

# Creating a Pop-Up Living Lab in Penang: Innovation on a Shoestring

Living Labs are often imagined as permanent innovation infrastructures with dedicated spaces, stable funding streams, and strong institutional backing. In reality, many creative ecosystems do not operate under those conditions. Particularly within the creative industries, innovation frequently happens through small teams, freelancers, and informal collaborations rather than large organisations with access to structured innovation support.

This creates a disconnect between dominant Living Lab models and the realities faced by creative sectors in emerging economies such as Malaysia, where funding in some areas of the creative economy can be limited. At the same time, because the Living Lab approach is still relatively new in the country, it makes sense to start with a low budget proof of concept. A pop-up Living Lab run deliberately on a shoestring therefore becomes a sensible way to test what works.

This approach was used in the Penang Creative Industries Living Lab (PLLACE) project, funded by the British Academy and delivered through a collaboration between Manchester Metropolitan University, University of Greenwich, Universiti Sains Malaysia, and Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman. Among other objectives, the initiative sought to explore how Living Lab principles might support the creative economy in Penang. Rather than attempting to establish a permanent Living Lab infrastructure from the outset, the team experimented with a pop-up Living Lab, a one week intervention designed to bring creative practitioners together to explore ideas, collaborate, and experiment.

## Starting with the ecosystem

Penang has a rich cultural and creative landscape. Designers, artists, makers, storytellers, and digital creators are active across the island, contributing to its reputation as one of Southeast Asia's most vibrant cultural hubs. Yet like many creative ecosystems, much of this activity happens within small enterprises or independent practices.

While this diversity is a strength, it can also mean that opportunities for structured collaboration, both across the creative sector and with wider stakeholders, are limited. Many practitioners work primarily within the boundaries of their own craft or individual businesses rather than engaging in collective innovation or experimentation.

The PLLACE project set out to explore how a Living Lab approach might help address this. However, we quickly faced a practical question. How do you run a Living Lab without the infrastructure that many established models assume?

Rather than seeing this as a limitation, we treated it as a design challenge. Instead of building a permanent space, we focused on creating a temporary but highly focused innovation experience.

## Designing a Living Lab in a week

The pop-up Living Lab was deliberately designed as a short and intensive intervention. The goal was not to replicate a full-scale Living Lab programme but to create a moment of energy within the ecosystem that could bring people together, stimulate new thinking, and generate momentum.

Several design choices proved particularly important.

## A strong thematic hook

First, the Living Lab needed a compelling theme. Creative practitioners are busy people, and attracting participation requires more than simply inviting them to an innovation workshop.

To create that draw, each day of the Living Lab featured a panel discussion or talk by a distinguished speaker focusing on themes highly relevant to creative entrepreneurs. Topics across the week included digital creativity and emerging technologies, sustaining crafts and visual arts markets, entrepreneurial success stories, funding opportunities, institutional development and intellectual property, and the development of future talent for Penang's creative industries.



The Living Lab opened with a launch evening featuring YB Wong Hon Wai, a Malaysian politician and Penang State Executive Councillor, bringing together creative practitioners, policymakers, and the wider community to introduce the initiative and celebrate the participating businesses.

These talks and panels acted as a hook that drew people into the pop-up Living Lab space. Once there, attendees were invited to participate in the co-creation activities at the heart of the programme.

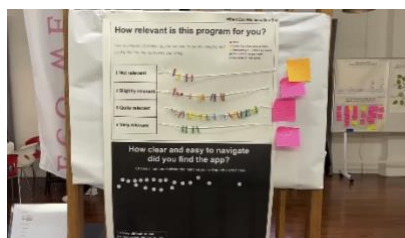
Visitors were encouraged to co-create with eight creative businesses drawn from different parts of Penang's creative sector. Through facilitated discussions and interactive activities, participants

contributed ideas and feedback to help these businesses refine products and services, strengthen marketing messages, identify target audiences, test price points, explore distribution channels, and consider potential partnerships.

In this way, the talks did more than share knowledge. They helped activate the Living Lab and bring a wider community into the co-creation process.

## Structured but accessible co-creation

The co-creation methods used during the week were intentionally simple, visual, and highly participatory. Rather than relying on traditional research tools such as surveys or interviews, which can feel formal and disengaging in a busy public setting, the Living Lab used interactive techniques that allowed visitors to quickly share their thoughts and ideas.



These included approaches such as dot voting and sticky notes, alongside visually engaging formats that invited participants to leave feedback directly on posters and display boards associated with each of the participating businesses. The aim was to make participation easy and immediate so that visitors could contribute insights and suggestions while moving through the Living Lab space.

This approach was particularly important in a pop-up setting where people might be attending talks, exploring showcases, or networking. Feedback mechanisms needed to be quick, intuitive, and engaging rather than requiring lengthy written responses.

