

CASE STUDY

METROPOLITAN AREA OF BARCELONA (SP) – BOSTON (USA)

IURC - NA

JUNE 9, 2023

Thematic Network(s): Urban and Regional Renewal

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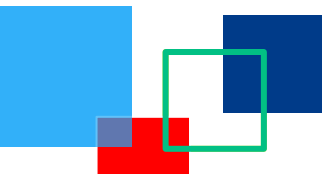
METROPOLITAN AREA OF BARCELONA – BOSTON

IURC – CASE STUDY

The Metropolitan Area of Barcelona's quest for civic innovation across 36 municipalities leads them to explore replicating Boston's Mayor's Office of Urban Mechanics, the City's pioneering civic research & design team.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2021, the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (AMB) in Spain and the Northern Virginia Regional Commission (NVRC), and Boston in the United States began cooperating as part of the International Urban and Regional Cooperation (IURC) program in North America. When AMB first learned about Boston Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics (MONUM), they were immediately intrigued and recognized its potential to drive civic innovation and collaboration within their metropolitan area. MONUM was established in 2010 as Boston's pioneering civic research and design team. As one of the first initiatives of its kind in the United States, they operate across agencies and communities to explore, experiment, and evaluate novel approaches to government and civic life. Through Boston and AMB's participation in the program, both entities have had the opportunity to exchange experiences around civic innovation, gaining valuable insights into the key ingredients and success factors of the MONUM model. By sharing challenges, and lessons learned, AMB is looking to tailor the model to suit their unique needs and challenges.



CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

The rapid change in the way we live, work, and play has become a challenge for city governments, as they are required to quickly iterate solutions that respond to the evolving needs and expectations of their constituents. In some cases, government agencies have taken on the task of developing solutions over time, launching pilots, and, once they accomplish the expected result, scaling them across the city. However, this approach often leads to a siloed perspective and a lack of alternative visions of success. The Boston Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics (MONUM) challenges this approach by promoting collaboration and experimentation while developing novel approaches to government and civic life.

At the heart of MONUM's success lies its ability to forge collaboration between agencies, presenting requests as if they originated directly from the Mayor. The essential ingredients for MONUM's achievements include strong executive support, an intelligent and diverse team, and projects explicitly aimed at solving the issues that Bostonians bring to the Mayor's office.

The diversity of their multidisciplinary team allows them to analyze the challenges from different perspectives and explore non-conventional solutions. In addition to its in-house expertise, MONUM engages with external partners through fellowships, alliances with educational institutions, and job training partnerships.

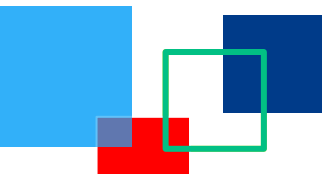
Another crucial aspect of MONUM's work is ensuring that financial constraints do not hinder the pursuit of good ideas. While their annual prototyping budget from the City of Boston is approximately \$40,000 USD, they work closely with other City departments and often collaborate to utilize their budgets when exploring potential solutions. A great deal of the experiments MONUM runs are under \$10,000 USD to prove viability before scaling up investment. Additionally, MONUM secures grant funding and philanthropic support to undertake riskier projects without relying on taxpayer dollars. This financial flexibility allows for a cycle of exploration, experimentation, evaluation, and scalability, de-risking projects for city agencies since it is important for MONUM also to embrace that ideas may fail. Once the solutions have been tested and validated, they can pass them on to agencies, enabling the execution of groundbreaking ideas at a city level.

MONUM maintains more than 15 active experiments at any given time, each designed to generate valuable insights that inform subsequent endeavors. Unlike agency pilots, which often have predetermined funding and decisions, MONUM's focus is on continuously iterative experimentation and learning. By placing people at the center of their endeavors, MONUM ensures that projects resonate with the public and address their needs effectively.

“It's about people. We are picking projects that put people at the center of the question we are trying to answer.”

