

LABORATORIO PARA LA CIUDAD

“The Lab for the City will further interaction between citizens and the government... to think about the city together, to build a city that stimulates imagination, a creative city.”

Dr. Miguel Ángel Mancera Espinosa
Mayor of Mexico City

A LABORATORY FOR THE CITY?

The Laboratorio para la Ciudad (Laboratory for the City) is Mexico City's experimental office for civic innovation and urban creativity, the first city government department of its kind in Latin America. The Lab is a space for rethinking, reimagining, and reinventing the way citizens and government can work together towards a more open, more livable and more imaginative city.

RECONNECTING CITIZENS WITH THEIR CITY

How do we reconnect cities and citizens through government itself?

This is the question that drives our work at the Lab. We approach it not only as a matter of delivering better services or offering new channels for engagement, but truly reimagining the role of government and how it can contribute to building better cities.

What if government went beyond administration, to promote innovation, and even possibly channel imagination? What if government was not just a regulator, but a true catalizer for change?

THE MEGALOPOLIS AS A CREATIVE PROVING GROUND

Mexico City is more than our context: it is our creative proving ground. Mexico City is the space that inspires and provokes us, that shapes our views and our roles.

Mexico City is a perfect example of both the promise and the hurdles of our coming global urban challenge. It is the largest and oldest urban agglomeration on the continent, with all the problems of an emerging city, but it is also the eighth-largest urban economy in the world. Half our population is under age 26 and half work in the informal economy. Our city is home to an incredible diversity of people and cultures, but it is also divided by class and hindered by infrastructural deficiencies and environmental problems.

Ideas that succeed here have a good chance of working elsewhere. Places like Mexico City give us the opportunity to start exploring and experimenting with solutions for a new urban age, by prototyping in the present what cities of the future will look like.

Mexico City is what makes the Lab unique. We want to overcome stereotypes and help the city fulfill its own capacity for invention. We want to connect the untapped creative energies of this megalopolis and its 22 million inhabitants, in order to inject good ideas back into the city's system, to give Mexico City a new vocabulary and a new identity.

A DIFFERENT BREED OF GOVERNMENT OFFICE

The Lab is a new breed of government office, the first of its kind in Latin America. A few weeks after being elected, Mayor Miguel Ángel Mancera approached our director Gabriella Gómez-Mont to create an experimental area within the new city government that could reimagine the way government and civil society could collaborate, by implementing public policy and projects that promote citizen ingenuity and talent.

The Lab is conformed by a young, multidisciplinary team, mostly without prior government experience. We're an unusual bunch: architects, technologists, editors, art historians, political scientists, journalists, urban planners, filmmakers, sociologists, designers, urban psychologists... The one thing we all share is our impatient optimism, a passion for the city, and the belief that positive change can be born within government.

Another key factor is collaboration. The Lab is constantly seeking new proposals and provocations around the problems and opportunities of the city through collaborative efforts, both within government and through civil society.

BIG CITY, SMALL LAB

Although we are a small office compared to most government departments, and tiny compared to the sheer size and complexity of Mexico City, we have big ambitions and we believe true change comes in small packages. That's why we rely on small-scale interventions, prototypes, soft infrastructure and social capital. We believe that by sowing seeds we can still reap big rewards, that if our experiments prove successful at a micro-scale they can be adopted by the city at a larger scale, either at the policy level or as citizen-driven initiatives. A focused, intimate perspective can be a good way to address and shed light on big, complex, serious issues such as social innovation, sustainability, economic development, infrastructure, participation, public space, common good, etc. At the same time, we are able to push strategic conversations across the silos of different ministries, creating joint action and narratives.

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WHAT WE DO: CIVIC INNOVATION

Across the globe, technology is playing a crucial part in reshaping the way citizens and government communicate, interact, and relate to one another. A good deal of our experiments take advantage of digital technology to design new participatory platforms and make government more open.

Digital technology offers incredible advantages: immediacy, familiarity, flexibility and the possibility of two-way communication. Still, we cannot rely exclusively on digital technologies in a city where only half of its inhabitants have access to the Internet on a regular basis. What other creative ways can we connect government and citizens?

