video consultations, so relieving local offices. Personal interaction remains essential where conflict resolution or individual judgement is required, but routine steps can and should be systematically grouped into common processes.

This logic also requires a **new approach to governance**: outcomes must take precedence over inputs. Priorities should be clearly operationalised, and programmes managed within defined target frameworks. An effective administration should not only initiate projects, but also simplify, standardise and crucially discontinue those with little impact.

Equally important is to enhance productivity by end-to-end digitalisation, automation and shared modules. Not every ministry or municipality should develop parallel solutions. The “one-for-all” principle—where services are developed once and reused widely—demonstrates the potential of standardised approaches.

Lever 3: Public excellence with a service ethos

Modernisation will only succeed if federal, state and local roles are redefined. **The goal is not centralisation**. What matters more is aligning quality issues, efficiency targets, scalability and proximity to citizens at the right level.

Municipalities are often overburdened with tasks that do not require local delivery. This applies, for example, to aspects of migration—especially residence permits—and for registering, updating and deregistering individuals. Standardisation and integrating can relieve local authorities, freeing capacity for services that truly require local presence. Additionally, inter-municipal cooperation and shared operating models can support smaller municipalities.

Federal states are **well placed to integrate** or pool delivery capacities, set standards and provide the digital pillars for communes. They can ensure reuse, harmonise security requirements and define architectures. This must be built in from the outset—“governance by design”.

The federal level should take responsibility where high standardisation, scale and digitalisation coincide, for example, benefits such as housing

allowances. Municipalities are already developing digital and AI-supported solutions to manage increasing verification requirements and erroneous applications. Local innovation projects are valuable, but inefficient if replicated many times. **Shared infrastructures** can improve efficiency while maintaining local access through advisory services.

This transformation should begin **not with an abstract grand reform**. What makes more sense is a prioritised modernisation portfolio with a defined set of tasks and modules selected according to their urgency and effectiveness. A structured approach — assessment, preparation, piloting and scaling — can deliver visible progress and build trust.

Investing effectively and strengthening resilience

The need for reform is especially visible in construction and infrastructure. Germany faces a massive investment backlog. In 2025, the federal government launched a €500 billion infrastructure and climate fund over twelve years. Good infrastructures are central to Germany's economic competitiveness, attractiveness, social cohesion and future proofing. The Federal government has stressed that businesses need reliable transport and networks, that citizens need housing, childcare and schools. Regions need digital infrastructure that gives citizens the ability to participate. Society needs systems that function under climate stress.

Investments in construction and infrastructure are therefore not just a sectoral issue. They are economic, social and security policy pillars. Implementing the special fund clarifies how closely investment funding, planning and approval capacity, procurement expertise, standards, data and project management are all interconnected — and how significant the need for reform is.

The “one-for-all” principle being applied to establish a nationwide standard approach to digital building permits is an example. It not only accelerates new construction across regions, but also relieves pressure on municipalities and illustrates the potential of shared solutions. Construction and infrastructure are politically important, but also a test case to practically show what a modernised public administration can be like.

Standardising can **deliver significant gains**: common procedures, reusable contracts, consistent data on time, cost, quality and sustainability as well as portfolio management to improve efficiency and predictability — while still allowing for local adaptation, such as the social impacts of individual projects. It is precisely this combination of standardisation and local adaptability that makes reforms both transferable and effective.

Effective investment strengthens overall resilience. Shared standards and cooperative models increase security, scalability and innovation capacity. In the context of climate change, robust infrastructure and rapid recovery become critical location factors.

Summary

Modernising public administration means aligning economic performance, social needs and state capability. The state should be **defined less by institutional boundaries** and more by its ability to deliver: investments that produce results, reliable infrastructure, and transparent, predictable services for citizens and businesses.

Delivery capacity is built through clear priorities, effective distribution of responsibilities, and standardisation where scale is possible—relieving municipalities, strengthening coordination at federal state level, and enabling shared national solutions where appropriate.

This is **not another reform programme but a systemic shift**: from fragmented, analogue approaches to standardised, data-driven and collaborative structures. If applied to key priorities, it can rebuild trust and secure long-term state effectiveness. If implemented successfully in a few priority areas, this approach can quickly rebuild trust — and secure the long-term effectiveness of the state.

Philip von Haehling, a lawyer with an MBA, has been working for nearly 30 years at the interface between business and public administration, helping to make policy effective and modernising administration. Following leadership roles at Accenture, BwConsulting and Amazon Web Services, he has been co-managing Director of PD – Public Sector Consulting GmbH since 2025.

*politics, the administration,
business and tech operate within the
same system, but speak different languages
and follow different logics...*

CROSSING BOUNDARIES & CONNECTING CAPABILITIES

Ingo Caspari, Silke Lehnhardt, Katrin Suder,
Philip v. Haehling

Germany's ability to remain a shaping force in the digital age will be decided less by technology itself than by whether the state can attract and empower people who bridge systems—between politics, administration, business and tech. D Stack, AI capacities and digital register modernisation are strategically vital, but without more adaptable institutions and a new talent strategy, real decision making power risks shifting to markets, technology providers and, indirectly, other governments.

Technology alone will not save us. In 2026, here in Germany, much of the discussion centres on technology: D Stack as a shared platform, end to end digitalisation, AI support for case handling. With the Federal Modernisation Agenda, federal and state governments have committed themselves to becoming faster, more digital and more capable. Yet an uncomfortable truth remains: no D Stack and no AI tool will enhance our capacity if organisations themselves do not become more adaptable and capable of learning—and if we fail to bring the right people into key roles, including diversifying the DNA of our administrations.

Same space, different languages. From within the public sector perspective, we see how much our environment has changed and is continuing to change on a daily basis. Decisions about networks, cloud infrastructure or data spaces are no longer purely technical, they are also industrial, security and location policies. While politics, the administration, business and tech operate within the same system, they speak different languages and follow different logics. Niklas Luhmann noted they are distinct systems: the public administration prioritises legal robustness and accountability; business focuses on time-to-market and scaling; tech emphasises feasibility and architecture. None of these perspectives is wrong—but without translation, they create friction and misunderstanding. This is where entrants from the outside play a critical role.

AI will shape decisions—whether we like it or not. The Modernisation Agenda and the IT Planning Council in Germany rightly frame AI as a productivity lever: it is intended to help process applications, classify files and generate forecasts. Given staffing pressures, this is attractive. But AI is more than efficiency technology, it is also a decision technology. It determines which information reaches decision-makers, how options are framed and which

risks are visible. Already, algorithms shape credit decisions, recruitment, risk assessments and security contexts, areas traditionally governed by human judgement and democratic responsibility. If we cannot understand, test and govern these systems, decision-making power shifts to AI and the companies behind it, not due to a lack of authority, but due to the public sector's insufficient speed, expertise and personnel.

Boundary crossers are translators between worlds. This is where entrants from outside the public sector come into play: individuals who move from the private to the public sector then bring their expertise into the service of the state—a path still less common in Germany than elsewhere. For public administration they are much more than response to skills shortages; they are a governance resource. Those who have crossed systems understand both worlds: how projects are driven in business, and how legal, political and budgetary constraints operate in government. This dual perspective is essential for major initiatives—from the digital register modernisation, the National-Once-Only-Technical-System (NOOTS), and D Stack architecture, to AI governance and large-scale planning and programmes requiring permissions.

