



Innovation Atelier Guide

A practical guide for setting up, organising and sustaining collaboration in urban innovation projects



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Disclaimer

This guide offers practical insights based on project experience and is intended as a reference for early-stage decision-making.

Colophon

Innovation Atelier Guide

A practical guide to organising long-term collaboration in complex urban innovation projects

This guide builds on the experience of Innovation Ateliers developed within the EU Horizon 2020 ATELIER project. It translates project-based insights into a structured approach for setting up, organising and sustaining collaboration around complex urban transitions.

The guide is intended for practitioners working in municipalities, public agencies, innovation programmes and urban partnerships. It supports the design, development and institutional embedding of collaborative structures that aim to move from experimentation to long-term implementation.

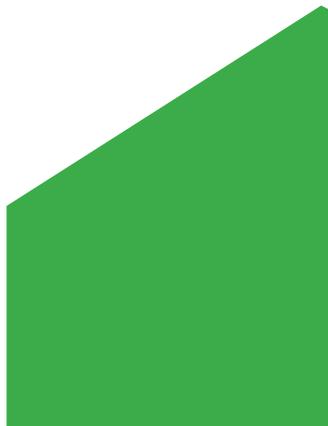
The content draws on practical experiences from Amsterdam, Bilbao and several Fellow Cities, as well as contributions from project partners, municipal actors and knowledge institutions involved in the ATELIER programme.

Acknowledgements

This guide builds on deliverables developed within the ATELIER project by consortium partners. Their reflections, lessons learned and practical insights have informed the structure and content of this publication. Special thanks go to Aranka Dijkstra, Omar Shafsqat and Eva Winters for their support in developing the Innovation Atelier method.

Contents

Introduction to this guide	1
What are Innovation Ateliers	2
Why does it benefit cities and partners?	2
The five phases of your Innovation Atelier	3
The building blocks	4
Phase 1: Preconditions	6
Phase 2: Establishing	8
Phase 3: Maturing	10
Phase 4: Stabilising	12
Phase 5: Continuation	14
Innovation Atelier use case	16



Introduction to this guide

A practical handbook for organising long-term collaboration in complex urban innovation projects

Cities face increasing pressure to accelerate transitions in areas such as energy, mobility and circular development. In many cases, progress slows down due to fragmented governance, unclear mandates, financial constraints and misaligned stakeholders. Pilot projects are launched and lessons are generated, yet collaboration structures often dissolve once funding ends.

Innovation Ateliers were developed as a response to these challenges. They provide a structured way to organise collaboration around projects, bringing together municipalities, companies, knowledge partners and citizens. An Innovation Atelier is designed to become a stable collaboration mechanism that supports learning, coordination and long-term implementation.

This guide draws on the experience of eight Innovation Ateliers developed in Amsterdam, Bilbao and several Fellow Cities within the EU ATELIER project. It translates these experiences into a phased approach that supports cities in setting up, strengthening and sustaining collaborative structures over time.

The guide follows the life cycle of an Innovation Atelier, from early preconditions to long-term continuation. It introduces five phases that describe how collaboration evolves, and six building blocks that highlight the core elements requiring ongoing attention. Together, they provide structured direction while allowing adaptation to local governance contexts and strategic priorities.

The guide is intended for practitioners responsible for organising collaboration in complex urban projects, including municipal officers, project leaders, policy advisors and innovation managers. It can be used when establishing a new Innovation Atelier, strengthening an existing one, or reflecting on whether current collaboration structures remain fit for purpose.

The aim is to support cities in moving from isolated pilots and short-term networks towards stable, embedded collaboration that can sustain innovation across political cycles, staff turnover and shifting agendas.

What are Innovation Ateliers?

An Innovation Atelier (IA) is a structured way for actors in a city to organise collaboration around complex urban challenges. It brings together municipalities, companies, knowledge partners and citizens to work on innovative projects that support transitions such as energy, mobility or circular development. It is an ongoing collaboration setup that helps cities move from ideas to implementation.

An Innovation Atelier establishes a structured collaboration framework in which technical, legal, financial and governance questions are addressed jointly. Partners meet regularly, clarify roles and responsibilities, and align their interests around concrete challenges. This makes it easier to deal with issues that normally block progress, such as unclear mandates, regulatory constraints or misaligned incentives.

What distinguishes an Innovation Atelier from other innovation formats is that it is designed to last beyond a single project. It is embedded in existing governance structures and linked to city strategies. Over time, it builds local innovation capacity, supports learning across projects, and helps scale or replicate successful solutions. The goal is not only to test ideas, but to create a stable collaboration mechanism that supports long-term urban transformation.

