

# **ACTORS OF URBAN CHANGE**

**2017–19**

ACTORS  
OF URBAN  
CHANGE UK

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URBAN UTVIKLING

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The future of cities across Europe looks very bright! That's the most important thing we've learned from the energizing experience of the past 18 months. We had the pleasure to work with 30 amazingly engaged changemakers from municipalities, citizen-driven movements and local businesses who are all enthusiastic about one question: how can we make our cities better places for people to live in?

This magazine serves two purposes. Firstly, it documents the work that has been done in the past 18 months in the Actors of Urban Change program. It sheds a light on how engaged people from Chişinău, Hamburg, Kherson, Lecce, London, Oslo, Rijeka, Timisoara, Valencia and Vilnius are shaping the future of local neighborhoods—thinking across institutional as well as national boundaries to advocate for long-lasting social change in cities. In addition, this magazine also gives you a deeper insight into the urban topics these projects are working on—and can hopefully serve as a source of inspiring examples to adapt and to learn from.

The three sections of this issue represent the topics that the projects we supported are working on: How can communities be activated to co-shape their urban environments? How can nature be an inspiration and solution for the future of our cities? How can abandoned spaces be re-imagined as vital and conscious hubs for cities under pressure?

We believe endings are also great beginnings. As this round of our program Actors of Urban Change comes to an end, we are happy to look forward to the future of our network, to the topics that may arise, the collaborations that may grow and the fun and excitement we will share to work together for a better future of our cities.

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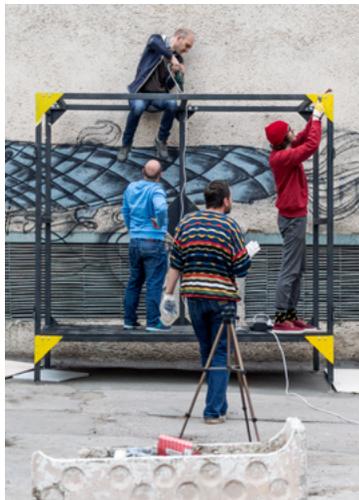
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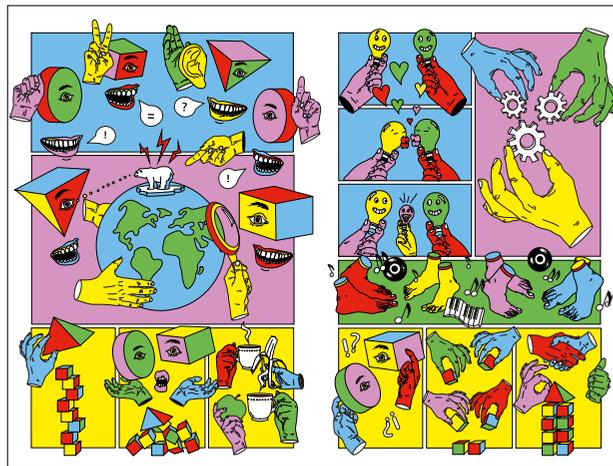
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# TRANSLATING PASSION INTO ACTION

By Sebastian Schlueter and  
Agnieszka Surwiłło-Hahn

“Compatibility should be an achievement of love, not its precondition”, writes the philosopher Alain de Botton in his novel *The Course of Love*. De Botton’s wise observation about relationships sums up our very own leitmotif. To make our cities better places for people to live in, we need the commitment of a variety of people working collaboratively for a greater cause. This sort of collaboration between people, we believe, asks for experimental spaces and time for playfulness to actually work.

Working collaboratively to make  
cities better places  
(Or: why we do what we do at  
Actors of Urban Change)

Actors of Urban Change aims to provide such spaces for teams across Europe to achieve more compatibility and synergy in their collaborations: because successfully working together on a joint idea for social change is not a precondition of any kind of relation, but is an achievement of trying it out.

Relationships between people often start with shared passions as well as shared concerns—and the desire to translate them into action. In order to practice and establish compatibility, the Actors of Urban Change network creates an environment to test and imple-

ment new ideas in a safe space. At the very heart of this lie our international meetings, each taking place in a different European city. During these summits, the Actors community comes together and participants exchange intensively on topics such as project management, processes for citizen participation and co-creation, advocacy and long-term sustainability. Field visits, workshops, open spaces and one-on-one coaching offer opportunities for learning and expert facilitators create space to reflect on and speak freely about the challenges of cross-sector collaboration and urban change work.

Our program is based on three beliefs: we believe that people from very different backgrounds can work together to improve their cities if the right context is provided; we are certain that long-lasting change can only happen when a culture of co-creation is taken seriously; whereas true change mostly starts locally, we believe that thinking globally is necessary to ground practices of urban change in an interconnected world. To put it differently, cross-sector collaboration, a culture of participation and co-creation and international exchange is the triad we think works best to make cities better places for people to live in.

**Why cross-sector collaboration?**

In an era of ever growing complex urban challenges, collective, lasting change can only happen if people with diverging ideas, experiences and perspectives work together. The goal of every cross-sector collaboration is to create an environment that turns different ways of doing things into a productive tension of getting things done. Our program enables innovative partnerships between private entrepreneurs, public institutions and civil society, providing them with a space for experimentation so they can discover new, creative ways to collaboratively improve their cities. Whereas citizen-driven movements very often spearhead local initiatives, they can reach a far more effective change when working together with municipalities and local businesses. Practicing cross-sector collaboration means to be able to advocate much more profoundly for long-lasting change than individual actors could ever do.

**Why a culture of participation and co-creation?**

Culture—our ideas, art and ways of socializing, thinking and behaving—is a vehicle of creativity, social life, heritage and the values we bring to shaping shared space. Culture, as a driving force for urban change, shapes places that better reflect our humanity, where people experience a sense of belonging and are motivated to care for place, each other and for the future. Our theory of change places culture at the center of strategies for the sustainable development of cities. Fostering the potential of culture in the practice of urban development helps

facilitate more diverse participation, deepen understanding and strengthen community solidarity.

We believe that it sometimes takes a nudge to change local ways; we do this by showing the potential of co-creation. True co-creation of urban spaces asks for changed practices, a change in the culture of doing things. Old ways of thinking can create obstacles on the way to real transformation—whether thinking about change only in institutional silos, or making an administration responsible for local problems that could easily be solved through community efforts. Actors of urban change aim to overcome such barriers by rooting ideas radically within their diverse communities from the very beginning.

**Why international exchange?**

We support actors in kick-starting and shaping local projects that can become models for how to tackle urban problems collaboratively within their cities and across Europe. Actors' projects act as laboratories, coming forward with new methods and practices that allow people from many different backgrounds to participate in urban change. The safe spaces we create allow them to learn from each other across local as well as national boundaries, while at the same time making Europe more tangible through working together.

Cities everywhere are facing similar challenges—climate change, population movements, demographic change, the quality of housing and other urban infrastructure—and they can all benefit from sharing experiences and solutions. By using and shaping

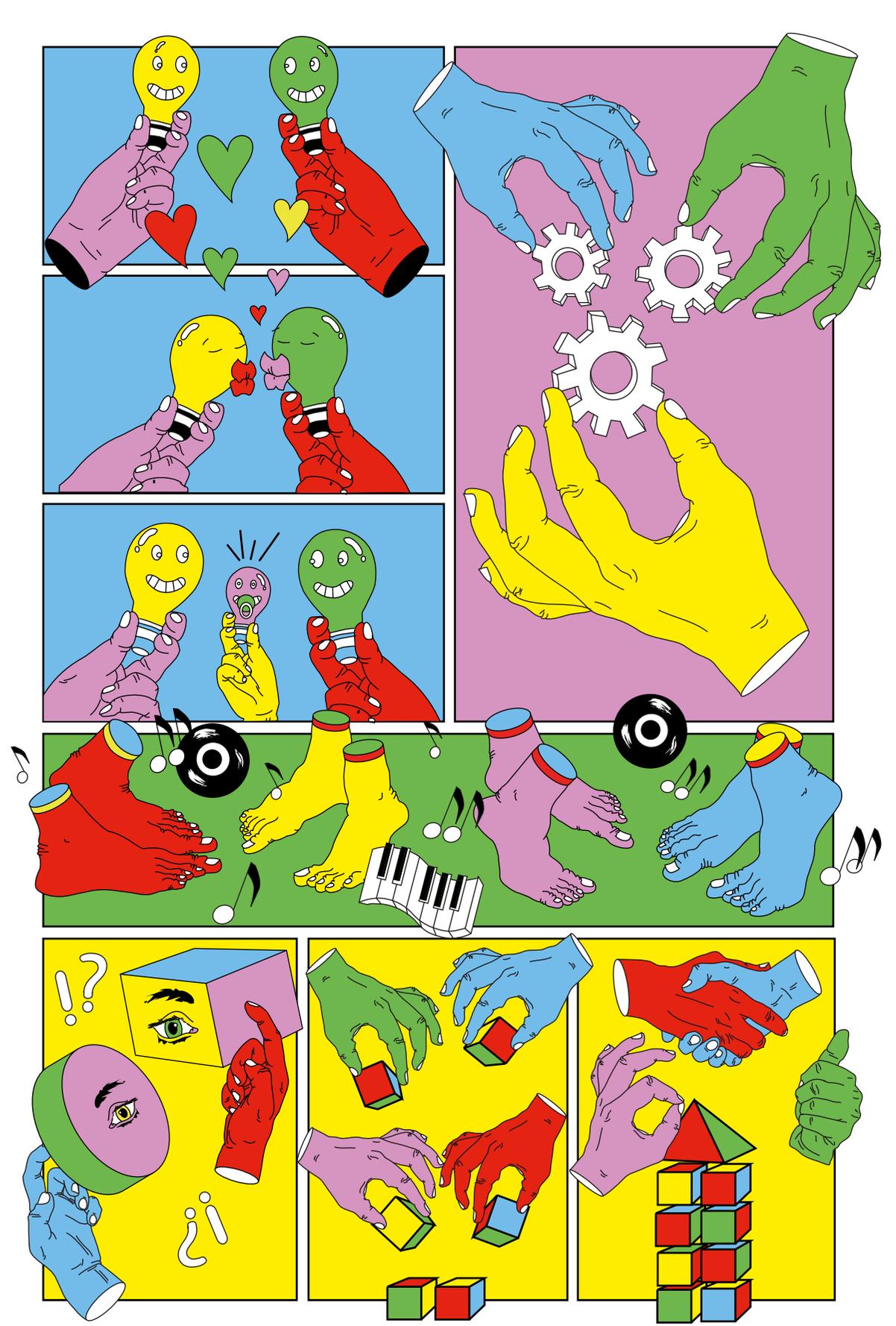
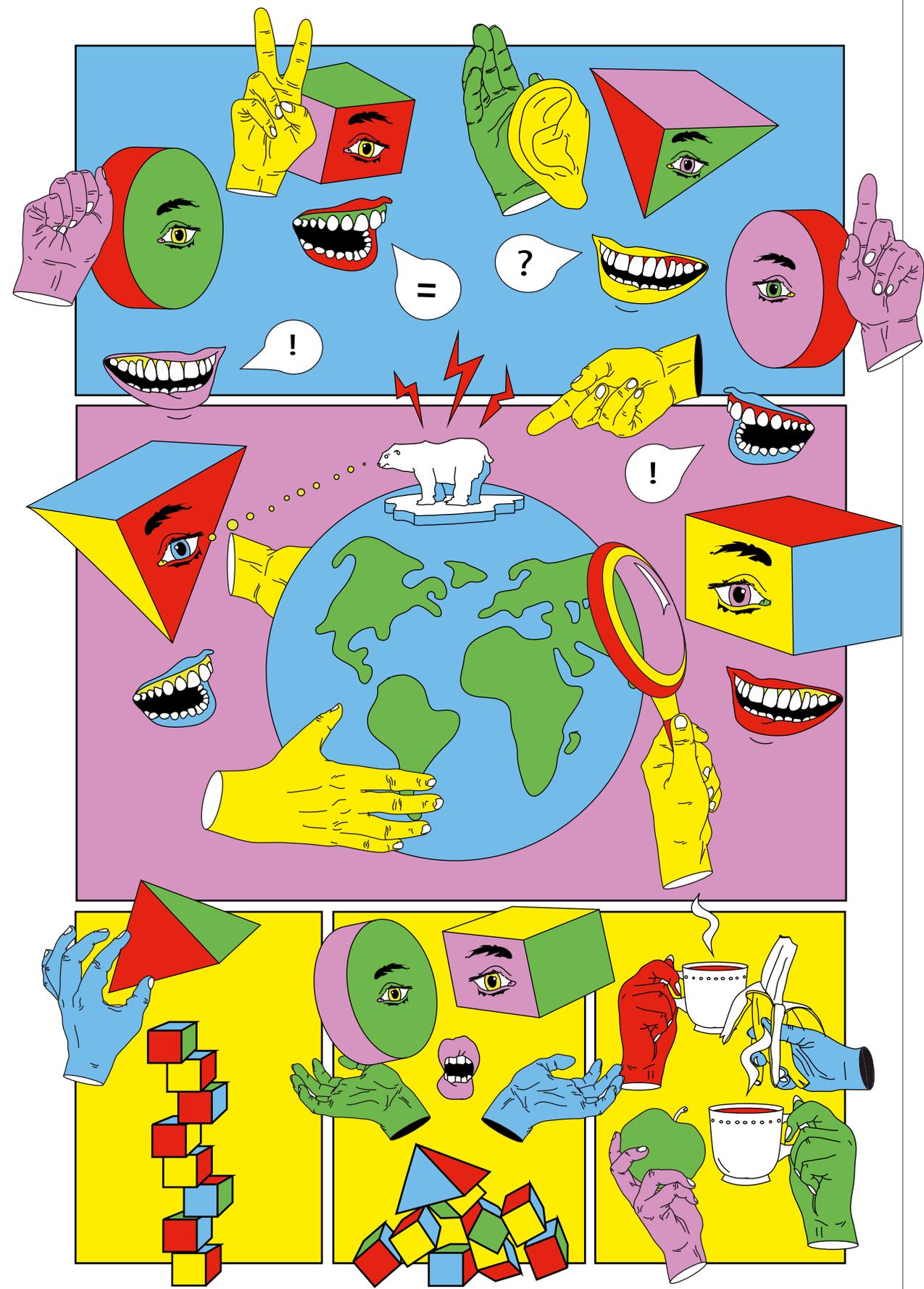
our program as an international platform, the Actors become part of and co-create a good-practice network: they show how to carry out initiatives that can inspire and drive positive change in cities everywhere.