A double pressure: staff shortages plus structural change. The need to act is clear. As baby boomers retire, forecasts suggest a workforce gap of up to 20% in the public sector by 2040, particularly in technical and IT roles. The answer cannot be to hire more of the same. The www.querwechsler-netzwerk.de responds with clear demands: 30 per cent of replacements in relevant leadership positions should be recruited externally, 30 new professorships in public management to build-up future capabilities in analysis and transformation. The creation of future-oriented capacities such as analysis and change centres; a Charter of Open Doors with competence based recruitment and transparent pay structures, alongside the strengthening of hybrid institutions such as in house consultancies and innovation labs. This agenda aligns with the insight that pooling capacities, division-of-labour delivery models, and more permeable workforce are core to an effective public administration.

Boundary crossing starts at home. Importantly, this is not an abstract task for policy makers alone. Leaders and staff in public organisations can begin today to make moving sideways operational. The first lever is recruitment. As long as we prioritize traditional career paths and formal criteria, we will struggle to attract talent from tech, start ups or global firms. Competence based recruitment, as envisaged by the Charter of Open Doors, are a practical starting point: clear role profiles that prioritize delivery experience, technical understanding and leadership in complex projects, while explicitly allowing for

external career paths. Equally important are transparent, faster processes and an honest signal that external experience is genuinely valued. Clearly metrics such as time to hire and a proportion of competence based recruiting can be integrated into the monitoring of the modernisation agenda.

Reducing risk. Increase attractiveness. The second lever is attractiveness and reversibility. For many, the barrier is not the role but the perceived career risk. Fixed term leadership roles with clear transformation mandates and mobility pathways back to the private sector are important. Equally showing visible examples of how people successfully transitioned from one sector to the next. This is can make lateral moves a normal career step rather than being a courageous exception.

Culture determines success. The third lever is culture. People who move across sectors rarely fail because of lack of expertise but due to cultural barriers. Onboarding itself should be treated as a transformation tool, creating space for new perspectives and “aha moments” where people are encouraged to share questions such as “What do you see differently compared to your previous environment?” and leaders actively seek out these perspectives. Mentoring peer networks and rotating across hybrid units can help stabilize their bridging goal. These investments are modest compared to the cost of failed recruitment.

Hybrid units as bridges. Hybrid units—such as in house consultancies, digital services, GovTech partnerships and innovation labs—can serve as both administrative backbone as well as learning environment. Operating across sectors and levels, they are natural entry points for outside entrants. Properly integrated, they turn initiatives like D-Stack and AI deployment into shared transformation efforts rather than isolated IT projects.

Boundary crossing as a system capability. Ultimately, this mobility is not a niche HR tool but a core system capability for the digital state. The modernisation agenda, in the German context, provides the structure and technologies—but whether these translate into real capacity depends on whether we bring in people who can bridge systems—and whether we open our institutions to them. The fact that our German Minister for Digital and State Modernisation comes from the private sector sets an example worth following.

The authors are active in the Querwechsler Network. If you are interested, please visit: www.querwechsler-netzwerk.de/



*we depend so much on
choices by people who are
not the obvious leaders...*

MOBILISING THE MIDDLE: THE NEXT FRONTIER

Margie Caust

The challenges of our times are so huge that it is no wonder we want **to change everything, everywhere and all at once**.

Over the last nine years the *Creative Bureaucracy Festival* has showcased stories about influencing change. Many speakers focus on the urgency of system change and renewal and on what might achieve this. It's frustrating that government bureaucracies **are much the same** as they were nine years ago - potentially even more constrained.

What if it was possible to **transform these systems from within**, potentially even within existing rules? What if this was led by those in the middle, connecting with each other, creating a critical mass that might reduce the risk that any individual might be punished?

One starting point is **understanding creative bureaucrats** and what makes it possible for them to act. The Festival has helped public servants reinvent their identities and claim their creativity and imagination. They might call themselves **civic punks, imagination activists or intrapreneurs** as well as creative bureaucrats.

The Festival has been **a beacon to frustrated public employees** who know what is possible but feel isolated within their organisations.

As a former public servant I know it can be hard to influence the system from within, how controlled people can feel. **But it is possible** and we need to understand more about those that succeed.

Over the last 10 years I've interviewed more than 100 hundred public employees, one on one, about what they see as possible, how they would improve things, what makes their work meaningful. This has included people at the front line, in middle levels and senior executives.

So much of the humanity of our government systems, comes down to the people who care, who try to make a difference, who work to the **spirit of their jobs** rather than the letter of their job descriptions, and who bring humour and warmth to the task. They show how much we depend on choices made by

people who are not the obvious leaders but who occupy of influential positions across their organisations.

Beyond *warming the system* some manage to transform the system itself.

Many of us know how some **senior leaders can create a tone** and a sense of possibility that radiates beyond them and makes the organisation feel safer and more intelligent.

Yet those in **the middle of organisations can be invisible**. Their contributions can be overlooked. These are the people who manage to create something new with value. Theirs might be a heroes' journey. They **take on the system**, find work arounds, recruit allies, play four-dimensional chess, nearly fall at the final hurdle. Their success might be owned by someone else. Yet they feel satisfied when the idea is realised.

They show us the '*how to*' and **what is possible now**.

We know about those in the middle and front line of government from the work of people such as Sandford Borins—a US/Canadian academic who studied innovation in government over many years. He tells us that **most innovations are initiated in the middle of organisations** (more than 50%). That what motivates innovators is finding problems to solve. Their innovations tend to persist longer than those initiated by bureaucratic leaders, by interest groups or political leaders.

Creative bureaucrats often have a range of skills and insights that go unnoticed in their daily working lives. Those in the middle know how the system works. They know who needs to be influenced and what their objections might be. They aim to turn people who might 'say no' into allies. They **help everyone own the issue**. Their strength is that they work step-by-step, are patient, good-humoured and persistent. Their colleagues like them. They draw people in. They work ahead of what is possible now, with faith in what will be possible soon.

Yet, many feel isolated. What might be possible if they were somehow supported by those who have done similar things in other parts of the system?

These driven inventors can teach us how to introduce ideas into complex systems and, importantly, they can also teach other bureaucrats these methods. But most need to first appreciate the skills they have.

There are also those who might not have the courage to initiate *but respond to well-crafted invitations*. In my own city and state these include the early adopters and participants in *Splash Adelaide*, *90-Day Projects* and *the Thinkers in Residence programs*. **These mechanisms invited public employees to apply**

their ideas to real problems with colleagues. Each was very different in design and intent but all were highly influential programs with long and significant legacies.

Simple, powerful mechanisms for change like these are examples of creative practice. Imagine a design competition to showcase small ideas as these, how they were designed, and what they led to. To create a *philosophy of practicality for those who work with the world as it is now*.

There is real hope out there if we **connect motivated public employees** to practical support from others trying to do hard things, perhaps only a few steps ahead. The bigger idea is a critical mass of motivated bureaucrats who can change these systems from within. Many people are trying to work this out now.

