

# Boston must get more residents involved to grow its innovation economy

*By Li Zhou, Beta Boston for Boston Globe*

Boston represents a unique intersection, of history and innovation. [Innovate Now](#), a four-hour workshop spearheaded by the World Economic Forum's Global Shapers and recently held at District Hall in the Seaport/Innovation District, sought to bridge these two areas and catalyze civic participation from younger members of the local community.

The event united Boston millennials from diverse backgrounds including startups, nonprofits, consulting, and design with an array of government officials and media partners including NPR, to brainstorm and discuss the next steps in the city's growth and development. The "global shapers" — the organizers of the event — are a group of young leaders around the globe, with chapter presences in 320 cities, and 33 members in Boston, including chief of staff Daniel Koh. According to Kate Aitken, one of the organizers, this is the group's flagship event in the city and the first as part of a larger initiative to truly connect local millennials with Boston policy-makers. "Real innovation comes from getting into the guts of an organization," she said.

The workshop featured Michelle Wu, one of four Boston city councilors-at-large and also a "global shaper," as the keynote speaker. Her speech focused on the need for Boston to represent both innovation and inclusion in order to grow, while dispelling previous stereotypes. "Boston is perfectly poised to lead the innovation economy," said Wu, "but it also needs to reshape its national perception."

For anyone doubting the substance of the new innovation economy movement, Wu noted that District Hall was "more than a geographic location or branding project" touching upon the ability for the city to leverage and strengthen its "community, flexibility, and history," as it ventures forward. She stressed the importance of investing in three key areas that will drive growth: Showcasing the independent neighborhoods of Boston as destinations themselves, streamlining

the process for businesses to obtain permits, and getting young people civically involved in Boston through channels like the ONEin3 program, neighborhood associations, and partnerships with local schools.

Her rousing speech challenged attendees to collaborate throughout the day and think about their role in the future of Boston. “We believe innovation is a social process, and it has always been a conversation,” said Wu, citing a quote from Venture Café’s Carlos Martinez-Vela, “With your help, your energy, Boston will continue to lead the way as the best place in the world to live, learn, play, and stay.”

Following her speech, attendees were split into three breakout sessions, each of which tackled a different area. One focused on the new Creative Economies Initiative launched by the Massachusetts State Government, striving to break down siloes that kept creative industries separated from other businesses and each other. Helena Fuscio, director of the initiative, led the brainstorm, which culminated in the development of three main ideas: A creative leadership institute that would provide fellowships for interested participants at local creative organizations; a brain trust, which would unite experts in different creative fields to share and build upon their knowledge; and an accelerator for creatives that would infuse funding into new fields.

A second session focused on one of the very problems that Councilwoman Wu called out: The limited and complicated process of obtaining permits as a small business in Boston. Members of City Hall came in to explain the infrastructure of the process and get feedback on how it could be improved. Brainstorming centered on improving the user’s ultimate engagement and experience resulting in key ideas like showing people what the journey will look like so they know what to expect as well as creating a personalized dashboard that business owners could utilize as a tool to help track progress.

The third breakout involved NPR’s Generation Listen, the branch of the storied radio network that is focused on targeting millennials and getting them engaged with the content offered. NPR is currently grappling with an aging audience and low awareness and interest

among millennials. The group worked with Generation Listen founder, Danielle Deabler, to brainstorm ideas that combated these issues including an app that customizes content for a listener's time window, area of interest, and occasion much like Songza does for music, an Instagram campaign that would help increase the brand's relevance, and a comedic online video that would demonstrate what NPR means to a younger generation.

Following the workshop, these ideas will be fleshed out by the “global shapers,” who will also outline concrete next steps. Attendees were overall excited about the conversation that took place and ready to build upon this experience. “There is so much to do, so much to learn here—I want to engage in my home,” said Tim Buhay, a land surveyor from Charlestown.

For others, this event felt like the first time of, hopefully many, when they were able to have tangible conversation with their local government. Michelle Miller, a graduate student at Harvard, said that “I live in Cambridge and I wish I could get connected into Boston—I wish there was more opportunity for me to get involved with this city.”

In the spirit of Wu's speech and the palpable energy at Innovate Now, it feels like the “conversation” is just getting started.

*Li Zhou is a freelancer for BetaBoston. She can be reached at [li.zhou.ca@gmail.com](mailto:li.zhou.ca@gmail.com).*

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