What do cities gain from an Innovation Atelier

Innovation Ateliers help cities address coordination bottlenecks that often delay complex transition projects. Many urban challenges are not blocked by technology, but by fragmented mandates, unclear roles, regulatory uncertainty and misaligned incentives. The Atelier makes these interdependencies explicit and creates a structured setting in which actors can align decisions early in the process.

For **municipalities**, an Innovation Atelier strengthens institutional continuity. Instead of organising collaboration from scratch for each project, cities build a stable coordination structure that can be reused. This reduces transaction costs, improves role clarity and links innovation projects more directly to long-term policy goals.

For **companies and knowledge partners**, the Atelier reduces uncertainty. Early involvement in governance discussions clarifies regulatory conditions, public expectations and risk allocation. This makes investment decisions more predictable and increases the likelihood that tested solutions can move towards implementation.

For **all partners**, the added value is structured coordination. The Atelier connects technical, legal and financial discussions that are often handled separately. By surfacing barriers early and aligning responsibilities, it reduces late-stage conflicts and stalled projects. Over time, it also supports cross-project learning, making it easier to replicate and scale successful approaches.

The five development phases of an Innovation Atelier

An Innovation Atelier develops over time. To support this development in a deliberate way, we distinguish five phases. These phases describe how a collaboration structure typically evolves, from initial preparation to long-term embedding. They help cities understand which conditions and organisational choices are relevant at different moments. The development phases are shown in the figure below and are described briefly in the following text. The phases will be further explained in the rest of this guide.

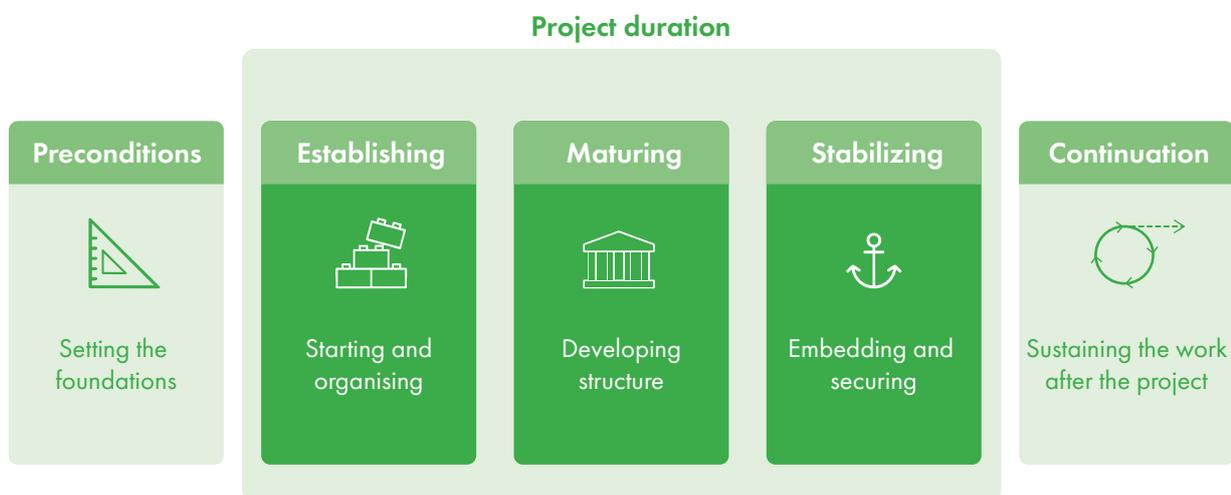
The first phase, **Preconditions**, focuses on establishing the basic requirements to start. This includes political and organisational backing, clarity about ambitions and scope, and an initial understanding of local stakeholders and innovation capacity. Attention in this phase is directed at positioning the Atelier within the municipal context and ensuring there is sufficient mandate and support to proceed.

The second phase, **Establishing**, concerns setting up the core structure. The city and its partners define the purpose and expected outcomes, agree on roles and responsibilities, organise coordination, and initiate the first joint activities. The focus is on creating a functioning collaboration structure with clear ownership and working routines.

In the **Maturing** phase, collaboration becomes more regular and structured. Additional partners may join, thematic discussions deepen, and technical, legal, financial and social aspects are addressed in a more integrated way. Shared routines develop, and the Atelier gains visibility and relevance within the wider municipal organisation.