This has been our approach to our *Creative Bureaucracy Hub in Australia and New Zealand*. Inviting people to bring forward that which matters to them. After our initial prototype Festival in 2025 we are regrouping and imagining what might come next.

The other reality is less positive. From interviews I know that so many of those who achieve amazing things end-up shattered at the end. They don't feel valued. They leave the organisations they offered so much to. **What a terrible waste of their potential** and for our own hopes for meeting the many challenges we collectively face.

Margie Caust is co-author with Charles Landry of the *Creative Bureaucracy* book. Formerly worked in South Australia's State Premier's Department to join the state, the city and stakeholders together and then for the London Development Agency on catalysing the Thames Gateway. Now running her own business Rethinkery.

*you can delete programs,
but it's not as easy to delete teams
and their human connections
and shared values...*

DISTURBED, DISSPERSED, UNDETERRED

Arianne Miller

Fourteen years ago, I began my career as a creative bureaucrat in the United States federal government. Two years in, I joined a small and emerging program called the Lab at OPM (the Lab)—a team inside the U.S. Office of Personnel Management charged with building both the capacity and demand for human-centred design across the federal government. This pivots the **focus from rigid procedural compliance** to the actual needs, behaviours, and lived experiences of the people served. Ultimately it's about building trust, improving efficiency, and repairing the connection between citizens and government. Our program was a design-led experiment, crafted incrementally and iteratively, responding to constraints and opportunities as we encountered them.

I had the privilege of leading that team for over a decade. During that time, I hired nearly 100 designers into our team and helped dozens more secure roles in other federal programs. They were researchers, service designers, lawyers, artists, urban planners, teachers, and more. Most were entering government for the first time. Others brought valuable prior government experience. All were committed to making government work better for people.

Over our 13 years, the Lab partnered with more than 70 federal programs to understand and improve the services they deliver, and we introduced or deepened human-centred design practices for over 7,000 of our fellow civil servants. Most of the people who left our team went on to join, grow, and/or start other design-focused nodes throughout the federal system. (That was one of several intentional strategies we used to build the widespread, sustainable capacity government actually needed.)

Then, in April 2025, our program was **dismantled almost overnight**. We became part of the tens of thousands U.S. civil servants pushed out by the Trump administration—often specifically by DOGE.

The losses we have individually and collectively experienced matter and should be acknowledged. I have spent the past year processing it, stabilizing, finding a path forward, and helping others do the same. In doing so, I have also arrived at a deeper, more complete understanding of what my teammates and I built, and that understanding is what gives me hope.

What we built was the human infrastructure necessary for constructive change and resilience. Alongside colleagues from 18F, others in the Technology Transformation Services, the real U.S. Digital Service, the Presidential Innovation Fellows program, and dozens of agency-level teams, we grew and developed a generation- and a network- of hundreds of civic designers and technologists committed to improving government.

Most of the people from those teams named above have been pushed out of our federal government. Some are still there, doing whatever they can to hold fast, mitigate harm, and carry forward despite the barriers. All of us were disrupted, harmed, and depleted. We are also resilient, committed, and undeterred.

You can delete *programs*. It's not as easy to delete teams. **The human connections, shared values, and mutual respect still remain.** Those individuals are moving in many different directions currently, but versions of those teams are still holding together, helping each other stabilize and gradually find new opportunities. Though many are still searching, others have gradually secured new roles in state and local governments, nonprofits, advocacy organizations, and mission-aligned for-profit companies. Some, like my team at Civic Design Collaborative, have established and are building new organizations to continue in our work. Most are still in regular contact with each other, thinking together, pooling knowledge, showing up for each other.

Those relationships that drive us to stay connected are the core of what endures and the foundation of what comes next. Together, we are greater than the sum of our parts. We have deep knowledge and experience that still offers great value—to our own country and to others, but that value will only sustain if others join to help us hold it together—deliberately, generously, and with urgency.

So here is my call to you—and I mean this concretely:

Connect with us. Hire us. Fund us. Help us join good work already in progress- or start something new. This disrupted community of creative bureaucrats represents one of the largest pools ever assembled of civic design knowledge combined with government experience. Now it is more dispersed than ever before. That dispersion is disorienting and disruptive. However, the redistribution that is emerging from it also carries enormous potential if we all work together to navigate this ongoing uncertainty and to reclaim and harness the value this community still has to offer.

We are looking for places to contribute. If you lead or have influence over an organization, a team, a foundation, or a government program at any level, now is the moment to consider what's possible and to act. If you are a colleague,

a peer, a former collaborator: reach out, share opportunities, and keep the connective tissue alive. **If you find that possibility compelling but are not sure where to start, get in touch with me. Let's talk.**

Arianne Miller was Managing Director, the Lab at the Office of Personnel Management, US Federal Government, and is currently co-founder Civic Design Collaborative Arianne@civicdesign.co

[Note: As I share the story above, I am mindful that my team and our experience are a *small* part in a much larger, much harder truth. In the past year, well over 250,000 civil servants have been pushed out of the United States federal government. The number grows *substantially* when accounting for losses in government-adjacent organizations due to contract cancellations, refusal to release approved funds, and overall chaos and uncertainty. And, as I wrote this piece, that purge continues.]

*AI can't solve, or even
cover up, those systemic issues
that should have been addressed
decades ago...*

A TOOL TO REFINE, NOT MAGIC TO FALL FOR

Martin Jordan

AI in everything – because ministers want it, announcement culture rewards it, and funding shifts towards it.

It seems equally fashionable to be **either all pro or all contra** artificial intelligence in government. Neither of these positions is particularly helpful. The attention of both the press and senior officials is often too short to appreciate the nuances between these positions.

AI is **considered the silver bullet** by those lagging behind in digital transformation. When their predecessors haven't done the hard work of building capability, rethinking structures and processes, and shifting to new operating models, people in power wanting things to change quickly is understandable. The **monsters of legacy debt are taunting us now**. In folklore, only silver bullets defeat werewolves, vampires and witches. Yet the monsters ministerial staff and their seniors want to slay are often of their own making. It's the infrastructure work that **should have happened decades ago**; it's the government reform initiative that required too much political capital for anyone to spend, and it's the detailed procedural efforts that weren't deemed attractive enough to be prioritised at the time when they should have been. Shooting silver bullets and making some noise doesn't fend them off, unfortunately. AI can't solve, or even cover up, these systemic issues.

When big tech and the big consultancies offer AI-powered solutions, **the promise feels too good to resist**. Fixing old problems with new whizzy means is tempting. However, the alleged integrated solutions are no more than parlour tricks, because the underlying issues stay unresolved. The IT systems are still siloed, data remains messy and non-interoperable, and the same words in different policies describe distinct things.

But AI in government and the wider public sector isn't useless, far from it. For us to reap the genuine benefits, we have to adjust our common approaches. In large part, our ways of working continue to be useful and valid because AI does not erase all the learning we've gained since the digital transformation began. Over the past 10 to 15 years, a generation of public servants has learned to work in an evidence-based, human-centred, and data-informed way. These ways of thinking and working endure. Indeed, these traits are even more valuable and needed than before.

