CITY ON THE EDGE

COMPETITIVE PLACEMAKING AND COLLECTIVE ACTION IN THE INNOVATION AGE

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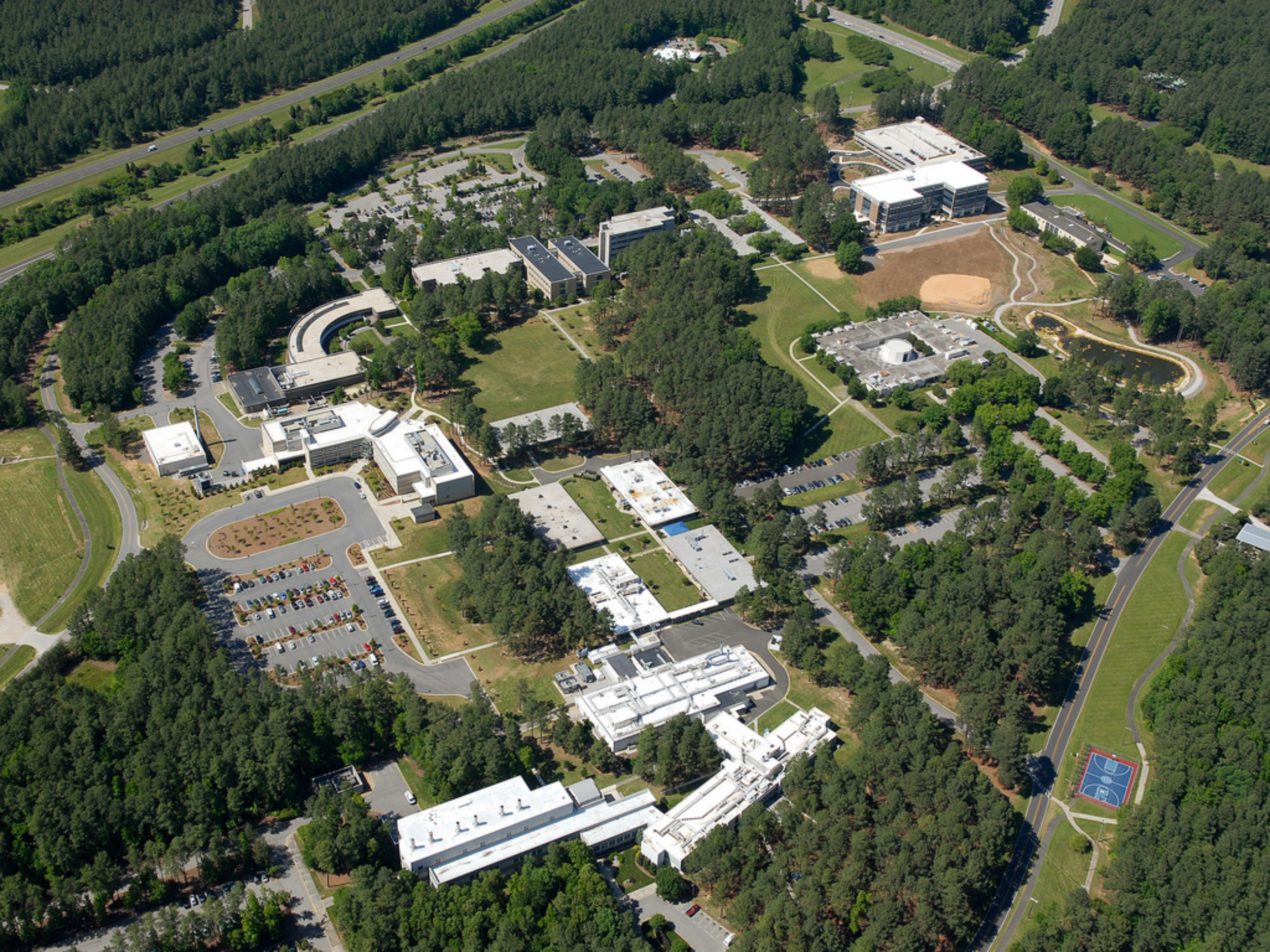

Why do cities seek to foster innovation?

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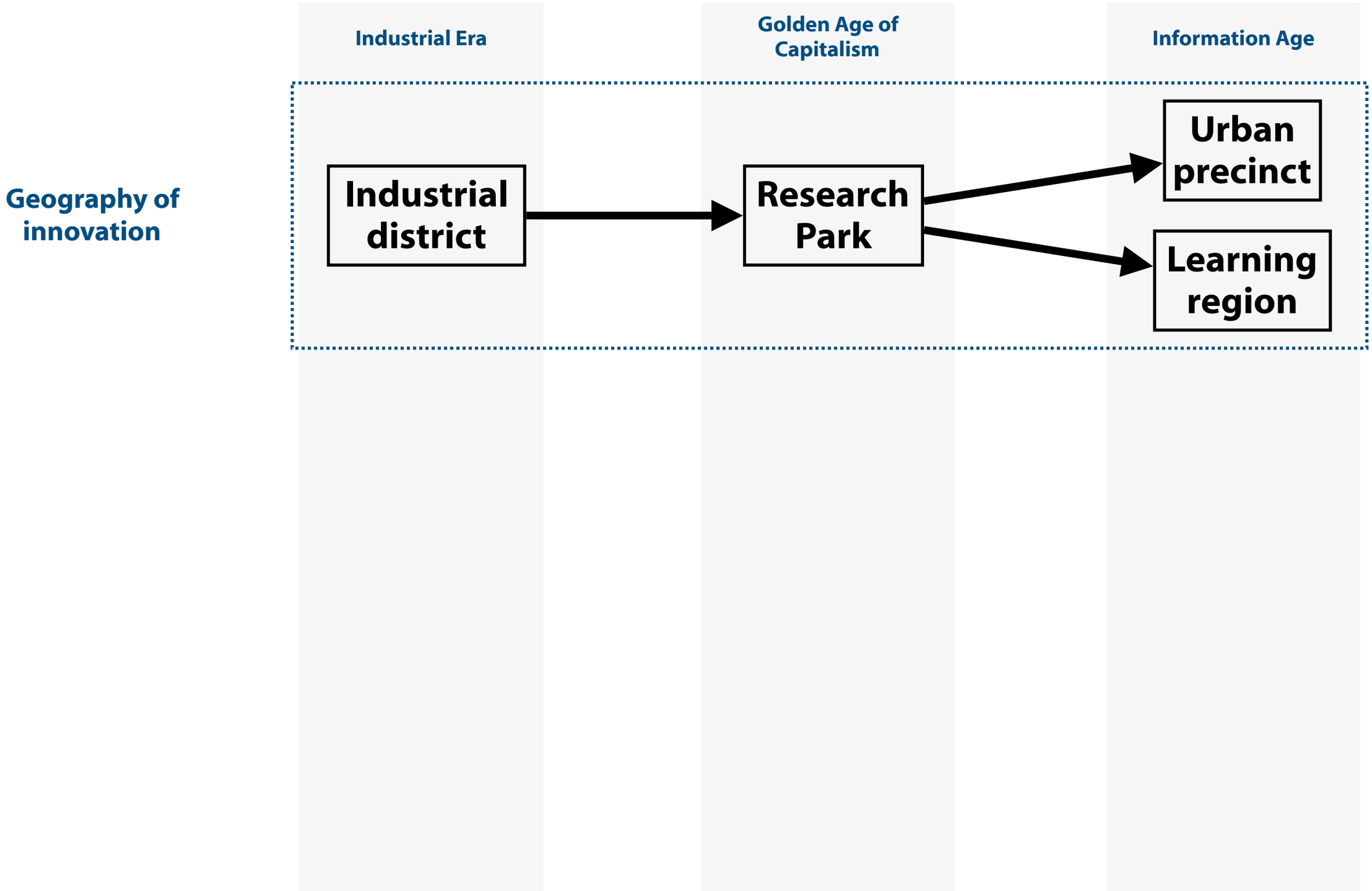