The **Stabilising** phase centres on embedding the Innovation Atelier within existing governance structures. This involves clarifying decision-making procedures, formalising partnerships where necessary, securing longer-term resources and aligning the Atelier's activities with broader city strategies. The collaboration structure becomes more robust and less dependent on temporary project arrangements.

The final phase, **Continuation**, concerns long-term operation. The Innovation Atelier functions as an ongoing coordination mechanism, maintains partnerships, adapts its focus where needed and supports the transfer of knowledge into practice. At this phase, the structure is positioned to contribute to sustained urban innovation beyond individual projects or funding cycles.



Development phases of an Innovation Atelier



The building blocks of an Innovation Atelier

Core elements within the establishing, maturing and stabilising phases

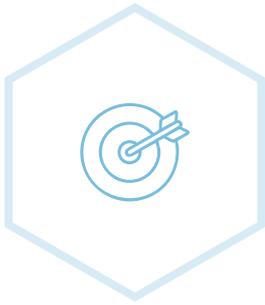
The building blocks describe the core organisational elements that shape how an Innovation Atelier functions once it has been initiated. They are most relevant during the establishing, maturing and stabilising phases, when the collaboration structure is being organised, strengthened and embedded.

Where the phases describe development over time, the building blocks focus on the internal organisation of collaboration. They concern ownership, decision-making, alignment with strategy, resource allocation and learning processes. These elements determine whether the collaboration structure remains coherent and effective. Urban innovation projects frequently encounter organisational and governance-related challenges.

Responsibilities may be unclear, coordination fragmented, or political backing insufficient. The building blocks help make these conditions explicit and provide a structured way to monitor and improve them.

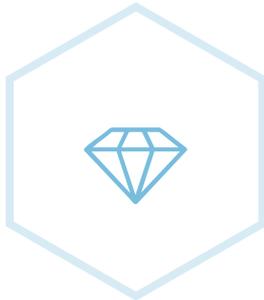
As partnerships evolve and activities expand, these elements require regular adjustment. In the establishing phase, they help clarify expectations and working arrangements. During maturing and stabilising, they support alignment with existing governance structures and strengthen long-term continuity.

The boxes on the right explain every building block that needs understanding before explaining the phases.



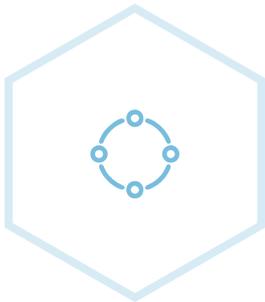
Vision, mission & strategy

Clarity of direction. Without a shared vision and a concrete mission, an Atelier turns into a talking shop or a collection of unrelated activities. The strategy translates ambitions into priorities, focus areas and realistic steps. In practice, this block keeps partners aligned when interests start to diverge or when projects become politically or financially sensitive.



Value proposition

Why partners stay involved. Different actors participate for different reasons: policy goals, business opportunities, learning, legitimacy, or access to networks. The value proposition makes these benefits explicit and balances short-term project value with long-term ecosystem value. Without it, engagement fades and partnerships become fragile.



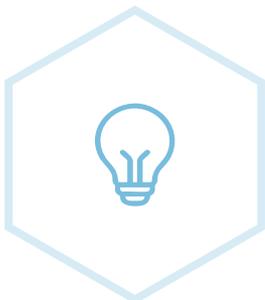
Strategic coordination

How the Atelier connects to existing governance structures and decision-making arenas. It defines who decides what, how issues are escalated, and how the Atelier aligns with municipal strategies and external programmes. Without this block, Ateliers remain isolated from real power and budgets.



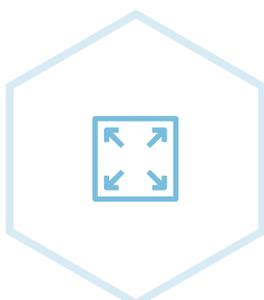
Open innovation activities

Where collaboration becomes concrete. Workshops, co-creation sessions, expert meetings and real-world experiments are the engine of the Atelier. They generate tangible outputs, not just ideas. This block ensures that the Atelier stays action-oriented and relevant to real projects.



Learning & knowledge diffusion

How learning is captured and used. It includes reflection moments, documentation, and sharing insights across projects and cities. Without this block, the same mistakes are repeated and innovations remain one-offs instead of building blocks for scaling and replication.



Organisational capacity

The basic operational setup: facilitation, coordination, time, budget and clear roles. It also includes governance arrangements and mandates. Without this, everything depends on individual champions and collapses when people leave or funding ends.