**Nature, communities, spaces**

During the past six years of Actors of Urban Change, nearly 100 changemakers have been working relentlessly on a wide range of challenges and sharing their visions for a better future with thousands of citizens in their local environments. For the past two years, our participants have been equally engaged in projects representing a variety of topics. They invite people to think about the relation between urban and rural spaces by testing out new ways of producing and consuming resources, taking nature as a source of innovation and inspiration. They activate local communities to advocate for global systemic changes. And they show how to dedicate new imaginations to old spaces, in order to put them at the center of thinking about the future of their communities.

To be compatible in a relationship, Alain De Botton reminds his readers, means to continuously remain curious and learn from each other and also to be patient with each other, so that failures and learnings can build the ground for growth. With this evolving network of Actors of Urban Change, we are hoping to not only make cities better places, but to establish a community whose joint actions for a better future are based on strong bonds and close companionship.





# CONSCIOUS COMMUNITIES



Illustration:  
Norma Nardi

# POWER TO THE CITIES

By the Ouishare Team



Citizen-led movements are flourishing in European cities. At home, they practice collaboration face-to-face. Together as a network, they want nothing short of global systems change.

Cities have become the last hope to tackle issues that are otherwise too broad and complex to deal with: from climate change to inequality, they are rising as hubs of hope in the turbulent era we live in.

It feels like regressive forces all over the world are in high tide—from President Trump to Bolsonaro, Brexit and the rise of fake news, economic and political turmoil in Latin America and the authoritarian paths of Russia and Turkey.

International coordination has failed to tackle the most urgent issues of our time: global warming, structural inequality and the worst refugee crisis in recent history. Nation-states, the very foundations on which this order was built, are crumbling—and the collective indignation we share from one Facebook post to the next is not changing much.

### **Cities are where we can make change happen.**

More than half of the world's population now lives in cities and the proportion could reach 70% by the middle of the century. Over the last few decades, a limited club of world cities have been concentrating more and more of

the global population as well as its financial, cultural and intellectual resources. London alone accounts for 22% of the United Kingdom's Gross Domestic Product. 50% of the South Korean population lives in the Seoul metropolitan area. Back in 1950, there were only 290,000 people living in Lagos. Today, there are 20 million and 40 million residents are projected by 2050.

There is a widening gap between people living in big cities and the rest of the world's population. It is no secret that people who call themselves progressives mainly live in big cities. In fact, if you are reading this, you are likely to be one of them. In cities such as San Francisco or Seattle, less than 10% of voters backed Trump. The majority of Londoners voted to "remain"—75.3%.

Yet, cities are also powerful discrimination tools. The boom of real estate prices and high-end development projects in global cities in the course of the last three decades has fueled structural inequality. Cities still consume a tremendous amount of resources and energy and generate a gigantic amount of waste. They are at the core of a looming environmental disaster.

All the more reason to focus our collective efforts on the city scale. As citizens, we need to assume our roles in the governance of our cities, assume our roles in decision-making processes, build strong relationships across cultural, sectoral, political and spatial differences, embrace diversity and become more resilient and adaptive in times of rapid change.

This empowerment does not happen in isolation. Our modern society has rarely seen a widespread use of democratic tools: in contrast to the continuous messages we get daily from commercials and politicians on our supposed freedom and individuality, our agency as individuals is relatively limited in our daily lives.

It's through the continuous practice of collaboration that one learns to collaborate; it's not a theoretical concept. In the same way, it's through the repetitive use of democratic principles that one learns how democracy works and feels empowered to use his/her own agency for a cause. Local communities, from urban gardening groups through neighborhood associations to collectives that fight for the right to housing, are the spaces in which we can prac-

tice these principles and feel empowered to take collective action.

Citizen-led communities are flourishing in Europe, occupying the space where local governments and municipalities are not able or willing to act together with citizens. Groups of citizens are coming together towards common goals such as improving their neighborhoods, preserving the environment, promoting integration, growing healthy food and more. We call these initiatives conscious communities.

To scale and achieve maximum impact, share resources and spread their ideas, changemakers across different sectors and political beliefs are coming together in their cities. The following are examples of some of the conscious communities throughout Europe that are leading the way.

**Roubaix: A community fighting against energy poverty, connecting local actors around a local social challenge.**

In Roubaix, one of the poorest cities in France, there were several citizens and local actors concerned with energy precarity. They did not identify as a community, though. In September 2018, a local foundation organized an event around the question: how can we bring together people and organizations to work on the problem of energy precarity? Several months of collaborative and eco-systemic work have followed. Now, they have built the necessary common ground and trust to jump into action and tackle the challenge of energy poverty together.

Not only is a community of engaged actors in Roubaix working directly on the issue of ener-

gy poverty, but a network is also forming in the towns nearby—and even Paris and other cities have expressed their interest to contribute and learn from the process.

**Munich: Making good use of welfare, reconnecting with the city.**

On the other side of the economic spectrum, Munich—one of the richest cities in Europe—faces a different set of challenges.

This city luckily still enjoys a very high welfare status, making it more difficult to awaken local interest in conversations about the future and the current challenges its citizens face. They exist, but are less visible. There are many initiatives dealing with integration, education and other relevant topics, but the conversation is mostly about how to use such welfare for good: how to promote sustainable practices and places, promote circular economies and encourage inclusion.

There are some topics that go unnoticed, though: isolation and alienation from the city; as if it doesn't belong to its citizens. To react to this scenario and to spark a conversation that can awaken the local interest, there is a growing community around the topic of the Wise City.

In contrast to the Smart City concept that most councils have chosen to adopt by filling up cities with sensors, in a wise one, citizens have the chance to shape the city they live in: they develop future products that make sense for them and respond to actual needs. This engagement awakens the feeling of ownership of their space and shows how they can influence its design to improve the quality of life in their city.

**Paris: Connecting conscious communities**

The need for connection is not only felt towards the city, but also among the different communities that act within it, as is the case with Paris. The city boasts a vibrant economy with an abundance of actors and a plurality of approaches and challenges to be addressed. How can cooperation and clear communication be facilitated among a dense network of actors? The goal is to increase the impact of their endeavors: enable large-scale actions and multiply the collective emulation.

An experiment with a network of communities is already on its way with la Base, a place of acceleration and mobilization for climate and social justice that opened its doors in March 2019. It brings together associations, videographers, as well as a citizen cooperative of popular education. And they're not alone: coworking and experimentation spaces such as Volumes, Woma, Kézako, Labtop, Les Halles Civiques and Studio Singulier have recently joined forces not only to create synergies between their activities, but also to ensure their sustainability and implement actions that have a stronger impact.

**Barcelona: Fostering citizen empowerment, connecting to the local government**

In some cities, the local government has understood the power of engaging citizenship in decision-making process. Barcelona, with its Digital City Plan, is one of the references on digital social innovation and participatory democracy. Its goal is to put peo-



ple before technology and engage them in policymaking.

Hubs and connection areas have also been key in Barcelona so that its well-known maker movement could flourish: the Fab Lab and the urban factories foster learning and skill development of citizens on digital competencies, it allows them to develop their own devices, circular production models and it helps finance digital social innovation.

One could argue that most of these initiatives are led by the administration and citizens “only” contribute to them, instead of the administration supporting citizen-led initiatives. It’s a learning process. One such community-led initiative supported by the public administration is Maker Mornings, through which more than 50 different organizations gather periodically to discuss, exchange knowledge and collaborate around digital social innovation.

**International conscious communities: Systemic connection**

Conscious communities are not isolated experiences in different cities; they are part of a growing movement that is le-

veraging the power of community, networks and participation to work on systemic challenges. These collectives are starting to see the need for deeper and more strategic collaboration to increase reach, impact, access to audiences and funding and share lessons on how to govern and collaboratively scale products and services. They are aware that their work is a contribution—not a complete solution—to the challenge they aim to solve and that it is a piece in a much larger puzzle of interlinked global problems.

**A common thread: seeking connection**

As we have explored through these examples, the connection to others—whether at an individual level or among communities—is key so that initiatives can emerge. Local governments can play a key role in facilitating these physical and thematic spaces in their cities, but they are not the only ones to be able to do so. We all have a shared responsibility in this role. Communities such as Ouishare, a decentralized collective, have been connecting ecosystems around the world for collaborative, systemic change. Ouishare does

this through Ouishare Fests, with editions in four continents: Ouishare Fest Paris and Barcelona, Eco2Fest in Québec, Colaboramerica in Río de Janeiro and AltShift in Cairo; as well as more than 300 other events that its members have organized over the past seven years. The connection happens at many levels: unlikely allies meet and engage in a dialogue through participatory methodologies; the space, breaks and leisure activities at these meetings are carefully prepared so that everyone can make valuable connections that deepen the impact of their work.

In the overwhelming era of the internet in which we spend a good part of our time making social media “connections”, building trust face-to-face—MPRL, Meeting People in Real Life, as we say it in Ouishare—to develop empathy and common understanding is essential.

Cities are spaces where the great challenges of our time materialize in concrete forms; but they are also spaces where actors that care about environmental and social issues can connect and engage in collective action more easily, which is also a great opportunity. Let’s take it.

# GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER!

By Sara Grossman

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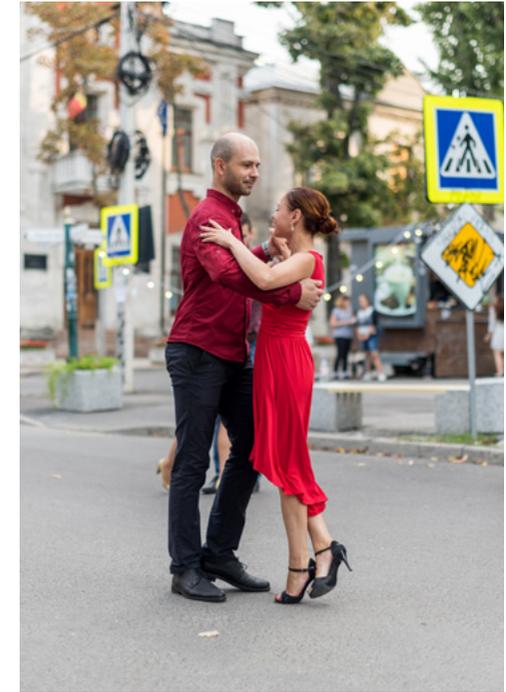
RIJEKA  
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Connecting people in fast-changing cities



Team Chisinau closed off Veronica Micle for several hours for a tango workshop, encouraging residents to engage with the street as a meeting place.  
Photo: Centrul de Urbanism



In the third act of Shakespeare’s great, albeit lesser known, tragedy *Coriolanus*, the elder tribune Sicinius ponders aloud, “What is the city, but the people?”

In the four centuries since this observation was first put to parchment, “the people” have grown even more integral to what the city fundamentally “is”.

Indeed, in an era when the movement of people to and within urban space dominates headlines and conceptions of “community” have been fundamentally changed by technology and globalization, cities today are even less about buildings, barricades and boundaries than they are about the constellation of individuals within them.

