

Is Creative Bureaucracy getting anywhere?

An inspirational step-by-step guide to Creative Bureaucracy, a reflection on hot topics, and an attempt to answer the question of what has been achieved by the Creative Bureaucracy initiative.

Is Creative Bureaucracy getting anywhere?

What began as a hypothesis has evolved into a certainty after years of working as an urban professional and advocating for the right to the city: the genuine commitment of bureaucrats to transforming cities into better places is indispensable for any meaningful progress. The most compelling projects I've been part of, and the most impactful policies I've been involved in, would not have been feasible without the collaboration of one or more creative bureaucrats.

Since my student days, I have been engaged in processes of participatory improvement of public spaces and their democratisation. From occupying a large square in São Paulo during the peak of the "Rebel Cities" movement, my journey expanded internationally. In addition to working towards improving public spaces in a community-driven manner to meet the genuine needs of their users, a significant ongoing challenge has

been and continues to be, the quest for co-governance models where citizens and local government can jointly work towards the sustainability of these spaces: ensuring their maintenance, evolution, and adaptation to various changes.

This is what I shared at the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at UN headquarters in New York. In that same year, 2015, I decided to delve into existing policy models in this direction: advancing democracy through collaboration between citizens and bureaucracy on a neighbourhood scale. As a fellow of the unfortunately now-extinct excellence program, The German Chancellor Fellowship for Tomorrow's Leaders, organised by the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung, I had the opportunity to learn about some of these European policies from Berlin, resulting in the book "Doing it

Together – Cooperation Tools for City Co-governance." Upon returning to Brazil, I expanded this research to encompass some Latin American policies, in collaboration with the OSC team "The City Needs You", of which I am a co-founder and which remains very active. As a result, a Portuguese/Spanish edition of the book was released, featuring updated and expanded research.

One of the occasions where I shared the "Doing it Together" research was at Placemaking Week 2019, where I had the chance to meet Charles Landry, who had been working on related issues for years. The concept of Creative Bureaucracy resonated deeply with everything I was thinking about and working on, and the highly captivating figure of Charles sparked fruitful conversations. Since then, we have crossed paths at other events and I have made a point of closely following subsequent editions of the Creative Bureaucracy Festival.

I was invited to pursue my curiosity and motivation through a PhD, and I embraced this opportunity. I am now further investigating the circulation of knowledge about these "co-policies": urban public policies that involve the co-production of spaces through intense collaboration between citizens and bureaucrats, as well

as the co-governance of these spaces based on models of shared management. More and more cities are considering developing similar initiatives, drawing inspiration from existing cases. However, the challenge lies in blending inspiration with local aspects, and once again, creative bureaucrats play a central role in this.

Drawing on my close association with the Festival, Charles, and his fantastic partners Robyn Bennett and Johanna Sieben, I have organised the material you are currently reading. While I have made some contributions, primarily it is a remix of existing materials on Creative Bureaucracy: Charles' book and writings, the Festivals (mainly the 2023 edition), talks with the Team, and interviews with key figures. The idea is to provide a "snapshot" of the current state of Creative Bureaucracy, focusing on the 'how', so creative bureaucrats and enthusiasts like myself can reflect on mechanisms facilitating systemic change and assess some of the progress of the Creative Bureaucracy movement.

I hope you enjoy the ride.

Laura Sobral (org.)

What is, after all, creative bureaucracy?

You can't be a creative city without a creative bureaucracy: cities cannot be comprehensibly successful, alert, agile, attractive and sustainable without an imaginative and engaged bureaucracy that is resilient and proactive in finding better solutions. It requires harnessing the collective imagination and capacities of those who work within the city, as well as able outsiders and partners — in short, leveraging both people and knowledge.

Governments are increasingly struggling to adapt to the world around them. They're striving harder and harder to meet the evolving needs, and the pressure is mounting. The stakes are increasing, which puts more pressure on governments to adopt innovative practices.

Derek Alton, Apolitical

To confront the challenges of our era, it is urgent to mobilise human potential and redefine the city as a 'community of brains.' These brains need to cooperate, producing "elastic planning" that is "strategically principled and tactically flexible", thus serving as the backbone to address the effects of climate change, the digitising world, and the need to

value all of our diversities. This endeavour is impossible without creativity.

Cities are becoming more complex and interconnected daily, and so are their issues. As public bureaucracies change, so too will the outside world's view of what they can offer to society if they can operate at their best. Governments and bureaucracies are being called upon to think with foresight.