Preconditions

Phase 1: create the right conditions

The preconditions phase marks the starting point in the development of an Innovation Atelier. It focuses on ensuring that the challenge is clearly defined, that key actors are aligned, and that the necessary mandates and resources are in place. Without these foundations, structured collaboration cannot function effectively.

1 A first step in this phase is to clarify the central challenge. Before convening additional stakeholders, a clear and shared problem framing is required.

questions in this phase include:

- What systemic issue is being addressed?
- Why is this challenge urgent or meaningful?
- What boundaries or constraints already exist?

Clarifying these questions provides direction and anchors the Innovation Atelier.

2 The next step involves mapping the broader context. Complex urban challenges are shaped by technical systems, governance structures, market conditions and social dynamics. Understanding these interdependencies helps determine where coordination is needed.

3 Identifying and securing key stakeholders

The third step concerns identifying and securing the most relevant stakeholders. An effective Innovation Atelier requires the involvement of actors who hold influence, formal responsibility or essential knowledge related to the challenge.

This includes ensuring that:

- Key actors with decision-making authority or ownership are willing to participate
- Affected communities are represented where relevant
- Roles and expectations are sufficiently clear to begin collaboration
- Early interaction supports trust, commitment and a shared understanding of purpose

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Setting up a basic governance structure

The Innovation Atelier requires an initial governance structure from the outset. This involves clarifying who facilitates the process, who holds decision-making authority, what mandate the group has, and which resources are available to support its work.

Clear governance arrangements in this early phase provide stability and prevent ambiguity about responsibilities or expectations. Even a light but explicit structure helps maintain focus and direction.

5

Removing operational barriers

Before collaborative sessions begin, basic operational conditions need to be secured. These include access to relevant data and documents, agreement on confidentiality where required, availability of technical expertise, and a modest facilitation or logistics budget.

Addressing these practical matters early prevents delays and reduces uncertainty once discussions start. Even small operational gaps can slow progress if left unresolved.

Narrowing the focus and formulating initial hypotheses

With the challenge defined and stakeholders engaged, attention shifts to sharpening the focus. Initial discussions often generate a broad range of themes and concerns. These inputs need to be structured and prioritised.

This involves assessing relevance, feasibility and alignment with existing mandates. Through this process, the group distinguishes between issues that require immediate exploration and those that fall outside the current scope.

The outcome of this step is a first set of working hypotheses: concise, testable assumptions that guide further exploration.

Examples include:

- Grid capacity is the primary bottleneck for project X.
- Increased flexibility improves system feasibility
- Stakeholder Z holds a decisive role in enabling implementation.

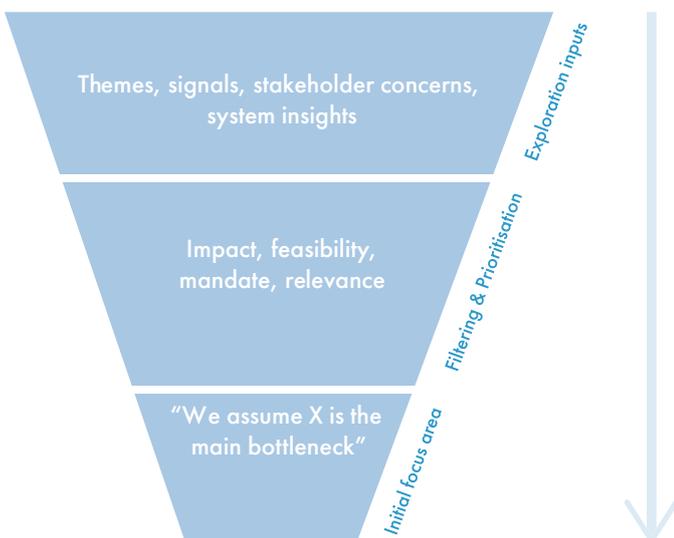
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Outputs of the Preconditions phase

By the end of the Preconditions phase, several concrete outputs should be in place:

- A clearly articulated and validated challenge statement
- A committed group of key stakeholders
- An initial governance arrangement with defined roles and mandate
- Operational conditions secured
- A first set of focus areas or hypotheses for exploration

Together, these outputs ensure that the next phase begins with clarity, alignment and a shared understanding of purpose.