Still, today’s news about European cities is characterized by two dueling narratives about “the people”. One account warns of the continent’s smaller cities threatened by negative net migration and communities degraded by a steady outward flow of people; another warns of its urban jewels overcrowded with newcomers, unequipped for such breathtaking growth. Latvia, for example, where most of the population lives in the capital city of Riga, is

experiencing a stunning loss of residents—over a quarter of its population has disappeared since 1989, a trend with little sign of slowing. London, meanwhile, has gained nearly 2 million residents since 2000, with more than 500,000 newcomers arriving since 2015 alone.

Both phenomena—remarkable shrinkage and even more remarkable growth—mean that cities across Europe are scrambling to address new urban realities and the social cleavages that result from rapid re-adjustment. In places that are emptying out, citymakers are seeing a growing detachment from civic life and cultural engagement. In cities with many newcomers, rising anxiety towards change and difference has led to heightened xenophobia, fragmentation and exclusion along identity lines.

It is within this context that three Actors-supported projects from Chișinău, Rijeka and Valencia are working to cultivate new notions of community, seeking to expand access to cultural and civic life and, most criti-

cally, help their cities adjust to fast changing urban realities.

On the aggregate and across decades, the continent's transformations can be traced along its nebulous national borders and unstable political alliances. Yet the changes that Europe is experiencing today are perhaps best examined not from the view of the nation-state, but from the vantage point of the city—a category in which nearly three-quarters of Europeans now identify as home.

Perhaps the best illustration of a city still adjusting to fast changing urban realities is Chişinău, in Moldova, which enjoys the dubious honor of being one of the top three fastest shrinking countries in the world, with a projected population loss of nearly 20% by 2050. The city alone has lost almost 10% of its residents between 2004 and 2014.

Coupled with challenges surrounding the city's post-Soviet transition in the 1990s, like the degradation of cultural infrastructure and the private development of public space, this demographic shift has contributed to a "general process of individualization," said local journalist and community organizer Vitalie Sprinceana. The overall "lack of opportunity to participate in the citymaking process" in Chişinău, coupled with the replacement of cultural spaces with for-profit entities, has fundamentally eroded communal values, he said, emphasizing that he does not mean to suggest a particular nostalgia for Soviet cultural infrastructure.

"But it's really tragic when you look at the fact that most forms of collective participation have shrunk in size," Sprinceana said. "People go less to the church, they participate less in trade unions, political parties and so on."

Perhaps the most conspicuous manifestation of this communal alienation can be found at the street level, where cars litter public space and roads act as de facto parking spaces—and the lonely pedestrian has little claim to the pavement. The byproduct of this "car is king" policy has been to further isolate individuals from shared public spaces, cultural offerings and, fundamentally, from each other.

"Generally having equal access to space is a right, a right to the city and pedestrians

don't have this right in Chişinău," said Alexandru Munteanu, president of Chişinău's Center of Urbanism. "You could break your neck walking on the city's sidewalks if you're not careful."

It is this particular problem that Actors' Team Chişinău is seeking to tackle—if they succeed, the community will benefit well beyond the street. Over the past year, the team, which brings Munteanu together with a local architect and a representative from the city's Department of Transportation, has been working to turn a road used largely for parking into an active hub for pedestrians. They have successfully closed off Veronica Micle Street in central Chişinău sev-

**"Cultural moments are a framework for people to come together... to create meaningful relationships and then build upon that."**

eral times over the past year for cultural events and workshops, such as a tango workshop and a Christmas market.

"This kind of active citizenship [helps] people understand that this is their space, it's not the authority's space and, in this case, it's not the cars' space [either]," said Munteanu.

Solidifying neighborhood relationships encourages citizens to engage with city decisions that affect their community in critical ways, Munteanu argues. In Chişinău, he said, too often residents are excluded from the city's decision-making processes—a secondary, but equally important, challenge that his team is working to address by closing Veronica Micle Street and encouraging neighbors to get to know each other.

"We are building up a community of active citizens who care about their city," Munteanu said. "We believe this is actually activating community. It is making them believe that they actually have a voice in the city and their voice should be on the agenda of the authorities."

Sprinceana echoed this sentiment, noting that one of the biggest failures of community organizing in Chişinău has been a focus on cul-



La Despensa de Frida, Mexican food stall in Valencia's Russafa Market. Team Valencia hopes to bring visibility to small migrant-owned businesses with their culinary guide of the city. Photo: Sergi Inclan



A young resident of Skurinjje helps to build some benches for an open space in the neighborhood, which Team Rijeka hopes will become a meeting area in the warmer months. Photo: Panos Georgiou

tural activities without a similar push for active citizenship. The strategy of Team Chişinău—bringing people together around cultural events and then activating them on issues like the privatization of public space—is a model for future organizing, he said.

"The real way to engage people is to supplement their cultural participation with political participation," he said. "Cultural moments are a framework for people to come together...to create meaningful relationships and then build upon that and do civic actions and engagements."

Fifteen hundred kilometers west of Chişinău, resting along the glittering Adriatic coast, the

Croatian port city Rijeka is similarly struggling with demographic shifts and a fundamental lack of cultural infrastructure. Having lost, according to projections, around 15% of residents since the early 2000s, the city has been left with swaths of deteriorating and unused infrastructure. A recent headline declared that, "With Drivers Moving Abroad, Rijeka Forced to Reduce Commuter Bus Services."

Yet the city wasn't always so exhausted. Rijeka was hotly disputed among empires for generations, each of whom sought to lay claim to the city's strategic port and the river that snakes through it. The empires came and went, but their influences endure—not



“It could take one direction or another — it can be a future segregated city or a model of integration, an experiment that can be replicated in other cities in Europe.”

only with the remarkable architecture that remains, but in the diverse makeup of Rijeka’s citizens, who lived under nine different flags in the 20th Century alone and have come to embody and embrace the various influences that accumulated through time.

“When someone wants to see another country, they go there,” the city wrote in its successful bid to become Europe’s Capital of Culture in 2020. “Here, countries come to Rijeka’s citizens.”

However, the authors continued, “this array of worldviews, social systems and, more recently, classical transition challenges has created a kind of dome over the local population under which it is difficult to discern a unique identity of the city and its citizens.”

Indeed, Rijeka’s biggest challenge today, said Kristian Benic of the Rijeka City Library, lies with the alienation of citizens from culture itself. With thousands of Croats leaving every year or commuting hours outside the city for work each day, coupled with deindustrialization and the disuse of the city’s once-demanded port, the notion of community itself is fraying.

As a child in the 1990s, said Bernard Koludrovic, Program Manager with Rijeka 2020 LLC, the residents in his building shared daily communal activities to take care of their shared environment. Today, a private contractor is paid to manage everything—just a single example of how once-tight community relationships are loosening.

Along with Benic, Sonja Šegon and Patricia Tićac—both members of the Association for Urban Regeneration Courage—Koludrovic is working in the hilltop neighborhood of Skurinje to counteract the area’s lack of shared space and cultural infrastructure, for, as Koludrovic said, “not a single cultural thing exists”—no clubs, cinemas, concert halls, or even a library.

“If you’re not contributing to communal activities, the next step is alienation and then psychological disorders and mental health issues,” he said. “Connecting community contributes to quality of life in a solid way.”

Team Rijeka is seeking to push back

against this lack of communal engagement by tackling a root cause of Skurinje’s engagement problems—lack of open space to share and gather. To achieve this, they are reframing private “micro-spaces”—like balconies, a key architectural feature of Skurinje’s block-style apartment buildings—as places of communal exchange with seminars and exhibitions. Seeing urban sustainability and green space as key aspects to a livable city, the team has also held a number of workshops to promote urban gardening and seed exchange.

They ultimately hope to foster residents’ relationship with nature in a city that remains largely detached from its own central waterway, much of the river’s banks cut off by long-shuttered factories and other vestiges of the city’s former industrial might.

“Things are changing, but [it] is a long way from the notion of the city that fully uses and lives its river and harbor in a way you can see in other Mediterranean cities,” Koludrovic said.

The warm waters buttressing the Mediterranean city of Valencia remain comparatively wide open. Most recently in international headlines for welcoming a boat carrying hundreds of migrants that was previously rejected by Italy and Malta, Valencia is a city not lacking in people who wish to live there.

In the course of a few decades, Valencia has witnessed a substantial increase in the number of foreigners who call the city home—from under 1% in 1991 to almost 17% in 2018, an increase on par with Valencia’s more glamorous sisters Madrid and Barcelona. Having gained nearly a million residents since the mid-1990s, the city is primed to benefit from increased diversity and its role as an increasingly international city. Still, this superficial openness can also serve to mask the challenges Valencia is facing in achieving lasting integration and inclusion.

Certainly, said Papa Balla Ndong, representative for the civil society association JARIT, after 15 years in Valencia, he is still asked why he inhabits certain spaces—even activist spaces—as a Senegalese man with a migrant background. “They ask me, ‘What are you doing here?’, because the purpose of the

“They ask me, ‘What are you doing here?’, because the purpose of the migrant is to work, to seek money and to send it back home.”

migrant is to work, to seek money and to send it back home,” he said. “They don’t know that when something affects the whole population, like inequality or lack of jobs, it affects the migrants [even more].”

Still, said University of Valencia researcher Oscar Miguel Blanco, Valencia remains a relatively good place for migrants compared to other European cities. Immigration is still fairly new in Valencia, he said and the local population is open to accepting difference—although he warned that in order to remain a positive place for newcomers it must actively include them in the development process as the region grows.

“On the one hand Valencia is an open society, but institutionally it has a long path to go,” Blanco said, noting that migrants can be found in social spaces and shared areas, but not yet in universities or government.

Fundamentally, Blanco said, the city is at a turning point. It could easily turn to embrace newcomers and enjoy the fruits of rich cultural diversity, but could just as easily go the way of other European cities like Marseilles and Brussels, which suffer from entrenched spatial segregation and migrants who are locked out of opportunity in de facto urban ghettos.

“Valencia is at key moment,” Blanco said. “It could take one direction or another—it can be a future segregated city or a model of integration, an experiment that can be replicated in other cities in Europe.”

Blanco and Ndong, along with journalist and fellow team member Paco Inclán Cervera, are seeking to enter this conversation with an editorial guide to Valencia’s gastronomy, highlighting the varied and indulgent cuisines of the city’s diverse migrant communities. The guide is multifold—a cookbook, with recipes and articles from the many cultures highlighted in the book, as well as texts from contributors representing an array of fields, including journalism and sociology and research about gastronomy and migration.

Along with community food events and festivals, Team Valencia hopes its work will demonstrate the benefits of the city’s growing diversity and change perspectives of the migrant as someone who has deep and fruitful cultural knowledge, not just one who is only asking for help.

Gastronomy, they say, is the perfect entry point to bring the topic of cultural diversity into the wider conversation. As Blanco said, “Food is not only that which you can find on a plate; food is everything that surrounds the recipe”—and, perhaps most critically, a place of bridging and an opening for dialogue, the dinner table synonymous in many cultures with friendly conversation and familial understanding.

As the project grows, they hope to hand over the reins of the cultural events to the migrants themselves, giving them an opportunity to earn money and gain financial stability. Their events so far have hosted more than 300 people, coming together to experience and enjoy dishes from Senegal and other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In the long run, Blanco said, Valencia’s acceptance and enjoyment of diverse gastronomic offerings (or not) could be a good indicator of the city’s progress in integration. As Valencians come to see these dishes as rich and important parts of their city identity, he hopes so too will they see the people that brought them.

Community projects like that in Valencia, as well as in Rijeka and Chişinău, are perhaps the ultimate illustration of Shakespeare’s keen observation more than 400 years ago. People, these projects declare, are at the heart of what turns space into place and place into community.

Indeed, in response to Sicinius’ idle question, the Citizens in *Coriolanus* respond rightly in unison: “The people are the city.”

Volunteers build Casa Micle, a pavilion and meeting space where people can learn more about Team Chisinau’s vision to turn Veronica Micle Street into a pedestrian zone. Photo: Centrul de Urbanism



CHIȘINĂU (MD)

Micle— Pedestrian Street

Team Chisinau is (left to right): Andrei Vatamanuic, MIEZ Architecture Lab; Irina Bosca, Department of Public Transport, Chisinau City Hall; Alexandru Munteanu, Center of Urbanism

Chișinău lacks qualitative, inclusive public spaces where people from different backgrounds can interact and citizens are hardly ever involved in the decision-making processes in their city. Team Chișinău wants to transform a street used mainly as parking space in the center of Moldova’s capital city into a lively pedestrian public space. To do this, they’ve worked together with citizens, artists, activists, students, businesses and the local administration to create an inclusive space that stimulates interaction, communication and participation in urban life. They also hosted community events such as an urban game, a tango workshop, a neighborhood dinner and a Christmas party. Through an open and participative dialogue, the team hopes to establish the needs and visions for this new space.