Creative Bureaucracy is a catalyst for mutual learning about the real-life experiences of bureaucrats, the factors that foster creative thinking and problem-solving, and the conditions that facilitate

personal growth. These discussions are essential for fostering innovation and development within bureaucratic systems, as they address the need to create conditions for people and their systems to think, plan, and act with imagination

to solve problems and create opportunities. It sheds light on the idea that creativity can emerge from any source, including bureaucrats, rather than solely from the business or digital hipster community.

Creative Bureaucracy for me is an asset-based and solution-oriented approach to building trust and better results for people. Improving the culture of government so that you can attract and retain the best possible talent, creating a more collaborative culture in government.

Tommi Laitio, Bloomberg public innovation fellow at the Bloomberg Centre for Public Innovation at Johns Hopkins University, US

For me, Creative Bureaucracy is a space to try new things. It is a way that we have to build -in flexibility within the context, considering not only "university knowledge" but also local knowledge; they need to be integrated.

Eric Hubbard, coordinator for the Urban Biodiversity Hub in Sierra Leone

Creative Bureaucracy can be seen as a way to transform risks into opportunities. Is a way to question the usual way of doing things. By questioning you're not denying anything, it is about experimenting with new ways related to the needs of the people, it is looking and understanding in a very empathetic way what people really need and then creating new ways to help solve these problems. When I think about creativity in bureaucracy I think about adaptiveness. Public service has to be adaptive all the time.

Luana Faria, General Coordinator, LA-BORA! gov, Brazil

It is Creative Bureaucracy when...

In Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital, bureaucrats are creatively addressing climate crisis challenges by integrating local knowledge, resources, and technology. One such initiative is #FreetownTheTreeTown, where residents are encouraged to plant and monitor trees using the TreeTracker app, earning rewards for their participation. Each tree is tagged and valued, and investors purchase carbon offset tokens from the city to fund additional reforestation efforts, creating a sustainable cycle. This initiative is part of Freetown's Heat Action Agenda, developed collaboratively with communities to mitigate vulnerability to heat stress.

These insights were shared by Eric Hubbard during the Creative Bureaucracy Festival 2023.

LA-BORA! gov, a Brazilian government innovation lab, applies behavioural science to improve the public servant experience amidst political polarisation and low trust in government. One of its initiatives, FREE-LA, introduces a new management model where public servants allocate time to other projects, leveraging their skills and interests. Participation is voluntary, and public servants receive a declaration of participation at the project's conclusion, documenting their hours as part of their job. With FREE-LA and other initiatives, LA-BORA! gov has impacted over 53,000 public servants, seeking to redefine public service paradigms.

Luana Faria shared LA-BORA! gov's experience during the Creative Bureaucracy Festival 2023.

The city of Linz introduced the Enter_Tainer, a 13m² container strategically positioned in the central square. Its aim is to provide residents with a hands-on understanding of the city's administration functions, goals, and methods. Manned by a designated city representative, the Enter_Tainer serves as a welcoming hub for Linz residents to engage with their local government. Acting as a user-friendly presentation platform, it is tailored to make administrative services more accessible and comprehensible to the public. The challenge was to condense Linz's diverse range of services into an engaging and informative format. Linz administration representatives showcased the Enter_Tainer at the Creative Bureaucracy Festival 2023.

It is all about people

To adapt Shakespeare's famous quote as Charles notes: 'What is the bureaucracy, but the people in it?' Within our public bodies, many creative bureaucrats are supporting change and enhancing effectiveness. They exist at every level of the organisation, embodying a 'yes, if' attitude rather than a 'no, because' mindset, which is one of the Festival's key slogans for releasing possibilities and potential. Organisations and systems can then embody the values and qualities expressed by the best individuals. Creative bureaucrats can, as individuals, shape cities. A critical mass can reshape the bureaucratic system itself.

'Behind every great project is a creative bureaucrat' and 'they are mostly invisible and unacknowledged' so exclaimed Jochen Sandig founder of Radialsystem in Berlin, responding to a creative bureaucracy workshop.

Creative Bureaucracy book

For cities to innovate, they need the talents of creative bureaucrats prepared to experiment (and even risk their careers) in pursuit of systematic changes. Cities need to rely on their bureaucrats' capacity for creativity and cooperation instead of placing all trust in the "consultantocracy".