Kris Carter, Chair MONUM

The current focus areas for MONUM encompass future streets and mobility, housing innovation, welcoming and connected public spaces, the green new deal for Boston, resident well-being, and the development of functional,



transparent, and trustworthy digital tools. In 2022, MONUM successfully developed projects such as alternative sidewalk materials to enable rain gardens, a public engagement program using movement therapy to learn about the city's budget, a digital library system for bus-riders, a song to incentivize community compost bin usage, and a surveillance technology working group to enhance transparency around data collection in public spaces and increase the city's accountability that will soon publish a "birding guide" to the technology on Boston's streetlight poles.

One significant challenge faced by cities attempting to replicate the MONUM model is maintaining continuity through changes in city administrations. MONUM has already navigated this successfully with four mayors. In such situations, the support of residents becomes crucial. By voicing their appreciation for the team and sharing examples of how MONUM has positively impacted their lives, residents play a vital role in advocating for the model's continuation. Visibility during elections, including opinion pieces that highlight the team's work, can further solidify public support.

RESULTS AND IMPACT

The Barcelona Metropolitan Area, consisting of 36 municipalities, typically collaborates with city councils rather than directly engaging with residents. When thinking of replicating the MONUM model, AMB aims to shift this dynamic and establish a multidisciplinary team to explore replicating the model. To effectively reach the people and build trust, Boston has suggested to AMB to use different communication strategies. By ensuring that the innovation office is seen as a distinct entity responding to and interacting with residents, separate expectations can be cultivated, providing the innovation office with longevity and room for experimentation. Furthermore, the innovation office must approach departments within AMB and the municipalities with a different perspective, reframing the questions to foster collaboration and innovation.

By replicating MONUM's approach, AMB wants to create a broader impact across their metropolitan area, encouraging cooperation between municipalities and scaling up innovative projects. The replication process will involve careful adjustments and adaptations to suit the local context and challenges faced by the region. By embracing the MONUM model, AMB aspires to drive innovation and work with municipalities and residents to enhance citizen engagement and foster sustainable urban development in the municipal area.

"Everyone can be an urban mechanic, everyone can think about what they can do, how they can contribute, how they can help their neighbors to make the city great."

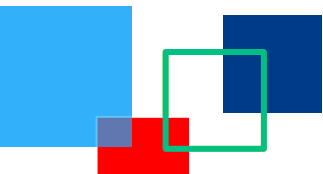
Jaclyn Youngblood, Chief of Staff, MONUM

KEY FIGURES

13
years in
operation

15+
active projects
at any given time

\$40,000
Average USD
budget per project



LESSONS LEARNED

Boston's Mayor's Office of Urban Mechanics drives innovation in government by bringing different agencies together, working with a multidisciplinary team and experimenting with solutions that bring novel approaches to government and civic life.

The essential ingredients for a successful civic research and design office include strong executive support, a multidisciplinary and diverse team, and projects explicitly aimed at solving the issues residents bring to the Mayor's office.

- The process of building is just as important as the end result.
- Projects should encourage civic action and foster citizen engagement.
- Technology should build trust and compassion, thereby instilling faith in government institutions.

To effectively reach the people and build trust there needs to be a communication strategy. The innovation office should be perceived as a distinct entity responding to and interacting with residents, providing room for experimentation.

THE IURC PROGRAMME

The International Urban and Regional Cooperation (IURC) programme enables cities in different global regions to link up and share solutions to common problems. It is part of a long-term strategy by the European Union to foster sustainable urban development in cooperation with the public and private sectors, as well as representatives of research and innovation, community groups and citizens. Through engaging in IURC, cities will have the chance to share and exchange knowledge with their international counterparts, building a greener, more prosperous future.

The IURC programme is an opportunity for local governments to learn from each other, set ambitious targets, forge lasting partnerships, test new solutions, and boost their city's international profile. Its activities will support the achievement of policy objectives as well as major international agreements on urban development and climate change, such as the EU Urban Agenda, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and the Paris Agreement.



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Links to related outputs:

[Website MONUM](#)

[Urban Mechanics \(Team Bios\)](#)

[MONUM talking about failure](#)

[News Piece on the Physical Space](#)

[What Inspires the MONUM Team](#)