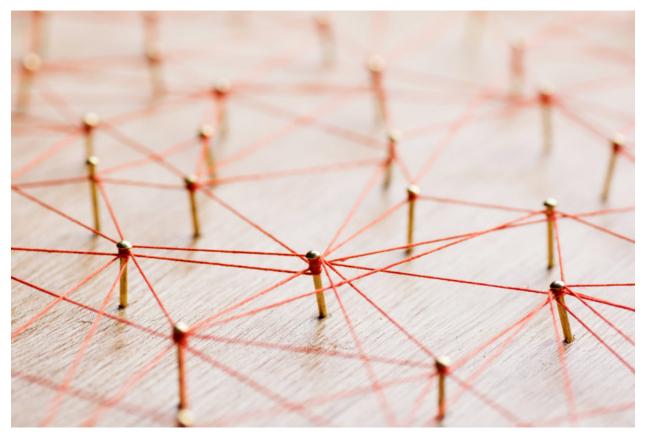# What's New in Civic Tech: New Directory Maps the Top Civic Innovation Labs

Zack Quaintance | October 18, 2018

As gov tech principles spread and cities began sharing insights into using innovation to overcome long-standing municipal problems, the concept of the innovation lab has become more common.

Now, a new directory has mapped the top civic innovation labs in the world, including, of course, those located in the United States. Dubbed the Innovation Lab Directory, at a glance it serves as an excellent list of the local, state and federal government agencies at the forefront of using technological advances to improve quality of life for residents.

Indeed, many of the pioneers in that area are represented on this directory. At the federal level, it includes the tech consultancy 18F, which since its inception during the Obama administration has gone on to inspire many of the tech efforts taking place at the state level all across the country. USAID's Global Development Lab is also represented on the directory, as is the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's The Lab at OPM.

There are no strictly state-level agencies from the U.S. represented on the list, which is perhaps telling. Meanwhile, at the city level are many of the usual suspects, including

the biggest cities in the country — Austin, Boston, Los Angeles, New York City, Philadelphia, Seattle and San Francisco.

Perhaps most interesting are the smaller cities that made the list, many of which are for some time now punching above their weight class in terms of tech and innovation. This includes the likes of Louisville, Ky.; Rochester, N.Y.; South Bend, Ind.; and West Hollywood, Calif.

Philadelphia Selects Internal Innovation Grant Recipients

The city's Innovation Fund, which aims to facilitate civic tech and innovation work, recently awarded grants to seven pilot initiatives created by city employees, all of which aim to improve services within the municipal government there.

The awards are being billed as startup funds to help create lasting projects. The seven winners, the city announced in a press release, were chosen from a pool of 15 applicants by Philadelphia's Innovation Working Group, which is made up of city employees from across departments who are trained in helping to seed innovation. The money ultimately comes from the Mayor's Fund for Philadelphia, which provides the grants out of its annual operating budget. Six of the grants were approximately $7,500, while a seventh was for $1,080.

The grants went to a diverse group of recipients and projects, ranging from the Philadelphia Fire Department upgrading its video equipment, software and programming to a pilot project by the Philadelphia Department of Public Health aimed at safely identifying and disposing of opioid needles.

"The Working Group gave consideration to many deserving and inventive ideas submitted by city employees," said Andrew Buss, deputy chief information officer for Innovation Management, in the release. "The Innovation Fund demonstrates that innovation is alive and well in the city's many operational departments, and that many of our workers are creative thinkers who are committed to improving services for all residents."

Project proposals were assessed on five criteria: process improvement, novelty/value creation, delivery of public services, government relations and cross-departmental collaboration.

New York Times Maps Every Building in America, Causes Stir on Civic Tech Twitter

The civic tech and gov tech corners of Twitter are interesting places, often brimming with enthusiasm for the future, details of the latest municipal open data efforts and plenty of pictures of PowerPoint presentations being given in hotel conference rooms across the country.

Every so often, however, something comes along from outside the usual purview of gov tech and civic tech folks to cause a bit of a stir. That was the case this week when *The New York Times* published a new project that mapped every building in America, thereby inciting basically every gov tech person on my Twitter timeline to excitedly re-tweet the project and ask everyone to imagine the possibilities.

To be sure, this project certainly merits the excitement and exposure. Fittingly titled _A Map of Every Major Building in America_ , the project really is an impressive feat, one that will surely have vast implications for visualizing open data and GIS work. The images on the map are drawn from a massive database released by Microsoft earlier in the year.

It remains to be seen what exactly enterprising tech and innovation folks will be able to do with this mapping effort. In some areas, that data has now been supplemented by _The New York Times_ with extra information from state and local governments. The end result is exactly what the name of the project purports to be: a map of every single building in our country. I'm not even a data visualization kind of guy, at least not on a deeply technical level, and I still had a great time playing with it.

Durham, N.C., iTeam Looks to Improve City Forms

Finally, the Durham, N.C., Innovation Team (iTeam) is the latest government agency working to use human-centered design to make public services more accessible by creating better forms.

Indeed, this overhaul of governmental forms is one that is ongoing across the country, with perhaps the most direct example being what the design firm Civilla was able to do with a human services form in Michigan. The problem is a simple one: At some point in recent decades, forms for government services got unwieldy and obtuse for any number of reasons, evolving to become cumbersome for both the residents who fill them out and the public servants who process them.

Civic groups are now moving to create simpler and more efficient forms using human-centered design, which sees them doing field research and studying real experiences in order to develop new products.

The effort to redesign any and all forms in Durham is ongoing, and the iTeam there held an event Oct. 17 to learn more about the forms folks tend to struggle with most.

This is from the event description: "We've all had that experience of filling out a government form, and pausing to ask ourselves, ' could they have made this any more confusing or difficult?' Forms are an important way we all engage with our governments, and in Durham we are launching a new effort to make our forms better. We want to have the best forms. Period. And we can't do it without you."

It'll be interesting to see what Durham, and the increasingly high number of other local and state governments nationwide, come up with.

http://www.govtech.com/civic/Whats-New-in-Civic-Tech-New-Directory-Maps-the-Top-Civic-Innovation-Labs.html