

***INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY IN THE ORDINARY  
CITY? TALENT MATTERS IN LONDON ONTARIO***

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*Draft: Comments Welcome*

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*I've been trying to remember why I moved to London and can already see how this piece will immediately commence a slide into tedium. Because I had two reasons, and they could not be duller, but they could also not be more typical, which is why I will mention them anyway. I moved to London from Toronto because unlike Toronto, it's affordable. And because I was offered a job that seemed pleasant and promising enough ... But if it can be (relatively) easy to live here, it's awfully hard to lure guests. Whoever the clever person was who first said, "London's a great place to live, but I wouldn't want to visit there" spoke, apparently, for practically every out-of-towner I know.*

-Joan Barfoot, award winning author and longtime London resident<sup>1</sup>.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, studies of economic development in OECD countries have stressed the importance of innovation – the generation of new ideas and their commercial application through quality products and services that meet the global competition<sup>2</sup>. Importantly, this research also reveals innovation to be an iterative and interactive process that engages a host of economic actors in ongoing relationships that circulate different forms of specialized knowledge across firms and among workers. It follows that some of the most dynamic innovation systems have emerged in geographically localized places that supply a creative milieu for learning and collaboration. A growing body of research now highlights the potential for city-regions to emerge as hubs of innovation in the global knowledge economy (Gertler, 2001; Wolfe and Bramwell, 2008). Those urban centers containing a robust infrastructure of knowledge supports and networks, as well as an attractive mix of cutting-edge amenities and cultural openness, can expect ample flows of investment and talent (Florida, 2002).

Not surprisingly, much of the literature exploring the implications of the systemic and place-based dynamics of innovation has concentrated on the large cosmopolitan city-regions (OECD, 2006; Sands and Reese, 2008). These 'creativity hotbeds' are powering innovation in the knowledge economy and they are the engines of their national economies. However, in many countries, Canada included, there are only a handful of such urban powerhouses. A clear majority of citizens still reside in smaller places, typically mid-sized cities with knowledge infrastructures, amenity mixes, and demographic profiles quite different from the aspiring global cities of Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal (Bunting et al. 2008; Lewis and Donald, 2009). Yet these mid-sized cities must also find their way in the new global economic competition. How can such places build their niche by leveraging a quite different set of local assets? What

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<sup>1</sup> In 2005 the *London Free Press* published a collection of 'Next London' essays to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the incorporation of the City of London. The quotation comes from Barfoot's contribution titled 'Staying a Step Behind the Curve'.

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Kadie Ward and Matthew Patterson for their research assistance, especially with the key informant interviews..

talent attraction and retention strategies are available to places without vibrant downtown cores, much urban buzz, or cultural diversity?

This paper takes up these questions through case study analysis of one such mid-sized city with its share of innovation gaps and creativity deficits in relation to today's knowledge-based economic competition: London Ontario. To situate London's particular mix of challenges and opportunities, we draw on recent literature analyzing the problems and prospects of "ordinary" regions and cities (Benneworth 2007; Todtling and Trippel, 2005; Bradford, 2003). This literature convincingly argues that ordinary places are distinguished by certain 'innovation system failures', and further, that these can be addressed through concerted mobilizations that strategically couple local planning with extra-local resources. In these terms, we explore recent civic collaborations in London to tackle key deficiencies in the city's knowledge economy infrastructure, deficiencies identified by local actors themselves as significant barriers to innovation and creativity. To convey the long term nature of London's change process, and the uncertainty of the ultimate destination, we also borrow from the ordinary cities literature the concept of the local "innovation journey".

The paper is organized in three parts. We begin by discussing the ordinary city and the London case as an interesting example. Second we track the development of novel collaborations and institution-building triggered by two social learning exercises that framed London's problems and mobilized local coalitions. Finally, we draw on a data set of key informant interviews to assess both the *change process* and the *substantive content* of London's strategies for supplying the creative talent necessary for innovation.

## **INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY IN THE ORDINARY CITY: SITUATING LONDON ONTARIO**

Innovation and creativity are now understood to be crucial to strong economic performance in the knowledge economy. Across a wide swathe of sectors, firms require the capacity to generate new products and services to meet rapidly changing demand in conditions of intense quality competition. Recent research on innovation and creativity emphasizes both their systemic character, involving ongoing interactions among different organizations involved in knowledge generation and application, and their localized expression as city-regions become strategic economic spaces where key flows of people and ideas converge (Asheim and Gertler, 2005). As the global economy becomes increasingly important in organizing markets and competition, local communities emerge as pivotal actors in supplying the infrastructure of innovation and creative milieu underpinning knowledge-based production.

Thus far, the *place turn* in innovation and creativity research has spawned two robust bodies of urban and regional literature examining the dynamics of economic change in quite different kinds of localities. On the one hand, there has been much analysis of the high performing city-regions with well-developed clusters of leading-edge firms embedded in learning communities that capture knowledge spillovers and enable tacit

flows (Brender and Lefebvre 2006; Knudsen et al. 2007). These ‘success stories’ are not without tension or challenge, but overall they convey a dynamic local innovation system featuring world-class universities, specialized and diverse talent pools, and sophisticated knowledge transfer organizations bridging laboratory and market. These city-regions are the knowledge economy’s hotbeds, incubating world-scale research breakthroughs and product innovations. They are the hubs of national economies and cosmopolitan centers with the lifestyle amenities, urban design motifs, and social attitudes that attract and retain the creative talent – engineers, scientists, entrepreneurs, financiers and so forth – who drive economic innovation (Scott, 2006; Sands, 2009).

On the other hand, there are many studies of places at the other end of the innovation and creativity continuum, the so-called ‘less favoured regions’ that economic modernization has mostly bypassed (Cooke and Morgan, 1998; Markey et al., 2005). With an overspecialization in older industries relying on outdated technologies and bygone advantages such as proximity to raw materials or cheap energy, these cities and regions confront massive restructuring challenges and do so without either the knowledge networks or compelling amenities that facilitate change in the dynamic urban centers. Nonetheless, it is the case that over the past three decades a number of such marginalized places have managed quite remarkable ‘turnarounds’ and scholars have been keen to tell their stories. Crises, it seems, can trigger rapid, extraordinary community mobilizations and extra-local investments that set in motion economic transformations. In turn, creativity researchers have taken note (Landry, 2000; Dubinsky 2006). These same older manufacturing outposts or smaller rural communities often leverage unique place assets, ranging from outdoor recreation, appealing natural landscapes, and recycled industrial infrastructure, to attract their own class of creatives, often mid-career changers seeking alternative lifestyles and novel entrepreneurial opportunities (McGranahan and Wojan, 2007).