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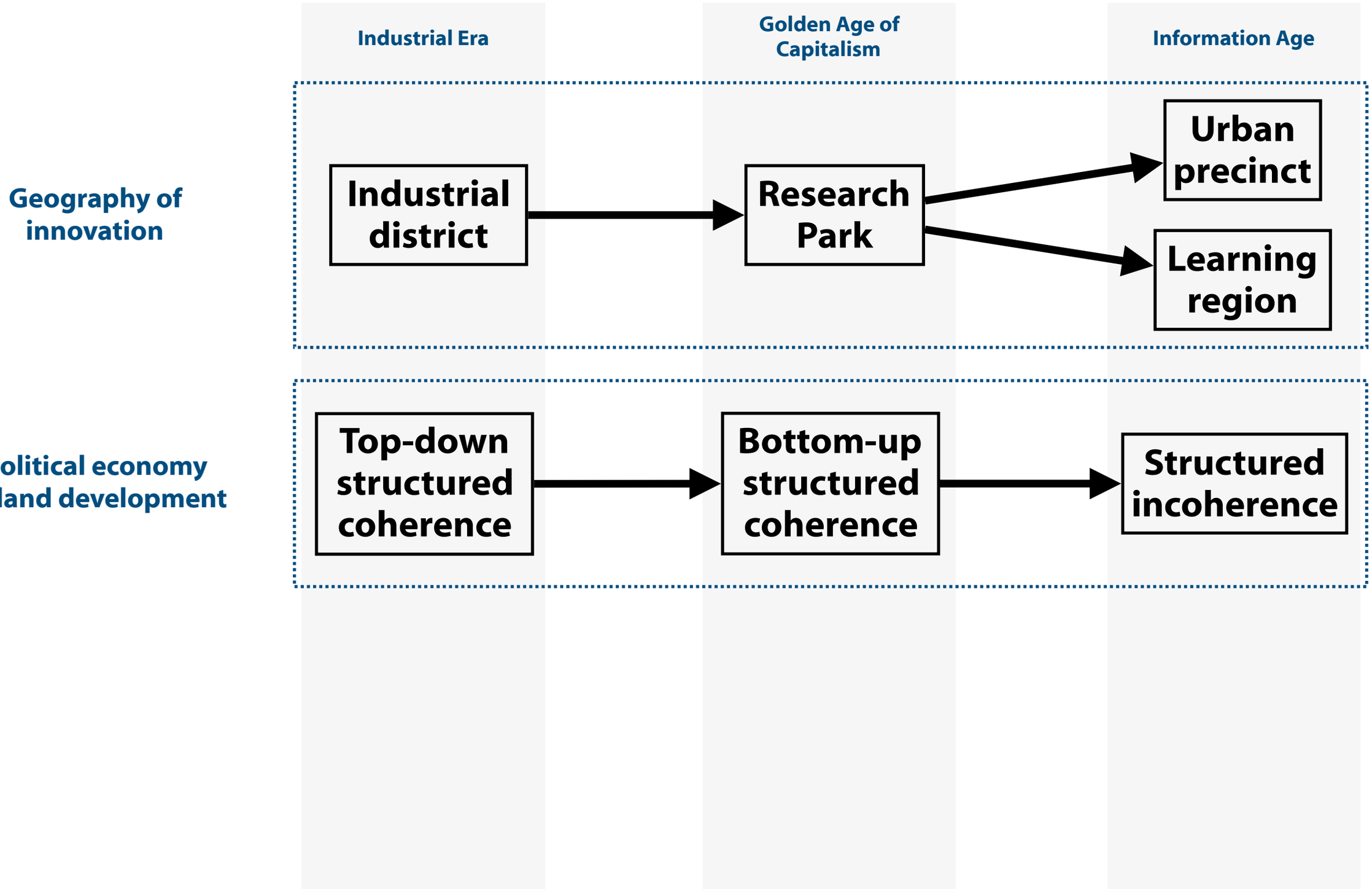

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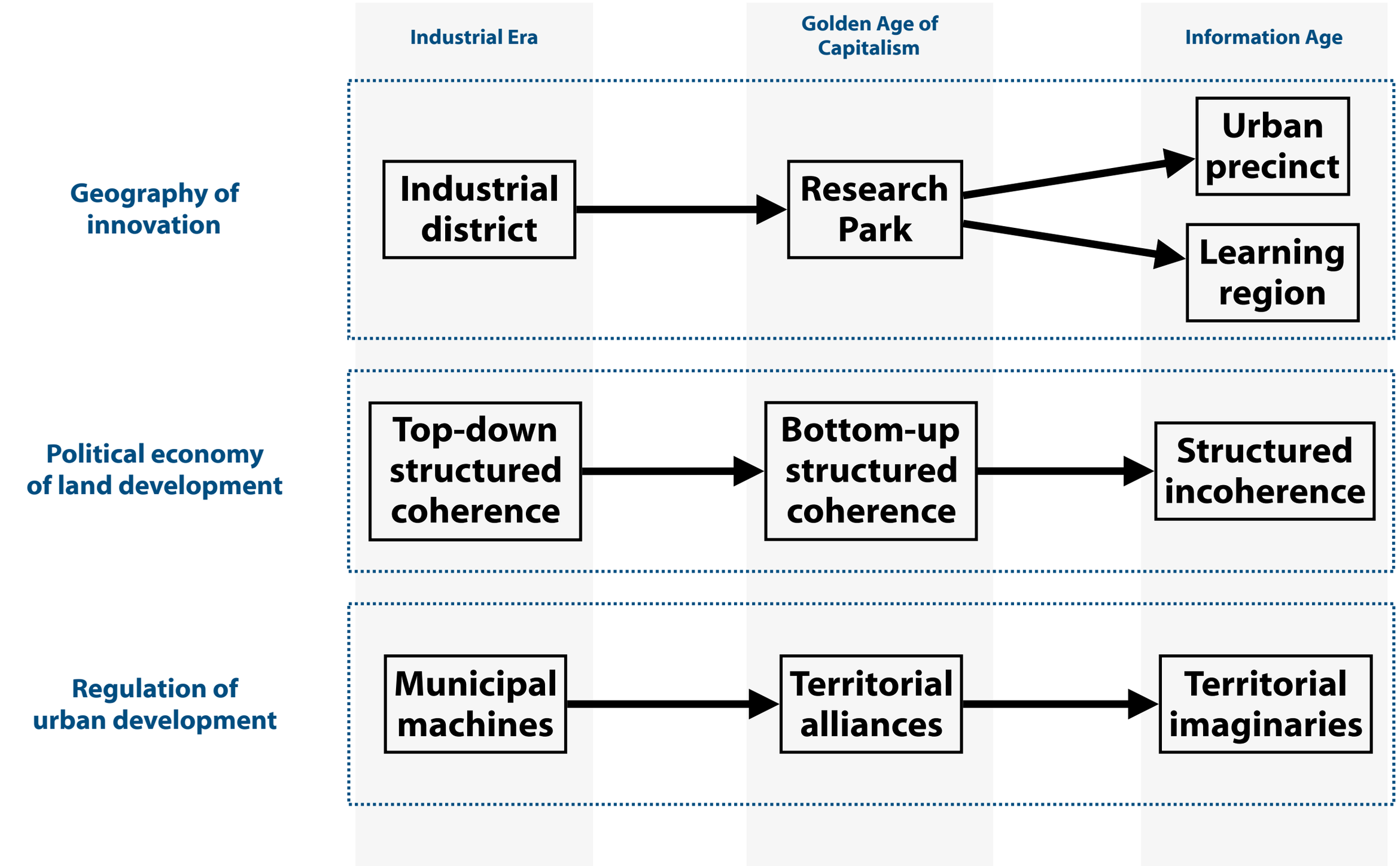