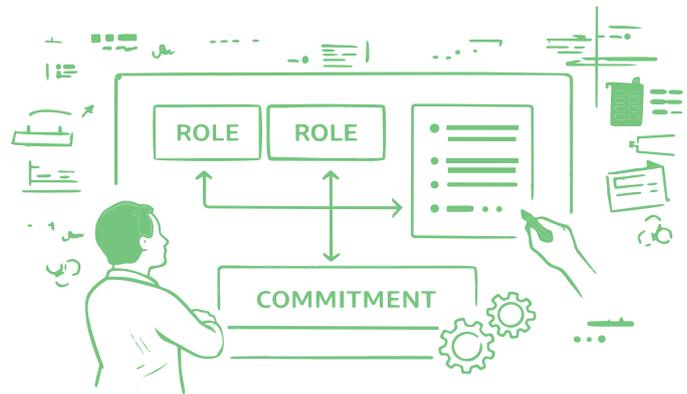


Establishing

Phase 2: Bring partners together, define direction, and structure the collaboration.

The Establishment Phase formally initiates the Innovation Atelier. Core partners come together to define a shared vision and mission, clarify how the Atelier supports the concrete innovation project, and agree on how collaboration will be organised.

This phase focuses on making concrete agreements on direction, roles, governance arrangements and initial activities. The objective is to create a structured collaboration that can actively support implementation.



Vision, Mission and strategy

In joint sessions with the core partners, define the shared long-term ambition and clarify how the Innovation Atelier contributes to the concrete innovation project. Keep statements concise and operational. Avoid abstract language that cannot guide action.

questions include:

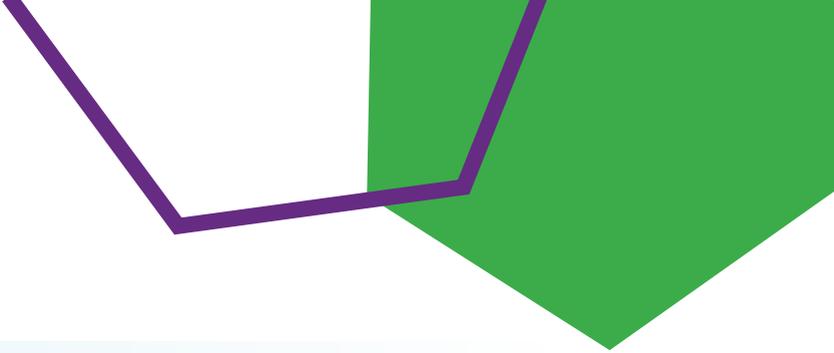
- What long-term change does the Innovation Atelier aim to contribute to?
- What concrete objectives are prioritised in the first year?
- Are vision and mission formally endorsed by partners?

Value Proposition

Different actors participate for different reasons. Clarifying these motivations strengthens commitment and reduces the risk of disengagement.

questions include:

- What concrete value does participation create for each partner?
- Are short-term outputs and longer-term benefits clear?
- Are expectations aligned across partners?



Strategic coordination

This element concerns how the Innovation Atelier connects to existing governance structures and how responsibilities are distributed. Clear agreements on roles, escalation routes and alignment with municipal strategies prevent fragmentation and duplication.

questions include:

- What is the formal mandate of the Innovation Atelier?
- How are decisions prepared and taken?
- How does the Atelier align with municipal strategies and project governance?



Open innovation activities

Early workshops and co-creation sessions translate strategy into concrete action. This element focuses on organising sessions with a clear purpose, defined outcomes and follow-up steps.

questions include:

- Are early sessions clearly scoped and outcome-oriented?
- Are roles in sessions clarified?
- Are follow-up actions documented and assigned?



Learning & knowledge diffusion

As activities begin, early lessons emerge from workshops, technical exploration and stakeholder interaction. This element focuses on documenting insights, sharing them within and beyond the project, and using them to adjust direction where needed.

questions include:

- How are lessons documented?
- Who is responsible for translating insights into follow-up actions?
- Is learning influencing decisions and strategy?



Organisational capacity

An Innovation Atelier requires coordination capacity beyond project content. This includes facilitation, administrative support, time allocation and access to expertise.

questions include:

- Is a stable core coordination team in place?
- Are dedicated time and resources allocated?
- Are key skill gaps identified and addressed?



Maturing

Phase 3: Grow partnerships and strengthen activities

The Maturing phase marks the transition from initial set-up to steady delivery. Pilots are implemented and evaluated, coordination deepens, and the Innovation Atelier strengthens its role within the wider governance landscape. Learning becomes more systematic and the basis for long-term continuity begins to take shape.

Vision, Mission and strategy

In this phase, the shared direction is refined based on early results and practical experience. The Innovation Atelier adjusts its focus where needed and aligns more explicitly with long-term municipal ambitions.

Questions include:

- Is the vision updated based on implementation insights?
- Are objectives aligned with long-term city strategies?
- Do key partners continue to endorse the strategic direction?