VALENCIA (ES)

The Gastronomic Guide to the Migrant Valencia

Team Valencia is (left to right): Paco Inclán Cervera, Revista Bostezo; Papa Balla N’Dong, JARIT Asociación Civil; Oscar Miguel Blanco, University of Valencia

In Valencia, some population sectors—immigrants, youth, women and the poor—are often left out of the processes and spaces of city-making. Immigrants in particular are one of the most vulnerable groups to the impacts of the recent economic crisis. Team Valencia tackled these issues by using gastronomy as a tool to make the city’s cultural diversity visible, promote dialogue in between cultures and boost migrant communities’ economic growth. They met with migrant cooks and small restaurant owners, held community building workshops, promoted knowledge sharing with professional chefs and invited migrant chefs to teach recipes and dishes at cooking shows and fairs. The results of this process were collected and printed in a publication that showcases the gastro-cultural richness of the city.



RIJEKA (HR)

Culture on the balcony

Team Rijeka is (left to right): Kristian Benic, Rijeka City Library; Sonja Šegon, Association for Urban Regeneration Courage; Bernard Koludrović, Rijeka 2020 LLC; Patricia Tićac, Association for Urban Regeneration Courage

Skurinj, a typical neighborhood in Rijeka built during socialism, went through a series of transformations over the years, but one thing remained the same: a serious lack of any public, cultural or artistic spaces, services and content. Team Rijeka set out to fill this gap by using balconies as “micro-hubs” to activate citizens and create cultural encounters in their neighborhood. To do so, they motivated residents to use their balconies for creative purposes and ran a series of creative workshops for the community dedicated to urban gardening, art and DIY culture. They also hosted a public discussion and exhibition about the history and the future of the neighborhood. The project expanded beyond balconies, as the team developed one open space as a place for outdoor cultural activities during the warmer months.



Teamwork: Actors spring to action as the group’s bus got stuck in the mud during the Actors of Urban Change academy meeting in Lecce, Italy. Photo: Panos Georgiou

# NATURE -BASED SOLUTIONS



# THE CITY AS ECOSYSTEM

By Ania Rok

## Nature can be a source of innovation and inspiration to transform our cities.

I am not a big fan of new terms that appear seemingly out of nowhere and become wildly popular despite being so vague that most people struggle to define them (to be fair, vagueness is probably precisely what makes them so popular). I have witnessed my share of hypes and they mostly make me feel old. When the term “nature-based solutions” appeared on the sustainable cities circuit a couple of years ago, I was skeptical. How many more ways do we need to tell people that environment is the basis upon which human life depends?

And yet I’m happy to report I was wrong. Nature-based solutions, first promoted by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and then quickly picked up (and generously funded, both in terms of research and implementation) by the European Commission and other international actors, have turned out to

be useful in flipping the conversation. They provided a user-friendly umbrella term for other, more academic concepts describing how well-functioning ecosystem services help to address some of the biggest societal challenges of our times, such as climate mitigation and adaptation, water management, food security or health and well-being.

This rhetoric shift, together with the evidence generated, reminds us that nature is not only something we need to protect, the annoying obstacle to bypass when designing our grand future projects and nor something that exists purely for our enjoyment, pleasant but essentially useless. Instead, nature is reframed as a source of inspiration and innovation, a resource that can be harnessed, one that in fact we would be stupid to waste.

This perspective is not without its problems, but the purpose

of this article is not to offer in-depth analysis of nature-based solutions as a concept. In fact, I would like to take a step towards an even more abstract territory and share, from my personal experience, a few points on how thinking of, learning from and working with nature can benefit our work on urban change. So what does taking nature as inspiration mean for the messy business of transforming our cities?

### Nature and cities

Historically, building cities was about conquering nature. It is only recently that this opposition has become increasingly blurry or simply false. We think of cities as socio-ecological systems, with its different human and non-human components interacting and influencing each other. As humans, we are shaping our natural environment—but we are also shaped by it: our well-being, our health, the way we relate to each other, the way we fulfill our needs and organize our institutions. There is no longer a clear boundary between the city and nature. This also means that activities that previously took place outside city limits, such as food or energy production, are being brought back into the city—redefining the relationship between the city and its hinterland.

### Nature and culture

This is yet another opposition that is losing its power. Nature was long understood as something raw and uncontrollable that needs to be tamed and civilized. Culture, on the other hand, was seen as the civilizing force per se: distinguishing humans from the natural world, a predominantly ur-

ban phenomenon. Today, we are learning to value both cultural and natural heritage, appreciate the complexity and ingenuity of nature and acknowledge the oppressive nature of culture understood as civilization. We are also witnessing an increasing number of transdisciplinary projects where artists and cultural practitioners collaborate with social and environmental scientists, further contributing to blurring the boundaries between research and art. One interesting parallel is to look at how nature and culture are both instrumentalized in urban development, with a range of indexes expressing their value in economic terms and yet their space to grow increasingly limited by growing pressure on urban land or failure to support the diversity both need to flourish.

### Nature and communities

In our increasingly divided and individualized cities, nature provides an easy meeting point. Urban gardens and parks offer us a chance to experience a community with all its highs and lows: sharing space, engaging in common activities, solving conflicts. Fighting for the quality of our urban environment—whether pro-

tecting green spaces or mobilizing against noise and air pollution—is often a gateway drug towards civic activism. Nature and natural resources understood as urban commons help to reinvent urban governance, questioning both traditional top-down narratives and more recent neoliberal ones. We should also keep in mind that the quality of the urban environment is yet another dimension of spatial segregation so prevalent in our cities—and a changing climate only serves to amplify those inequalities, making certain areas hotter and drier, more prone to flooding or erosion.

### Nature and change

It is hard to forget the lessons on change that nature can offer us. The lenses we use to study the resilience of socio-ecological systems (basically their capacity to adapt to change) bring really interesting results when applied to cities. One of the properties of resilient systems I particularly enjoy bringing up in my work with local governments is redundancy, meaning duplication by design. Isn’t it the very opposite of efficiency and cost-effectiveness we so enthusiastically praise in

our organizations? Observing nature reminds us that change is the only constant. Instead of imposing rigid (policy) structures, we should rather train ourselves in thinking in cycles, identifying critical points and understanding interdependencies.

There are many other “C’s” I could bring up here: crises and conflicts, complexity and control, consumption and circularity, capitalism and climate, connections and conversations. However, I would like to leave you with just one, that for me is the essence of the Actors of Urban Change program: curiosity. The reason why I have been such a big fan of this community since the very beginning is that it invites its participants to explore the unique living ecosystem that is their city, with all its human and non-human elements, with all its contradictions and blank spots. By taking people out of their comfort zones and confronting them with new ideas, new questions and new places, it lets them look at their own cities with a new sense of curiosity and helps them to critically examine their own role in this ecosystem, changing it and being changed by it at the same time.

Nature is not only something we need to protect, the annoying obstacle to bypass when designing our grand future projects, nor something that exists purely for our enjoyment, pleasant but essentially useless.

# DESIGNING FOR WELLBEING

By Sara Grossman

## Why nature matters in human-centric urban planning

“The city is, for those who count, a growth machine,” concluded the American sociologist Harvey Molotch in his landmark 1976 paper that would go on to fundamentally change urbanism discourse for decades.

Molotch’s analysis, for which he would later receive the American Sociological Association’s highest honor, argued that the design of cities is not so much the result of direct competition over land, as had previously been the prevailing analysis, but of the mechanical urge for constant growth by business elites. While this assessment may seem hardly remarkable today, at the time it reflected a significant step forward in the understanding of how cities function—and towards what end.

More than 40 years later, Molotch’s analysis offers insight into why cities are, quite simply, so unhappy.

Cities, according to emerging research, are more often home to unhappy people than other environments. Despite their allure as

places of spontaneous interaction and thrill, urban spaces offer residents double the risk of schizophrenia when compared to rural areas, as well as 20% more risk for anxiety disorders and 40% more risk for depression.

## Human connection with nature—when regular, easy and serendipitous—is critical to positive and resilient urban life.

“The city strips its citizens of the protective factors that help people maintain good mental health,” explained Layla McCay, Director of Centre for Urban Design and Mental Health, in an article for the UK Design Council. McCay added that urban living can decrease access to nature, which can in turn reduce one’s ability to engage in regular exercise and

LECCE  
(IT)

LONDON  
(UK)

OSLO  
(NO)

TIMISOARA  
(RO)

enjoy leisure time in shared public space.

Those factors, coupled with congestion, high noise levels and overwhelming stimuli, can lead to a host of physical and mental ailments. And the design of cities themselves—which prioritize the insatiable wants of the “growth machine” over innate human needs—are at the root of these outcomes, say advocates like McCay.

“A lot of urban design mistakes of the past are related to how we saw the city as a machine,” said Itai Palti, architect, researcher and director of Conscious Cities. “A successful machine is an efficient machine—but that doesn’t mean it’s good for wellbeing.”

Today, researchers like Palti are increasingly looking at ways that cities can be designed not for the benefit of the “machine,” but for that of humanity, with health, happiness and sustainability at their foundations. And at the forefront of these findings is that the human connection with nature—when regular, easy and serendipitous—is critical to positive and resilient urban life.

It is within this perspective shift that four Actors of Urban Change projects from across Europe are seeking to guide their communities

towards a more sustainable embrace of community-oriented, nature-based urban design. Although their work is fundamentally connected by a reliance on green strategy, these projects are all, ultimately, seeking to build happier, more resilient urban communities.

“When you start understanding the value of human metrics, you start designing for them as well,” Palti said, noting that researchers are increasingly looking to alternative metrics to measure societal satisfaction, as opposed to traditional ones like GDP.

“And I think it’s possible to design for anything,” he added.

Public spaces, parks or otherwise, where neighbors can engage and interact are key to designing a happy city, argues McCay of the Centre for Urban Design and Mental Health and mental health is closely associated with strong social connections and capital.

Indeed, researchers have consistently found connections between strong mental health, happiness and open green spaces in urban spaces. One recently published Danish study on nearly 100,000 children born between 1985 and 2003 found that the risk of develop-



Youth from Oslo’s Grønland neighborhood enjoy a meal with vegetables from the rooftop garden where they worked for the summer. Team Oslo wants to use urban gardening as a tool to provide young people with work experience and inspiration for green career choices. Photo: Mandel&Sesam

ing a psychiatric disorder later in life was significantly higher for those who grew up around the least green space.

“There is extensive potential for designers to innovate, creating features within projects that facilitate positive, safe, natural interactions amongst people and foster a sense of community, integration and belonging,” McCay wrote.

Perhaps one of the most innovative plans to redesign green space for “positive, safe and natural interaction” is in the Romanian city of Timisoara, where advocates have proposed an ambitious plan to repurpose old drainage channels that surround the city and neighboring villages into accessible and interconnected green pathways. The goal, says Timisoara-based architect Loredana Gaita, is to create a larger “green network” in a city that fundamentally lacks green space.

“It’s ‘chaotic urbanization,’ in which lands are being urbanized without any sense of a larger urbanistic scheme,” said Gaita, who is working with her fellow teammates—social entrepreneur Teodora Borghoff and Sorin Ciurariu, chief architect at the municipality—to push the proposal forward. “[As a result] there are no public green spaces. So this could be another layer to systemize urbanization.”

## Timisoara is increasingly facing threats of floods and other natural disasters as climate change worsens.



Timisoara’s extensive network of drainage channels could fulfill several functions to improve quality of life in the city. Photo: Resilience Lab Timisoara

The ingenuity of their plan is twofold: Built on a historic swamp that was largely drained by man-made channels in the 18th Century, Timisoara is increasingly facing threats of floods and other natural disasters as climate change worsens and the drainage channels further degrade. The city must, at the very least, ensure that the drainage channels are functional. At the same time, the city is severely lacking in open park space—just 18 square meters of green space per inhabitant, as compared to the World Health Organization’s recommendation of at least 50 square meters per person—and the 2.5 meter protection area that already surrounds the channels could easily be repurposed as open space for “slow mobility,” like bikers and pedestrians. Team Timisoara has named this plan the “Healing Grid.”

“[Especially] in the peripheries [of Timisoara], there are areas where there are no quality public spaces—kids can only gather in the streets,” Gaita said. “This [plan] is the best alternative and it’s the cheapest for the municipalities—if they don’t own the land, they cannot build parks, but the ecological corridors already have protection areas and the paths can be built with less struggle.”



Team Lecce’s organic garden uses the synergistic agriculture method to grow food. This means letting nature do most of the work—no ploughing, no fertilizers and no pesticides. Photo: Panos Georgiou

The idea came out of Team Timisoara’s Resilience Lab project, which sought to address the lack of connectivity amongst the city’s public services by acting as a meeting point and innovation hub for experts from different sectors and institutions to identify ways to address natural threats facing the region.

Their drainage channel proposal, is a “concrete deliverable for the city to take into their policy planning,” said Borghoff.