When corporate salespeople pledge true magic, staying critical and verifying evidence are virtues. Public servants need to develop robust judgment to validate what is promised and what gets delivered. They need to explore and understand if and how AI can accelerate outputs and improve outcomes in their specific work contexts. When citizens and residents don't trust their government, public servants need to get close and work out why. Slapping AI on government services and offering access through inconsistent chat experiences is unlikely to help. It can make things worse.

AI can play a supportive role at an individual, service or system level. It should **never be used as an end in itself**. It is a technical tool deeper in the stack, there to enable better-scaled results. In proven service implementations, government bodies have used large-language models to match different datasets in the background, validate eligibility, or simplify the language of government decisions. At an individual level, many public servants use it in their daily work. Among other things, policy officers develop an overview of vast amounts of documents using AI-enabled tools. Equally, digital teams make use of them when developing digital offerings. Software engineers write code more efficiently. Designers can prototype faster and test more divergent hypotheses. Content specialists are better supported when breaking down complex legal language into plain language.

None of these applications is showy. In most cases, **they are utilitarian, not gimmicky**. That can disappoint when a leader looks for something 'announceable' and wants to make a splash with AI. In all of these cases, the intermediate results require human review. We see powerful, imperfect tools that need tweaking to maximise potential. **Without checks and balances, they can cause harm**. Hence, it needs adequate time for public servants to critically make themselves familiar with them.

Beyond that, public servants deploying AI are responsible for causing potential discrimination, environmental impacts, and ethical and legal complications. EU and national bodies in EU member states have highlighted challenges in numerous reports. Depending on the models used, there may be severe bias in the training data. There can be labour exploitation in the production of AI models, violating national clean supply chain laws. Furthermore, teams need to review the resulting carbon emissions and intensive water use in line with climate and environmental targets. Public servants must **consider the positive and negative impacts of their actions across all dimensions**.

Eventually, **AI tools will not help with one of the biggest challenges in government**: departments operating in isolation. Joined-up policies, services and systems require a different culture and structure. It needs humans who

want to change those – and who need to stay in charge of decision-making. When there is a willingness to change, AI tools can support more systemic work.

Martin Jordan works as the Head of Design & User Research at the German government's DigitalService in Berlin. Previously, he was Head of Service Design in the UK Cabinet Office's Government Digital Service (GDS) based in London.

DANCING WITH DISRUPTION

Brenton Caffin

When Covid-19 arrived, it stress-tested everything—systems, institutions, relationships, assumptions. Many of our deepest held beliefs about how government works were destroyed or made redundant in ways we'd never anticipated. We needed courage and candour to admit that and to step forward through the uncertainty that followed.

For me, the biggest shift was seeing just how capable many governments were of acting at scale and pace in situations of great uncertainty when the situation demanded it. My hope was that governments would build on this rediscovered sense of agency and urgency to work on the many other crises befalling us. Not least the climate emergency.

That hasn't happened. As the pandemic receded, its knock-on effects compounded—poorer life outcomes from disrupted schooling and healthcare, a new generation of conspiracy theories bred online, housing stress fuelling anti-immigration rhetoric, and populist movements that have taken a chainsaw to government programs and institutions. The disruptions keep coming. The collapse of the rules-based international order. **The transformative effect of AI. And still the planet warms.**

Eric Hoffer once wrote, "In times of change learners inherit the earth; while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists."

In a world of polycrisis, our learning faculties have never been more critically needed.

For public innovation practitioners, these last six years have felt like a make-or-break moment for the field. Not to produce shiny new innovations, but to practically help communities adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. To learn from each other around the globe in real time. And to support governments so they can continue to deliver on their promise to citizens—upholding their wellbeing, dignity and prosperity.

This is where the AI moment becomes truly transformative—not as another disruption to absorb, but as a genuinely new capability. The question is whether we use it to further centralise decision-making, strengthen vendor dependencies, and strip away human judgment, or whether we use it to

*for public innovation practitioners
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enhance the capabilities of public servants closest to the people they serve. AI that helps a policy officer rapidly synthesise what's working across jurisdictions. AI that supports frontline workers to navigate complexity rather than just follow scripts. AI that unlocks and augments human agency rather than simply usurping it.

And the opportunities before us are real and pressing.

For example, how might we speed up environmental approvals while maintaining regulatory integrity, so that we might achieve a just and humane energy transition? How might we optimise citizens' life-long learning pathways to better support career transitions? How do we support the public to be confident, critical and capable navigators of this new world? And, more broadly, how do we best **use these technologies to connect and empathise, not to divide and hate?**

Getting this right demands the same capacities that every major disruption demands of government: the ability to anticipate what's coming, the discipline to experiment rather than just plan, and the courage to genuinely involve citizens in shaping the response. These are muscles, not projects. They need to be built and maintained over time, not merely stood up in a crisis and then dismantled when the emergency passes.

If governments are to rise to this occasion, they will need imagination and courage. And the task for public innovation practitioners—those of us who choose to work at this uncomfortable boundary between what government is and what it could be—is to keep building these capabilities from the inside. Not waiting for permission. Not waiting for another crisis to make the case for us.

The world that no longer exists isn't coming back.

The question is whether we're learning fast enough to dance with the one that's arriving.

Brenton Caffin is the Director of Courageous - a public innovation studio. He is the Co-founder of States of Change, a network of leading public innovators, a former Executive Director at Nesta, and the founding CEO of The Australian Centre for Social Innovation.

*we can't wait for
another crisis to make the
case for us to innovate...*

REMAKING PUBLIC INNOVATION PRACTICE: THREE SHIFTS

Nicolás Rebolledo & Juan Felipe López

*the urgent question is no longer
what creative bureaucracy means in theory,
but what it demands in practice...*

After a decade of the Creative Bureaucracy Festival, the urgent question is no longer what creative bureaucracy means in theory, but what it demands in practice. We met in London fifteen years ago, at the London School of Economics and the Royal College of Art. One of us had arrived from a period as chief of staff to a Chilean mayor, the other from running digital communications for a presidential campaign. Out of that encounter, we went on to create the Chilean Government Laboratory, the first of its kind at the central government level in Latin America, and have spent the years since trying to connect what we learned on each side: the texture of public administration and the discipline of design. Public Design UNIT is what came out of it: a studio that works with governments, multilateral organisations and innovation teams to design the infrastructure of public innovation itself, that is, the labs, capabilities, methods and programmes through which the **public sector reinvents how it works**.

At UNIT, we read the question of public innovation practice as one about the conditions that bring about a sufficiently stable relationship between two elements: structure and people. By this we mean a public apparatus, or institutional architecture, animated by a cultural fabric of experiences, languages, and capabilities. Creativity emerges in the deliberate effort to shape that relationship to enable public value. The task remains the same, but around it the **conditions have rearranged faster than our methods**. Technology, political economy, geopolitics, demographics, climate, and the legitimacy of public institutions are all moving at once. The toolbox most of us inherited (design thinking, lean methods, the standard innovation playbook) is **no longer fit for purpose**. As public design practitioners working across the globe, we see three interrelated shifts remaking public innovation practice.