Value Proposition

In the maturing phase, value must become tangible. The Innovation Atelier demonstrates concrete benefits, refines its services, and clarifies how it supports implementation and scaling.

Questions include:

- Does the Innovation Atelier demonstrably add value to ongoing projects?
- Are services and support clearly defined and used?
- Is the value proposition strong enough to support scaling or replication?

Strategic coordination

Coordination moves beyond internal alignment toward deeper embedding in governance structures. The Innovation Atelier strengthens its links to decision-making arenas and expands collaboration across sectors and projects.

Questions include:

- Is the Innovation Atelier embedded in relevant decision-making structures?
- Are cross-sector and cross-project connections actively maintained?
- Is visibility and credibility increasing within the municipal organisation?



Open innovation activities

Activities become more targeted and implementation-driven. Sessions move from exploration toward problem-solving, experimentation and application in practice.

Questions include:

- Do activities directly address real implementation challenges?
- Are practitioners, experts and decision-makers effectively involved?
- Are insights from activities applied to improve on-going projects?

Learning & knowledge diffusion

Learning shifts from ad hoc reflection to structured knowledge management. Insights are documented, synthesised and shared beyond the immediate project context.

Questions include:

- Are lessons systematically documented and synthesised?
- Is knowledge shared across cities or projects?
- Is learning informing strategic or policy-level decisions?

Organisational capacity

In this phase, the Innovation Atelier strengthens its institutional and operational basis. Roles become more stable, funding more predictable, and coordination less dependent on individuals.

Questions include:

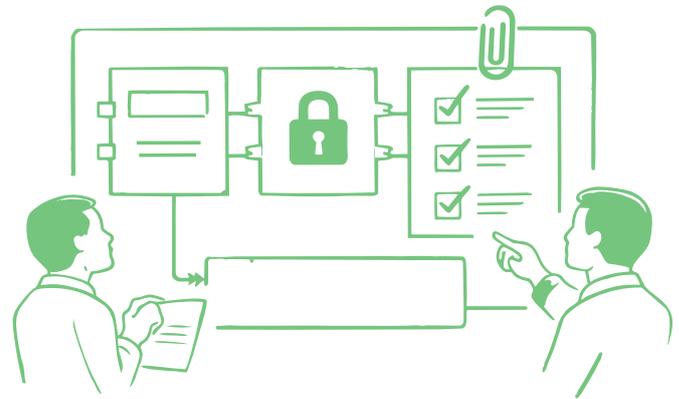
- Are roles and responsibilities formalised for the longer term?
- Is financial and operational continuity secured?
- Is staff turnover managed through onboarding and knowledge transfer?



Stabilising

Phase 4: Embed the Atelier in local governance

In the stabilising phase, the Innovation Atelier becomes structurally embedded in the local innovation ecosystem. Governance arrangements are formalised, funding is secured beyond temporary projects, and partnerships become more stable. The focus shifts from developing the collaboration to ensuring institutional continuity, long-term scaling and systemic impact.



Vision, Mission and strategy

The strategic direction is broadened and aligned with long-term municipal or regional transition agendas. The Innovation Atelier's role evolves from supporting a single project to contributing to wider policy objectives.

Questions include:

- Does the strategic direction align with long-term city or regional transition priorities?
- Is the Innovation Atelier's role clearly defined beyond the initial pilot context?
- Do core partners support continued development at this broader level?

Value Proposition

The value proposition becomes institutional rather than project-based. The Innovation Atelier positions itself as a stable knowledge hub and coordination mechanism that supports sustained innovation and replication.

Questions include:

- Is the long-term value proposition clearly articulated?
- Are services and expertise ready for sustained external uptake?
- Is there a credible case for continued funding or contributions beyond the project?



Strategic coordination

The Innovation Atelier is formally embedded in municipal governance structures and connected to cross-city and cross-project networks. Decision-making processes and reporting lines are clarified.

Questions include:

- Is the Innovation Atelier formally integrated into relevant decision-making structures?
- Are connections to national, EU or cross-city networks secured?
- Is long-term institutional support established?



Open innovation activities

Activities shift from local experimentation toward broader dissemination and structured exchange. The Innovation Atelier contributes to collective learning across cities and sectors.

Questions include:

- Are activities connected to wider networks and events?
- Do collaborations extend beyond the initial project context?
- Are sessions contributing to scaling or replication?



Learning & Knowledge Diffusion

Learning is institutionalised. Insights are systematically documented, monitored and used to inform long-term strategy and scaling efforts.