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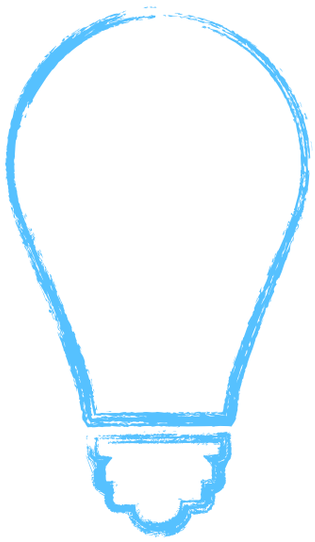
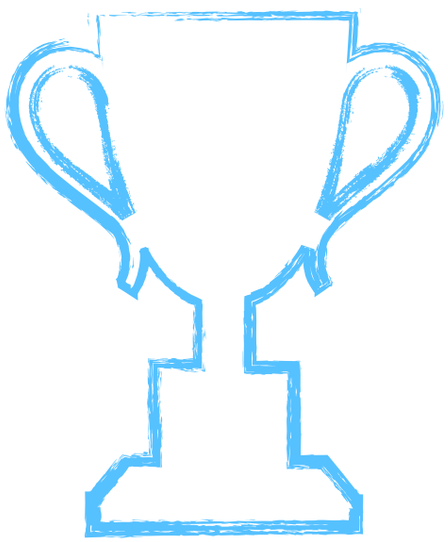


Innovation



Competitiveness

Growth

How do cities foster competitive advantage in the innovation age?

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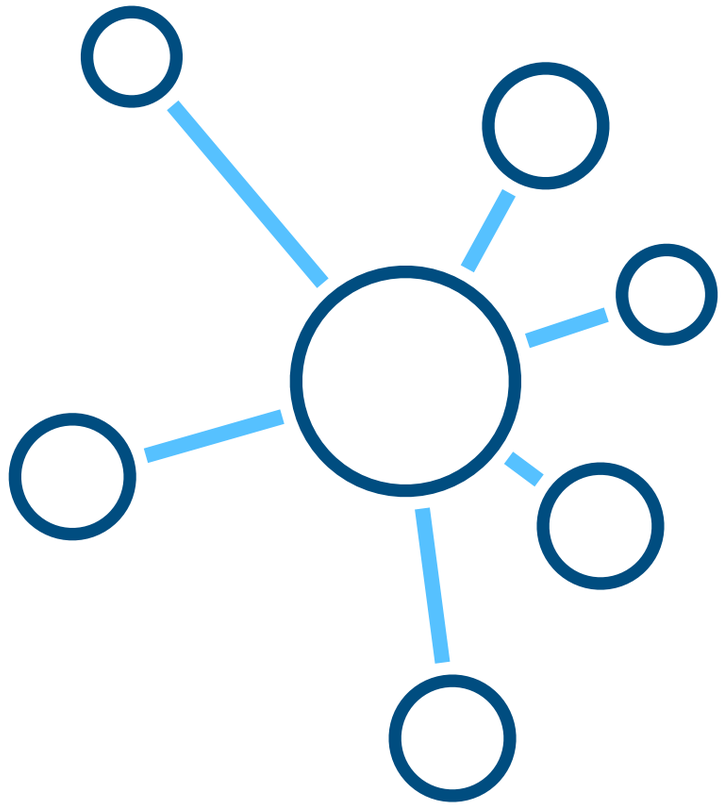
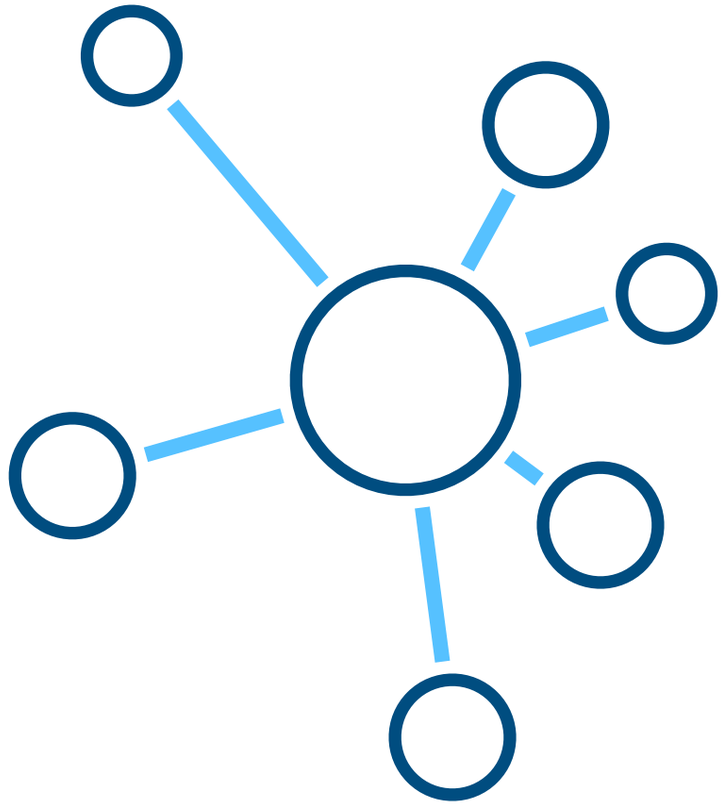


Region building

Local placemaking

How do cities foster competitive advantage in the innovation age?



Innovation strategies at multiple spatial scales

What is the role of knowledge locations?

Role 1. Fostering innovation with local assets

Role 2. Enhancing a city's competitiveness in the knowledge economy

What is the role of knowledge locations?