While the preoccupation of innovation and creativity scholarship with the knowledge economy’s ‘hotbeds or hinterlands’ is understandable, it has left another category of city-regions more or less on the analytical sidelines. These are the in-between places, neither the cosmopolitan centers with their dynamic innovation systems and multiple creativity attractors, nor the crisis-ridden outposts facing structural decline and forced to reinvent themselves and their economies. For the in-between places, the label “ordinary city” has been aptly applied. On several grounds they are unexceptional: mid-sized in population, lacking clear cluster profiles to distinguish or brand the local economy, these places also are without claim to either the hip buzz of the big cities or the quaint identity and natural beauty of many smaller cities (Filion et al. 2004; Christopherson, 2004). As Paul Chatterton puts it, the ordinary city is left with its own “hum” – “the everyday, the mundane, the ordinary and the drabness which makes up life for urban dwellers”(Chatterton, 2000).

But there is little evidence to suggest that such cities are unsuccessful or that their economies are not performing well enough to maintain a reasonable local place quality and living standards (FCM, 2009). Indeed, they have some of the elements and assets for a local innovation system but lack the fully networked infrastructures that distinguish the

high performers. They are not the ‘places to be’ – innovative and creative milieux where talented workers and leading edge firms congregate to access the latest knowledge flows that power world-class performance. As such, ordinary cities *are* pressured to adapt their economies, not only to hold their middle ground but to advance forward to the leading edge. However the substantive developmental challenge facing local actors in the ordinary city exhibits a particular logic – finding strategies less encompassing than the wholesale reinventions called for in the ‘innovation backwaters’ yet involving something more than the ongoing fine tuning sufficient in the ‘established hotbeds’ (Bradford, 2003).

For these reasons, the ordinary city and its development trajectory present an important research target. Moreover, an emerging body of literature now speaks to the particular economic dynamics and governance challenges that shape such localities. A good starting point is research examining the gaps and limitations in the innovation systems of cities and regions not included among the high performing centers. Todtling and Trippel have helpfully sorted the problems into three key categories: lock-in; organizational thinness; and internal fragmentation (Todtling and Trippel, 2005). *Lock-in* refers not just to an economic overspecialization in mature industries, but to associated cognitive blockages that bind local actors to established world views thereby limiting knowledge flows and renewal possibilities. *Organizational thinness* reflects the absence of a critical mass of knowledge generation and exploitation activities that compromise the local economy’s capacity for cluster growth. Often originating in a local branch plant structure that engages little research and development, organizational thinness may denote either the absence of knowledge institutions such as universities and colleges or their limited local specialization and embedding. *Internal fragmentation* arises when localities do have extensive organizational infrastructures of research and educational institutions, including various knowledge transfer services, but lack the connective tissue and social relations for interactive learning. In this case the whole is less than the parts, resulting in innovation performance below what might be expected from a simple organizational inventory.

The identification of these three systemic failures provides a useful template for interpreting the economic challenges and adaptive opportunities in city-regions without robust local innovation systems. For their part, Todtling and Trippel return the focus to the less favoured regions and propose a classification of such places based on which of the three failures precipitates economic collapse. However, we propose that the specificity of the ordinary city innovation and creativity experience lies precisely in the *presenting mix* of elements of all three system deficiencies. Where less favoured regions or cities may well fail in one aspect on an order of magnitude producing crisis, in the ordinary city conditions and signals are more ambiguous. With a combination of systemic pressures at work, the ordinary city’s economy requires a more balanced set of interventions and middle range adjustments, encouraging certain trends and movements while discouraging others. Civic leaders in the ordinary city are likely to find themselves addressing various problems of moderate intensity at the same time (Benneworth, 2007: 23)

From this situating of the ordinary city's innovation and creativity challenges three implications arise. First, the absence of crisis or clear signals of structural decline can make it more difficult for a local community to rally behind projects to 'unlock' development trajectories and reset courses. Second, a broad-based strategy may be most appropriate, working to address institutional gaps rooted in both organizational thinness and internal fragmentation. Third, it is apparent that any course correction will be less an event than a process. In ordinary cities metaphors of crisis-driven turnarounds should be set aside for those more attuned to stepwise change over what may be quite protracted periods of incremental movement. For the ordinary city the default position of allowing established development models to deliver less than stellar performance is always at hand. However, such 'passive resistance' to change may consign local authorities to managing a long term decline in city fortunes. Simply stated, the ordinary city puts issues of local agency front and center. How can these places initiate change and sustain the capacity to correct the deficiencies in their innovation systems?

On this question, the work of Paul Benneworth and his team is instructive as they look specifically at leadership for creativity and innovation in ordinary regions and cities. Emphasizing the attitudinal and institutional barriers that make change more difficult in these places, the Benneworth team offers two concepts for empirical inquiry. First, they describe the search for a new development model as a localized *innovation journey* unfolding over time in place-specific ways, involving multiple actors at different scales, and allowing for set-backs as reform projects roll-out and evolve. Second, they conceptualize leadership through *innovation coalitions* focusing attention and mobilizing resources to strengthen local knowledge assets and innovation infrastructures. Such coalitions lead by creating awareness, often through generating "a bold narrative of the problem" so as to alter local mindsets and engage key actors in new collaborative problem solving activities (Benneworth, 2007:17). Playing-out across a range of project pathways, the journey's endpoint is sufficient institutional capacity for "strategically coupling" of local assets with extra-local resources to reposition the city-region economy for development (Benneworth, 2007: 24).

With these ideas about innovation gaps and creativity deficits in ordinary cities, and leadership strategies to address them, we now turn our attention to case study analysis of one such place -- London, Ontario. At the heart of a Census Metropolitan Area of some 460,00 people, and located at the geographic mid-point between Toronto and Detroit on the NAFTA corridor, London exhibits an ordinary city mix of innovation systems failures, and it is regularly overlooked in Canadian urban creativity tables. At the same time, it is not a city economy in crisis; as the Martin Prosperity Institute summarized in their mid sized city technology, talent and tolerance rankings: "London has some advantages but would benefit from improved performance on the 3Ts as it positions itself to compete in a creative economy" (Martin Prosperity Institute, 2009:7).

