Policy Brief

Improving Street Urban Design Through Co-creation

Learning | Leadership | Governance

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Hong Kong aspires to create a world-class, walkable environment (PlanD, 2016) and develop "interesting, vibrant, and mixed-used streets" (Development Bureau & Planning Department Hong Kong, 2016; Walk in HK & HKTD, 2019). Street experimentation has the potential to breakthrough conventional design regulations and develop new norms. In particular, government-civic collaboration can be an effective way to deliver **community-oriented, engaging, and innovative street designs**. While the Transport Department has previously partnered with civic organisations, the outcomes have been limited in scope and impact.

This policy brief identifies the challenges associated with innovative urban design and proposes actionable policy and managerial adaptations to enhance design outcomes. The insights presented are derived from the "Tactical Urbanism in Asian High-Density Cities" research project conducted by the Urban Infrastructure Transition Lab (uLab) from 2020 to 2024[1].

KEY MESSAGES

To obtain effective collaborative design, both government and civic organisations need to take proactive steps:

Government Actions:

- Integrate reflective learning components into executive workflow;
- Establish public engagement protocols for small-scale trials to validate and scale successful prototypes;
- Refine channels for interdepartmental and inter-divisional communication;
- Enhance regulatory transparency to allow for street design experimentation.

Civic Organisation Actions:

- Articulate alternative pathways to implement community-driven urban design;
- Conduct rigorous evaluation to demonstrate experiment feasibility and impact;
- Foster continued dialogue with government partners to co-create policy change.

[1] The research overview can be found at: https://www.uitlab.org/project/tactical-urbanism-asia/

BACKGROUND

People-centric streets require both technical solutions and innovative design. The "Walk in HK" initiatives (GovHK, 2022) mainly covers technical solutions such as sidewalk decluttering and low-speed zones. Yet, the urban design aspect has not been sufficiently addressed, which is a vital component to achieving a Walkable City outlined in the Traffic and Transport Strategy Study[2] and to improve residents' quality of life.

Civic organisations serve as valuable partners by bringing expertise in community-driven urban design. In the "Study on Enhancing Walkability in Hong Kong" 《提升香港易行度研究》, the Walkability Task Force of the Transport Department proposed testing innovative pedestrian planning and design concepts in Sham Shui Po (Walk in HK & HKTD, 2019). The civic partner, Social Lab, implemented a co-creative street experiment called Healthy Street Lab 2.0 (HSL2.0) to explore community-driven design prototypes. This programme recommended several design prototypes that are new to Hong Kong. Despite a comprehensively consulted co-creation process, the collaboration has not yet resulted in a scalable change (Figure 1). This points to the need for reflection on the challenges faced and possible improvements in future initiatives.

Figure 1. Health Street Lab Action Day and Long-term Outputs (Zhao et al., 2025)

[2] Traffic and Transport Strategy Study (TTSS), https://www.ttss.gov.hk/en/innovativegreenmobility/shaping-hong-kong-into-a-walkable-city/.

UNDERSTANDING

Street experiments act as catalysts for complex and innovative processes. When implemented effectively, new designs can be formalised and scaled up, as evidenced by cities like New York, where street experimental programmes have revitalised urban centres and fostered vibrant public activities. When street experiments fail to achieve long-term change, the scholarship points to the stakeholders' leadership and learning capacities (Wolfram, 2016).

Leadership is the ability to articulate a vision that cultivates a strong sense of shared purpose toward collective goals (Ardoin et al., 2015). It drives the development of new designs. **Learning** is the process of knowledge creation and adaptation to the environment, often reflected in changes in behavioural, views, or decision-making processes (Kolb, 2015).

As Figure 2 shows, enhancing leadership and learning can lead to transformative street experiments, whereby facilitating material, organisational, and institutional changes (Zhao et al., 2025).

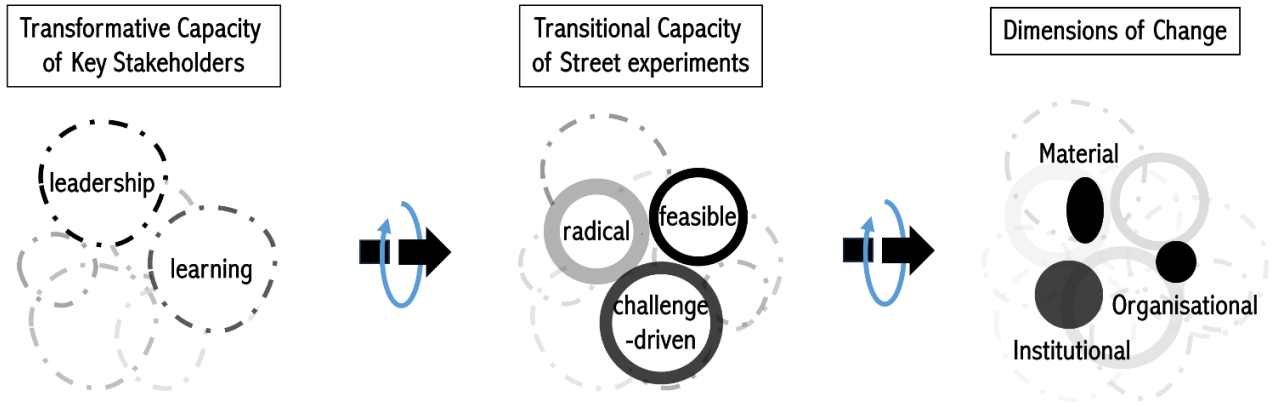

Figure 2. Street experiment transformation logic on layers of potentially changing system levels (Zhao et al., 2025)

IDENTIFY CHALLENGES

REGULATORY OPERATIONALISATION

One challenge for co-creation is the need for technical specialists to operationalise regulations in a way that is accessible to non-experts. This requires effective communication of policy and regulatory priorities, along with translating them into clear, measurable criteria. For example, in the HSL2.0 case study, the design evaluation standards for 'safety' were not fully understood by the civic partner, which complicated the non-governmental stakeholders' ability to propose designs that met safety expectations.