“planned area-based initiatives aiming to agglomerate knowledge intensive activities in a designated area or city district”

(Carvalho and van Winden, 2017)

Role 1

Fostering innovation

Producing **innovation in-place**, same logic as research/technology/science parks

Development of specific precincts where individuals can live, work, learn and play in ways that are conducive to innovation

What is the prototypical knowledge location under open innovation ?

Closed innovation

Open innovation

Suburban science park

??????

How does open innovation affect urban development?

Changing location preferences

Structural shift

New intra-urban geography of innovation

Consequence

Innovation districts

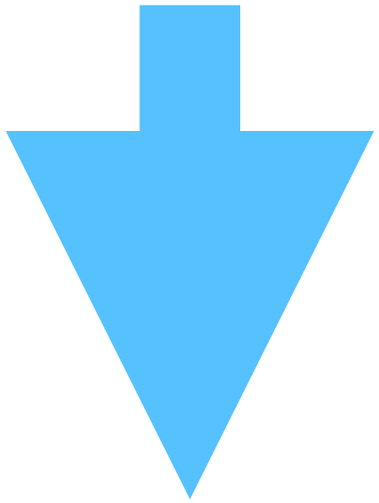
New policy model

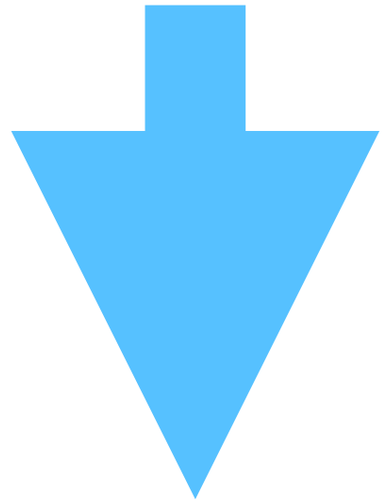
How does open innovation affect urban development?

What is the prototypical knowledge location under open innovation ?

Closed innovation

Open innovation

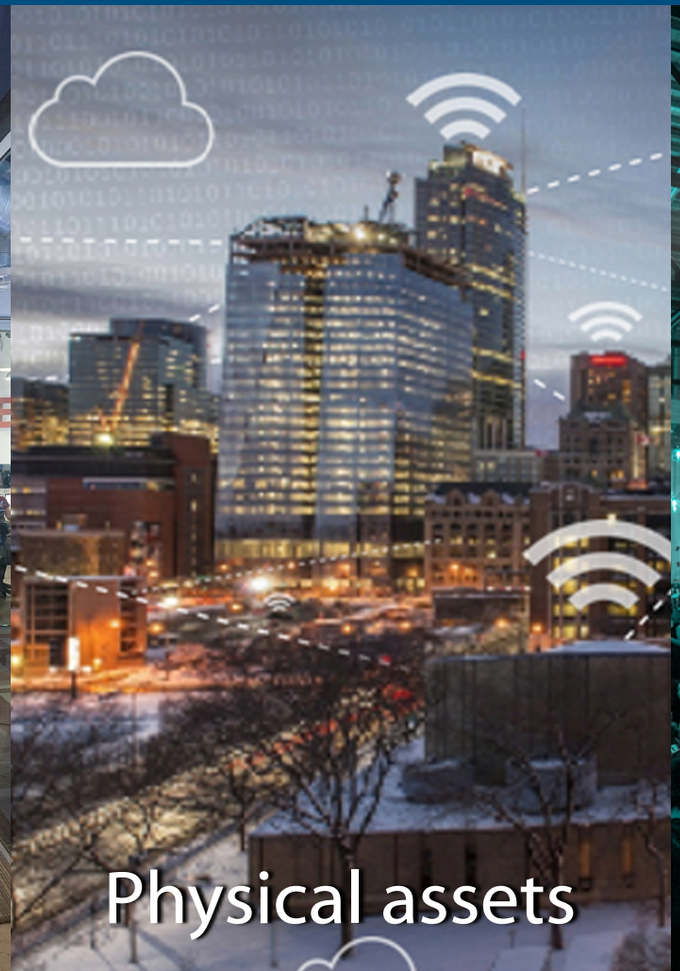




Suburban science park

Urban innovation district

Innovation districts as a policy model



Role 2

Competitive placemaking

A balancing act?