The first is technological, and it changes everything. AI has arrived, reshaping not only structural and cultural dimensions of social life but the creative process itself. Productive capacity has leapt forward. But the harder question is what AI does to the way we think: to deliberation, judgment, the slow work of framing problems well. Here, the picture is far less settled.

AI does not replace the creative process. It restructures it. It demands we become explicit about what our methods actually are, because you cannot integrate a tool into a process you have never articulated. It changes how you

build teams, what skills you recruit for, and how you train the next generation. What emerges is not the spectacle of a single general-purpose solution, but a **new ecosystem integrating artificial and human intelligence**. The question is no longer whether to adopt AI, but who shapes the terms of its entry into public service. Technological transformation should be an incentive for renewed curiosity, not a new form of ignorance. From a Latin American perspective, this is not an abstract worry. The region's public conversation has so far centred on AI governance and regulation, an important debate, and one in which countries like Chile, Brazil and Uruguay are moving with real seriousness. But governance frameworks alone do not decide how an algorithm reshapes the deliberative life of a ministry, a city hall, or a participatory budgeting assembly. That deeper question, **how technology enters and reorganises public reasoning**, is where the toolkit needs rebuilding, and where regions with strong democratic-innovation traditions have something distinctive to contribute. In Latin America in particular, that tradition rests on a hard-won foundation: the recognition of human rights as the bedrock on which any participatory democracy stands.

The second shift is cultural, and it shapes how technology touches ground.

Born mostly in the Global North, the new toolkit of innovation methods, from design thinking and systems theory to behavioural economics and management, carries assumptions about structural and cultural elements that do not translate to other contexts. The point is not simply that a public innovation lab in a European capital has more analysts than a municipal team in a mid-sized Latin American city. The deeper issue is that the **standard design-thinking script**, with its narrow notion of the “user”, is poorly equipped for places where most economic and social life is informal, where citizenship is negotiated in unregistered settlements and street markets, and where the people who would be classed as “users” are political actors with their own organisations, histories and demands. It is also **poorly equipped** for the long Latin American tradition of participatory design and popular planning, in which communities are not consulted as users but engaged as co-designers of public life. Our methods, like our technologies, must be *situated*: imagination shaped by the cultural, institutional, and historical ground on which they operate. Experimentation is not voluntarism. It is a cultured, learned imagination, informed about the kinds of effects technology has on human experience.

The third shift is political, to see whether any of this holds. There is a dangerous strain of techno-optimism that treats democratic deliberation as “friction” to be bypassed for the sake of technological shortcuts; faster means better, strategy reduced to efficiency, and politics to an obstacle. But this is a false opposition. Understood as a reflective process of value formation rather than bureaucratic overhead, is **not the enemy of effective innovation**; it is its

condition. It is through deliberation that societies determine which problems are worth solving, which trade-offs are acceptable, and whose interests count as public purpose. Without it, **technology does not eliminate politics; it merely hides it**. Take the kind of decision now landing on every public-sector desk: whether to use an algorithmic system to triage social benefits, allocate school places, or flag children at risk. Framed as a procurement question, it disappears into a line item. Framed as a political question, it forces a public choice about error tolerance, accountability, and whose mistakes the state is willing to make. Both framings produce a system; only one produces a defensible one. This is why we read the third shift through the lens of democracy, not just politics. The festival's slogan, **creative bureaucracy, stronger democracy, is exactly right**. A bureaucracy that absorbs new technologies without renewing its democratic muscle becomes faster at delivering decisions that fewer and fewer citizens recognise as their own. Creative bureaucracy, in our reading, is the practice of keeping that muscle in use.

Nicolás Rebolledo and **Juan Felipe López** are the founders of Public Design UNIT, a strategic design and innovation studio working with governments, multilateral organisations, and innovation teams across Latin America, Europe, and North America. They specialise in public innovation infrastructure, open-innovation programs, and capacity building for organisations navigating complex change.

PART IV — THE HUMAN CORE OF CREATIVE BUREAUCRACY

Leadership,
judgement and
organisational
culture

*nature is not always wise or moral,
but it reveals patterns of adaptation,
survival, and relationship that leaders
ignore at their peril...*

ELEPHANT WORK: WHAT NATURE AND ELEPHANTS CAN TEACH US ABOUT LEADERSHIP IN THE AGE OF AI

Lisa Witter

I grew up obsessed with elephants.

Even as a kid, I sensed that elephants carried something the rest of the animal kingdom did not. Dumbo, the little Disney elephant, flew on the very ears the world told him were a defect. Then I watched them paint, yes, paint, with brushes on canvas at my local zoo. Chai. Bamboo. Watoto. And when I finally saw one in the wild in South Africa at twenty-five, what struck me most was not the size. It was their **enormous power, held so quietly**.

In a world racing toward artificial intelligence, I keep coming back to elephants. I think they have something to teach us, and I think leaders should pay attention.

Nature as a teacher

I have long believed that nature is one of the most **underused sources of leadership insight**. Not because nature is always wise or moral, but because it reveals patterns of adaptation, survival, and relationship that leaders ignore at their peril.

I grew up in the Pacific Northwest, where volcanoes press up against old-growth rainforests, the ocean on one side and desert on the other. Nature is not a backdrop but a presence. It was impossible to grow up in that landscape and not feel it had something to teach.

Chief Seattle, the leader of the Duwamish and Suquamish peoples whose land I grew up on, is widely credited with an idea that has never left me: **we do not inherit the earth from our ancestors**; we borrow it from our children. It carries something true about leadership. How we lead today is shaped by what came before and by what we leave behind.

Human institutions are relatively young. The problems leaders face now—navigating threat, staying steady, adapting with integrity, rebuilding trust—are problems nature has been working on for millions of years longer than we have.

Nature does not theorize. It shows what survives. Its intelligence was not downloaded; it was earned through the consequences of living and dying. That is a different kind of knowing from anything a machine can generate.

Which brings me back to elephants, and to what I have started calling “elephant work”.

What the elephant brain might teach us

The elephant brain appears to be built for depth. Its neurons are markedly larger and more sparsely arranged, thought to support slower, more integrative processing rather than rapid-fire response. **Not faster. Deeper.**

Three elements of their brain stand out.

Elephants recognize themselves in mirrors. At the very least, it suggests a level of self-recognition that most other animals do not show. While AI can process images with extraordinary precision, it has never actually *looked* at anything.

They also appear to mourn. Researchers have documented elephants returning to the bones of other elephants years later, touching the remains, lingering. It looks like a ritual of memory with loss and attachment woven through it. **AI stores everything, but has felt nothing.**

The third thing is the one that interests me most, and to understand it, you have to meet the matriarch.

The matriarch's wisdom

Elephant societies are matriarchal. The oldest female leads not because she is the strongest, but because she remembers. More than that, she seems to have done something with what she remembers that no amount of processing power can replicate—turned it into wisdom.

Wisdom is not simply knowing more. It is judgment shaped by consequence and reflection: the ability to read a situation not only for what it is, but for what it means, what it could become, and what it will cost if you get it wrong.

Research found that matriarchs aged sixty and older are far better at reading danger—recognizing male lions as more threatening than females. Younger matriarchs often got that wrong. The information was the same. The difference was in how it was interpreted. At minimum, that suggests that experience, over time, can deepen judgment in ways raw information alone does not.