People are initially attracted to bureaucracy because of shared values. When they can express these values at work, it motivates them to contribute. The challenge is creating the right conditions for them to do so. Most bureaucrats walk a fine line. Arbitrary creativity can appear risky or be simply fluffy.

Policy imagination is led by individuals who find themselves in a position to lead, influence and change systems. Individuals who have either the 'permission' to act or can operate sufficiently under the radar to lead changes. They want to make a difference in the world and they see their work as meaningful. It is a humane system based on human potential.

The Creative Bureaucracy Manifesto

A business-as-usual approach can never be the answer to a period of dramatic transformation. Our societies need support. To this end: Good government matters! Bureaucracy is not everything, yet little can be achieved without it. Public administration promotes and protects public welfare and the common good – and deserves greater appreciation for it.

We are committed to a strong public sector and want to unleash the hidden and untapped potential within public administrations. We offer a platform to the multitude of unsung heroes across the globe, and put new ideas in the spotlight.

Bureaucracies that feel more competent and confident to tackle the big social, economic and political challenges of our time – that is what we want to support. To do so we ask ourselves the following questions:

- What incentives and regulations are needed?
- How can we enrich bureaucracies and empower the people working within them?
- How can the relationship to civil society and businesses be rethought?

An imaginative, adaptive, agile, accountable and trustworthy public administration becomes the backbone of a future-oriented society that is capable of tackling the impact of a global pandemic, climate change and the digitising world head on. This requires organisational structures and cultures that are open-minded and solution-oriented – moving from 'no, because' to 'yes, if'!

The Creative Bureaucracy Festival brings together creative bureaucrats and their allies at all levels, aiming to build a movement with international partners who support the idea of positively transforming our public institutions – and help to make it happen.

I consider myself kind of an activist. To me, a creative bureaucrat is someone who can navigate that inner world and still create an impact in the outside world, and in society. It's more like a DNA—it's about one's willingness, motivation, and creativity in order to navigate the complex world of the public sector.

Karl-Filip, University of Brussels, Belgium

Many people entering public positions in local or state government are 'our people,' who want to change things from the inside. They bring their challenging mindset into a public structure. It is not easy, but many people are convinced that this can be done. Count me in."

Candelaria Yanzi, Deputy Director, Red de Innovación Local, Argentina

Are you a creative bureaucrat?

Yes, you. To be a creative bureaucrat is more than just a role; it's a perspective and a mode of action. Throughout the years of the Creative Bureaucracy Festivals, several changemakers within the movement have held bureaucratic positions for a period and then have transitioned to other roles. However, this transition doesn't signify an end to their contributions towards the change they wish to see in the world, and they often continue to collaborate with bureaucracy. Conversely, some individuals who were initially 'outsiders', are now actively involved in governmental roles.

Being a Creative Bureaucrat is a lifestyle that prioritises driving change, regardless of one's position—whether inside or outside formal bureaucratic systems. It is about an experimentation culture; courage, tenacity and passion.

Being a Creative Bureaucrat is not merely a role; it's an attitude.

What are the personal qualities of this emerging community of practice? Most Creative Bureaucrats are open, curious, and highly committed to public value, the common good and human rights. They also bring a series of qualities that are not so obvious, such as a listening attitude, a willingness to show vulnerability, and emotional intelligence.

They trust those they bring into their team and challenge the hierarchical approach, yet realise that at times hard decisions need to be made.

They value imagination as a powerful resource and can think afresh, recognizing the importance of collective imagination for broader impact. Yet they have an acute sense of when to encourage imaginative exploration and when to shift focus towards implementing ideas.

Is Creative Bureaucracy getting anywhere?

After several years on the road, it has become relevant to understand the results of the numerous meetings, presentations, and collaborations under the Creative Bureaucracy umbrella. The encouraging news is that it seems the Creative Bureaucracy movement is indeed making progress and "getting somewhere"! One notable fact to celebrate is that many fantastic people identify themselves as creative bureaucrats and are actively spreading the word about creative bureaucracy.

All the people we have spoken with mentioned that they recognise they have built new, relevant relationships through the Creative Bureaucracy Festivals, with some evolving into productive work partnerships. Some have also shared that they've implemented new methods or approaches aligned with Creative Bureaucracy in their professional contexts. Committed Creative Bureaucrats have even taken the initiative to organise their own local Creative Bureaucracy festivals, events, and programs, such as in the Czech Republic and South Africa!