We believe in investing in people before investing in infrastructure, creating tools but also spaces for interaction, developing ideas and promoting innovative policy and best practices. We want to push innovation in the public sector, helping government create and implement new mechanisms for collecting citizen inputs, generating useful and accessible data and also offering spaces for dialogue, debate, and citizen engagement.

The Lab's civic innovation experiments seek to improve government services and make government more open, more responsive, more receptive to citizen participation and feedback. We want to see government as an attractor of talent, a space of opportunity, a motor for innovation and civic entrepreneurship.

WHAT WE DO: URBAN CREATIVITY

We see urban creativity as a way of revealing the city to itself by highlighting often overlooked aspects and underused resources. When we become familiar with our environment, we also become numb to the many things that make it special. Our urban creativity projects allow people to see their city (and their place in the city) with new eyes.

We want citizens to engage with their city at multiple scales: their street, their neighborhood, their borough. We believe citizens should take part in decision-making regarding their urban environment, but also be adventurous enough to take active part in reimagining and prototyping solutions for making cities better. We think we can work out ideas in public, highlighting great projects and talented people, and also bringing other experiences from around the world to the table.

Creativity is a key factor to spark conversations and collaborations. Creativity is the engine that pushes us to reimagine, rethink and rebuild cities. Citizen talent is a vital resource to approach everyday problems and come up with possible solutions. Beyond the idea of creative industries, the Lab sees urban creativity in all the different and ingenious ways people intervene, read, understand, navigate, and live their city. We believe more ingenious collaborations are the only way forward, and cities need to have the newest ideas at their disposal.

The most successful and exciting cities are nourished by a constant stream of bold speculation and thought-provoking questions on how they can be better. The Lab wants to prove that imagination isn't a luxury or a simple nice-to-have, but a requisite for a city that thrives. We are convinced the city itself has the possibility of becoming a traveling surface for ideas and connections.

HOW WE WORK: PROVOCATIONS

The core questions at the heart of our research and activities, that we call “provocations” are actually open-ended themes that spin off multiple processes and are part of a shifting knowledge-building structure: our dynamic research method in the making. More than a simple questions or hypothesis, provocations also contain the seed of an action. They are a first step towards thinking about relevant, imaginative and practical solutions.

Our provocations mark a path for us. They are questions that move us, that haunt us when we're riding the subway or our bikes to work. Provocations contain multiple starting points for conversations and discussions, they draw frameworks and research paths, as well as lead us to new questions.

A provocation helps us position ourselves between long term goals and everyday concerns. They are always inclusive and open, often changing. Some will remain at the top of our priority list, others will be resolved along the way, while others will be rallied to different areas of government; some are put on the side only to come back at a better time.

A provocation is only the starting point: our biggest challenge is to transform these provocations into open conversations, active community-building, successful experiments, innovative and creative methodologies; changing tools that allow us to rethink and reinvent the city.

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HOW WE WORK: EXPERIMENTS

A laboratory thinks but also does. A laboratory is a community of learning and practice, a space to propose, test, challenge and refine new approaches, ideas or hypotheses. A space to probe unfamiliar territories, to risk, to take lessons from failed approaches, constantly learning. Practically everything we do we approach as an experiment: our projects, but also our encounters (conferences, rooftop sessions, workshops, etc.) and our inquiries (research, residencies, etc.) This way, we are able to mitigate risk on behalf of the government and still have it benefit from new conversations and cutting-edge ideas.

WHERE WE WORK: LA AZOTEA

A few blocks from the Pino Suárez metro station and next to Plaza Tlaxcoaque, in the heart of the city, the Lab is perched on a 3,000-square foot green rooftop, or *azotea*. The Azotea is not only our workspace, but also a space for new ideas and projects, for meetings and provocations. Here, though our Sesiones de Azotea, we invite both local and international guests to host all sorts of encounters, from round tables to barbecues, from lightning sessions and ephemeral interventions, to film projections and book presentations. The Azotea is a tiny urban vortex to reimagine the city, a place to ponder social scripts and urban futures for the largest megalopolis on the continent. A door to creating dialogues and igniting controversies, to building bridges between government, individuals and creative communities: a concrete gesture that embodies our belief in an open and creative government.