AI has information in vast quantities. But information and wisdom are not the same thing. In our excitement about the former, we risk undervaluing the latter.

The matriarch did not download information about lion behaviour. She lived it: the fear, the choices, the cost. When she leads the herd away from danger, she is not retrieving data. She is acting from within an experience that never fully left her.

We can build tools that process information faster than any human alive. What we cannot build is a tool that has *lived* through anything. AI cannot bring to this moment the weight of having been here before.

The matriarch's authority comes not just from what she knows, but from what she has become through knowing it. I am not sure any AI model has that. The judgment that can hold a frightened group together and decipher which threat is the real one, is wisdom through experience. It cannot be outsourced. It can only be earned, slowly and often painfully, over time.

What elephant work is in the age of AI

Elephant work is a part of leadership AI can assist, but not replace.

It is not just producing something that sounds smart in five seconds. It is the slower, deeper work of turning experience into judgment; of reading what is happening beneath the surface; of carrying consequence and building trust. It is sensing what is brittle, what is unsaid, what is escalating, and what is ethically at stake. It is **knowing when to move, when to wait**, when to reassure, when to tell the truth plainly, and when to absorb fear rather than amplify it. It is helping people through uncertainty without performing certainty.

It is also the work of carrying consequences. Making the call when the information is incomplete. Living with the outcome. Learning from it. Being changed by it. Coming back wiser the next time.

And in the age of AI, **elephant work matters more than ever.**

AI can assist with judgment by decluttering, creating more time and space for it, and possibly sharpening the inputs into it. But it cannot earn it. It has never had to calm a frightened team, rebuild trust after breaking it, or look someone in the eye after making the wrong call.

Those are not inefficiencies. They are the job.

The real leadership challenge now is not deciding whether to use AI. Of course, we should use it. The challenge is to use it in ways that protect and deepen human judgment rather than replace the very capacities leadership most depends on.

And since AI is making many parts of leadership faster, cheaper, and easier to fake, the thing that will increasingly **separate serious leaders from performative** ones is whether they have judgment, and whether they use AI to deepen it rather than simulate it.

What Dumbo knew

Dumbo's ears were not a defect. They were exactly what he needed to fly. What the world read as a liability turned out to be the thing that set him apart.

What we are now tempted to dismiss as too slow, too emotional, or **too human** **may be exactly what leadership most needs.**

We are building machines that can do almost everything a leader can do, except be changed by it. Except carry the weight of it. Except stand at the bones of what came before and understand that this matters, and that moving forward well means honouring it.

Use AI for what it is good for: buying time. But **do not confuse** assistance with judgment, or fluency with wisdom, or speed with leadership.

Then spend that saved time doing the work only humans can do.

That is elephant work.

And in the age of AI, it may be one of the most important forms of leadership we have. The question is whether we will protect it before we get so enchanted by artificial intelligence that we forget what human intelligence is for.

Lisa Witter, CEO of Better Politics Foundation and Co-Founder of Apolitical—the peer-to-peer learning platform used by 40 million public servants across 160 countries.

*we do not inherit
the earth from our ancestors;
we borrow it from our children...*

*what makes design compelling
is that it pushes the boundaries
of what can legitimately count
as evidence.*

FROM METRICS TO MEANING: HOW DESIGN REINVENTS GOVERNMENT KNOWLEDGE

Anke Gruendel

Picture this: a drab hallway—grey floor, off-white walls, elevator doors polished by decades of impatient hands. At the far end, a screen lists the offices on the 30th floor of the Ted Weiss Federal Building in downtown Manhattan. Beneath the wall-mounted display sits a recycling bin. And next to this **bureaucratic still life** stands a rickety easel, propping up a colorful poster with snappy graphics and a contemporary typeface: “Build Your Design Superpowers Here.” A small arrow points down one of the identical grey corridors.

This scene comes from a workshop organized by the now-defunct American Lab@OPM. It captures a broader truth about the visibility of designers in government: where they exist, they stand out—but only if you know where to look. Their work often sits on between the cracks of their host organizations, both physically and culturally. It’s interstitial, in more than one way: it fills practical gaps, connects agencies, and draws together different elements of government. At the Office of Personnel Management, designers took on **a range of “wicked problems,”** from suicide among American veterans to the provision of free school lunches for low-income children. Although this pioneering lab ultimately fell victim to reforms associated with Elon Musk’s DOGE in the winter of 2025, its legacy endures—not only in the United States, but across governments worldwide.

What sets this form of “public-sector design” apart is not the intractability of the problems or the polish of the visuals used to communicate solutions. More **distinctive is design’s approach** to producing knowledge—what scholars would call its epistemological focus. Designers have long been concerned with how people experience problems in practice: interacting with a vacuum cleaner or a photocopier, reading an event poster or public notice, navigating a building with particular features and constraints.¹ These “user experiences” must be negotiated alongside the demands of clients and the limits imposed by materials, budgets, and institutional rules.² In this sense, designers have become **adept at working across** multiple forms of knowledge without a common standard of measurement—technical, experiential, organizational, material, factual—and they ideally synthesize them into a coherent outcome.³

As designers moved into the service sector and eventually into government,⁴ they brought with them their discernment, their ability to identify and **reconcile differing experiences, constraints, and goals**. But government is not the private sector, and practices that are routine in industrial or service design can become difficult—sometimes nearly impossible—in public administration. Organizing focus groups or participatory co-design workshops, scaling the rollout of solutions, or even defining the scope of a problem (such as free school lunch provision) depend as much on regulatory frameworks, the appropriation of taxpayer monies, and existing accountability structures. On top having to learn the machinery of government, designers find that even **deceptively simple “wicked problems” are rarely contained**. They sprawl across agencies, cut through national, regional, and local levels of governance, and involve overlapping—and at times competing—authorities.

And yet, design’s **promise of synthesizing different forms of knowledge**—making diverse knowledge bases visible and translating them into the language of government—remains. This is the core of what the practice of public-sector design offers and what makes it compelling. It pushes the boundaries of what can legitimately count as evidence. While arguably design should do more to become democratically robust, expanding governmental knowledge capacity has the potential to challenge the claims of would-be (and established) autocrats that they alone understand what people want or need. Even at a less politically charged level, design complicates the conventional idea that public administration is a neutral, technical domain entirely separate from political decision-making.

It is perhaps unsurprising that design in government is often precarious. It can be beholden to a political office, vulnerable to changing leadership, or **treated as the “weird bird”** that must fight for funding and is first in line for cuts when

the going gets rough. Changing how evidence is produced and used is a slow, uneven process, and success is never guaranteed—but even fleeting victories, such as the work of the Lab@OPM, show that government can think differently, see differently, and, occasionally, act differently.

Anke Gruendel is the academic coordinator of the Transformation Lab at Leuphana University of Lüneburg, Germany. Together with Charles Landry, she co-chairs the research network Organizing in Uncertain Worlds. Her work is interdisciplinary and focuses on the public innovation and public design, particularly its democratic ambitions

¹ Lucy Suchman, *Human-Machines Reconfigurations: Plans and Situated Actions*, 2nd ed (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Christopher Alexander et al., *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (Oxford University Press, 1977).