In fact, over the last decade key civic actors in London have mobilized on a number of developmental fronts to build a local innovation system. Organized around a creativity discourse for talent attraction and retention, the results of London's diffuse and evolving efforts are not yet clear. In 2008, the city received two external recognitions, a national

award for its cultural diversity achievements and a North American-wide citation for the quality of its economic development work (City of London, 2008; LEDC, 2008). Such external validation always requires ‘a large grain of local salt’, but our argument is that London’s innovation journey offers insights about both the possibilities and the limits of change in the ordinary city.

## **LONDON’S INNOVATION JOURNEY: MOBILIZING AROUND TALENT ATTRACTION AND RETENTION**

London has long been known as the ‘typically Canadian city’. Across a number of economic and demographic indicators, London’s postwar performance and profile frequently gravitated close to provincial and Canadian averages. For decades, corporations have relied on London as the test market for new consumer products from drugs to donuts. And while the postwar local economy’s balance among traditional financial, manufacturing, and trade sectors provided a certain stability, it also left the city without an identifiable cluster identity to distinguish its economic brand.

The foundations of this unremarkable yet stable trajectory began to come apart in the 1990s (LEDC, 1998). As continental and global restructuring took its toll on Ontario’s economy, London lost several of its long standing corporate head offices and many branch plant manufacturers closed. London’s economic performance, population growth, and median family income fell behind those of its key mid-sized municipal competitors in Southwestern Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2008). Moreover, the head office flight drained away business leaders and philanthropic families heavily invested in the community, and signaled that London’s labour market would not offer in the new knowledge economy the same opportunities for either senior advancement or movement across professions. The immediate impact of these shifts was buffered by the city’s continued role as an important regional center in Southwestern Ontario for retail trade and services in health and education (Spencer and Vinodrai, 2009).

London’s adjustment capacity in the face of economic change was limited by the general lock-in effects distinguishing ordinary cities. The city’s business culture, shaped by an impressive postwar generation of corporate elites in insurance and banking was conservative and risk adverse -- an ‘old boys club’ with high barriers to entry and resistance to new ideas (Currie, 2006). One young technology entrepreneur choosing to locate in London was dismayed at the “destructive and self-propagated” image of close-minded conservatism that local corporate leaders still projected to the world (MacLean, 2005). When the City established an arm’s length economic development corporation in 1998, its initial priorities were the familiar ones of attracting manufacturing branch plants by making available serviced industrial land on the city’s edges (Bradford, 2008).

A similarly uncreative mindset was evident in the political arena, most notably in the late 1990s when the Mayor refused to proclaim Gay Pride Week and the Ontario Human Rights Commission found the City in breach of human rights legislation and imposed a fine (Hume, 2009). Likewise, the City’s community visioning exercise in the mid 1990s

generated considerable public interest and some novel planning ideas, but the overall outcome was disappointing when little or no action followed on key recommendations. In these years, several members of the City's senior administrative staff became embroiled in a series of 'scandals' leading to high profile resignations. None of this was conducive to robust civic leadership as the economy was buffeted about in new competitive conditions (Cornies, 2002). Not surprisingly, in the 2003 municipal election, when a referenda question asked about reducing the size of the City Council and eliminating its Board of Control, a majority of the 36% of eligible voters who came to the polls answered in the affirmative to both.

At the same time, London's civil society was not well organized to compensate for the drift in the economic and political domains (Stephenson, 2005; Bradford, 2008). London was one of the few cities in Canada without a Social Planning Council and local trade unions and district labour councils had never been engaged as local economic policy actors. With the exception of certain policy fields, most notably family violence, there was no tradition of sustained research-driven collaborations between the university and the local community. Concerns surfaced that the knowledge assets in the city's two post-secondary education institutions and several health research centres remained disconnected from the local economy. Missing in London were peak association networks or inter-sectoral councils that in many other cities initiated dialogue around longer-term community-wide challenges. One detailed study of London's efforts in the 1990s to revitalize its decaying downtown core found that local elites demonstrated little capacity to come together around redevelopment projects. As Cobban summarized, "there is no evidence that a stable, informal, and cross-sectoral governing coalition guided development policy-making in London" (Cobban, 2003: 352).

## **Local Innovation Coalitions: Three Pathways**

### ***1. Unlocking Mindsets: Organized Social Learning***

By the early 2000s these attitudes and practices came under fire. Important here was the recruitment of a new Chief Administrative Officer, Jeff Fielding, from Kitchener in 2004. On his arrival, he delivered "a wake-up call" to the City Council (Miller, 2004). Pulling together a range of trend line data, Fielding and his team documented London's declining population growth rate in comparison to competitor cities, and drew attention to looming labour shortages rooted in a long term failure to either retain young professionals or attract skilled immigrants. Challenged by Fielding as to whether London sought to play in the municipal "big leagues", the Deputy Mayor conceded that the city had been sliding over the past decade, that the city lacked a focused development strategy, and that it had no profile or influence on the larger provincial or national political and economic stages.

Fielding's wake-up call set in motion two novel policy development processes unfolding across 2005, each funded and facilitated by the City, representing a form of what Gertler and Wolfe term "organized social learning" (Gertler and Wolfe, 2004). Such exercises are initiated in periods of uncertainty for a locality and they aim to bring about change in



both the community mindset and its developmental trajectory. Particularly important, Gertler and Wolfe note, is the intelligence gathering and vision building process: it needs to be inclusive of diverse interests, interactive through dialogue, and with leadership rooted in the local place but not simply engaging traditional elites. In London the two learning exercises aligned with these criteria, notably the absence of outside consultants and the commitment to community representation beyond the ‘usual suspects’. Further, the particular mandates of the two exercises complemented one another in addressing London’s challenges. The first was the Creative City Task Force (CCTF), a 16 member inquiry with extraordinary cross-sectoral membership from the arts, technology, business, immigrant settlement, municipal, architecture, and tourism sectors (City of London, 2005). With a mandate to change “the way London thinks” and determine a “strategy to help London become a leader in mid-sized cities in North America”, the CCTF tackled issues of cultural diversity, workforce development, and urban design. The second report, *London’s Next Economy* (LNE) was written by a local technology entrepreneur who was mandated by the four key economic development organizations in London to recommend a framework for ensuring that London leveraged its business development and research assets to become a “new economy hotbed” (City of London, et al. 2005).