Fostering innovation

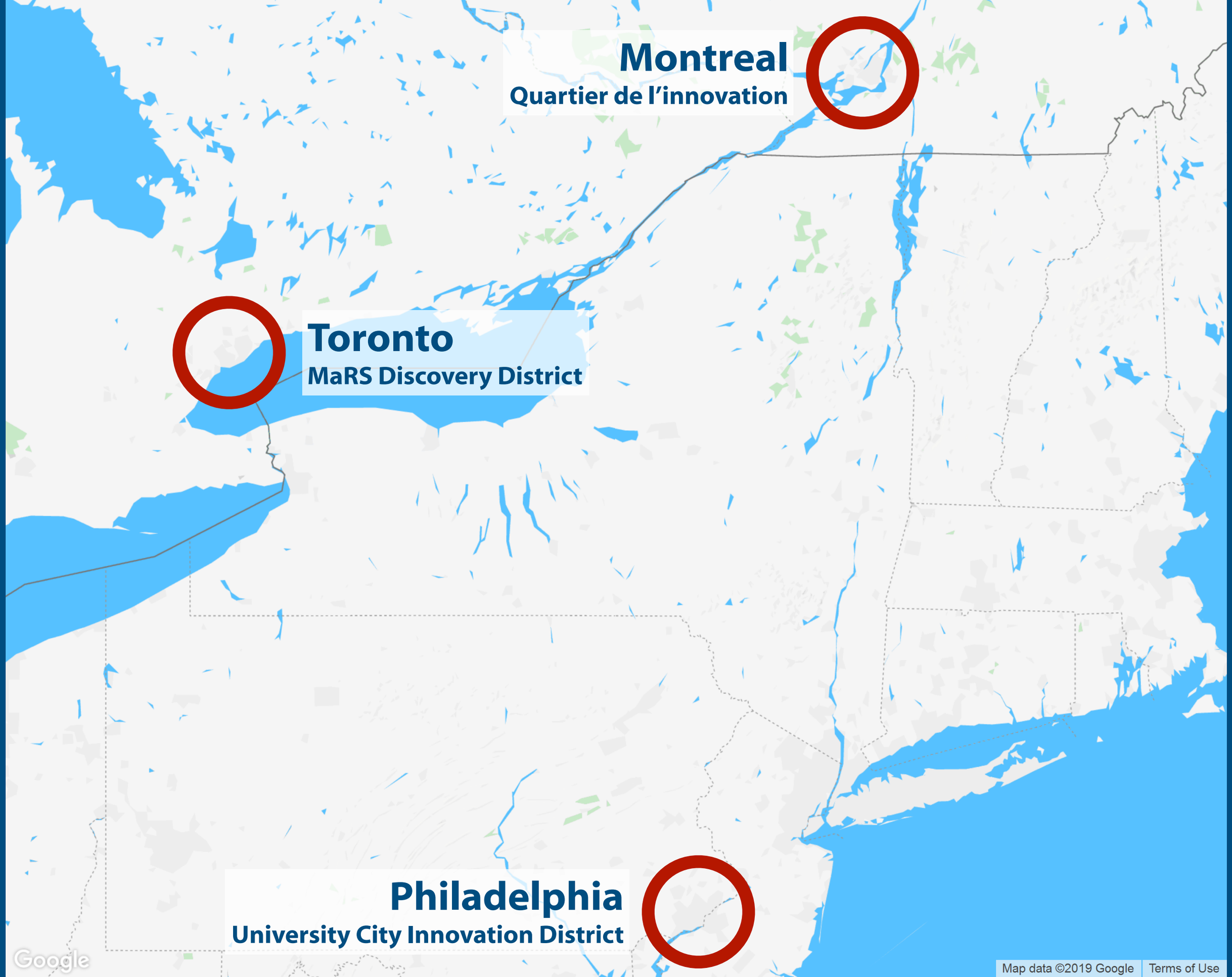
Projecting innovativeness

Innovation districts as a marketing construct

1. **Productive ambiguity**: ID imaginary facilitates multiple understandings of innovation and its geography

2. **Competitive placemaking**: projecting innovativeness trumps fostering innovation

3. **Urban innovation entrepreneurs:** Legitimacy relies on core group of visionaries who “think” the innovation district


Montreal
Quartier de l'innovation
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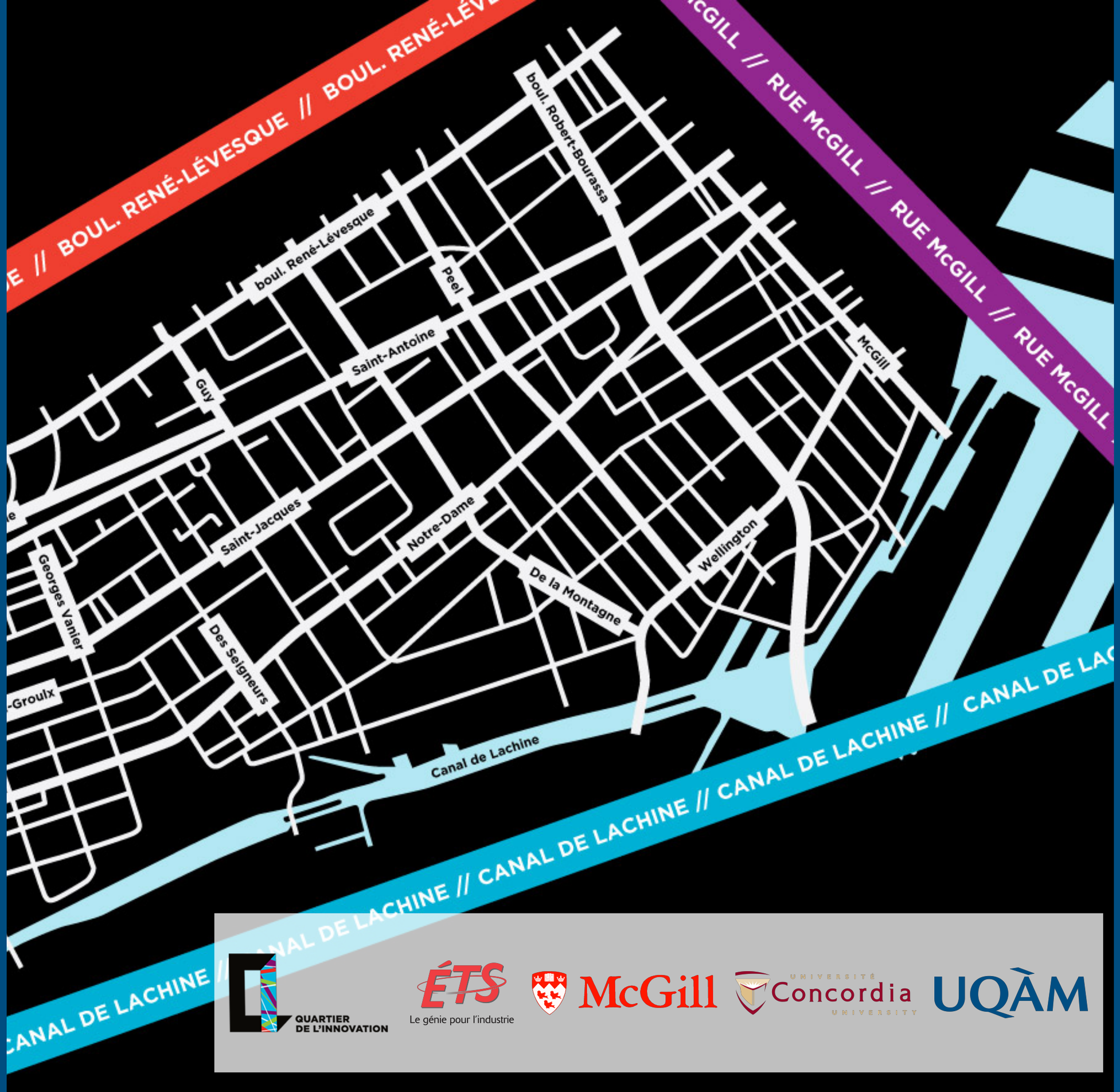
Montreal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Claim 1

Productive ambiguity

Innovation districts are flexible constructs

Floating signifiers (*imaginaries*) facilitate multiple understandings of innovation and optimal spatial forms to promote it

The many purposes of innovation districts

Showcase of local innovations and innovators

Real estate strategy (mostly institutional)