² Bruce Archer, “Design as a Discipline,” *Design Studies* 1, no. 1 (1979): 17–20, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0142-694X\(79\)90023-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0142-694X(79)90023-1).

³ Anke Gruendel, “Policy Design or Design for Policy: The case for boundary figures,” *Design Issues* 41, no. 1 (2026).

⁴ Anke Gruendel, “Designing Democracy: Third Way Political Thought, Public Design, and the Politics of Uncertainty in Britain’s Long 1990s,” *Contemporary British History*, January 18, 2026, 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2026.2615893>.

*creative workplaces drive
extra work commitment, care and
energy so employees voluntarily
contribute...*

HARNESSING THE DISCRETIONARY EFFORT AND CREATIVE CAPACITIES

Susan Pettifer

We know that creative workplaces generate distinct organisational and employee benefits. Creative workplaces not only feel more optimistic (due to their future orientation and solution focus) and safer (because they encourage experimentation and diversity of thought), but they can also be more *innovative* and *productive*.

Creativity in the workplace boosts employee engagement and increases productivity through its role in generating **positive emotions and discretionary effort**⁵. The relationship between creativity and employee engagement is mutually reinforcing. Engaged employees unlock the passion and energy needed for creative problem solving and creative tasks, which in turn boosts their motivation and job satisfaction. And these positive emotions then foster creative performance, **generating a virtuous cycle**⁶.

Creative workplaces via the mechanisms of positive emotions and employee engagement also drive discretionary effort—that extra work commitment, care and energy that employees voluntarily contribute when they are genuinely engaged. And this drives the organisational productivity and innovation dividends so clearly documented in the engagement research^{7, 8}.

But what does it take for leaders to foster creativity within a bureaucracy?

Leaders know that now more than ever, the hallmarks of the creative bureaucracy—creativity, openness, and innovation—are required to respond to our most complex, wicked problems. Yet senior bureaucrats must also be expert in developing and managing the systems and processes that keep the bureaucracy safe and compliant. Leaders who foster creativity and innovation

⁵ Zhou, J., & Shalley, C. E. (Eds.). (2024). Handbook of organizational creativity. Psychology Press.

⁶ Ye, L.; Li, Y.; Zhang, N.; Zhang, J. (2024). The influence of work engagement on employee affect and creativity: Insights from Occupational Mental Health. Behav. Science, 14, 1217.

⁷ Gallup. (May 2024). The relationship between engagement at work and organizational outcomes Q12® Meta-Analysis.

⁸ Engage for Success. (April 2025). UK employee engagement survey 2025: Why employee engagement is central to keeping Britain working. London.

but disregard their important role in protecting the organisation often fail and, in the process, give creativity a bad name.

The **tension between managing risk and compliance** (necessary to protect civic confidence in our institutions) and fostering innovation and creative solutions to complex problems, is a critical dilemma for leaders. The former favouring methods of control and the latter favouring methods of empowerment.

It's a tension I have struggled with for over 20 years.

Unfortunately, these **polarities show up as battlelines** among managers and teams in our bureaucracies—finance, procurement, and risk on one side and community developers and sustainability professionals on the other. The organisation lurches from side to side with each side feeling misunderstood. The teams innovating feel policed by the compliance teams, and the compliance teams feel resentful that the innovators are breaking the rules.

Landry and Caust described the term creative bureaucracy as an oxymoron; equally it could be described as a *polarity*—a condition in which opposing and interdependent forces within a system pull at each in a dynamic tension⁹.

Our most effective leaders see these polarities – between control and creative empowerment—they lean into them, acknowledging that there will always be a tension between the two because it's a feature of the system.

They embrace what Landry calls 'and thinking' and hone their **ability to process these dynamic tensions**—between control and empowerment, organisational stability and change, conformity and creativity—understanding they are two sides of a whole¹⁰. Both are necessary for a public sector organisation to survive and thrive.

This does not mean these leaders sit on the fence. It's the opposite—they **create safe spaces for dialogue** and embrace competing interests and diverse views to achieve the organisation's higher purpose.

At their best they see conflicting ideas or disparate sources of information as the raw material for the creative process.

⁹ Johnson, B. (1992). Polarity management: Identifying and managing unsolvable problems. Human Resource Development.

¹⁰ See also: Smith, W., & Lewis, M. (2022). Both/and thinking: Embracing creative tensions to solve your toughest problems. Harvard Business Press.

In doing so they **reject over-simplification of problems**, diffuse the battlelines between teams in our bureaucracies, and act as an anti-dote to damaging polarization.

This is not easy work—surfacing and managing ongoing tensions between opposing ideas and demands can be exhausting.

But it can start small. In the next project meeting or discussion we can ask: *What are we trying to safeguard, and where is there room to experiment?* A simple leadership discipline needed now more than ever in our polarizing world.

Susan Pettifer is an accomplished public service leader with 20 years' experience in executive leadership roles in Australian state and local governments, including executive director People, Performance & Technology, City of Sydney. She now works as an organisational consultant in Sydney.

*it does not denounce
bureaucracy, it reclaims it and places
bureaucracy at the centre of the
discussion...*

CONCLUSION

BE SIMPLE AND INSPIRE

Sebastian Turner

Can a common sense concept from business be helpful for public service leaders? **Every organisation is in need of a Leitmotif**—a defining idea that drives an organization and gives it life. And the larger the organisation, the more it's necessary.

One might argue that the most enduring institutions humanity has created—religions above all—owe their longevity not only to having a Leitmotif, but to possessing one that is both easy to understand and easy to communicate. Their core idea is clear, emotionally resonant and endlessly repeatable across generations. In my own Christian tradition, for example, this might be expressed as *Nächstenliebe*—love of one's neighbour or Christian charity. Leitmotifs at their best endure because they resonate emotionally and symbolically, creating an atmosphere that people instinctively recognise and feel part of.

Entirely secular institutions adopt these widely, such as companies, many of which are far smaller than public institutions. Every shop owner, however small the enterprise, has a kind of Leitmotif - often without consciously naming it. It is rarely written down, yet remains permanently present in the personality and instincts of the entrepreneur. The owner lives it, the small team absorbs it, and customers intuitively recognise it.

Yet when institutions grow, they tend to formalise, systematise and manage their Leitmotif identity or guiding spirit in more technical and corporate ways. This shifts things from something intuitive and immediately graspable to something consciously designed, codified and managed by specialists like consultants or branding experts. In the process the Leitmotif blurs and becomes fuzzy and so loses power.

People no longer recall the Leitmotif easily and, more importantly, interpret it in so many different ways that a shared essence never truly comes alive. Effective Leitmotifs work precisely because they are simple: you grasp them, you remember them and you can translate them into action.

The acclaimed international communicator Michael Conrad advocates what might be called a Leitmotif for Leitmotifs: the "one-word strategy". Conrad is German and because German happily permits compound words of almost

cargo-train length even “Creative Bureaucracy” or “Kreativbürokratie” can count as a single word.