The Creative Bureaucracy movement by the Creative Bureaucracy community

From followers and enthusiasts to advocates and co-creators, participants have expressed how being part of the Creative Bureaucracy community has positively contributed to their professional trajectories.

I've made some solid connections and found new collaborators, especially in the German-speaking countries. We've broadened our international network to include different types of people. And we've experimented with new methods in our work, like that fishbowl session we did last year. So now I'm gearing up for an event next month and I thought, "Let's try and do a fishbowl." When I first went to the festival, I went solo, and I thought, "This is great, but we need more people here." So, I brought some colleagues along the next year, and we've been attending together ever since, two or three of us. We've also been trying to connect with folks at more operational levels.

Lene Krogh Jeppesen, senior consultant at the Danish National Center for Public-Private Innovation, Copenhagen, Denmark

The people attending the festival have a real sensitivity towards bureaucracy, administration, and the public sector. I was surprised by the diverse range of actors involved, either directly or indirectly, with the public sector. It was like, "Wow, there are so many people connected in some way to the public sector." It's reassuring to see that, despite differing perspectives, everyone at the festival shares this feeling that something needs to happen. That was one of the main takeaways for me from attending the festival.

Idoia Postigo, General Director, BILBAO METROPOLI-30, Spain

The CB festival has become one of the most important platforms for addressing the broader issue of transforming and enhancing governments. People from all corners of the globe come to spend three days in Berlin, engaging in mutual learning. For example, just last week, I attended a meeting with an innovation lab that we got in touch with during the festival. Some people even applied for jobs at Demos as a result of their experience there. And next week, we have a meeting scheduled with GIZ, all thanks to the festival. I could cite many cases like these where collaborations arise.

Mikko Annala, Chief Revenue Officer, Demos Helsinki, Finland

Creative Bureaucracy as a strategy of influence

In thinking about a Creative Bureaucracy toolkit or guide that could assist those interested in pursuing this path, I drew inspiration from the questions posed by Charles Landry on the theme *The Creative and Cultural Economy and Bureaucracy*, as well as the scheme of the *Cooperative Trail* from my book *Doing it Together - cooperative tools for the city co-governance*. These questions were then adapted for the Creative Bureaucracy journey. Inspired by the concept of *creative commons*, which allows for the distribution, remixing, adaptation, and building upon material in any medium or format, the idea is that this initial version can serve as a foundation for multiple iterations, customised by creative bureaucrats as they see fit.



I am passionate about problem-solving

- Do I have an understanding of how the bureaucracy works?
- Have I considered my possible route through the system?
- Who makes decisions on my topic?
- What teams/departments work on similar topics?
- Where might there be budgets to help me?
- Are there existing projects that I could get involved with and that are aligned with my interests?
- Do I need to own or should I collaborate on a project?
- How do I capture interest and tell a convincing story?
- How can I make an impact?
- What inspiration can I find elsewhere?

For me, what moves a creative bureaucrat is the passion to solve problems.

Kate Philip, Program Lead on the presidential employment stimulus, South Africa

an inspirational
step-by-step



I am ready to act!

- Have I identified who can support my activity? Who is ready in my project and what roles do they have?
- What network do I already have and can it help to give my initiative credibility?
- Who can help me inside and outside of my organisation?
- What policies do I need to follow or create for my endeavour – do I have to bend it to existing schemes?
- Does my proposal rely completely on the administration and how much of my ideal budget do I have or can I secure it elsewhere?
- Do I have decision-makers buy-in – at what level are they?
- Do I have a long-term vision or is this a step-by-step action?
- Would the incentives and regulations regime need to change to have success?



I have started changing things

What are the internal and external expectations of my proposal and how can these be managed?

Is this a pilot or a mainstream project and can it develop into the mainstream?

Is support coming from one or more partners?

What are my measures of success?

How can I ensure consistent and open co-creation with communities of interest?

How do I monitor the progress of the activities?

Do any changes need to be made in the process and how do I respond to change along the route?

What follow-up opportunities arise through the development of the project?



I have implemented

Were my measures of success the right ones or were there unexpected results?

Have I been able to convince key decision-makers that the change implemented is significant?

How can those affected and involved be involved in any evaluation?

What has the evaluation told us and has it been able to build an evidence base?

Did the initiative have spin-offs and spillovers?

What was the quality of co-creation with the broader community?

What can we learn from the 'failures'?

How honestly and openly do you share results?

Have I set up a persuasive platform to continue with other related initiatives?



