



How Urban Futures Influenced the Design Decisions of Cities around the World

Examples of successful knowledge exchange need not come exclusively from the final outputs of a research project. In this case study, it is revealed how practitioner engagement at an early stage of *Urban Futures*' research generated an unexpected opportunity for collaboration. As a result of a steering committee meeting, CH2M HILL became interested in the *future scenarios* being used as a tool in *Urban Futures*' methodology. These were never intended to be outputs of the project, but rather as a means to generate research findings. Yet on the strength of the interest from CH2M HILL, they are now being used in sustainability projects internationally.

The ISSUES Project

SUE SUCCESS STORY

Urban Futures is primarily concerned with evaluating the future effects of decisions made and measures taken to improve the sustainability of urban environments. Their research is rooted in an awareness that the impact of, say, a policy decision will be contingent upon the social, political and physical context in which it is made. Since the impact of decisions made now will indubitably have an impact in the future, it is vital that the future context of a decision be considered.

To address this, Urban Futures adapted four future scenarios for the UK urban context, which are essentially archetypes based on potential global developments over the coming years and decades. Once developed and tested, these scenarios are used to gauge the effectiveness of urban regeneration solutions in the future.

The future scenarios have had an unexpected impact on real world scenarios. This has come about through the involvement of multinational construction and engineering firm CH2M HILL. Peter Braithwaite, the European Head of Sustainability at CH2M HILL, is a member of the Urban Futures steering committee. At an early meeting he realised the relevance of the future scenarios concept to his firm's work. He entered into a collaborative partnership with Urban Futures researchers in order to adapt the scenarios to meet CH2M HILL's needs. As a result, the adapted scenarios are now being used in what Braithwaite describes as one of "the key future projects for CH2M HILL", and are influencing the sustainability planning of cities across the world.

It should be emphasised that this was largely unplanned – although Urban Futures have a comprehensive dissemination strategy, it was not intended that the future scenarios be utilised by an outside agent independently of the Urban Futures methodology. Indeed, they were regarded as a part of the project's internal methodology rather an exportable output. The section overleaf outlines how CH2M HILL's involvement in the project helped to change this.



KEYS TO SUCCESS

The event that kick-started this successful exchange of knowledge was an early Urban Futures steering group meeting which was attended by Peter Braithwaite. The plans for the future scenarios were outlined during this meeting, and Braithwaite quickly realised their relevance to a work package he had recently begun work on. From this meeting, Braithwaite realised that Urban Futures' research could be of use to his company, not just in terms of its final outputs, but in terms of the methodological tools that had been established to deliver those outcomes.

Two lessons can be drawn about steering groups from this tale. Firstly, that steering group members should ideally be influential, open-minded and have relevant professional interests. Secondly, that there is value in meaningful engagement with project partners, steering group members and the like. It can be a positive development for a research group to involve non-academic practitioners in directorial boards and steering groups, but these institutions are likely to be superfluous if they do not involve interested and committed members, and are based upon regular meetings that genuinely engage the participants.

Allied to the effectiveness of the steering group meetings was the flexible approach of Urban Futures researchers. As a result of CH2M HILL's interest in the project, Urban Futures researchers were prepared to break from their planned schedules in order to collaborate with Braithwaite to make the scenarios useful beyond the narrower initial focus of the research project. The scenarios needed to be adapted slightly for them to be of use to CH2M HILL, and researchers had to diverge from the original plan to ensure that the scenarios would have real-world impact.

It could be argued that there was an element of fortuitousness in this collaboration – Braithwaite became aware of the consortium's plans immediately after being assigned the *International Cities* project at CH2M HILL. However, the successful collaboration is not entirely due to good fortune. The structure of the research group and commitment of the researchers and practitioners involved allowed all parties to take advantage of the alignment of interests when it occurred.

LESSONS LEARNED

> **Make Engagement Genuine**

Steering Groups can be very productive if their involvement is well-structured and planned.

> **Be Prepared to Show some Flexibility**

Being willing to collaborate with partners and allowing research to develop in new directions can bring about unforeseen benefits.

> **Take Advantage of Unexpected Events**

Sometimes in-depth collaboration may not be planned, but can be beneficial to all parties.