The Resilience Lab came about after the city’s response to a devastating flood in 2017 that killed eight people and injured more than 70—an indicator, advocates say, of the need to improve drainage infrastructure and strengthen the city’s ability to respond to disaster. In looking at ways to improve usage of the drainage channels that already existed, Lab members realized that they could serve a dual purpose to improve quality of life in the city.

“[The Healing Grid] is not only for design,” Gaita said. “It can promote a better lifestyle for people living there. If you don’t have quality public spaces, this can function as even better than a small square or park as it [offers] a connectivity with other places.”

Sustainability advocates in the Italian city of

Lecce are similarly seeking to reuse existing infrastructure that suffers from chronic disuse: the city’s botanical garden, whose revitalization they hope will not only promote wellbeing more generally, but also encourage urban dwellers to reconnect with the area’s heritage of agricultural production and environmental practice.

Lecce as a region is renowned for its production of olive oil and wine. Still, said architect and social researcher Giulia Toscani, the city itself lacks a fundamental relationship with nature or with its rural surroundings.

Within the city “there is almost no green space,” Toscani said. “Either you go to the seaside or the countryside.” But getting to those places requires a car or a willingness to ride far on a bike, she said—which can be inconvenient, not to mention unsafe, especially for women.

Toscani, along with fellow members of Team Lecce, is working to bring nature into the urban consciousness by slowly revitalizing a 1,500-square-meter portion of the Salento Botanical Garden, which sits just 4 kilometers away from the city center and has gone largely unused for a decade. The team, made up of a cultural association coordinator, a public foundation board member, an architect and an urbanist, has focused on encouraging locals

Team London hosted workshops on various topics at the community garden and kitchen site in Poplar, such as how to improve local air quality involving local schools and youth groups.  
Photo: R-Urban Poplar



to engage with the local environment as well as experiment with sustainable practice and production at a time when climate change is just beginning to impact the region. Lecce is particularly vulnerable, Toscani said, because it is so squarely rooted in a system of monoculture farming.

“Either you have olive trees or you have grapevines,” Toscani said. “This is against nature—in nature, plants are mixed and one of the reasons that climate change has had such a big impact on the region is that people do this.”

Team Lecce’s workshops have sought to invite urban locals into the conversation by centering topics like this and other critical sustainable issues that allow them to connect with their region’s environmental history and food heritage. Thus far, workshops have included a series on organic gardening, open-air concerts, community gardening days and communal dinners.

“We want to change the mentality [in Lecce] about health, climate change and the relationship between what we grow and what we eat,” Toscani said. “Somehow food is very

helpful to get people together to talk in a more informal way. But the goal is to just allow people to come and learn new things [together].”

Perhaps most critically, they hope to engage with those who live nearest to the garden but whose neighborhoods are poorly designed for wellbeing and access to nature. One nearby community consists mainly of social housing, while another is spatially organized with few public services like kindergartens or parks, Toscani said, which “creates isolation and alienation.”

Toscani and her team ultimately hope that the revitalization of the botanical garden will offer an alternative solution for this severe lack of shared community space and, subsequently, this isolation and alienation.

Team Lecce is not alone in recognizing the importance of designing for a strong relationship between city and nature. Nearly 3,000 kilometers north, in Oslo, advocates are similarly looking to foster residents’ relationship with nature and food production in an area with few shared green spaces.

Although Oslo enjoys the title of one of the greenest cities in Europe, the city’s Grønland neighborhood has “almost no spaces where people can meet,” with very few parks, squares, or even terraces, said Laura Martinez Izquierdo, International Project Advisor with Nabolagshager and a member of Actors’ Team Oslo.

The team works with a garden at Urtehaugen, which produces herbs in raised boxes in a compact, concrete plaza. The space serves not only as an experiment in urban gardening, but also in bringing together groups that might otherwise view each other with mistrust. The garden sits at a corner surrounded by what otherwise might be the set up for a joke: a kindergarten, a mosque and a soup kitchen for people with drug addictions.

“That’s why we thought we need [green] spaces where people can meet, because it’s very easy to talk to your neighbor when you are planting or watering,” Izquierdo said. “That’s why gardening works well—even if people don’t speak the same language, it’s still easy to smile to your neighbor.”

It was no accident that Izquierdo and her team centered their work in Grønland—the neighborhood is home to dozens of different nationalities, the largest of which include Somalis, Turks and Ethiopians, along with the types of challenges that many immigrant groups face when relocating to a new place, including poverty, language barriers and access to opportunity.

These groups have been largely left out of Norway’s highly lauded “green shift,” says Kate Louise Milosavljevic, a researcher at Oslo Metropolitan University and Izquierdo’s teammate, together with Circular Ways NGO co-partner Katerina Eriksen. Although Oslo is today Europe’s “Green Capital” and held up as a model for other cities in its prioritization of sustainability, many of these “green incentives are all really primed towards reasonably affluent white Norwegian communities,” Milosavljevic said.

She noted that the government offers a number of subsidies for buying Teslas and other electric cars. “But if you can afford a Tesla to start with do you really need all those ben-

efits?” she said. “It’s rewarding those who are already affluent.”

Team Oslo is working to tackle this systemic exclusion by bringing urban gardening to the city’s marginalized communities and in doing so improve the quality of life and sense of community among local residents. Towards this end, they have hosted a number of open gardening days, as well as a popular “garden circus” last summer that was attended by more

**“In our project the main objective is not to grow a big amount of food, but rather create a place where neighbors can talk to each other. It’s an excuse to meet.”**

than 600 locals. For teens, they offer part time jobs and trainings at both the Urtehaugen garden and a rooftop vegetable garden at the green social enterprise Nabolagshager, helping them learn not only about urban sustainability and food growing, but gain critical job skills and networks as well.

They also invite neighbors to enter the garden and take food as desired, embracing the square as a truly open and inclusive space of enjoyment.

“For us, [the garden] is for everybody,” Izquierdo said. “In our project the main objective is not to grow a big amount of food, but rather create a place where neighbors can talk to each other. It’s an excuse to meet.”

Indeed, although experts highlight open green spaces like parks as a key asset when designing for mental health, the positive effects that these spaces provide can be replicated in other types of spaces, says Palti of Conscious cities. Green spaces are often powerful mental health boosters because they signify a leisure

or community intent, rather than one for work or efficiency, he explained.

“The reaction to that intent is probably more powerful than the green itself,” he said. “We can take that same intent and embed it into streets and buildings where we need restoration, in places where we don’t necessarily have the ability to place a park.”

At least in Oslo’s Grønland neighborhood, community organizers are working with what they have, offering a space of intentional leisure and purposeful gathering for a community that has few accessible alternatives.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, studies from the USA, Australia and other parts of Europe have consistently found that low-income and minority communities have far less access to green spaces—and high-quality ones—than their high-income counterparts.

In the UK, the situation is particularly unequal—according to one *Guardian* article, “the inequality between ethnic mixes seen in local environments is even more stark than those in schooling, crime, housing, jobs and health.” The article further noted that predominantly white neighborhoods have 11 times

**With four shipping containers on a car park, R-Urban Poplar provides space for green experimentation on solutions to some of London’s biggest environmental challenge.**

more green space than those where at least 40% of residents are of a minority community.

In London, one community group is, like Team Oslo, trying to center sustainable urban practices in a space whose nearest neighbors suffer from high rates of poverty and relative-

ly low levels of education. Although Poplar, in east London, sits close to the city’s booming financial center, it also boasts some of the highest child poverty rates citywide as well as a long-term unemployment rate of nearly 20%, according to the 2011 census.

There, in a former car park between two social housing estates, Team London started “R-Urban Poplar,” a workshop, training and events series hosted in four shipping containers that seek to provide space for green experimentation on solutions to some of London’s biggest environmental challenges, such as poor air quality and waste management.

“One of the main things we’re interested in is how we can use this site as a space to prototype ideas that could operate on a bigger scale,” explained Andrew Belfield, a designer at an art and architecture collective. Belfield is a member of Team London, along with Danny Tompkins, a project coordinator for a Poplar housing association and Javier Rojo, director of a waste management company.

A current focus of experimentation is the anaerobic digester, a machine that consumes household food waste and turns it into usable biogas and fertilizer, the former of which they hope will eventually be used for R-Urban’s kitchen (using waste collected from estate residents) and the latter to grow plants in the community garden. After more than two years of planning and construction, they have just started to go door to door to encourage residents to collect food waste and allow them to trial the digester’s functioning as part of the larger project.

Like other Actors projects, the team is also engaging community—both local residents and Londoners from across the city who are interested in ecological issues—with events like family-style dinners and workshops on how to build a moss wall to improve air quality, as well as a “tool library” where residents can check out items as needed.

“We’re trying to form our space as a positive public space where education takes place,” Belfield explained. “It’s about the training of people—that is the main ambition of the project.”

Beyond education, however, Belfield and the team are also in the process of renovating the space itself into a more accessible area, with green infrastructure like benches that residents can enjoy even when the shipping containers are closed.

“Right now we literally open the containers and unpack everything, whereas we’d like to have something more permanent,” Belfield said. “We hope that that will be transformative for how people use the space when we’re not there.”

Ultimately, said Belfield, they hope their project can serve as a model for how local communities can effectively reduce their carbon footprint and create a closed-loop system of waste and reuse while also fostering wellbeing and community interaction in spaces that might otherwise be alienated from a city’s cultural or environmental offerings.



“It’s the moments where you bring different groups together that can make the biggest difference,” Belfield said.

Team London’s sustainable “closed-loop system,” as well as those projects proposed in Oslo, Timisoara and Lecce, are all, in their own ways, strong rebukes of the insatiable “growth machine” first recognized by Harvey Molotch more than four decades ago. Indeed, even then Molotch identified environmental advocates as key figures in local anti-growth movements, demanding more sustainable, human-centric city planning.

“When growth ceases to be an issue, some of the investments made in the political system to influence and enhance growth will no longer make sense, thus changing the basis upon which people get involved in government,” Molotch predicted in his conclusion. “We can expect that the local business elites... will tend to withdraw from local politics. This vacuum may then be filled by a more representative and, likely, less reactionary activist constituency.”

Perhaps, when joined with a growing urban design movement that demands wellbeing be considered in planning, projects like these will encourage more communities to experiment with alternative forms of consumption, production and interaction—all of which, in their own ways, are critical to healthy and happy urban life.

During a natural construction workshop hosted by Team Lecce, participants learned how to build garden structures using giant cane, a species of reed that grows in the region.  
Photo: Francesca Guarascio

## LECCE (IT)

Team Lecce is (left to right): Giulia Toscani, ExposeProposePolitiscise; Afro Carpentieri, Foundation for the Management of the Salento Botanical Garden; Francesca Guarascio, Freelance Architect & Urbanist; Marco Carlino, Janub Cultural Association.



## BotaniCALL

The Salento Botanical Garden, just outside the city of Lecce, was created 10 years ago as a public park, but remained dormant for years. In 2017, a group of volunteers created a vegetable garden inside the 13-hectare area. Team Lecce worked to transform this garden into a hub for food growing, research and planning of urban green areas. Through the project, they held a synergistic agriculture training program, natural architecture and medicinal plants workshops, open gardening days and community events. A cultural program on natural agriculture, organic architecture and ethnobotany brought together a wide network of local partners, new stakeholders and volunteers for the management and co-creation of the garden.

## TIMISOARA (RO)

Team Timisoara is (left to right): Teodora Borghoff, Borghoff Teodora Individual Enterprise; Sorin Emilian Ciurariu, Timișoara Municipality; Loredana Gaita, In Comunitate Association.



## Resilience Lab

Timisoara, built on a swamp that was drained by man-made channels, is prone to flooding—even more so through the effects of climate change. Team Timisoara sought to tackle this challenge by forming a knowledge network on urban resilience and mapping tools and solutions to the city's vulnerabilities. In workshops and lab meetings, they developed the concept of a Healing Grid that utilizes the city's drainage channels as interconnected blue-green corridors, making the city more resilient while creating green recreational areas and improving mobility. They also published a good-practice guide which serves as a tool for citizens and the local administration on expanding the city's green infrastructure.

## OSLO (NO)

Team Oslo is (left to right): Laura Martinez Izquierdo, Nabolagshager; Katerina Eriksen, Circular Ways; Kate Louise Milosavljevic, Oslo Metropolitan University.



## Growing Multicultural Communities

Grønland, Oslo's most multicultural neighborhood, faces significant social challenges, including drugs, violence and unemployment. Team Oslo worked to build a bridge between the green movement in Oslo and vulnerable, socially excluded groups through urban gardening. After running surveys and polls with the neighbors to find out their needs and interests, they ran several workshops for minority youth where they could learn new skills related to food growing and preparation, event planning and project management. They also held community events for children and families which involved preparing and sharing meals with vegetables from the garden.

## LONDON (UK)

Team London is (left to right): Javier Rojo, Quantum Waste Ltd; Danny Tompkins, Poplar HARCA; Andrew Belfield, Public Works.