Rebranding of postindustrial cities in transition

Lobbying and communication with higher orders of government

Actual innovative activities on premises

Changing geography

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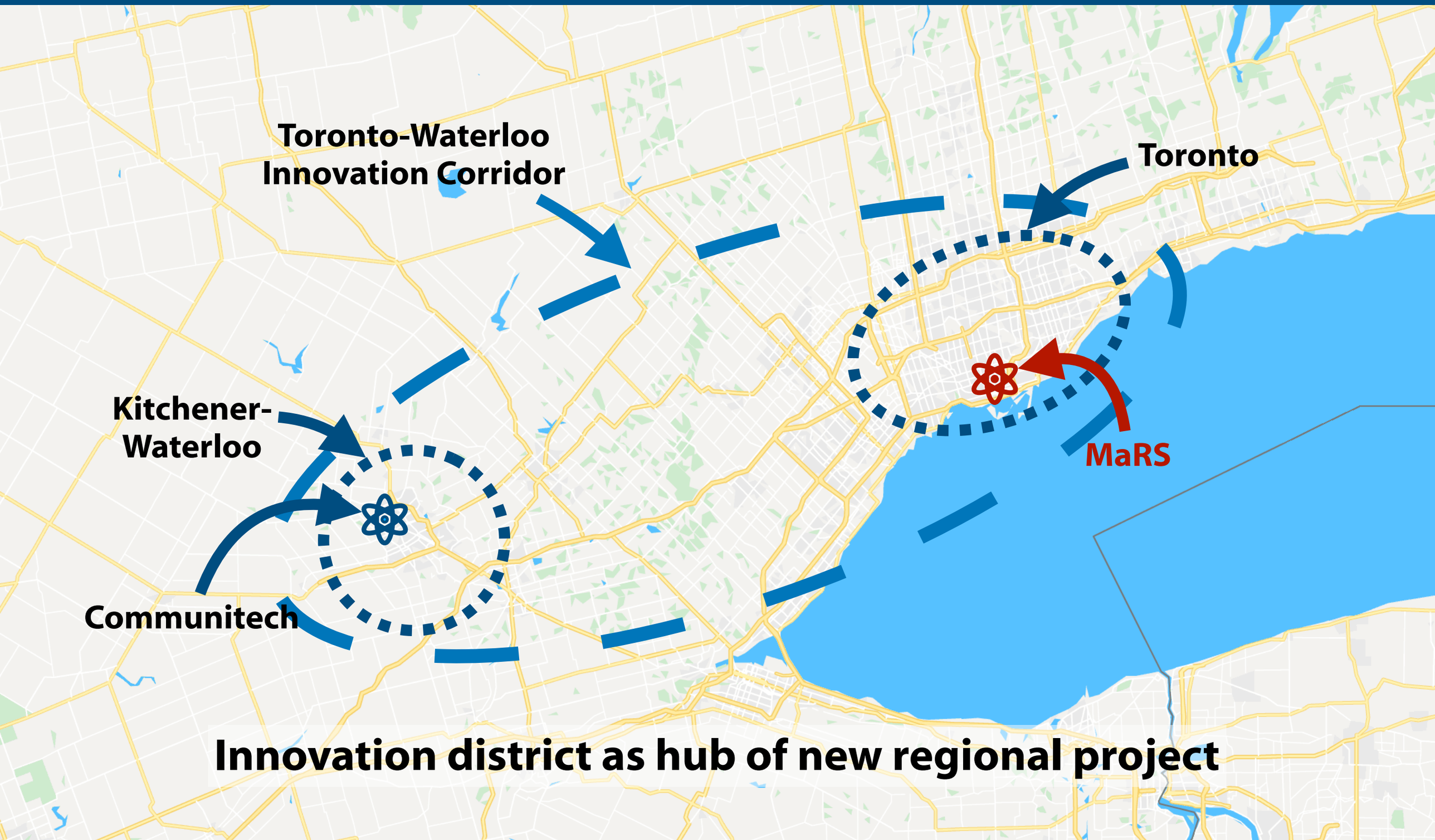
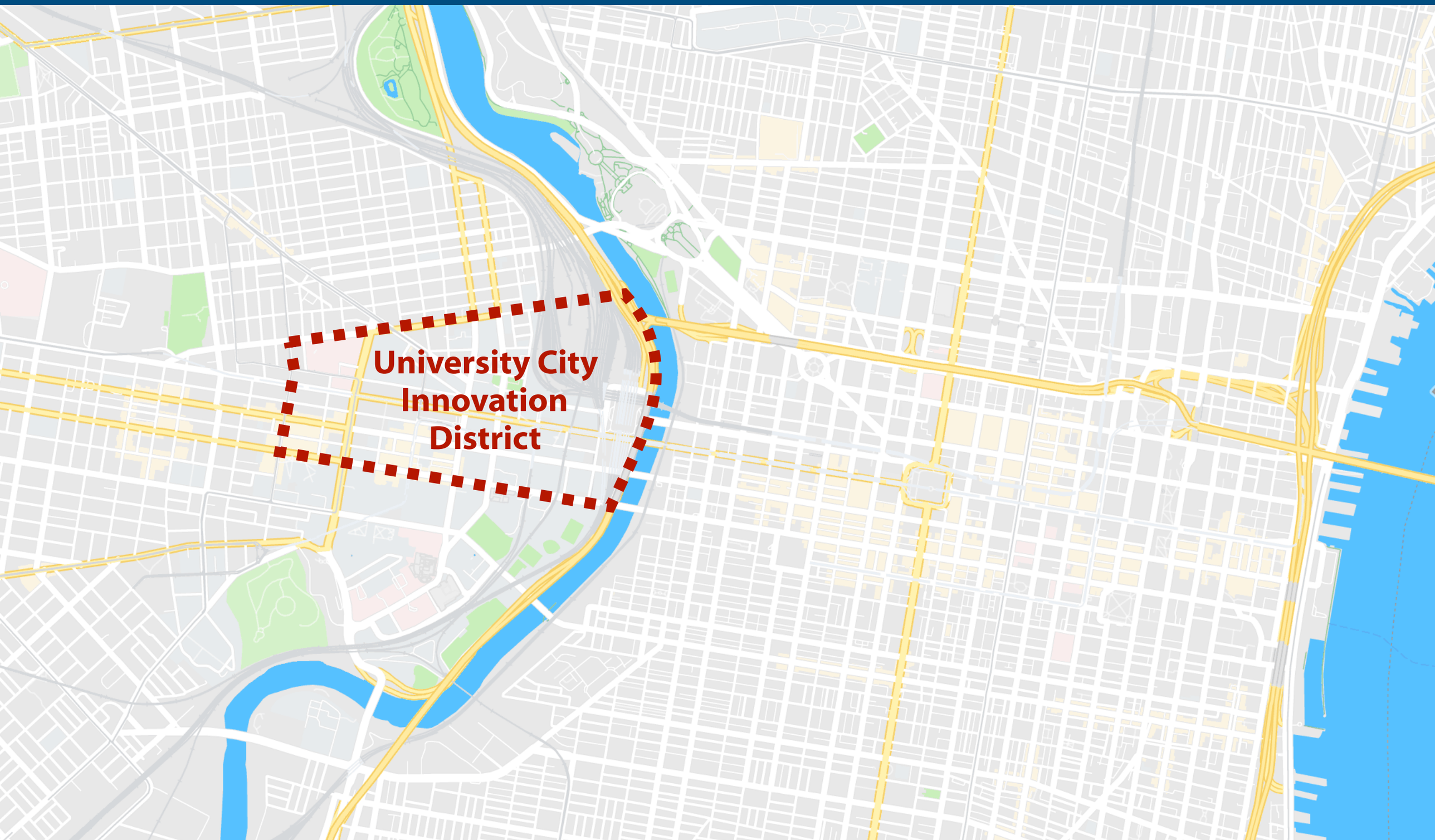