Alongside these visual contributions, facilitators actively interacted with participants, capturing additional insights through notes, observations, and conversations. These reflections complemented the ideas recorded on posters, sticky notes, and other materials and helped build a richer understanding of the perspectives shared by the community.

### **Real-world experimentation**

Living Labs emphasise experimentation in real world contexts. To achieve this, we deliberately avoided creating something that felt like a conventional exhibition. Instead, the aim was to bring the creative environment itself into the Living Lab so that visitors could experience the processes, materials, and practices behind the products.



Several of the participating businesses recreated elements of their working environments within the space. One practitioner demonstrated wood carving live inside the Living Lab so visitors could see the skill and craft involved in producing the work. Others brought raw materials and tools to show how their products are made and where the materials originate. In some cases, the Living Lab became a temporary extension of a shop or studio, offering insight into how products are developed, used, and valued.

Visitors were actively encouraged to touch the products, try them out, and interact directly with the creators. Rather than observing from a distance, co-creators could experience the objects and materials firsthand, ask questions, and respond with ideas and suggestions.

This approach transformed the Living Lab from something static into something immersive and interactive. Creative practice was not simply displayed but actively experienced, which made the feedback and discussions far more meaningful.



### **What happened during the week**

In total, the Penang Creative Industries Living Lab attracted more than 300 visitors, featured 25 speakers across six themed panel sessions, and brought together over 150 co-creators contributing ideas and perspectives about the future of Penang's creative industries.

The Living Lab created a collaborative environment in which creators, entrepreneurs, researchers, and members of the wider public shared experiences and insights. Importantly, the initiative also provided a platform for eight participating creative businesses, all of whom

benefited directly from feedback and interaction with the broader community throughout the week.

### **What we learned**

Running the pop-up Living Lab also generated several practical insights that emerged through reflections with the facilitators who supported the activities throughout the week. Some of these lessons confirmed things we already suspected about participatory innovation spaces, but the experience brought them very clearly to the forefront.

Location matters. A pop-up Living Lab works best when it is situated on the ground floor in an area with high footfall so that people can easily enter the space. Facilitators also play a crucial role. They need to be proactive, engaging visitors with probing questions rather than waiting for people to read posters or leave written comments. In a context such as Penang, being able to interact in multiple languages also proved extremely valuable.

Another lesson concerns scale. A Living Lab should not involve too many businesses, otherwise each receives limited feedback. Keeping the number manageable ensures that visitors can spend enough time engaging with each co-creation station.

Incentives such as prize draws can help attract people into the space, but the real driver of participation is the interactivity of the experience itself. When products can be touched, tried, or explored, visitors are much more willing to share their thoughts.



We also found that feedback tasks need to be intuitive and relatable. If a concept is too technical or abstract, people struggle to comment. Similarly, the information presented at a co-creation station must be concise and visual. Visitors rarely read long explanations and need to quickly understand what the product is and how they can contribute. The stage of the prototype also matters. If an idea is too early or difficult to imagine in practice, meaningful feedback becomes harder to obtain.

These observations resonate strongly with several well-established ideas in Innovation Management. The pop-up Living Lab created a temporary environment for open innovation, allowing creative businesses to access insights from users and stakeholders outside their organisations. It also reflects principles of user driven innovation and co-creation, where value is generated through interaction with those who will ultimately experience or use the product.

At the same time, the format echoes ideas associated with lean experimentation and rapid learning cycles. Rather than investing heavily in infrastructure or long programmes, the pop-up approach allows innovators to test ideas quickly, gather feedback, and refine concepts through real world interaction.

We are currently analysing the wider impact of the Living Lab on the participating businesses, and these findings will be presented at the ISPIM Conference in June.

### **Why pop-up Living Labs matter**

The experience in Penang suggests that Living Labs do not always require large budgets, permanent facilities, or extensive infrastructures.

What matters more is thoughtful design, strong facilitation, and a clear purpose.

A pop-up Living Lab can act as a rapid innovation intervention that brings people together, stimulates experimentation, and strengthens connections within an ecosystem. For creative sectors operating under resource constraints, this approach offers a practical way to test ideas, build capacity, and demonstrate the value of collaborative innovation.

In Penang, one week was enough to show that when the right people come together with the right structure, meaningful innovation can emerge. In many ways, this reflects a long-standing insight from innovation management thinking. As Henry Chesbrough famously argued, *“not all the smart people work for you.”* Innovation increasingly happens through interaction with users, communities, and partners rather than within the boundaries of a single organisation.

Pop-up Living Labs provide a practical way of making that idea tangible. They create a temporary but powerful space where creators, users, and stakeholders can come together, exchange ideas, and experiment with new possibilities. Sometimes innovation does not require perfect infrastructure or large investment. Sometimes it simply requires the right environment for ideas and people to meet.