## R-Urban Poplar

Every year, London produces over 1 million tons of organic waste which is destined for landfill. Team London sought to tackle the way we currently dispose of food waste in cities, proposing a localized waste management system in Poplar, East London. They developed an off-grid anaerobic digester which processes waste from the local community garden and, combined with a solar energy system, can power the nearby community kitchen. The team also ran workshops with local schools and residents on cooking and food culture, air quality and food waste.



This drone image shows a section of the drainage channel that passes by a new development in a suburb of Timisoara. The Healing Grid concept developed by Team Timisoara envisions blue-green corridors which form a network around the city and can be used for slow mobility, recreation and health purposes. Photo courtesy of Resilience Lab Timisoara.

# REIMAGINING SPACES



# COLLABORATIVE SPACES FOR TRANSFORMATION

By Dr. Bastian Lange

A new generation of city-makers is shaping the transition to the next city.



In times of increasing interest in urban spaces for living, working, meeting, finding shelter, exercising democracy, expecting safety, getting educated, consuming and even exploring as a tourist, one would expect that planners, politicians and city officials would have enough experience and knowledge on how to make use of niches, voids and hidden abandoned and unused spaces. Or those spaces that were given a clear but rather selective function decades ago and, today, are repurposed as societal needs are shifting: parks and green spaces built for esthetic reasons are becoming sites for urban gardening, physical exercise, performative practices or meditation. Public spaces formerly built for strolling, seeing and being seen are often temporarily transformed by skateboard meetups and teenage dance battles.

How can the social collaborative mechanism of small-scale, bottom-up placemaking approaches envision new and broadly accepted uses for these in-between spaces?

Very often, out of temporary cultural and district initiatives, initial seeds emerge and lead to open cross-sectoral cultural formats in more established festivals and urban places. The annual Lendwirbel festival in Graz, Austria, for example, is rooted in self-organized efforts of transversal initiatives that want to temporarily reprogram urban space into zones of cultural intervention. In doing so, they are helping new practices of cultural production and urban life to become visible so that new local practices start to transform the city and its public spaces.

There is an increasing need for new uses of urban spaces based on growing demands of diverse groups of people in European cities and beyond. But there's a lack of expertise on how to design, to initiate, to cope with and even to plan collaborative spaces that serve multiple purposes and are easily adaptable to specific local needs.

As a response to these rising demands of open types of urban spaces, community initiatives are starting to make sense of spaces for different user groups, espe-

**Social and collective practices serve as the backbone of redesigning and even reinventing open, accessible and user-centered spaces.**

cially on a small-scale dimension. This applies to top-down attempts by city administrations designing open public spaces, as well as state-initiated laboratories, where different parties come together to negotiate solutions for neighborhood demands. The German Advisory Council on Global Change (Wissenschaftlicher Beirat Globale Umweltveränderungen (WBGU) 2016, p. 26) in particular has stated that in so-called "real-world laboratories", researchers and stakeholders are able to explore problems and solutions for the urban transformation by

trying things out and experimenting together.

Contrary to top-down approaches, there's an ever-increasing range of bottom-up attempts envisioning spaces in cities that address political oppressions, social segregation, cultural and economic displacement or the lack of free spaces. Although both approaches operate on the same scale, a more collaborative, steered approach can enrich the multiplicity of urban spaces.

In classical top-down urban planning, knowledge and creativity-based placemaking go hand in hand with small place designs—after the era of large attempts such as campus universities, media quarters, suburban knowledge silos and monofunctional innovation parks. In these mega-projects, key concepts such as the Smart City or Sharing City very often ignore the relevance of various forms of social encounters.

After an era of ignoring local demands and needs, larger development projects are incorporating more participatory practices to meet the place-based demands in urban economic development strategies. In liberal, progressive societies, it is becoming more and more relevant to integrate diverse social groups and their identity politics in urban realities.

As they engage in the local context, established Smart City policies are challenged by less structured, collaborative forms of work. Open workshops, real laboratories, FabLabs, urban laboratories, repair cafés, coworking spaces and others are becoming increasingly important, as they provide valuable input into social urban innovation processes. Defined by social practices such as

craftsmanship, repairing technologies and DIY-attitudes, they make room for alternative consumption and production modes.

These experimental spaces have been gaining attention in the public, academic and policy arenas. Government agencies now want to support niche initiatives such as open workshops, open creative labs and real laboratories. Grassroots innovation movements are now a focus of academic discourses as expressions of experimental urban transformations. On the policy level, topics such as mobility, housing and energy supply—systems that affect the everyday life of city dwellers and which many of these spaces are working to transform—are becoming more relevant in order to achieve sustainable development goals.

A defining character of such experimental spaces is their rootedness in civic collectives. Unlike narrow notions of innovation, often restricted to fields such as small business networks or industrial clusters, social and collective practices serve as the backbone of redesigning and even reinventing open, accessible and user-centered spaces.

## People want to recreate a world in which food no longer tastes the same and social relationships and experiences feel real.

Such ‘open innovation’ attitudes have not only come to infiltrate alternative or green economies; they also support a needs-based and user-centered social logic. It seems natural, then, for maker-spaces, creative labs and open workshops to spontaneously get involved in resource-saving, environmentally friendly, socially balanced work, as they embrace the principles of open access, mutual learning, knowledge sharing and a do-it-together attitude.

Both perspectives—top-down and bottom-up—envision places as the relevant yet controversial terrain of the urbanized 21st century. On the one hand, places such as Billebogen in Hamburg are more than just public places and many of them have grown to become models of new social configurations and cultural practices. On the other hand, top-down efforts such as the “New Downtown” in Hamburg simply follow a planned formula with minor functional mixtures, as they emerge in Hamburg’s Hafencity.

Bottom-up, user-driven place formations are successful because there are backed up by social interest groups, social

movements and a collaborative governance: like-minded collaborators are often united by high motivation, anti-utopianism, practical enthusiasm and straight-forward political agendas. They act out of growing political concerns for designing free, open and affordable living spaces with a clear user orientation. These types of collaboratively designed spaces reduce development, building and planning costs and guarantee greater acceptance in the long run.

In turn, top-down planning approaches with a higher degree of formalities have started to be more sensitive to the ever-increasing public interest toward planning and building projects that are based on participation through collective structures.

### **An outlook: from collaborative places to transitional geographies**

The wide range of user-centered places and bottom-up phenomena can be understood as practical and collaborative manifestations of the local. These actions are primarily oriented toward their immediate surroundings. But to what extent can small niche ef-

forts be upscaled and disseminated in order to gain more momentum? Or should they remain local and small?

From an urbanistic perspective, small innovative projects such as the Billebogen often begin in geographical niches. They act and communicate live and in person within their communities. But even though their actions are local, they participate in horizontal communication networks stretching beyond the local fix. In this way, bottom-up initiatives become visible as local manifestations and responses to global challenges and crises in the urban context. They react to ineffective top-down approaches and complex challenges with horizontal practices. By showing pragmatic solutions within their own neighborhoods, they respond to regional, national, European and global economic, ecological or knowledge-based crises.

A core motivation of those city dwellers pushing urban change forward is to demonstrate that other, practical alternatives are possible within peer networks and that top-down hierarchies are often not the best way to provide alternative solutions. In believing and practicing this philosophy, they embody a narrative of autonomy, a narrative which shows that problem-solving can be made concrete and feasible.

The social designs of these local geographies can be seen as examples of a new, 21st-century urbanization: one that is happening under completely new social, political, cultural and economic conditions. They show how people in urban areas around the world struggle to ensure access to public common goods, acting on

their desire for social participation and their need to preserve social infrastructure for more inclusive politics, economies, cultural spaces and more.

The idea of public place as the polis of the European city—for strolling, consuming and showing oneself—is shifting more and more toward the idea of a place where existential questions about participation in social processes are presented, planned and negotiated anew. Young and old city dwellers alike increasingly demand a say in the design of new places in their neighborhoods, just as they strive to preserve places that have become culturally significant for them. New protesters, for example, are becoming increasingly skillful in defending themselves against projects that change their location, thus helping local and site-specific values to gain acceptance and recognition.

After an era of continuing globalization, communities are taking pragmatic approaches right where they live, work and play. Overwhelmed by the profusion of analog and digital networks, people want to recreate a world in which food no longer tastes the same and social relationships and experiences feel real. Edges and corners, sharp points and notches are placed in today’s world in order to lend the missing haptics of the digital age a new old grip. These initiatives are in stark contrast to the everyday objects that have lost quality, fit, usability or taste due to industrial production methods.

In the course of the search for the right plot of land, the do-it-together-and better-culture—originally assigned to the protesting punk in music, fashion and

society—has been reformulated and has become the source of new production of spaces. Their main focus is not only on the re-appropriation of production processes—that they want to do it “themselves”—but also on making it “better”. Do-it-better is the driving force behind numerous local designs. As a result, the poor, the elderly, asylum seekers, migrants and the unemployed are being displaced on the outskirts of cities. It is very difficult for them to take such design processes into their own hands as a highly qualified urban lifestyle community is doing by knitting, gardening, crocheting and crafting.

Socially and politically motivated groups undoubtedly try to react or point to these political distortions, social fragmentations and cultural exclusions with new forms of spontaneous and temporary appropriation of space. This shows that the long-standing and clearly existing relationship between city dwellers and their place is broken: more and more sub-collective, site-related and particular interest groups—no longer homogeneous local claims of a fictitious citizen—are standing up for their interests.

These are new city dwellers who no longer put forward uninformed concerns about the design of urban places, but rather draw their claims from disruptive global patterns. Climate change, the energy crisis, war, migration, mobility and structural economic change are forcing an ever-increasing number of people to reclaim their everyday autonomy and to initiate social and collaborative processes that create meaning—and are part of a larger narrative of transition.

# SAME SAME ... BUT DIFFERENT!

Our cities look more and more similar everywhere and both capitalism and communism are to blame. Gathering spaces are disappearing—sold out, left abandoned or replaced by virtual ones—at great peril to communities. Can urban collectives reclaim old spaces for new connections and creative experimentations?

By Sara Grossman

HAMBURG

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Urban sameness has reached epidemic levels. In city centers across Europe, the comfort of familiarity is never far out of reach. If not for the local Starbucks franchise, then for the non-chain coffee alternative—generally with its Millennial-approved, slightly edgy-industrial furniture to match. So convenient, so comforting and yet, in many ways, so bleak.

In the 20th Century, such successes of innovative Western enterprise served as proud rebukes to the tired sameness of centralized Soviet planning, in which economy and culture were orchestrated by the state, with grassroots culture having little place to thrive in the open.

From the view of the East, however, the economic and cultural achievements of western Capitalism were indulgent and chaotic—indeed, does the world truly benefit from 30,000+ McDonalds, some locations just blocks away from each other?

In today's cities, the legacies of both systems have proven unsatisfactory for local residents. In post-Soviet states, the remnants of standardized cultural infrastructure can be found in city centers across the region, with the same “traditional museums, traditional theaters and [traditional] universities,” according to one Ukrainian advocate. In more capitalistic

In Vilnius, an urban orientation game calls players' attention to some of the lesser-known corners of the city. Here, a player scores a point at the historical neighborhood of Šnipiškės. Photo: Panos Georgiou





During the 2018 edition of Hallo Festspiele at the Bille river, Team Hamburg started creating a public access to the waterfront from the power plant.  
Photo: Helga Lorbeer

environments, Starbucks, McDonalds and the myriad of other familiar global brands are just as expected in any chosen urban center.

Cities—whether developed in the legacy of heavy-handed central planning or shaped by global corporations vying for more and more of their market share—are suffering from a shared ill of dull uniformity. And yet, there is an even newer threat to urban autonomy: With the rise of the internet, savvy tech companies have seductively made the case that in an age

**“What we want ... is to protect and co-develop the space, letting it live on as it is now.”**

of instant global connection, non-commercial space to gather is hardly important—every need for community you think you might have can be found at the click of a button. These companies have appropriated the language of “local” and “community” enough to fully redefine them. Facebook, for example, claims to “bring the world closer together,” while Airbnb “create[s] a world where anyone can belong

anywhere.” Apple, meanwhile, has conceptually redesigned its stores as local “town halls”—a wholly unsubtle move “to reconfigure civic life around itself and its ideals,” according to one tech publication after the announcement.

Undoubtedly, it is easy to superficially belong anywhere when “everywhere” is fundamentally the same, devoid of any defining place-based character or complex engagement with local customs, needs, or communities.

At a time when the value of “local community” is itself under attack, collectives across Europe have begun to see the reuse of historic infrastructure for new forms of culture-making as a key strategy to maintaining unique local identity and culture. And three Actors projects working in very different urban contexts are seeking to do just that: repurposing old, abandoned spaces for new community connections and creative experimentations—elements that are critical to what makes a city a compelling and quality place to live.

Indeed, a 2010 Knight Foundation study of more than 40,000 people in cities worldwide found that the most critical factors for creating emotional bonds between people and community were not jobs or the economy, but “physical beauty, opportunities for socializing and a city’s openness to all people.”

