Urban challenges: Toward real and lasting social innovation

ADAM GREENFIELD

On 31 October 2014, in celebration of World Cities Day 2014, the British Academy held a seminar on 'Social Innovation and Creative Responses to Global Urban Challenges', which highlighted the role and importance of social innovation in contemporary urban change and 'smart' liveable city spaces. The event was organised in collaboration with the Economic and Social Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

One of the speakers, Adam Greenfield, discusses two recent examples of social innovation – in New York and Madrid. Adam was the 2014 Senior Urban Fellow at LSE Cities, an international centre in the London School of Economics.

Spend even a few days listening to the residents of just about any city neighbourhood on Earth, and you will come away with the acute sense that everyday urban life for all too many – in the affluent North as well as the developing South – remains beset by difficulties that existing institutions are powerless to resolve. You will hear, variously, that garbage goes uncollected, graffiti spoors the walls and storefronts, children go to school hungry, or that potentially productive land sits fenced-off and vacant, and that neither the public nor the private sector seems to have the willingness or wherewithal to do anything about it.

You will hear this sort of grievance almost word-for-word wherever you go, from Delhi to Florence to Leeds. It only takes a few such recitations for the sensitive listener to understand that a planetary gap has opened up between those few provisions the austere state is able to make for its constituents and that which the market offers, and that literally millions are tumbling into it. It shouldn't surprise us that, when faced with such circumstances, the more energetic will cast about for something that might help them attack the seemingly intractable challenges they face, and maybe restore a little pride and dignity to their lives into the bargain.

This, as I understand it anyway, is the aim of the diffuse global endeavour that its adherents call 'social innovation'. Broadly speaking, social innovation seeks to address these persistent challenges by calling upon the set of actors and resources we think of as civil society. The impetus for such efforts frequently enough begins with what Jane Jacobs would have called a 'local character', one of those more than usually vocal, independent and self-motivating people you will, again, encounter in every neighbourhood on Earth – but it can also be an existing affinity or pressure group that gets the ball rolling. When confronted with a situation that has finally become intolerable, this highly motivated kernel of activity surveys the community around them for available human and financial assets, activates them with whatever means they have at their disposal, and organises them into a functional ensemble that can be brought to bear on the crisis effectively. In many ways, this can be thought of as a formalised, institutionalised and scaled-up version of the processes of adaptive improvisation that communities under pressure have always relied upon – what might be called *jugaad* in Hindi and Urdu, or *gambiarra* in Brazilian Portuguese.

The necessity for improvisation clearly arises as a response to a set of real conditions on the ground. Scoured by 35 years of rigid adherence to free-market orthodoxy, communities have largely been left to fend for themselves in situations where the state has withdrawn from the provision of service, and no market actor perceives an enticingly clear revenue opportunity.

Further, there is unquestionably an appeal to it. Locally organised efforts tend to be more respectful of the knowledge, initiative and energy that exist in the neighbourhood than one-size-fits-all solutions imposed from the top down. They harness the insights and talents of those close to the ground, with a direct stake in the outcome. They recognise that creative ingenuity can and demonstrably does live anywhere, and foster sound habits of self-reliance. They make brilliant use of existing resources, leveraging the sunk material and energetic costs of tools that are already ready to hand. Perhaps best of all, they tend to restore to participants a sense of their own competence and agency.

We can see all of these tendencies at work in two cases we might understand as examples of social innovation at its best and most effective.

Occupy Sandy

In October 2012, the compound hurricane known as Superstorm Sandy made landfall on the Eastern Seaboard of the United States, to devastating effect. In New York City alone, hundreds of thousands of households found themselves without power, light, heat or potable water. Tens of thousands of elderly people and others with limited mobility were stranded on high floors, in buildings where elevator service might not be restored for a week or more. Entire housing projects were left to fend for themselves – in many cases because those responsible for their care and maintenance were stranded offsite by the collapse of the regional transportation network. Attempts to right that network struggled against acute and immediate fuel shortages, amid 40-block queues and spreading mayhem at gas stations.

One bright light in all of this was the effective response. Thankfully, in the aftermath of the superstorm there was an organisation capable of standing up a network of intake, co-ordination and distribution centres, and starting relief operations almost immediately. This organisation funnelled an enormous quantity of donated goods and supplies out to the hardest-hit areas, ensuring that thousands of New Yorkers were sheltered, warmed and fed, and provided crew after crew of volunteers willing to take on the difficult, dirty, and occasionally dangerous job of site clearance. It was called Occupy Sandy (Figure 1).

Organised by veterans of the previous year's Occupy Wall Street demonstrations, this group of amateurs, unequipped with budgetary resources, or any significant prior experience of logistics management, is universally acknowledged as having outstripped traditional, hierarchical and abundantly resourced groups like the US Federal Emergency Management Agency and the American Red Cross in delivering relief to the hardest-hit communities.