Both reports converged around labour force development, and specifically, issues of talent retention and attraction of the 25 to 44 population cohort as *the overriding challenge in London’s innovation journey*. “Providing this new economic base” the CCTF declared “ must become a top priority of the City, and its business and labour communities”. The LNE noted that London’s growth gap with its key mid-sized municipal competitors was “particularly concerning in the high value 25-54 year old age group” and that, absent new strategies “to keep its best and brightest at home”, the community’s long term prosperity and quality of life would be compromised.

From this common perspective, each report addressed key aspects of the three systemic gaps in the innovation systems of ordinary cities. First, with respect to problems of lock-in to outdated attitudes and practices, the CCTF was especially blunt, describing a city that was isolated, complacent, and smug and “perceived as not having an exemplary reputation for welcoming newcomers”. It declared that London was “at a crucial stage in strategizing for its future economic development”. The LNE spoke about the city’s inaction in the face of a “stealth-like erosion” of high-end jobs and talent, and perceptions of London “as a comparatively lethargic business community” known for its “modesty and conservative style”. London was “at an economic crossroads”.

Breaking through these barriers, both reports suggested, would require concerted effort to address the other two systemic problems – organizational thinness and internal fragmentation. The CCTF proposed various “partnerships, collaborations, and other joint initiatives” to institutionalize a new development strategy. These included a Cultural Division in city government, a public-private city-wide Prosperity Congress, an Immigrant Entrepreneurship Council, and several multi-sectoral networks closing the historical divides between the post-secondary institutions and the local economy. The LNE pursued similar institutional development and integration for the economy’s knowledge infrastructure. Under the heading “Consolidate, Coordinate and Regionalize”,

it called for a rationalization of the City's economic development services that would join-up three existing agencies with intersecting mandates under a single board with aligned "organic growth" and "business attraction" foci. Equally important, the LNE proposed a thickening of the innovation system in sectors such as health care and information technology since "London has never deliberately leveraged these knowledge assets". New structures were recommended: a local venture capital fund for start-ups; a research commercialization organization to connect laboratories and markets; and creation of an advanced manufacturing technology park or "downtown tech alley" to enable clustering of knowledge-based enterprises.

In sum, these two highly visible, City-sponsored social learning exercises provided both a rationale and a roadmap for London to alter its course, while also mobilizing a potential local innovation coalition to act on a number of concrete projects. Their combined approach to the core challenge of talent attraction and retention was broad, encompassing reforms in labour force development, business innovation, and urban revitalization. As such, they did not offer up a banal or artificial "creativity makeover" (Peck, 2007). Here, London's innovation journey started from premises closer to the multi-faceted creativity model described by Alan Scott than Richard Florida's preoccupation with cultural amenities and vague notions of tolerance. According to Scott: "any viable developmental program focused on building a creative city must deal – at a minimum – with setting up a local production system, training or attracting a relevant labor force, appropriate programming of urban space, and ensuring that all the different elements involved work more or less in harmony with one another" (Scott, 2006:11).

Moreover, both of the London reports emphasized the long term nature of the journey. As the CCTF wrote: "It took the City a number of years to get in this position, and it will take the City a number of years to reverse these trends". The LNE projected a "15 year end state" describing London's change process as an "economic evolution" requiring risk and patience. Each envisioned a new leadership role for the municipal government. The the City had to learn how to become an active partner, playing the role of catalyst and facilitator of joint work often led by other business and community actors working on projects of mutual interest. Only by coming together locally could London's various economic players leverage the external resources from senior governments, corporations, foundations and so forth that were needed for the scale and scope of change envisioned by the two reports.

It is important not to overstate the value of such organized learning exercises, however pathbreaking they might be in the particular local decision making milieu (*The Londoner*, 2008)<sup>3</sup>. Certainly in London both reports were greeted with considerable enthusiasm: about the LNE, the Mayor stated "The timing of this bold and insightful report could not

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<sup>3</sup> A 2008 survey of the impact of the CCTF reported that of the " 87 recommendations, 49 are either well established or have meaningful development and another 22 are currently or scheduled to be implemented shortly. "(*The Londoner*, 2008) The London Mayor told a gathering of provincial cultural policy specialists in June 2008 that the City had allocated \$1.6 million to follow-up CCTF activities since 2005. With the LNE, its recommendation for integration of the City's four economic development organizations was acted on immediately and a new LEDC CEO and Board were appointed with an emphasis on the technology intensive "organic growth agenda" (Bradford, 2008)

be better”; and the Dean of Business at the University of Western Ontario’s prestigious business school lauded both reports as groundbreaking, signaling that London was “embarking on an all-important , community-wide partnership” (Stephenson, 2005a). From the outside, former Winnipeg Mayor Glen Murray, one of Canada’s foremost creative city gurus, deemed the London effort “the best creative cities plan in Canada” (Coulson, 2005). London CAO Jeff Fielding joined the parade but with an important qualifier. Describing the CCTF as “an outstanding attempt to get something started” he also noted that “ London doesn’t execute very well”(The Londoner, 2005).

The next section takes up this issue of translating ideas into action. We follow developments on the two key priorities for talent attraction and retention brought forward in the reports: labour market diversity and knowledge economy infrastructure. In each case, we describe how actors mobilized to tackle the internal fragmentation and organizational thinness in this ordinary city’s innovation system and creative milieu.

## ***2. Overcoming Internal Fragmentation: Labour Market Diversity***

A central argument in the CCTF and LNE concerned London’s stagnating labour market. The reports documented the two urgent talent shortages: lagging attraction of newcomers, specifically immigrant professionals, and retaining younger knowledge workers graduating from the city’s two post-secondary institutions, the University of Western Ontario (UWO) and Fanshawe College. Analysts began to refer to London’s “brain drain” and “demographic time bomb” (LEDC, 2007; Florida, 2008).

Since 2005 concerted action has been taken on both the immigration attraction and student retention fronts. The City has been a catalyst for new collaborations, while the university and two non-profit organizations -- the local United Way and WIL Employment Connections (WIL) -- have acted as lead partners on particular projects. The animating goal has been to transform a patchwork of services and organizations into more coherent and accessible ‘talent support system’ tailored to the needs of newcomers and students alike.