When I met Charles Landry a decade ago, his “one-word strategy” for the rejuvenation of the public sector struck me immediately. “Creative Bureaucracy” is a remarkable Leitmotif for any public institution. It is simple, clear, challenging and engaging at the same time. And above all, it is honest.

It does not denounce bureaucracy, deny it, or attempt to distance itself from it. Instead, it reclaims it and places bureaucracy at the centre of the discussion and aligns it with the defining human capacity: the ability to be creative.

The straightforward use of a term so often criticised conveys self-confidence and dignity. The civil service, as Charles envisions it, is not running away from its core institutional role. Instead, it seeks to redefine how rules are made, interpreted and applied in response to the needs of the citizens it serves.

At the opening session of the first Creative Bureaucracy Festival 2018 in the Senate Hall of Humboldt University of Berlin, I asked Charles what lies at the heart of a creative bureaucracy? Inspired perhaps by a place so deeply associated with the pioneering Prussian reforms that helped shape the modern university and beyond he gave a magic answer and so wonderfully simple:

“When you move from a ‘no, because’ culture to a ‘yes, if’ culture.” That single phrase captures the essence of the shift. So inspiring, so simple and thus so powerful!

Use it and change your institution for the good right away.

Sebastian Turner is co-founder of the Creative Bureaucracy Festival; he founded the Falling Walls Foundation and Table.Briefings.

*politics is not the
enemy of effective innovation;
it is its condition...*

AUTHOR DESCRIPTIONS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Charles Landry — Inventor of the Creative Bureaucracy concept and co-founder of the Festival.

Geoff Mulgan — Professor at University College London (UCL), adviser to over fifty governments, and co-founder of TIAL, the Institutional Architecture Lab. Formerly worked in city and national government in the UK, Australia and Europe. Author of Another World is Possible.

Piret Tonurist — Leads government transformation work at the OECD and co-manages the OECD Mission Action Lab. She has led anticipatory governance and innovation capacity work at the Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI).

Christian Bason — Co-founder of Transition Collective, Adjunct Professor at the University of Technology Sydney, former CEO of the Danish Design Center and former Director of MindLab, one of the world's first national public innovation agencies.

Giulio Quaggiotto — Innovation Advisor at the Mohammed Bin Rashid Centre for Government Innovation (UAE) and former Head of Strategic Innovation at UNDP.

Indy Johar — Co-founder of Dark Matter Labs, focused on developing institutional infrastructures for radical civic societies, cities and regions.

Mariana Mazzucato — Professor in the Economics of Innovation and Public Value at UCL and Founding Director of the UCL Institute for Innovation & Public Purpose (IIPP).

Rainer Kattel — Deputy Director and Professor of Innovation and Public Governance at UCL's Institute for Innovation & Public Purpose (IIPP).

Mike Lydon — Principal and Co-Founder of Street Plans, internationally recognised planner and writer credited with inventing the term "tactical urbanism."

Gabriella Gómez-Mont — Founder of Experimentalista and The Institute for Everything In-Between. Former Chief Creative Officer for Mexico City, Honorary Professor of Practice at Central Saint Martins and Senior Fellow at UCL's IIPP.

Melanie Kunzmann — Member of the Executive Board at PD – Public Sector Consulting GmbH and expert in urban development, sustainable building and public-sector transformation.

Edgar Pieterse — is an urban researcher, writer and curator and professor at the University of Cape Town, he is founder and director of the African Centre for Cities (ACC) and professor at the School of Architecture and Planning.

Tommi Laitio — Principal of Studio Laitio and former Director of Youth Affairs and Executive Director of Culture and Leisure for the City of Helsinki. Former Bloomberg Public Innovation Fellow at Johns Hopkins University.

Robyn Bennett — Former International Programme & Partnerships Lead at the Creative Bureaucracy Festival (2020–2024), now working with Dark Matter Labs on expanding civilizational optionality.

James Anderson — Leads the Government Innovation program at Bloomberg Philanthropies and advises mayors globally on public-sector innovation and urban transformation.

Philip von Haehling — Managing Director of PD – Public Sector Consulting GmbH. Lawyer and MBA with nearly 30 years of experience at the interface of business and public administration.

Ingo Caspari — Member of the Querwechsler Network working on cross-sector mobility and administrative modernisation in Germany.

Silke Lehnhardt — Member of the Querwechsler Network focused on public-sector capability building and organisational transformation.

Katrin Suder — Member of the Querwechsler Network and experienced leader at the intersection of government, technology and organisational change.

Margie Caust — Co-author with Charles Landry of *The Creative Bureaucracy*; former senior official in South Australia and the London Development Agency; founder of Rethinkery.

Arianne Miller — Former Managing Director of The Lab at the U.S. Office of Personnel Management and co-founder of Civic Design Collaborative.

Martin Jordan — Head of Design & User Research at Germany's DigitalService. Former Head of Service Design at the UK Government Digital Service (GDS).

Brenton Caffin — Director of Courageous, co-founder of States of Change, former Executive Director at Nesta and founding CEO of The Australian Centre for Social Innovation.

Nicolás Rebolledo — Co-founder of Public Design UNIT, specialising in public innovation infrastructure and strategic design for governments and multilateral organisations.

Juan-Felipe López — Co-founder of Public Design UNIT and former co-creator of the Chilean Government Laboratory, focused on public-sector innovation and design.

Lisa Witter — CEO of Better Politics Foundation and co-founder of Apolitical, the peer-learning platform used by public servants worldwide.

Anke Gruendel — Academic Coordinator of the Transformation Lab at Leuphana University of Lüneburg and co-chair with Charles Landry of the research network *Organizing in Uncertain Worlds*.

Susan Pettifer — Former executive public-sector leader in Australian state and local government, including Executive Director at the City of Sydney; now organisational consultant in Sydney.

Sebastian Turner — Co-founder of the Creative Bureaucracy Festival, founder of the Falling Walls Foundation and Table.Briefings.

CREATIVE BUREAUCRACY WHERE NEXT & HOW?



This first Global Report captures the spirit, tensions and emerging ideas shaping a new era of governance. Bringing together leading international voices, it explores how governments can become more imaginative, adaptive, enabling and human in a time of accelerating complexity, democratic strain and technological disruption.

The book presents a mosaic of perspectives, practices and provocations—from mission-driven government and public innovation to leadership, how cities can innovate, AI and institutional culture—offering not simply critique, but pathways forward.

It points to examples of what is already working well across the world—institutional breakthroughs and public innovations that show what a more capable and trusted state can look like—while also identifying where governments still need to evolve and rethink their operating models.

The Creative Bureaucracy Festival in Berlin is now the world's largest gathering dedicated to public sector innovation, bringing together thousands of public servants, civic leaders, designers, thinkers and institutional changemakers from across the globe. No longer an oxymoron, the Creative Bureaucracy idea is becoming an operating logic for turbulent times.

Bureaucrats are the most innovative people on the planet, if given the chance!"
— Audrey Tang, Former Digital Minister of Taiwan

"This is a veritable 'Who is Who' of the creative bureaucracy movement. A must read companion for anyone seeking to bring radical, citizens-oriented change into the public sphere"

— George Papandreou, General Rapporteur on Democracy, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and former Prime Minister of Greece

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