

Takeaways from Oslo Innovation Week 2019

October 11, 2019 | Doria Lotan

OSLO



Historically, competitions have provided a reason for people from different backgrounds, cultures, and ways of life to come together and showcase what they can achieve when skill, ingenuity, dedication, and perseverance are passionately pursued. Today, competitions are often a strategy to engage

the public and inspire innovative thinkers to focus their talents and skills on solving problems that affect our everyday lives.

As a company based in NYC, we are focused on being part of the solution to the urban challenge of decarbonization, a challenge that isn't uniquely American but shared by the entire world. As such we are constantly looking to learn from other countries which are tackling the urban challenge head on. In 2010, recognizing that more than two-thirds of Europeans were living in towns or cities, the European

Commission decided to offer an annual award to the "European city that demonstrates the greatest commitment to improving their urban environments." The main objective of the European Green Capital Award (EGCA) is to promote and reward cities in their efforts to reduce emissions and drive sustainable development. But a welcome side effect has been the initiation of a friendly competition among cities that are now vying for the prestigious title of "European Green Capital of the Year."

Winning the European Green Capital Award is no small feat. Entries are assessed on the basis of **12 indicators**, and cities need to provide substantial documentation proving the accomplishments they believe earned them the right to be the next city to win the award. Oslo, this year's winner, held its 14th annual Oslo Innovation Week last month, and I was lucky enough to attend. I witnessed a city proud of its accomplishments and also fully aware of the responsibility that comes with the EGCA title.

The Path Less Traveled

This year's Oslo Innovation Week theme was "Explorers" — "the people and businesses who dare take the path less traveled to solve real global challenges."¹ One of the key characteristics of an explorer is foresight and the ability to capitalize on curiosity in order to discover something new and hopefully useful. The theme set out to celebrate the individual innovators and explorers who have made significant strides to advance Oslo's environmental agenda. But Oslo's ability to maximize the efficient use of its existing systems also makes the city an explorer in its own right.

I witnessed several ways Oslo has turned a knack for efficiency into a full-fledged strategy for change. Here are the three innovations that left the most lasting impact on me:



- Posten, Norway's leading postal service, and the city's waste elimination service teamed up since their timetables work in complementary ways and their travel patterns significantly overlap. Drop-off and pick-up hubs are being built throughout the city in order to provide solutions for the postal service and waste transport — two major city functions. On the way into the city, the designated postal service vehicles are loaded with packages. They arrive at these inner city hubs, unload all their packages and reload their vehicles with trash instead. The result of this specific coupling is a less congested city center and a more pleasant urban experience. The wide-scale potential of a doubling up of functions and cooperation among various companies is endless.



- Norway is surrounded by picturesque fjords that have been a great source of inspiration for poets and artists. With an abundance of water all around, one company — **Massterly** — is creating tailored solutions for eco-friendly brands that seek to minimize the negative impact of CO2 emissions due to transporting their goods. Getting from point A to point B on land alongside the Norwegian archipelago, can often take a very long time as vehicles need to travel great distances. By introducing automation, Massterly is reintroducing waterways as an efficient, eco-friendly means of transport. It is also allowing environmentally conscious brands to expand their mission statements and find more ways to be progressive when it comes to reducing their carbon footprints.



- According to Kristopher Ågren of **Telia** and Kjartan Slette of **Unacast**, data is one of the tools cities often overlook in their efforts to serve the average person in their everyday lives. Oslo has exhibited tremendous ingenuity in its effort to build smart cities that are data-driven. It is creating partnerships with companies and community groups aimed at tackling barriers to jobs, housing, education, and other issues related to urbanization. By tracking the movement patterns of its inhabitants, Oslo is among other things, able to improve transportation demand, help reduce traffic and create a more streamlined model for inner city communication. As a city, Oslo maintains that it is with the help of data that citizens are able to play an integral part in the city's planning process.



A Role Model for Environmental Change

For Americans, the potential job loss brought on by replacing old technologies with new innovative ones is a major concern. But when asked if such is the case in Norway, the answer was an overwhelming "no". Whether this is a result of their socialistic government which provides a financial safety net for all of its citizens, or the fact that the vast majority of the population is highly educated and skilled, Norwegians tend to feel less threatened by the possibility of becoming redundant. But that doesn't mean they haven't their own obstacles to overcome in the face of change. While the Green Party to the left gains momentum, it's currently encountering a rising opposition on the right. *People's Action — No to More Road Tolls (FNB)*, Norway's newest party, is gaining steam and proving that even the most progressive

countries are bound to face resistance when wide scale measures to lower carbon emissions are implemented. The cities who win the ECGA are not only leading the way for environmentally friendly urban living but also acting as role models for other cities seeking to do the same. The winner of the ECGA can showcase the innovations that led to the win and share the thinking and process behind it. But the solutions it implements will have to be uniquely tailored to the obstacles it faces as an individual city. These obstacles include, among other things, cultural and societal readiness and awareness. They include the ability to collectively accept that there will be a price to pay if significant change is implemented. There will be changes to daily practices surrounding energy use, waste management, agriculture, and industry, to name a few.

Looking ahead, we will continue to keep an eye on what our European friends on the other side of the pond are up to. Next stop is Lisbon, the 2020 EGCA winner. We look forward to learning more about the city's decarbonization plans, the unique set of challenges it faces, and what solutions it has come up with to tackle them.

¹ Oslo Innovation Week, <https://oiw.no>.