With immigration, there were three outstanding issues (Brochu and Abu-Ayyash, 2006). First, London was falling behind competitor cities in its percentage of foreign born population, a demographic trend with worrisome economic implications given that recent immigrants were more than twice as likely to have university degrees than the Canadian born population. Second, beyond the raw numbers, it was apparent that newcomers arriving in London faced significant obstacles to labour market integration. Surveys showed the unemployment rate for recent immigrants to be more than double the general population’s, and some three quarters of immigrant professionals and tradespersons worked in fields unrelated to their training (Voices for Change, 2003). Third, London service providers consistently reported that the labour market blockages were compounded by a broader set of settlement challenges. Here it is notable that while London lagged in overall immigrant flows the city had the highest per capita number of government sponsored refugees and refugee claimants in Canada. Front-line settlement agencies described a muddle of services that left many newcomers in ‘survival mode’.

As such, the talent attraction agenda in London inevitably crossed the boundary between economic integration and social inclusion. Employment issues of credential recognition, language training, and employer outreach almost always were bound up with more fundamental inclusion challenges across a range of health and family services such as health, housing, and childcare (City of London and United Way of London & Middlesex, 2008; Alboim, 2008).

In this context the CCTF's call to bring together London's numerous immigrant service providers, along with business, educational, social, and municipal sectors, in a major "Celebrating Cultural Diversity Conference" was important. In 2006, such a conference was held and advanced two unprecedented forms of coalition building in London, one at the city-wide level and the other within the immigration sector itself.

First, at the city-wide level, a multi-sectoral steering committee emerged known as "Welcoming Cultural Diversity in London" (City of London, 2006). Supported jointly by the City and the local United Way, it produced a 'Community Action Plan' with five themes in meeting immigrant needs: income; neighbourhoods; social inclusion and civic engagement; services and supports; and systemic change. For each priority, the Steering Committee completed a SWOT analysis, designated lead organizations on theme projects, and set out reporting protocols. Under the income theme, the employer community acted on another of the CCTF's recommendations, forming an Immigrant Employment Council. Co-chaired by two executives from RBC and 3M, the Council coordinated 40 stakeholder institutions in strategies to recruit and retain immigrant workers. Similar networks took shape on the other four themes with appropriate leadership based on expertise and experience in the particular field. For example, through the neighbourhood stream, a major project 'Engagement Strategies for Diverse Communities' was launched with federal funding and City support, led by the local non-profit, Childreach, to remove barriers to social inclusion among six ethno-cultural communities. In 2008, when the Welcoming Cultural Diversity steering committee released its update on the many activities underway across the five themes its membership had expanded to include 15 organizations encompassing both economic and social perspectives on local immigration challenges.

The second novel form of coalition-building around immigration in London involves the work of WIL Employment Connections (WIL). It is interesting for two reasons. First, WIL's history, dating back to 1984, reveals a progression from concern with social and cultural inclusion of immigrant women to a broader mandate to serve all newcomers and to integrate social and cultural supports with economic opportunity (confidential interview). Since 2005, this progression is clearly expressed in WIL's modus operandi -- extensive networking within and beyond the settlement sector (White, 2008). WIL's networks now include regional cooperation on a Skills International website to assist employers in accessing pre-qualified foreign-trained professionals and enable resettlement outside Toronto; partnership with the London Economic Development Corporation (LEDC) on a Global Talent project that circulated 10,000 diversity guides to London employers and recent immigrants; partnership with the Libro Financial Group for a skilled immigrant loan program for certification and retraining; convening eight

local labour market organizations in a mentorship program for immigrants; and a partnership with the provincial government in the Access Centre for Regulated Employment, the first such centre located outside the Toronto region.

The other key area of labour market challenge for London concerns retaining young professionals. Here the focus is on UWO and Fanshawe College representing a mostly untapped talent pool for the local economy of some 45,000 students. The outgoing UWO President referred to the university – and the city -- as a ‘pass through’ with 85% of graduates leaving London (Graham, 2008). Several collaborative initiatives now tackle the problem: a revitalized “town and gown” committee bringing together neighbourhood associations and student councils to work on housing problems; a local settlement program known as Cultureworks to deliver language training services to foreign students before they arrive in London; and “Student-2-Business” networking conferences facilitated by the LEDC. More broadly, in 2009 a new UWO research centre on Migrant and Ethnic Relations was awarded a Community University Research Alliance grant to study immigrant experiences in mid sized cities, including London. UWO’s most recent Strategic Plan commits to strengthening its presence in the local economy with strong endorsement for such community collaboration from the incoming President (Office of the Vice-President, 2008). As we report below, such relationships are emerging as both post-secondary institutions become involved in building London’s knowledge economy infrastructure.

In sum, London’s recent mobilizations to diversify and deepen its labour market talent pool have produced several new institutions or networks cultivating what for this city of ‘sector siloes and policy stovepipes’ represent novel collaborations. Notably, the process has often worked at the intersection of economic integration and social inclusion challenges, as illustrated by the range of projects coordinated by the Welcoming Cultural Diversity steering committee and the multiple connections forged through WIL. Moreover, the local coalitions have demonstrated sufficient capacity to secure key investments from senior governments. On the skills and employment side, the provincial government has invested in the credential recognition centre, the immigrant employment council, and various other labour market partnerships. On the inclusion and settlement side, the federal government has invested in neighbourhood and library immigrant service hubs, community action research projects on immigrant families, and special supports for London’s large refugee population. Most recently, the City and the United Way have partnered on an application that draws on joint federal-provincial resources to further integrate and institutionalize progress. Under the 2005 *Canada-Ontario Immigration Act* monies are available to municipalities to build for community-driven councils known as Local Immigration Partnerships, designed to be the focal point for all the newcomer initiatives underway in a city.

### ***3. Organizational Thickening: Knowledge Economy Infrastructure***

Following release of the CCTF report, one of the younger task force members told a UWO audience “if you asked any student on campus if they would consider staying in London, they would answer ‘if I can find a job’” (Anderson, 2005) Indeed, both the

CCTF and LNE emphasized economic transformation to more knowledge-driven production as the lasting foundation for talent attraction and retention in London. Each recognized the need for an infrastructure of knowledge collaboration connecting firms, researchers, and financiers. Only an “organic growth plan,” the LNE argued, could enable London’s traditional manufacturers to embrace more advanced processes while also nurturing cluster growth among knowledge-intensive firms in health sciences or information technology.

