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Navigating the Future of Innovation Districts

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Innovation District

The way innovation happens has radically changed over the past decade, moving from closed innovation work inside an organisation to innovation ecosystems where networks, knowledge exchange, and partnerships play an essential role. To meet this transformation, innovation districts have grown in importance for regions and cities to retain and attract companies and talents. An innovation district is a geographic area where leading-edge anchor institutions and companies cluster and connect with start-ups, business incubators and accelerators. Ideally, innovation districts are physically compact, transit-accessible, technically wired and offer mixed-use housing, office, and retail.

The conference

The purpose of the conference was to explore how regions and cities can work with innovation districts to strengthen economic development and attractiveness. And to create a forum where experience in developing, supporting, and enhancing innovation districts could be shared. Different key actors, such as companies, universities, and real estate developers shared their perspectives. Stockholm Science City, who worked with the development of Hagastaden, hosted the conference.

The conference covered four topics:

- **The Value of the Place:** The importance of the geographic location, physical environment and infrastructure of the innovation district was elaborated, and how it contributes to an innovation district's success.
- **Community Governance:** Showed how effective governance of an innovation district ensures that various stakeholders work together, fostering an environment that supports innovation and sustainable growth.
- **The ecosystem secret sauce:** Explored the importance of different anchor organisations and how they contribute to the innovation ecosystem.
- **Looking into the future:** The last topic addressed how innovation districts buffer social and economic changes and their role in the future.

Hagastaden – a mid-stage innovation district

The conference took place in Hagastaden, Stockholm, Sweden, a mid-stage innovation district within life science. In 2007, when the planning and development of Hagastaden started, a vision was launched, describing that Hagastaden should become a world-leading place for life science by 2025. Hagastaden is home to Karolinska Institutet, a world-leading medical university and Karolinska University Hospital. Today, more than 170 life science companies, both SMEs and global companies are located here. Within walking distance from Hagastaden, you can reach both KTH Royal Institute of Technology, the largest technical university in Sweden and Stockholm University, the largest university in Sweden. Hagastaden is a 24/7 city district with housing, service and culture.

Take-homes from the conference

An innovation district is not just a physical place but a vibrant ecosystem with a joint mission. This ecosystem contributes to the local community in different aspects, not only in terms of economic output. Each innovation district is unique, having its own fabric, depending on its heritage, geography and vision. Therefore, you can never copy-and-paste from another innovation district, you can only get inspiration. Another critical piece of advice was that when working with an innovation district, it is crucial not only to strive upward but also to look in front of and around you and to understand the heritage.

It was concluded that it is important to understand the difference between an innovation district and a cluster. Unlike innovation districts, clusters are more extensive networks of similar industry players that may be spread out geographically but benefit from proximity in the same region.

Developing an innovation district is a never-ending story; it needs constant maintenance. It is essential not to have tunnel vision and to constantly re-evaluate the direction. A metaphor that was brought up was that the ecosystem of an innovation district is like the soil of your garden; it needs water and fertiliser. With good soil, your plant will grow and thrive, but it needs your constant attention.

People are the most essential ingredients of an innovation district, and therefore, attracting and retaining talent is critical. Attracting talent starts with attracting the youth, and for an innovation district to stay relevant, it is essential to include the youth. The younger generation brings fresh perspectives, creativity, and a strong sense of adaptability to new technologies and trends. Their participation ensures that these districts align with the evolving needs, values, and ambitions of the future workforce, enhancing their long-term sustainability and relevance. Involving young people fosters a sense of ownership and community, empowering them to drive economic and social progress in their region. The success of the individuals or the companies is the success of the innovation district and vice versa, it is an ecosystem where everything is connected.

Collaboration is the key to success, and for collaborations to happen, people need to meet, interact, and build trust, and the community needs to be closer to the innovation. Through community service learning, outreach, arts, and culture, new ideas and perspectives can flow into the ecosystem and feed innovation. Bringing the community closer to innovation is an enabler for unique collaborations.

Throughout the conference, two words echoed frequently: trust and courage. Trust forms the backbone of collaboration, while courage is essential for taking risks and achieving success.

Hagastaden was highlighted as a case study during the conference, showcasing its role as a unique innovation district with a global presence. However, to maintain and grow its success, collaboration with other innovation districts is essential. The discussion also underscored that innovation districts have now become a permanent feature of modern urban development.

Speakers at Navigating the Future of Innovation Districts

Opening speech:

Karin Wanngård, Mayor of Stockholm

Speakers:

Anikka Fulop, Manager Community Building & Partnerships
Science & Business organisation

Annika Borgenstam, Vice President

Annika Östman Wernerson, President

Beth O'Neill Maloney, Executive Director

Christine Wergeland Sørbye, CEO

Emma Frost, Chair

Filippa Kull, Business Development Director

Jacob Sahlqvist, Managing Director

Johan Christenson, Partner

Johan Weigelt, CEO

Jonas Schorr, Partner

Lena Mäler, Deputy Vice President

Magnus Björnsne, CEO

Mikael Ahlström, Entrepreneur and CEO

Peter Skogh, Museum Director

Peter Wallenberg Jr, Chair

Petter Hartman, CEO

Simon Danielsson, Project Manager

Stefan Dahlbo, CEO and President

Stefano Minini, Project Director

Travis McCready, Head of Life Sciences
Americas Markets

Ylva Williams, CEO

Organisation:

Amsterdam Science Park

KTH Royal Institute of Technology

Karolinska Institutet

Kendall Square Association

Oslo Science City

UK Innovation Districts Group

Stockholm Science City

White Arkitekter Gothenburg

HealthCap

KI Holding and KI Innovations

Urban Impact

Stockholm University

AstraZeneca BioVentureHub

The Park

The National Museum of Science and Technology

Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation

Medicon Village Innovation

KFUM Central

Fabege

Lendlease

JLL

Stockholm Science City

Moderator:

Dr Tim Moonen, Chair Co-Founder, The Business of Cities, London