I established a new process

Is understanding of the power and potential of the implemented process fully appreciated?

Who still needs persuading?

Can this and similar initiatives be seen as contributing to sustainability and resilience?

Is there a team that can continue when core people leave?

Do all the relevant departments and disciplines contribute to the vision and indicators of success?

Can my colleagues confidently explain and engage others on the subject?

Do I still need to start initiatives or can they start from a wider group of internal and external people?

Reflections and learnings

Impactful changes depend on systemic shifts, requiring many individuals in various positions to embrace a common vision. Here are some thought-provoking questions to challenge existing paradigms and assumptions: *Trust-building is essential, how can this be fostered in the public context? How to make colleagues allies, how to change the mindset of people who are resistant to innovation and are crucial for change to occur? How do you find the right language to communicate in and between different worlds?* These discussions, along with other pertinent public innovation insights, were featured at the Creative Bureaucracy Festivals. Here are some reflections I've been contemplating on key themes and hot topics.

Failure is inevitable

It is known that to innovate you need to be prepared that some things might not work. So we need room for failure. But how do we create this space? If we accept that mistakes are inevitable, how do we embrace failure? Should we consider breaking rules as an option? Would it be the case to create situations/ places/periods with some flexibility in the rules? This is intricately linked to our ability to navigate uncertainty and structure iterative learning processes that facilitate change integration.

It is impossible without cooperation

It is already known that progress can only be made with cooperation and common objectives. Breaking silos within and across organisations has been a mantra for over 30 years. Doing this within the public machinery is challenging, and cooperation with the private sector often seems the only option. However, an increasing number of administrations are embracing cooperation with citizens, recognizing the potency of aligning visions and actions between residents and the city. The challenge is to encourage, organise and carry out this way of delivering public services, but how can this be done?

Slower can be better

Consistent changes need trust, and trust-building needs time. How to find time in a world that increasingly demands quick results? How to design and build processes that provide for consistency to be achieved over the long term, with periodic reviews? This also aligns with the emerging emphasis on care in public policies, showing that we have to be attentive and take care of both people and processes beyond merely measuring results, due to the interconnected nature of everything.

Transformation needs resources

There are wonderful ideas that we know how to implement and we have all the relevant actors on board. However, dedicated time and resources are needed for implementation. How can we secure resources for processes that are often experimental? Beyond financial resources, talent is also an essential resource. How can we attract talented individuals to public service and make it an appealing place to work, so that they choose to stay rather than seek more stimulating opportunities elsewhere?

Learn from the past by inhabiting the future

Globalisation has led to city standardisation, yet a recent shift emphasises the significance of diversity. These differences often stem from unique historical backgrounds, prompting a growing recognition of identities, ancestral ties, and the distinctiveness of various groups. Notably, digital media is being used to acknowledge tangible and intangible heritage, aiming to deliver services that promote fairness and equity.

Adapting to a digital world is not (just) about digitising processes

In the pre-digital era, transparency and accountability operated differently. Today, with the advent of IoT, AI, and other technologies, governments are adjusting. While some have made significant progress, others are still catching up. How can transparency and accountability be effectively implemented in the digital age? In the transition to digital public processes, there is a risk of viewing technology as an end goal rather than a tool to provide better solutions to contemporary challenges. It is crucial to recognize that social technologies are equally important and to contextualise the role of technology in this regard.

Re-framing the welfare state

More and more cities understand care work as an important job performed by thousands of people daily, but it is undervalued and completely outside the public service. The recognition of so many workers engaged in daily care has led to the emergence of public policies to support this activity, including new approaches to empathic, mental, and health care. How does a contemporary version of a welfare state operate with care work at its core?

Possible futures as a developing field

Many of the crises we currently face stem from the need to redefine what is “development” and acknowledge that there is not just one model to pursue, but rather multiple possibilities drawing from diverse sources of inspiration and local knowledge. Hence, there is a call for imagination, placing dreams at the forefront of discussions. In the quest for potential futures, public initiatives aimed at building the muscle of collective imagination are proliferating. The task seems to involve more than imagining; it requires building actionable strategies from these speculations.

Politicians must be on board

Relationships serve as mechanisms that structure creative bureaucracy. The best-implemented ideas often stem from partnerships involving multiple groups. However, equally important for project success is the political will for implementation. Whether decision-makers embrace a proposal is often crucial. Various methodologies have been discussed to ensure politicians are on board with creative initiatives, enabling their execution and promotion.

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