Reflecting on these findings two years later, Urban Land Institute’s Edward T. McMahon concluded that “character is key” in driving a city’s prosperity.

“Planners spend most of their time focusing on numbers—the number of units per acre, the number of cars per hour, the number of floors per building,” McMahon wrote. “In the future, they will need to spend more time thinking about the values, customs, characteristics and quirks that make a place worth caring about.”

Unfortunately, he continued, “many communities are suffering the social and economic consequences of losing their distinctiveness.”

In the northern German city of Hamburg, residents are witnessing perhaps the ultimate example of how grassroots community and local culture can be swept aside for the benefit of outsiders with little connection to place.

The port city is today one of the top cities in Germany for foreign direct investment, according to fDi Magazine. And the effects are evident: Prices for existing apartments have risen more than 70% since 2009, according to a 2018 Deutsche Bank report.

Even back in 2010, however, the German Spiegel newspaper documented early anxieties around the city’s changing landscape and inhabitants. “Hamburg currently functions as a focal lens of sorts, one in which the conflicts

of the coming decades are already recognizable,” wrote journalist Philipp Oehmke. “These conflicts will pit change against preservation, private property against the community and, most of all, economic interests against social considerations.”

Nearly a decade later and these conflicts are in full view with the completion of the shiny development of HafenCity, home to the city’s €789 million Elbphilharmonie, a towering glass concert hall representing one of Hamburg’s biggest investments in local culture.

And still, Hamburg advocates say, this “local culture” is not necessarily for the locals.

“In general there is a much larger focus on classical or high culture,” said Dorothee Halbrock, collaborator on projects for HALLO:, a cultural organization working at the crossroads of art and urban development. “While there is support for grassroots projects, it is really in small amounts—there is definitely a huge difference in funding.”

One *Spiegel* article described the HafenCity quarter as “the loneliest place in the world”—a “neighborhood planned first for investors and tourists, then for citizens.” According to Deutsche Bank, rental prices per square meter in the city center are almost double that



Vilnius’ St. Virgin Mary the Comforter Church has long sat in the center of urban life, an inconspicuous observer to the many transformations in this post-Soviet city.  
Photo: Panos Georgiou

“Now we don’t need large-scale production, [but the] old city infrastructure is our urban heritage, which also has to be transformed.”



Team Kherson revitalized the abandoned factory lot and turned it into an urban garden where more than 100 social and cultural events have taken place.  
Photo: Urban CAD

outside the area, largely due “to elevated prices in the HafenCity quarter.”

As global investors further belly their way into prime urban property, longtime residents find themselves with little say in development decisions and at risk of being shoved aside entirely—and most at risk are the colorful people who have long made the city interesting: its artists, musicians, young people and other culture makers.

Halbrock, along with the fellow members of Actor’s Team Hamburg, is working to bridge that support for grassroots culture with Kraftwerk Bille, a former power plant along the Elbe River in Hamburg’s industrial Hammerbrook neighborhood. Together with the private company MIB Coloured Fields—the building’s owners—and the public agency Kreativgesellschaft, which supports the city’s creatives in finding space, the team is redeveloping part of the plant as a public space for culture, new forms of work and experimental co-creation. In doing so, they hope to ensure that the city remains an open and viable space for artists and other grassroots culture makers to continue contributing to Hamburg’s unique urban culture and identity.

So far, they have implemented regular cultural programming at Schaltzentrale, a neighborhood office in Kraftwerk Bille and kicked off a new project exploring new forms of work. During their annual Hallo: Festspiele festival at the power plant, they explored ways to increase access to the nearby waterfront.

Unlike some of Hamburg’s larger cultural projects, Halbrock said, the team intends to develop the space with neighbors and other locals, ensuring that it remains a cultural center truly grounded in community, even as the area around it grows and becomes more attractive to new residents.

“[Hammerbrook] is definitely an up-and-coming neighborhood,” she said. “What we want is not to help to bring it up in the common sense of city [growth] but to protect and co-develop the space, letting it live on as it is now.”

Eastward across the Baltic, in a city more recently cleaved open for fevered global investment, a team of Actors is similarly seeking

to “co-develop” historic infrastructure into a space for community engagement. Unlike Kraftwerk Bille, however, which sits tucked away in Hamburg’s industrial east, Vilnius’ St. Virgin Mary the Comforter Church has long sat in the center of urban life, an inconspicuous observer to the many transformations in this post-Soviet city.

Constructed in the 1600s, the church has since borne many identities: Catholic, Orthodox, Catholic again and, in Soviet times, an industrial storage space for meat and vegetables. Until recently, the church has stood empty, observing silently as the spaces nearby were bought out by private investors and closed off as public spaces.

Ten years ago, said architect and longtime Vilnius resident Zemartas Budrys, his dog could run freely through historical parts of the city. Now even he himself cannot pass through many parts as “the Old Town becomes more and more locked in [with] no strategy to serve public interests over private ones.”

Indeed, after gaining independence in 1991, Lithuania shifted rapidly from Soviet development practices—in which every city, street, square and cultural institution or program was carefully planned by the central communist government—to one in which the free market became the key influence in development. Today, just less than 30 years after independence, Vilnius’ Old City is almost unrecognizable, with historic buildings now home to standard global retailers like Zara, Mango and United Colors of Benetton.

In the August 2008 edition of *Global Urban Development*, Jurate Raugaliene, an architect with Vilnius’ Old Town Renewal Agency, wrote that new groups of inhabitants in the Old Town have adapted the environment to their purposes, “sometimes to the detriment of the existing historic urban context.”

“Few of the social groups residing in or basing their businesses in the Old Town have sufficient knowledge of the history, culture and heritage value of the area and fewer have the functional knowledge of conservation methodology,” Raugaliene wrote. “The need for education in the management of cultural properties has increased significantly, then, with the

growth of renewal work in Vilnius Old Town and with the potential for more active resident and investor participation.”

Budrys, as part of Actors’ Team Vilnius, is seeking to foster such active participation by tackling the city’s growing lack of noncommercial shared space and urban “samification” more broadly. Working collaboratively with the Ministry of Interior and the local Catholic community, they are redeveloping the church as a community space, particularly interested in addressing what they say is a lack of dialogue between authorities and community. They’ve been opening up space for exchange towards that end, seeking to improve understanding between local police and community groups. In honor of the church’s long religious history, they have also made space for a chapel on the second floor, open for use by believers and other local residents.

Through the space co-creation process, the community now involved with the church has also identified a key topic area—human trafficking and modern slavery—as an issue for further exploration and engagement. The team, working with the Ministry of Interior, which owns the church, has held a number of research and advocacy events on this topic and hopes to ultimately engage local artists with an ongoing residency for those working on issues related to modern slavery.

“[The space] is really an enclave, there is something extraordinary in the way it functions so differently from other places around it,” Budrys said. “The city itself is very privatized—but the Old Town is to the extreme.”

As the rest of the Old City continues to give way to the wills of the free market, the redeveloped church may one day stand as a safe space for different communities to develop a

feeling of belonging—a sign for local residents that all are welcome, not only those with something to spend.

While Lithuania quickly replaced the stultifying sameness of communist infrastructure with a shiny new brand of capitalistic uniformity after independence, Ukraine, another former Soviet state, has not transitioned quite as rapidly.

In the southern city of Kherson, says Olena Afanasieva, the same type of expected cultural offerings can be found as 50 years ago, with little room for other types of creative culture making. The city has “all the traditional culture institutions which remain from the Soviet times,” said Afanasieva, who is a cultural manager with the Centre of Cultural Development “Totem” in Kherson.

“In my city—in each city—you have the palace of culture and a traditional theater,” she said. “Of course you can use these spaces, but really innovative new ideas appear in creative spaces.”

The consequences of this lack of space are evident: young people continue to flood outward, seeking excitement and experimentation in places with greater possibility. More generally, the city has lost population at a rate of more than half a percent per year since Ukraine gained independence in 1991.

“Active young people leave the city because of an absence of places to realize their creative potential, innovative ideas, culture and social initiatives,” Afanasieva said.

And unlike Vilnius, the infrastructural relics of the Soviet Union and Kherson’s industrial past continue to loom large over the city. Once a hub for shipbuilding, textiles and agricultural machine production, many of these factories—some of which are located in the city center,

“[The space] is really an enclave, there is something extraordinary in the way it functions so differently from other places around it.”

despite their toxic ecological and health effects—now sit empty, partially used, or entirely abandoned.

“These empty spaces not only form a depressing view of Kherson for residents and tourists, but also forms a depressed economic, ecological and emotional background to the city,” Afanasieva said. “Now we don’t need large-scale production, [but the] old city infrastructure is our urban heritage, which has to also be transformed.”

As a member of Actors’ Team Kherson together with a business association chairman and a city official from the culture department, Afanasieva is seeking to do just that, revitalizing a former factory into a space for culture and community interaction—all while working to preserve the history of the space and honor the city’s industrial past.

During the course of their time as an active Actors’ project, they have invited a number of artists and designers to create new works and installations within the factory, developed a lecture and exhibition space and hosted more than 50 open lectures on art and culture and, most critically, gained the active involvement of the local community, NGOs, activists and social entrepreneurs in planning activities for an art platform.

They also revitalized an abandoned lot into an active public square, which hosted more than 100 cultural and social events, particularly on urbanism and community development.

“We created the urban garden as an open public space,” Afanasieva said. “[A] new format that is the most important step for understanding the possibilities of modern urban development by the community and for the benefit of community.”

Fundamentally, she said, Kherson is at a key moment, as the world has “become open” to Ukrainians and Kherson’s residents are seeing alternative ways that culture can be made and experienced, beyond traditional boundaries.

“That’s why we created this project—to break the gap between World of Big Possibilities and Kherson,” Afanasieva said.

And the World of Big Possibilities is truly vast, filled with diverse cultural activities and com-

elling local identities that offer respite from the bleak sameness produced by either communist central planning or the freewheeling open market.

“Place is more than just a location on a map,” explained the urban researcher McMahon in his 2012 analysis of why “culture is key” to a prosperous city. “To foster distinctiveness, cities must plan for built environments and settlement patterns that are both uplifting and memorable and that foster a sense of belonging and stewardship by residents,” he wrote.

These projects, in Hamburg, in Vilnius and in Kherson, are steadfastly working towards that vision, not only stepping in to develop space for culture makers and artists where support is lacking, but at the most base level making their cities, their communities better places to live. No matter what bloated tech brands or other omnipresent global companies might suggest about what community “is”, nothing can replace the simple act of connecting in person, of meeting one’s neighbors and of experiencing the joys of art, culture and education together in space that was not developed for commercial use or economic gain.

“Given all this, I believe that one of the big questions for cities in the future will be: Do you want the character of your city to shape the new development?” McMahon asked, “Or do you want the new development to shape the character of the city?”

At least in these three cities, advocates are fighting to ensure the former.



Team Kherson envisioned the Urban Garden as a space for creativity—both artists and community members were invited to create new artworks and installations for the space.  
Photo: Urban CAD

## HAMBURG (DE)

Team Hamburg is (left to right): Lukas Grellmann, Hamburg Kreativ Gesellschaft mbH; Dorothee Halbrock, HALLO: Verein zur Förderung raumöffnender Kultur e.V.; Frauke Woermann, MIB Kraftwerk Bille GmbH.



## Hallo: Kraftwerk Bille

Hamburg lacks affordable spaces for non-commercial, cultural, public use. Urban development often fails to incorporate participation processes and social segregation is evident in its neighborhoods. Team Hamburg set out to create a public space within the privately owned Bille power plant, a factory complex from the late 19th century in a mostly industrial area. Their goal: to run a long-term, cultural, public project as part of Kraftwerk Bille's redevelopment. So far, they've managed to run a consistent cultural program at the power plant, have started a project to explore new forms of work at the site and are developing a new public park around the plant together with other partners.