The concerns about gaps in London’s existing knowledge economy infrastructure were confirmed in a follow-up Technology Audit completed by the LEDC in 2006 (LEDC, 2006). It found that London’s high technology firms, numbering around 250, were not working well as a sector. According to the audit, the firms functioned without the “glue” necessary for clustering. Missing elements included anchor companies that branded the sector and spun-out start-ups, and support services in key areas such as research commercialization, venture financing, and mentoring. The weak links between UWO and the business community were responsible for the absence of any London economic “brand” on Canadian and global platforms. All of these gaps in the local infrastructure for the knowledge economy, the audit concluded, contributed to London’s critical problems in attracting and retaining skilled workers in the 25 to 44 year old cohort.

Over the past few years, these various gaps have begun to be addressed. Leadership has come from organizations and entrepreneurs directly involved in the CCTF and LNE. In particular, TechAlliance, a service organization for technology firms, the University of Western Ontario’s Research Park, and Paul Palatto, the business leader who authored the LNE, have mobilized around three priorities for the local knowledge economy infrastructure. These are: research commercialization for advancement in both traditional manufacturing and science-based industries; formation of social networks to engage young professionals in the London economy and community; and institution building to position London for regional economic leadership.

With research commercialization, a trigger came in 2006 through strategic provincial investments that consolidated and extended a fledgling partnership between the Stiller Centre for Biotechnology Commercialization and TechAlliance at the UWO Research Park (Nelles, 2006). Under the provincial Regional Innovation Network program, the two London organizations were able to leverage their complementary technology services and strengths to support a number of science-based businesses in the progression from product development and investor readiness to start-up financing. Building on this initial success, London’s research commercialization process has evolved two further institutional supports. TechAlliance brought together a group of local investors, with the support of the LEDC and expertise from UWO’s business school, to launch the Southwestern Ontario Angel Group as a regional branch of the National Angel Organization. Venture capital was highlighted as a key gap in London and the new group focused on technology entrepreneurs in high potential business ventures. The second addition to the knowledge economy infrastructure came in 2008 with formation of WORLDiscoveries, a technology transfer consortium to commercialize research from laboratories at UWO and the city’s two major health and medical science institutes. The

driving force behind WORLDiscoveries, and its first Executive Director, was LNE author Paul Palatto. In its first year the consortium produced six start-up companies, with the long term goal to “open the pipeline for technology development in London” not only in health-related sectors but also in areas of emerging research strength such as energy and the environment (Robarts Research, 2009).

These research-based collaborations have not been confined to the most dynamic science-based firms. A priority for both LEDC and TechAlliance has been to move traditional manufacturing strengths into more knowledge-intensive production as restructuring pressures continue to mount. The London automotive parts sector, hit especially hard by the most recent global economic downturn, is a leading example of this bridging strategy. In 2009 the London National Research Council office, located in the UWO Research Park, secured the Centre for Automotive Materials and Manufacturing. Mandated by the federal government to act as the national hub for the Council’s research into smarter, greener vehicles through application of lightweight materials and alternative fuels, the Centre will exploit local research strengths in renewable energy, plastics and polymers, and biofuels (National Research Council, 2009). UWO’s Institute for Chemicals and Fuels from Alternative Resources is one focal point for such automotive related research and development synergies. The long term goal is to ensure that the locally-based research for the next generation of vehicles leads to investments to sustain and renew London region’s automotive parts and assembly sector. According to the TechAlliance CEO: “We needed a win in the auto industry and doing this research means we can look at having industry here over the next five to 15 years” (De Bono, 2009).

In addition to commercialization activities, London’s knowledge economy infrastructure has been thickened through network development. Research has shown that the most creative workers in the new economy pursue careers that span multiple firms and work experiences and that they value professional organizations and other work-related associations that circulate knowledge both about fluctuating job opportunities and new developments in their field (Scott, 2006) Such networks have taken two forms in London: on the one hand, new professional associations for the city’s younger talent, and on the other hand, new knowledge transfer relationships on a regional basis. In the former case, there are two notable examples jointly led by TechAlliance and the LEDC, known as Emerging Leaders and InterNetwork (Ward and Graham, 2008). Emerging Leaders offers an avenue for young professionals to contribute and participate in municipal decision making, thereby creating avenues into London’s traditionally closed social networks. InterNetwork works with LEDC in a focused strategy for learning and mentoring in the high technology sector. Running learning events for eight years, it has sponsored “high level case studies” from over 70 local technology leaders.

On the regional scale, knowledge exchange networks have emerged along several lines. Among universities, UWO is involved in the so-called “C4” collaboration to enhance multi-disciplinary projects and commercialization across Southwestern Ontario’s \$600 million research investment. Partnering with the University of Waterloo, McMaster University, and the University of Guelph, UWO works through a regional pool of specialized knowledge transfer services in legal, patenting, and licensing services. Since

forming in 2004, the C4 consortium has received over \$5 million in federal and provincial funding, and has grown to include six universities. For its part, the UWO Research Park, home to 60 tenants, recently opened a Sarnia-Lambton campus to advance that region's traditional chemical and energy strengths. In 2008 this regional relationship moved forward when LANXESS corporation, a global leader in specialty chemicals, expanded its rubber manufacturing operations in Sarnia and located its new polymer research center at the UWO park. The firm valued what it termed the facility's combination of a "unique culture of innovation with access to cutting edge research" (*Western News*, 2008). The final notable regional knowledge network involves an agreement between the Toronto-based MaRS research center and TechAlliance that connects London researchers and entrepreneurs to a wider array of programs, services, and resources. UWO's Vice-President of Research and International Relations related this regional network to the ongoing effort to establish a brand profile for London: "We view this partnership as a very important step for the London region to create a global address" (MaRS, 2006).

