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Eddy Adam FRSA has spent the past year looking at how cities can innovate in addressing the challenges they face in the 21st century. Central to this is how cities can better learn from one another.

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Buddhists believe that on the eve of Buddha's birth, his mother dreamt that a white elephant gave her a lotus flower. Consequently, they hold white elephants to be sacred. In 1885, when the British were at the gates of Mandalay, the Burmese Emperor's white elephant took ill, which was deemed inauspicious by the local population. Even worse, as the British marched into the city the animal died of natural causes, portending the end of the great Burmese Empire and the fall of the house of Thibaw.

For the invading army, the idea of maintaining a white elephant as a palace pet was wasteful and ridiculous. From this incident we gained the phrase 'white elephant' in the English language. However, the conquerors' cultural misinterpretation was costly, and they unwittingly sparked widespread unrest in the city by dragging its corpse through the streets of Rangoon.

Nowadays, the phrase 'white elephant' strikes fear into the heart of those involved in urban development. Symbolising wasteful extravagance, it suggests vanity projects, unaccountability and poor decision-making. It was hard not to be struck by this on a recent visit to Myanmar. There, the regime has, in the past decades, invested millions in the construction of an entirely new capital city, Naypyidaw, halfway between Yangon (modern Rangoon) and Mandalay. This huge urban project remains pristine and unreal while no major foreign embassy has agreed to relocate from Yangon. Meanwhile, the country's two long-established cities experience population booms and traffic gridlock due to an explosive rise in vehicle use.

Walking the smog-choked streets of Yangon, it occurred to me that as cities grow they are too often condemned to repeat the mistakes of others. Is there any way we can avoid this, and

better assist cities to learn from one another?

Closer to home, I have been addressing these questions, working with cities across Europe as part of the EU URBACT (cities exchange and learning) Programme. My particular focus has been on social innovation: new ways to tackle the most chronic social challenges. Underpinning this is the more fundamental question of how cities learn and particularly how they learn from one another. In beginning to address this question, a number of themes emerge.

Not surprisingly, one of these is leadership. Many city leaders, particularly in Europe, are being tested due to the economic crisis. Cities need fresh thinking, new ideas and permission to innovate. However, they operate in a climate that can discourage risk-taking, particularly where public finances are involved.

Globally, we have seen a new generation of civic leaders emerge in the past decade, who embody innovative approaches and inspire their citizens. Antanas Mockus, former Mayor of Bogota, and Park Won Soon, current incumbent in Seoul, are prime examples; social innovators who deliver the unexpected.

Apart from providing inspiration, cities have identified other leadership qualities that stimulate city learning, including actively promoting new ideas generation. Engagement with 'unusual suspects' – who can provide alternative perspectives and fresh thinking is important here – as part of what Danish think tank Mindlab call ideation. Effective leaders broker key relationships between different players in the city and they give permission to stakeholders – including front line staff and customers – to generate new ideas. Collaborative leadership skills, encouraging the crossing of professional boundaries is of growing importance. This promotes learning both within and between cities.

The importance of dialogue has also emerged as an important condition for effective city learning. There are two dimensions to this. Firstly, the importance of an ongoing exchange, based on trust, between the different voices in the city. Allowing platforms where different perspectives can be shared – whether virtual or physical – is important, as the growth of 'shared spaces' amongst cities testifies.

In Finland, local communities have come together in a national framework to engage in dialogue

about their priorities and main issues. This process involves bringing together a microcosm of stakeholders from each area to engage with others. The URBACT process used this model to broker dialogue between cities including Berlin, Rotterdam, Copenhagen and Nantes. Through this, cities become aware of what they don't know, often triggering a debate amongst their own stakeholders. So the dialogue works on two levels: between the cities and within the cities. It can also provide a mechanism for scenario planning, through a future dialogue process of what the city's future will look like.

The process of engaging with other cities can be transformative for relationships within cities in other ways. A good example comes from the city of Wroclaw in Poland, which is now part of URBACT legend. A core group of city decision makers was due to travel to Hungary for an event with other cities, but due to bad weather the flight was cancelled. Instead, they travelled by mini-bus and during the long journey, in cramped conditions, relationships between the key city players were strengthened. The transformative effect of that shared experience was key to their subsequent collaboration.

And of course what you experience once off the bus is important. Exposure to the other provides an opportunity to benchmark, reflect and debate. Here, our experience suggests that cities are likely to take more from others that are closer to them. For example, in a recent discussion with a city manager from Tallinn, Estonia, he explained that having the opportunity to see developments in Stockholm had been interesting. But also depressing; he came back convinced that it will be another 20 years before city relationships in Tallinn are strong enough to work as the Swedes do. So the notion of proximal learning zones is also a consideration.

By visiting a leading edge global city, the main conclusion may be that you are not one... but at least the road to Nirvana may be clearer.