Questions include:

- Are monitoring and learning processes structurally embedded?
- Is knowledge accessible beyond the immediate project team?
- Are lessons informing long-term scaling or policy decisions?



Open innovation activities

Governance, staffing and financial structures are stabilised to reduce dependency on temporary funding cycles or individual champions.

Questions include:

- Are roles and responsibilities formally secured for the long term?
- Is stable financial and operational continuity in place?
- Is succession and knowledge transfer organised?



Sustaining the work
after the project

Continuation

Phase 5: Sustain and expand the impact

The Continuation phase marks the shift from building and stabilising the Innovation Atelier to sustaining it as a long-term mechanism within the local innovation landscape. The central question is no longer whether the Atelier functions, but whether it can endure and remain relevant over time.

Continuation builds on the structures developed in earlier phases. The Innovation Atelier evolves from a project-based initiative into a recognised platform that organises collaboration across themes, districts or cities. It becomes part of how urban innovation is structured, rather than a temporary intervention.



Long-term positioning

In this phase, the Innovation Atelier broadens its scope beyond the initial pilot or project. It connects to wider policy agendas, takes on new themes where relevant, and positions itself as a stable coordination platform.

The Innovation Atelier is no longer perceived as a time-bound experiment. It functions as an ongoing infrastructure for collaboration, experimentation and decision-making within the city or region.

Financial Sustainability

Long-term continuity requires moving beyond single project funding. The Innovation Atelier establishes a diversified financial base, which may include municipal budgets, programme funding, public-private partnerships, or service-based contributions.

A resilient financial model reduces dependency on short-term funding cycles and strengthens the capacity to adapt to political or strategic shifts.





Embedding and Governance

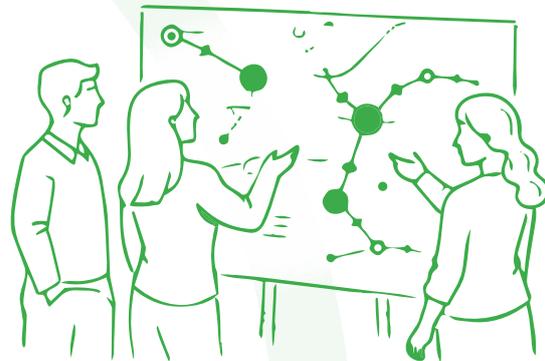
As the Innovation Atelier matures, its governance structures are formalised and integrated into municipal and regional systems. Roles, responsibilities and reporting lines are clarified, and alignment with policy frameworks is strengthened.

Continuation depends on institutional ownership, leadership backing and integration within administrative structures. When the Innovation Atelier becomes part of the city's established governance practice, its long-term viability increases.

Replication and Scaling

Continuation also concerns enabling broader impact. The Innovation Atelier model is adapted for use in other districts, cities or thematic areas.

This involves structured documentation of methods, transferable tools, and clear guidance on how the model can be implemented in different contexts. Scaling does not imply copying the model unchanged, but adapting its principles to new institutional and spatial settings.