Innovation district as hub of new regional project

Changing geography



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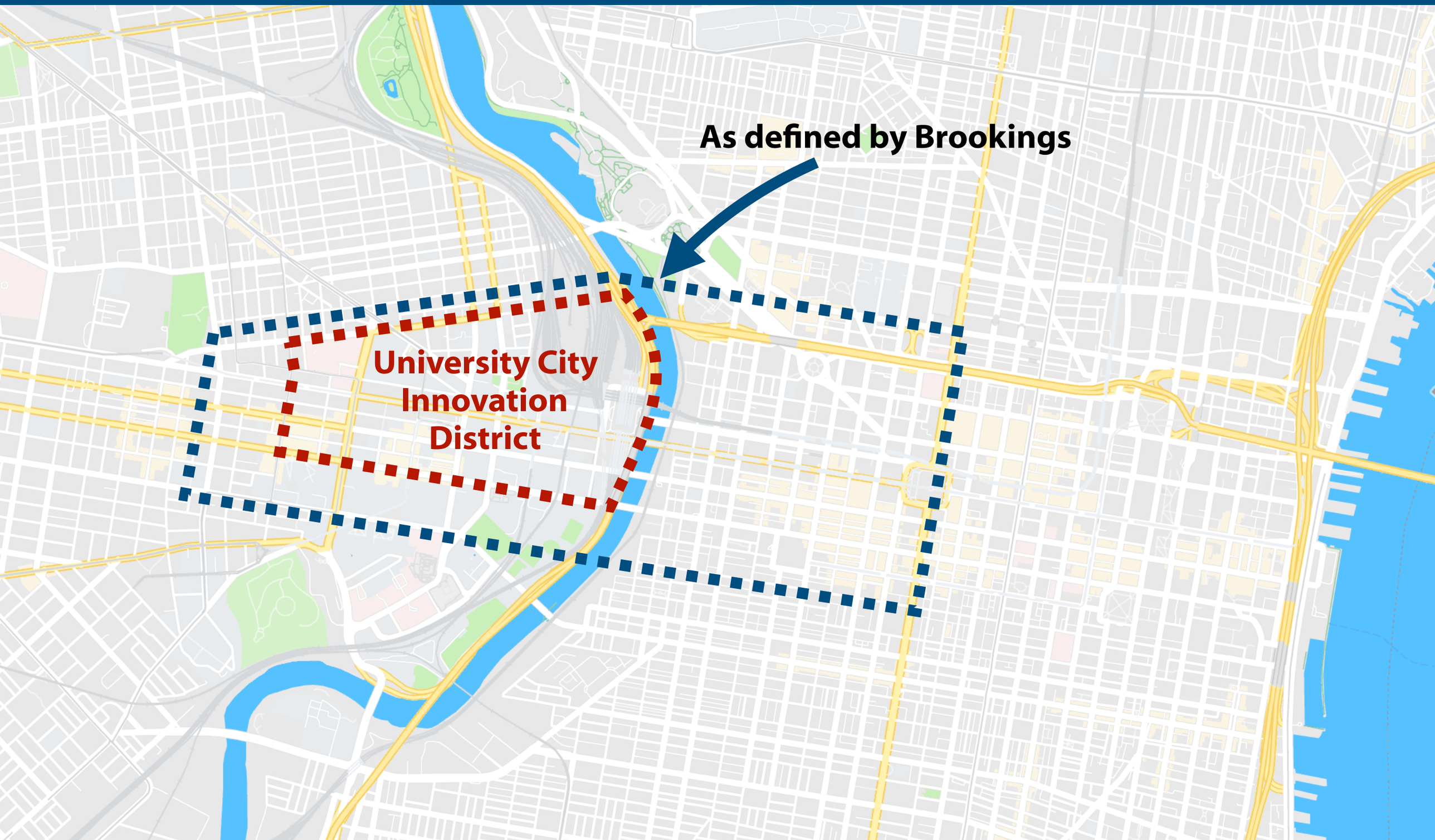

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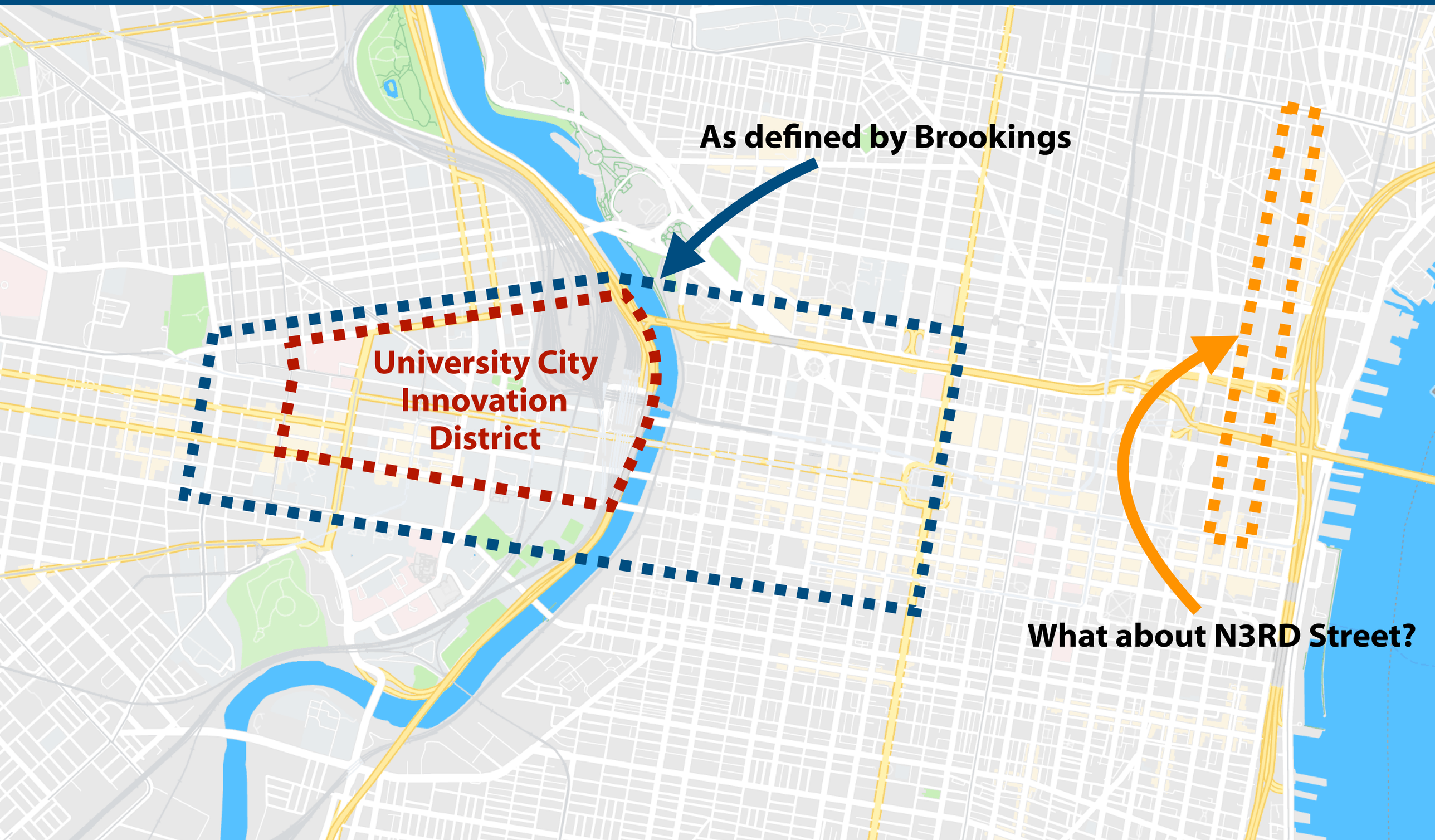

Ambiguity = dynamism

"Maybe the beauty of this innovation thing is, y**ou don't ever want a formal kind of leadership** team because then you're essentially **killing its dynamism and flexibility**." *(Toronto interviewee 1)*

Does innovation have a “place”?