NORMALISING LEARNING

Co-creation is fundamentally an active learning process, involving experiential learning, social learning, and organisational learning. Throughout the street experimentation process, stakeholders can develop new insights while also indexing existing knowledge from partners (von Schönfeld et al., 2020). In the HSL2.0 case study, there appeared to be limited learning on the government side, which may have contributed to the restricted change in both immediate outcomes and longer-term outcomes. By integrating learning as a routine practice – such as through regular meetings or dedicated reflective sessions – teams can summarise challenges and explore alternative pathways to achieve a shared vision.

RISK PERCEPTION

While risk aversion is often prevalent in government settings, it can pose challenges to innovative urban design. Managing risk perception through rigorous testing and active public consultation can pave the way for more progressive designs. In the HSL2.0 case study, some design prototypes were perceived as too radical and were not pursued further due to concerns about public acceptance. This decision, based on risk perception, may not align with the experimental nature of the project. Notably, the civic partner received positive feedback from users during public engagement sessions and the three-day street experiment, indicating that risk perception can be recalibrated through proactive public consultation and experimentation in safe, real-world environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To government bodies

1 - ALLOCATE LEARNING SESSIONS

Active learning helps overcome institutional barriers by promptly identifying challenges and adjusting designs to retain creativity and feasibility.

- Arrange learning meetings across executive levels to create a safe space for reflection; it can be as specific as a monthly 1-hour session for staff to review the collaboration effectiveness and make reasonable adjustments;
- Summarise and document learning outcomes to transform individual insights into organisational knowledge.

2 - DEMARCATE EXPERIMENTAL SPACE FOR DESIGN TESTING

Innovative designs are best tested in real-world settings for two key reasons: first, the space provides a buffer to refine design prototypes and demonstrate tangible changes that engage the public and elicit genuine feedback.

- Define selection criteria for street experiment locations such as pedestrian flow, vehicular traffic, and land use;
- Establish public engagement protocols to activate multistakeholder co-creation and collect public feedback.

3 - SET CLEAR CRITERIA FOR STREET EXPERIMENT FEASIBILITY

Government and policymakers need to set measurable criteria for urban design evaluation and communicate these effectively to civic partners. This requires fostering open communication across departments and divisions.

- Streamline street experiment permits by setting up application procedures and facilitating timely approvals;
- Translate concerns on innovative designs into measurable criteria to guide development;
- Build upon tested urban design guidelines from international contexts to inform local initiatives.

To civic organisations

1 - DEVELOP LONGITUDINAL UNDERSTANDING OF PLANNING REGULATION AND POLICY PRIORITIES

Gaining insight into historical government preferences equips civic partners to navigate the approval process more effectively. While it's essential to analyse recent documents, historical publications can provide valuable context for understanding government decision-making rationales. By aligning with established policy priorities, civic organisations can bolster their case for more innovative and risk-taking designs, fostering a collaborative relationship with government bodies.

2 - DESIGN PROTOCOLS FOR PROTOTYPE EVALUATION

Implementing rigorous field research will enhance the credibility and appeal of street experiments to government transport engineers. Civic organisations should harness both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive evaluation of designs. Qualitative data can illuminate human behavioural changes and public acceptance, while quantitative data can capture traffic pattern shifts before and after interventions. This dual approach not only strengthens the case for new designs but also demonstrates their impact in measurable terms.

3 - SET OUT LONG-TERM PROTOTYPE DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS

Civic organisations should take the lead in formalising a long-term experimental process, planning for incremental street experiments that ultimately aim to formalise or scale up innovative street designs. Recognising that transformation can take time, organisations can enhance their vision and leadership in urban design. By strategically navigating this pathway, they can foster tangible changes that resonate with community needs and aspirations.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

This policy brief is derived from the following research work:

Zhao, K. J., Chang, R. A., & Sun, G. (2025). Experiment unlearned: Unpacking leadership and learning of key actors in a Hong Kong street experiment. *Journal of Urban Mobility*, 7, 100091. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.urbmob.2024.100091 (Open Access)

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Kristen's research focuses on tactical urbanism, urban experimentation, urban mobility transition, and placemaking. She has a PhD in urban planning and design from the University of Hong Kong and was trained in landscape architecture and urban data analytics. Her research has been recognised for its unique contribution to the global comparison of people-centric street design transitions. Her work on urban mobility has been published in peer-reviewed journals including Landscape and Urban Planning, EPB: Urban Analytics and City Science, Journal of Urban Mobility, Journal of Transport Geography, and more.

ABOUT THE ORGANISATIONS

The uLab (www.uitlab.org) is a research lab specialising in evaluating the societal impacts of urban infrastructures. Founded by Dr Guibo Sun in the 2020s, it has garnered accolades from the Royal Town Planning Institute for its research excellence. The lab's research has been supported by competitive funding bodies, including the Hong Kong Research Grants Council, the Hong Kong Institute of Surveyors, and the Natural Science Foundation of China.

The Complexity, Planning and Urbanism [CPU]lab (www.complexurban.com), founded by Professor Ulysses Sengupta, is a Research Group within the Manchester School of Architecture. The lab specialises in using a complexity framework for interdisciplinary research that involves digital tools, computational thinking, and theory, addressing urban transformations.

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