Innovation Atelier Use Case

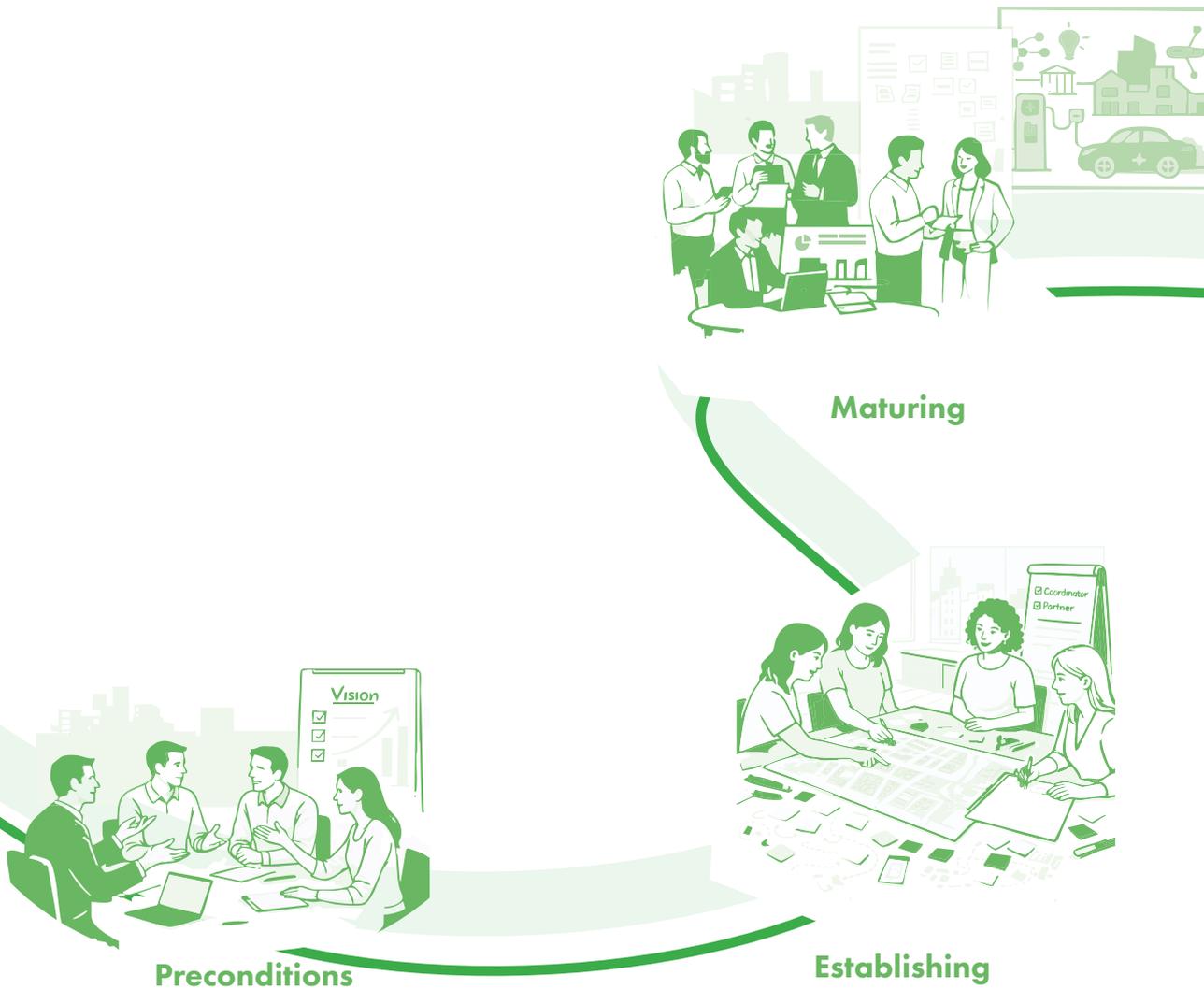
Case: Republica, Buiksloterham (Amsterdam)

Buiksloterham, located in Amsterdam Noord, is being redeveloped from a former industrial area into a circular and energy-positive mixed-use district. Energy-positive means that buildings are designed to generate at least as much energy as they consume over the year. Within this area, the Republica complex aimed to integrate solar PV, battery storage and smart energy management into a local energy system.

To realise this ambition, the municipality, the developer and energy experts needed to align technical design, grid capacity constraints and regulatory conditions. The Amsterdam Innovation Atelier provided the collaboration structure to organise this alignment.

Through the Innovation Atelier, partners met regularly to address technical, legal, financial and organisational questions. Sessions focused on clarifying what was technically feasible within grid limits, what regulatory options were available, and how responsibilities and risks should be allocated. Dependencies between actors were mapped, including grid operators, developers and future building users.

This structured coordination supported joint decision-making and enabled the project to remain aligned with the city's broader Positive Energy District ambitions.



Addressing grid congestion

Grid congestion occurs when the electricity network has reached its capacity limit and cannot accommodate additional connections or higher loads. In practice, this means that new buildings, energy systems or charging infrastructure cannot be connected as planned. In the case of the Republica project, the available grid capacity was strictly limited, creating uncertainty about whether the planned smart energy system could operate as intended.

Within the Innovation Atelier, partners jointly assessed how to operate under these constraints. Energy modelling was used to test whether the smart system design could function within the limited connection capacity. Real-time monitoring during operation provided data on actual energy performance and allowed assumptions in the model to be verified and adjusted.

The project also made use of a legal exemption that allowed the installation of a private microgrid. This enabled energy exchange and trading between commercial users, residents and tenants within the building complex. As a result, locally generated electricity could be shared more efficiently, reducing pressure on the public grid connection.

From a governance perspective, an energy community was established to organise collective decision-making about energy management. The Innovation Atelier supported the design of this structure by clarifying roles, responsibilities and operational arrangements. Insights from this process were shared with national policy actors and contributed to discussions on regulatory frameworks for local energy systems.





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Positive Energy Districts



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