Indeed, the regional theme, as emphasized by both the CCTF and the LNE, has become prominent in London's overall economic planning and policy mobilizations (Fielding, 2006; White, 2008a). In 2006, the City and UWO joined forces to drive formation of the Southwest Ontario Economic Assembly (SWEA) linking public and private sector partners across the region to promote economic cooperation, conduct research, and forge a regional development strategy (SWEA, 2009). After an initial period of uncertainty about focus and commitment, SWEA has gathered some momentum. A \$300,000 provincial grant supported annual summits hosted in different centers, and funded a major research project with UWO's business school. The resultant report, *A Southwest Ontario Vision for Economic Competitiveness and Cooperation: Gateway to Canada's North American Trade Corridor* included a regional business plan emphasizing more "government-business-university applied research and training" with enhanced trade and transportation infrastructure a key priority (Conklin and Holburn, 2008).

Here the SWEA process confirms London's recent mobilizations around its knowledge economy infrastructure and provides a context for the city's own economic mega-project focused on transportation (DeCicco-Best, 2009). In 2009, the City announced plans to make London a regional transportation logistics hub for moving freight internationally by rail, highway, and air. The project would leverage London's 'place luck' along the NAFTA trade corridor and its transportation advantages over Toronto-area competitors -- far lower airport landing fees, and much less road traffic congestion. Nearly \$14 million would be invested in upgrades to the London airport, expressway interchanges, and an inter-modal terminal for trucks and trains. The project, strongly supported by London provincial Cabinet Minister Chris Bentley, is presented by City politicians, administrators, and LEDC officials as a strategy "that looks to the next economy" (Van Brenk, 2009). There are some synergies emerging -- Fanshawe College has launched a \$31 million program in transportation trade and logistics, and the UWO business school has developed research expertise in sustainable transportation infrastructure and the role of cities in inter-modal integration. The school's Lawrence National Centre for Policy Management presented briefs supporting the Council's transportation hub concept



(Lawrence National Centre, 2008). One key challenge will be finding ways for London firms to ‘add value’ to cargo and freight such that the city does not become a shipping ‘pass through’. In this way, the transportation hub could generate the kinds of employment required to keep Fanshawe and Lawrence graduates in London. The City has established a multi-sectoral task force to consider the issues.

In sum, recent years have seen new coalitions take shape to fill gaps in London’s knowledge economy infrastructure. Prominent players engaged through the CCTF and LNE have supplied leadership in forging new institutions and networks. These local efforts have brought in extra-local resources – both public and private – at critical moments, for example with the provincial investments in the Stiller-TechAlliance partnership, and the arrival of LANXESS and the federal automotive technology center to anchor the UWO Research Park’s regional strategy. As the city moves forward with its transportation hub strategy the search for external partners will accelerate. With the plan not meeting the criteria for the recent round of federal-provincial stimulus funding, the City’s focus shifts to the \$1 billion federal regional development agency for Southern Ontario announced in the 2009 budget.

## **DISCUSSION : VOICES ALONG LONDON’S INNOVATION JOURNEY**

Over the past decade civic actors in London have come together in various coalitions to reposition the city for competing in the knowledge economy. Framed and triggered by the social learning exercises of the CCTF and LNE, these mobilizations have tackled specific deficiencies in London’s local innovation system – internal fragmentation of resources to attract and retain creative talent and organizational thinness in supports for innovative firms. Emphasizing the longer term nature of such change in places like London -- exhibiting various forms of lock-in – we viewed the process as a local innovation journey. Our account of London’s evolving strategies for the labour market and knowledge economy indicates that it is no longer ‘business as usual’. But as the journey metaphor conveys, it is not yet clear whether these various shifts add-up to a resetting of the city’s economic trajectory.

For more insight on this issue, our research included 50 key informant interviews with civic actors variously involved in London’s innovation journey -- business leaders, municipal officials, representatives from non-governmental and intermediary organizations and creative workers in London’s knowledge economy sectors. We asked these local players questions about the existence of new innovation strategies in London, the degree to which such plans and policies were being effectively implemented, and what factors attract creative talent to the city and help keep it there. From the interview data we can draw two kinds of insights. First, there are reflections about the *change process* in London. Do the actors directly involved in the recent mobilizations and institution-building believe that London is moving on a new economic course for innovation? Second, what are the *substantive qualities* in the London urban milieu that attract knowledge workers to the city? Is there evidence that London’s efforts to become a ‘creative city’ are resonating with the local talent?

In regard to the change process, the interview data confirms that local actors believe they are now coming together for joint work in more productive ways than in London's past. There was a strong sense that the past five years had witnessed developments that would pay dividends in terms of better economic and social outcomes for the community down the road. Many pointed to the CCTF and LNE as important civic exercises both in redefining the terms of the debate and setting in motion new collaborations. It was observed that these two reports marked the first time in decades that the London community demonstrated a capacity for proactive strategic planning on a longer term horizon and city-regional basis. Moreover, several interviewees noted that these two processes, by recruiting from a diversity of sectors, made a timely contribution to replenishing London's civic leadership just as prominent philanthropic families and corporate elites were leaving the scene.

At the same time, there were important qualifiers to the narrative of progressive development. Many interviewees stressed ongoing tendencies for groups to retreat into silos without a sustained commitment to inter-sectoral projects or working through differences to find common ground. Several non-governmental and intermediary organization leaders noted that London lacked an institutional focal point – or 'Council of Councils' as one interviewee put it – where all the interests convened on a regular basis to set direction and monitor progress on various joint projects. In London, such a body could acquire a particular significance since many interviewees voiced concern about the leadership capacity of the municipal government and administration. Despite the City's efforts at facilitating and enabling, the perception remains that it is a mostly unreliable partner – too wedded at an administrative level to bureaucratic command and control instruments and at the political level too divided to provide clear direction on major priorities.

Overall, interviewees stressed that the change process in London is a long term journey. There was frank acknowledgement that the city was a relative latecomer to the challenges of innovation and creativity. Moreover, there was recognition that while progress was occurring, the issues remained contentious and required sustained, respectful dialogue to move forward. On immigration, it was noted that while the business community and settlement agencies were unified around the importance of the issue, differences remained around how integration and inclusion priorities were balanced. On investing in the knowledge infrastructure, similar tensions were evident between different business voices on how to ensure supports for London's traditional manufacturing industries as well as the emerging research intensive clusters. Both sets of tensions will likely become harder to manage as the most recent economic downturn continues to depress investment and employment in London and across Southwestern Ontario (Sher, 2009).