El Campo de Cebada

For many years, Madrid's central La Latina neighbourhood supported a thriving market hall, and later a well-used community sporting facility. These were demolished in August 2009, to make way for planned improvements. But with Spain still in the grips of the 2008 economic downturn, the money earmarked for the improvements failed to materialise, and the site remained vacant and inaccessible for many months, cordoned off by a chainlink fence. As will tend to happen at such sacrifice zones, this site – el Campo de Cebada – increasingly began to attract graffiti, illegal dumping and still less salutary behaviour, to which the municipal authorities claimed they were powerless to respond.

Exasperated with this state of affairs, a group of community activists cut through the fence and immediately began retrieving the site for citizen use. Following a clean-up, the activists used salvaged material to build benches, mobile sunshades and other elements of an ingenious, rapidly reconfigurable parliament – and the first question they put before this parliament was

Figure 1
After Hurricane Sandy hit New York in 2012, the Occupy Sandy movement promoted relief and reconstruction in affected neighbourhoods, in a spirit of 'mutual aid, not charity'.

how to manage the site itself.

This ongoing self-stewardship was successful enough for long enough that the site collective eventually obtained quasi-official sanction for their activities. Some three years on, in its various roles as recreation ground, youth centre and assembly hall, el Campo has become a vital community resource (Figure 2). If it has problems now, they are of the sort that attend unanticipated success; on holiday weekends especially, the site attracts overflow crowds.

In both of these cases, organisations emerging from within civil society itself were able to do what the state manifestly could not, in contexts where the market did not perceive an advantage to be had. What did they have in common? And what distinguishes them from other examples of social innovation we might have cited?

Driven by an underlying commitment to values

Despite their many salient differences, Occupy Sandy and el Campo were linked by something very old-fashioned: an explicit commitment to a participatory, even a liberatory politics. Both were fundamentally organised along strong principles of leaderlessness, horizontality and consensus. Would-be OS volunteers, for example, were required to attend an initial 15-minute presentation (referred to, with refreshing straightforwardness, as 'indoctrination') in which this guiding ethos was explained to them. Anyone who didn't think they would be able to abide by this set of values was thanked for their time and invited to offer their help somewhere else. I can attest from personal experience that at least a core cadre of those who remained found sustaining energy, over some very rough days and weeks, in the idea that

Figure 2
El Campo de Cebada – a space in the centre of Madrid reclaimed and managed by its own citizens. Image: http://uneven-growth.moma.org/

they were living these values in the most concrete way possible.

Largely because of this, it's highly unlikely that anyone involved with either effort would have thought of what they were doing as 'social innovation' *per se*. The commitment to shared values stands in pointed contrast to all too many activities which transpire under the banner, which are strikingly decoupled from any broader theory of change, or for that matter from one another.

The process is the outcome

Social-innovation discourse implicitly constructs a model of urban crisis, treating the undesirable circumstance as a discrete and bounded *problem* which admits to a technical *solution*.

In both Occupy Sandy and el Campo, by contrast, there is a strong sense in which the ongoing effort involved in mounting an effective response *was itself* the solution to the issues confronting the community. While most of the activists involved would certainly have said their primary aim was distributing hot meals to the hungry, or restoring an abandoned lot to active use, almost as important (and probably of greater long-term impact) was their lived experience of enacting participatory values in the here and now. To hear them tell it, many participants gleaned both confidence and a sense of their own competence – tools in perpetually short supply, which might well be carried on to other circumstances, shared with other communities, or inform the response to future challenges. This makes these initiatives the frank antithesis of the many social innovation schemes which seem designed to appeal to a global community of bloggers, social-media aficionados

and self-designated 'change agents', before generating any particularly lasting benefit for local people.

It is, of course, inevitable in an attention-hungry age that some projects billed as socially productive would amount to little more than puffery and clever branding. Nevertheless, most of the people who think of themselves as being involved in social innovation represent the best that is in us. They tend to be optimistic, creative, boundlessly energetic. They are unquestionably entrepreneurial, in the sense that they are more than usually attentive to the gap between need and existing capability, and how it might best be spanned or filled. Above all, they demonstrably care about their communities, at a time when it's emotionally and psychological safer, and certainly easier, to withdraw behind a screen of cynicism and snark.

If it is occasionally misapplied, the instinct to communal repair that underlies their work is sound, and to my mind very much worth encouraging. When it does happen to be linked by some commitment to a set of shared values, sustained by an overt politics of solidarity, it can be astonishingly effective in restoring a sense of agency and ownership to communities beaten this way and that by decades of disenfranchisement. If we wish to see such initiatives reach their deepest potential, we should encourage the active citizens behind them to link up, to understand the common sources of their distress, and to think of what they are doing as steps toward a broader and more coherent inquiry into the allocation of resources and the organisation of our society. For all the good we see being generated by these occasionally brilliant acts of improvisation, the real and only lasting social innovation will be when we collectively face up to the reality of our profound interdependence.