“Place”-ing innovation in urban settings is an **assumption** of mainstream economic geography

Innovation districts are **responses to global transformations** in the economy, but based on findings stemming from a limited number of **exceptional cases**…

Not clear whether innovating in the knowledge economy is a distinctly **urban activity**… but **policy assumes it is**

Claim 2

Competitive placemaking

Projecting innovativeness trumps fostering innovation

Mimicry legitimizes innovation districts

A platform to showcase innovation

Goal = projecting **innovativeness**

Whether innovation actually takes place in the innovation district actually matters little

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Goal = projecting **innovativeness**

Whether innovation actually takes place in the innovation district actually matters little

Incoherence between goals/ justifications and actual development

Why the infatuation, then?

"We're looking at what **Boston** did, looking at what's going in **Toronto**, seeing what's happening in Skolkovo [**Moscow**], and of course **Barcelona**'s 22@. When we sell our project to policymakers here, we want them to think of all these places and go: 'Hey, we need this in Montreal too.'" *(Montreal interviewee 3)*

Mimicry to project success

Brand recognition, internationally

Brand recognition, internationally

"There's people coming to Montreal from all over, higher ups in leading firms, who specifically cite the *Quartier de l'innovation* as a reason to visit, a reason to consider setting up shop. When people think about innovation in Montreal, they might think universities or AI, but the QI isn't that far down the list." *(Montreal interviewee 3)*

But also perceived locally

"You can't just draw a rectangle on a map and say that you have an innovation district. **People living here must recognize it**, must have the reflex to say that we are at the center of Philly's innovation ecosystem. Otherwise, we're fake." *(Philadelphia interviewee 1)*

Claim 3

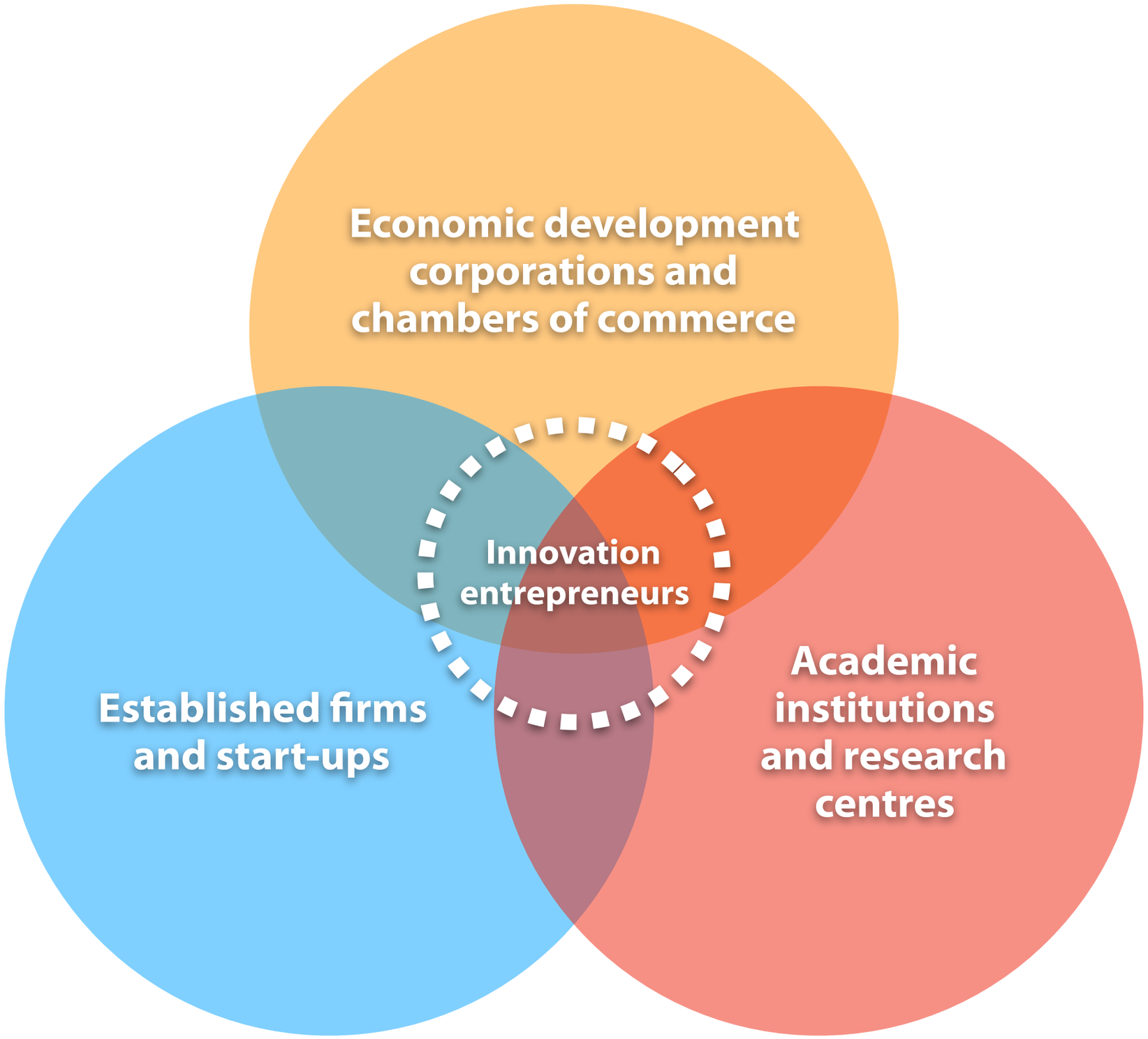
Urban innovation entrepreneurs

Core group of actors places innovation as key lever for urban development

Diverse horizons, not monolithic

They “think” the innovation district

Urban innovation entrepreneurs



Broad buy-in required

Innovation districts need champions

Embrace innovation

Provide stability

Embrace the innovation rhetoric

"The Brookings report identified an area of city, you know, from University City to Center City, but that's not all that important. Philadelphia's innovation ecosystem is not bounded within that area. What matters is that it got all the big players together, agreeing that we need to better **convey the message that Philly thrives on innovation**." (*Philadelphia interview 7*)

Providing stability

"People from Barcelona got in touch last year because they had basically run out of funds. They want to know how we do it, how we got from an empty bank account to building a multi-million nonprofit in five years. The answer is simple: **we're not a political pet project**. We're **not in the real estate business** either. These things have to be independent. We built the **relationships** for the Quartier de l'innovation to become self-sustaining." (*Montreal interviewee 1*)

Conclusion

Innovation districts: a chip off the old block?

Innovation districts, like research parks before them, are “floating signifiers.”

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Conclusion

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But such projects can and do act as catalysts for collective action in cities undergoing revival, regardless of whether they objectively enhance innovation capacity.

Thank you!

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