The overarching message from many interviewees about the change process in London focused on the particular form of collaboration that characterized the city's recent mobilizations. The connecting thread was pragmatism : partnerships formed around specific problems to be solved, and were organized and sustained on a project-by-project basis. In this sense, London's collaborations were not rooted in a robust base of social

capital that facilitated ongoing networking and problem-solving across sectors. And lacking the formal settings for multi-sectoral dialogue and leadership, London's local policy culture has not built up stocks of civic capital that circulate assets and resources across private-public boundaries for ongoing leadership on community-wide priorities (Wolfe and Nelles, 2008). Instead, key informants in London highlighted the limits or fragility of the recent local collaborations – problem driven, project specific, and not likely in the foreseeable future to scale-up to more generalized and institutionalized partnerships.

What about the substantive content of the strategies and policies informing London's innovation journey and especially its talent attraction and retention strategy? On this question, interviews with creative workers, their employers, and intermediary organizations were quite revealing. Three themes stand out.

First, the key attractor for talented workers in London was either the specific employment opportunity or family reasons. With employment, several high technology workers appreciated opportunities that were not necessarily available in larger centres such as Toronto, specifically around the breadth of professional experiences in a smaller talent pool and the degree of creativity autonomy. However, this advantage, particularly valued by younger workers, was tempered by general recognition that London's lack of head offices limited upward mobility and senior project management. In the health and medical science sector the existing depth of research networks through UWO were identified as providing a stimulating and supportive environment for leading edge work, and increasingly, spin-off enterprises. Leaders in the smaller information technology sector pointed to the need for stronger relationships, for example, between the sector's emerging digital gaming firms and UWO's Engineering Department and Fanshawe College's creative media programs. At present, information technology employers and workers pointed to the need for thicker and more integrated knowledge economy infrastructure in London.

The 'pull of family' came through as the other key attractor for London. On the one hand, several interviewees mentioned a desire to relocate, or remain, in close proximity to parents or relatives. A complicating factor, reported by several intermediary organizations and employers, was the difficulty of finding suitable spousal employment in the London labour market. On the other hand, there was strong endorsement from many interviewees of London as a good place to raise a family. This theme was prominent and it was specified in a variety of ways – affordable housing and overall cost of living, community safety, commuting time, recreational services, and good schools.

However, London's 'physical place quality' either in terms of its built environment or natural assets were not identified as important recruitment factors. On the contrary, for many these aspects were detrimental – both for attracting talent from elsewhere and for retention of newcomers. There were frequent references to the quite mundane physical features of the city – its downtown was viewed at best as a 'work in progress' in relation to an interesting or vibrant urban experience. Several interviewees noted that the city lacked inspired urban design and with banal buildings and an underutilized river front

offered no memorable physical identity or 'sense of place'. There was little support for the notion that London was a cultural city valuing experimentation or supplying a distinctive built environment conducive to creativity among workers or across firms. Here our interviews reinforce the findings from a 2007 LEDC workforce survey that found that persuading candidates to work in London was a much higher ranked challenge for London firms than persuading them to work for their company.

A final significant issue facing London's talent recruiters concerned immigrant settlement. When asked about barriers, many mentioned the complexities and difficulties associated with labour market access and credentials recognition. But these problems were seen as endemic to the Canadian and provincial regulatory systems rather than arising from any particular local obstacles. By the same token, the view was expressed that London needed to work harder to recognize its own multicultural character and welcome newcomers in leadership opportunities.

What then does the interview data tell us about the talent attraction and retention strategies that have been central to London's recent innovation journey? First, it is evident that the 'creative city' variables highlighted by Richard Florida, such as distinctive urban amenities and cultural libertarianism, are not leading indicators for London (Florida, 2002; Donald and Lewis, 2009). Other more prosaic elements come to the fore, specifically, jobs and families. As such, the current mobilizations around strengthening London's knowledge economy infrastructure and improving labour market access for immigrants and local graduating students are appropriate. When it comes to 'place quality', the City's recent attention to urban design (another legacy of the CCTF) needs to be flanked by continued investments in London's longstanding areas of strength -- the social infrastructure of community, including housing, transit, schools, and safety. In several of these more basic urban living measures, such as the quality and affordability of the housing stock and commuting distances, London performs above provincial and Canadian averages. As well, its public school board has been recognized as a provincial leader in creating a tolerant learning environment for children and youth, with notable initiatives in violence prevention and proactively addressing the needs of gay and lesbian students (confidential interview; Rayside, 2008: 236). For London, such investments in the fundamentals of urban -- and suburban living -- are likely to deliver greater community benefit and economic return than 'creativity makeovers' that often ignore local context and undervalue enduring strengths.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has used concepts from literature on ordinary cities to interpret a series of recent economic mobilizations in London. Mounting concern over the city's inability to attract and retain skilled knowledge workers became the focal point for new coalitions and collaborative exercises addressing deficiencies in the local innovation system. Drawing on key informant interviews, we offered an assessment of both London's change process and the substantive content of the policies and strategies pursued. While there is considerable evidence of new relationships supporting potentially significant institutional change, it is also true that most participants remain guarded about

such outcomes in London. Further, it is apparent that when the policy discourse of creativity is applied in London the indicators of urban vitality resonating in large cosmopolitan centers need to give considerable ground to more familiar and prosaic quality of life benchmarks. Appropriately, it seems London's calling cards in the talent wars remain the ordinary ones of 'jobs and family.'

In closing, our analysis of the London case raises three points that may speak more generally to the experience of ordinary cities embarking on an innovation journey. First, local agency is critical in initiating change. In London two organized, interactive social learning exercises produced high profile reports that reframed the local debate and set in motion new collaborations. Second, partnerships will emerge through project-oriented relationships in specific streams of activity. In London, these took shape in the absence of an overall coordinating body and a civic culture conducive to collaboration. As such, their durability depends largely on the partners continued 'learning by doing' -- building trust across sectors and recognizing mutual self interest in joint work. Third, the key incentive for making local collaborations work lies in the ability to lever external resources and to apply them on terms favourable to the local community. Without evidence of such absorptive capacity, mid-sized cities in the global economy will find themselves increasingly exposed and vulnerable. Here London presents an interesting case moving forward as the federal government now implements a large scale development agency for Southern Ontario and the two senior governments begin roll-out of the Local Immigration Partnerships. City leaders will look to leverage their recent innovation and creativity work by aligning new external resources with local priorities. How this next leg of London's innovation journey plays out promises to reveal more about the projects and possibilities for positive change in the ordinary city.

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