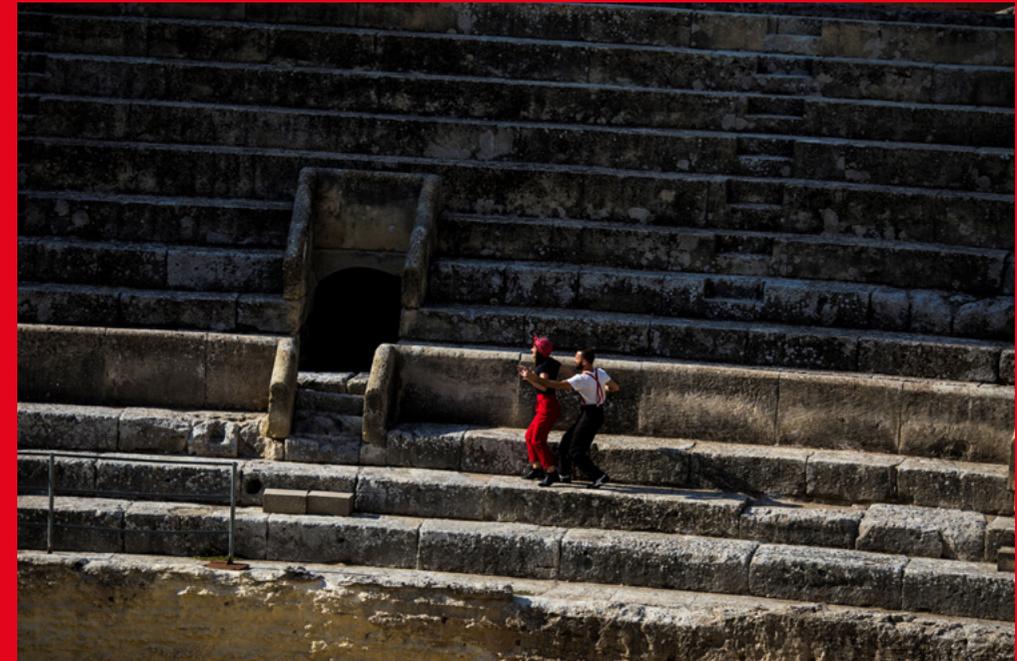
## KHERSON (UA)

Team Kherson is (left to right): Olena Afanasieva, Centre of cultural development „Totem”; Vitaliy Belobrov, Business Association “We Khersonians”; Maryna Druzyakina, Kherson City Department of Culture.



## Turbine &amp; Urban Garden—post-industrial creative spacemaking

Empty industrial buildings dot Kherson's city center, giving the city a feeling of neglect. Active young people leave the city because of the absence of places that allow them to explore innovative ideas. Team Kherson turned an old factory and industrial lot into a multi-functional open space through citizen participation, creating a new platform for creative and cultural activities in the city. They mobilized volunteers to clean and renovate the building and surrounding lot and invited artists and designers to create art installations in space. Team Kherson also involved the city community, NGOs, cultural activists and social entrepreneurs in planning activities at the urban garden; so far, the space has hosted dozens of music and literature events, theater and film festivals and community gatherings.



## VILNIUS (LT)

Team Vilnius is (left to right): Zemartas Budrys, Homo Eminens; Dovile Gaizauskiene, Performative Design Association; Alvydas Šakočius, Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania



## Creative space co-creation for an abandoned church

The St. Virgin Mary the Comforter Church in Vilnius' Old Town has seen many uses, from place of worship for different Christian denominations to food storage during communist times. Team Vilnius saw the abandoned church as a place that could bring different social groups together and offer them a non-commercial space to gather and co-create. Through their project, they facilitated a placemaking process and dialogue among different users: local community groups, businesses, government officials, law enforcement, NGOs, artists and students. The process resulted in finding a new focus for the space: the church as a space to research, work and raise awareness on the topic of human trafficking and modern slavery. The project has helped connect the church and surrounding area to a wider neighborhood development strategy.



The Bille power plant's boiler room („Kesselhalle“) is mostly empty today aside for occasional art exhibitions. Team Hamburg envisions this space as a common good, a space for new forms of work and collaboration, culture, arts and beyond. Photo: Nils Petersen

We need more places  
where you can just  
be yourself. Places  
to explore our own  
mindsets and share  
them with others.  
Where communities  
can mix up with one  
another.

Dovile Gaizauskiene

Creative space co-creation, Vilnius  
→ More info on p.63

Photo:  
Panos  
Georgiou



R-Urban is a chance to bring something different to Poplar. It's as much a place to have fun and learn as a space to prototype new technologies.

## Danny Tompkins

R-Urban Poplar, London  
→ More info on p. 45

Photo:  
Panos  
Georgiou



When you offer food, it's the perfect recipe to bring people together. That's the magic of growing food together. It's so easy and simple, anyone can do it.

## Laura Martinez Izquierdo

Growing multicultural communities, Oslo  
→ More info on p. 45

Photo:  
Panos  
Georgiou



When you increase  
fertility and biodiversity,  
the whole system  
becomes more  
resilient. It's useful for  
people  
and the environment.

Marco Carlino

BotaniCALL, Lecce (IT)  
→ More info on p. 44

Photo:  
Panos  
Georgiou



Where there is a lack of public spaces, people need to improvise—to be proactive and have the courage to take risks.

## Sonja Šegon

Culture on the balcony, Rijeka  
→ More info on p. 31

Photo:  
Panos  
Georgiou



Society has changed.  
We immigrants have  
more voice. But we  
still have to actively  
build alternatives to  
inequalities.

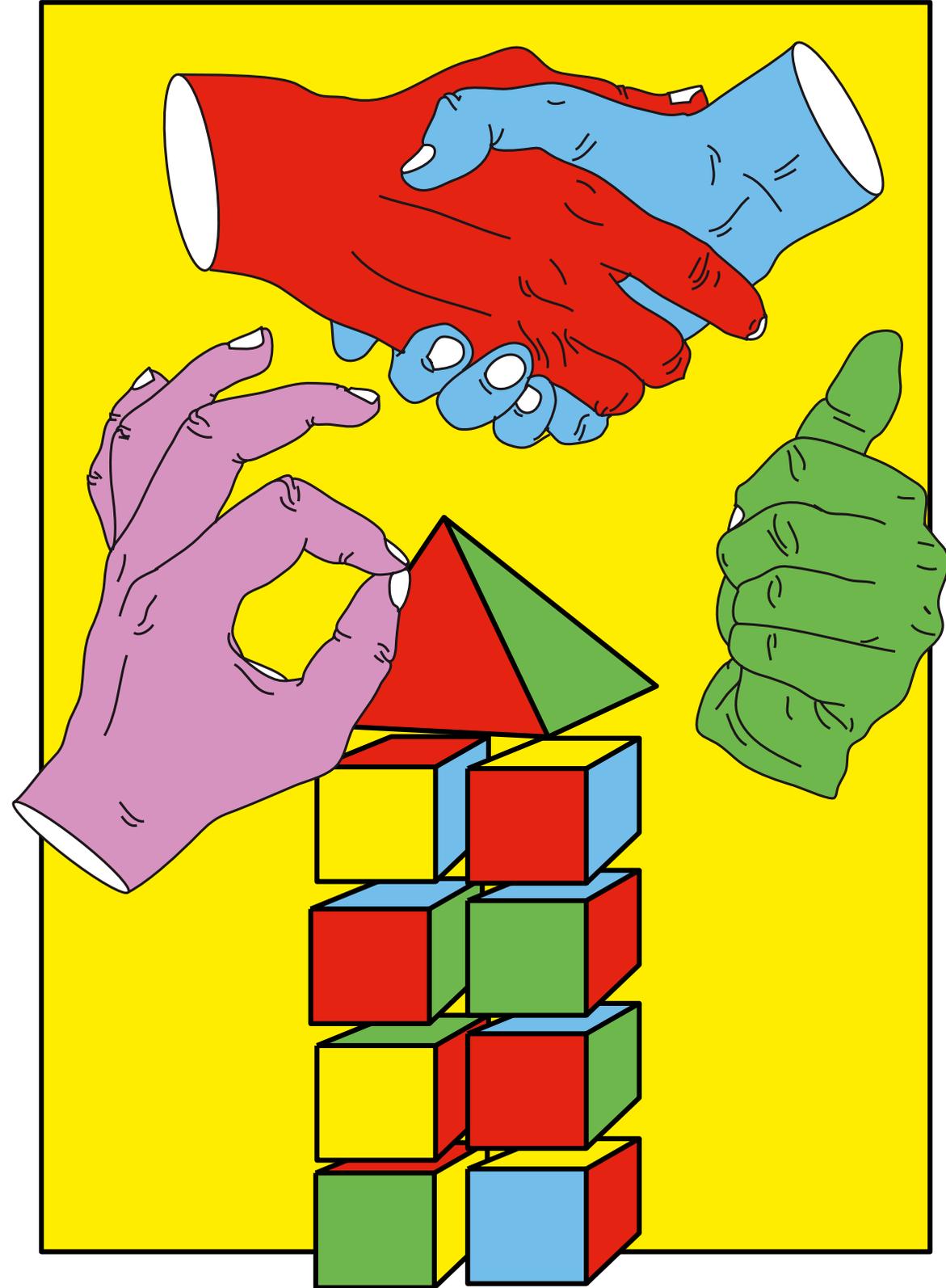
## Papa Balla N'Dong

Gastronomic Guide to the Migrant, Valencia  
→ More info on p. 30

Photo:  
Panos  
Georgiou



# STORIES OF IMPACT



# ACTORS AND THE CITY

## On belonging, adapting and re-centering

The impact of the Actors of Urban Change program is perhaps best measured not with mere data points, graphics, or charts, but through the long view of reflections and takeaways from participants in the weeks and months after their experience with the program. Last year, Dr. Julie Ren of Humboldt University in Berlin sought to do just that in producing a qualitative evaluation of the Actors program and its projects, shedding light on the victories and challenges of the individual Actors and their diverse projects, their societal and academic relevance and the nature of cities in transition that these projects inhabit. Ultimately, Ren's appraisal seeks to answer the question: In what ways are this program and its projects meaningful, for whom, where and based in which terms?

Throughout her evaluation, Ren discovered patterns in how Actors are having a meaningful impact in their cities. Three significant narratives emerged: a story of belonging, a story of resourcefulness and adaptation and a story of demarginalization. The following are excerpts from these stories.

### Belonging in the European City

Today, we are witnessing a heightened interest in centering practices of "belonging" and "inclusion" in urban development. This emphasis is reflective of a shift in thinking about the limits of formal political membership—as

societies become increasingly diverse, citizenship no longer serves as a useful indicator for inclusion. The exclusionary nature of national identity and its institutions of citizenship has been an important driver to explore belonging in the context of inclusion, participation and identity. In the terms of Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst, it is a kind of "elective belonging" that characterizes the subjective feeling of belonging, no longer linked to historical roots connected to a particular place of residence. In other words, people do not simply belong to a tribe, but belonging is determined by an active choice and a feeling of being a part.

It is within this framework that a number of Actors' projects have sought to tackle exclusion and othering in communities across Europe. These projects worked to advance belonging in three ways: in the recognition of marginalized groups, in encounters between and among groups and in fostering a sense of ownership over shared spaces.

In the small Bavarian city of Geretsried, Germany, the Actors project sought to foster belonging through the publication of residents' diverse oral histories. The project showed that recognizing the stories and struggles of marginalized groups can serve to both foster a sense of belonging among these groups while also acting as a valuable resource against mistrust towards those who are considered "others."



Residents of Stein, Geretsried take an aerial map of their district as starting point for discussions. Photo: Trägerverein Jugend- und Sozialarbeit Geretsried e.V.

Like many cities in Germany, Geretsried is grappling with the rise of new right-wing anti-immigrant political party, "Alternativ für Deutschland." The party's rise signaled not only a general discontent with the establishment parties, but was also reflective of a growing xenophobia and anxiety around demographic shifts across Europe. Still, the city, which was established during World War II, has long been home to new waves of migrants—first displaced peoples after the war, then guest workers (foreign workers invited to help with the labor shortage in Germany) and people with German ethnic backgrounds who moved to Germany from various countries of the former Soviet Union. More recently, immigrants from central and Eastern Europe, as well as refugees and asylum seekers from Vietnam, Syria and Afghanistan have moved to Geretsried. As Actors team member Andreas Porer explained: "All residents here have an immigrant history."

Given this varied history of migration, a fundamental issue for this Actors project was how to integrate heterogeneous groups in Stein, a diverse neighborhood in Geretsried that is isolated from the rest of the city. Not only does Stein face isolation, it also grapples

with the stigma of being dubbed the "Ghetto of Upper Bavaria," where children often face ostracism when attending local schools.

The greater aim of the Actors project was to establish a new community center that residents in Stein could use for on-going activities that needed a regular space to meet, like dance groups. Their approach was to begin with community-building work through collecting stories from residents for over a year.

**"By telling these stories we want to establish bonds: with other people, with the homes once left behind and those newly found—with the place where we live and make a living today, the district of Geretsried called Stein."**

(*Stories Set in Stone*, 2010).

In Aveiro, what was initially a temporary intervention to a vacant lot in a street corner became a permanent installation. Here, the square receives a makeover at the City-Toolbox Festival in 2018. Photo: Delio Sa



While the stories of more recently arrived residents are largely missing from the histories at the Geretsried City Museum, they are central to the publication that the Actors team ultimately produced, entitled “Stories Set in Stone.” The project of collecting subjective experiences, giving voice to those who came with various waves of migration and articulating their shared hopes for their children facilitated a different kind of belonging across generations: they offered recognition to the diversity of migrant trajectories and experiences encompassed by the residents of Stein and further uplifted their victories, contributions and struggles.

Ultimately, the project offered more than just visibility to overlooked communities in Geretsried: it caught the attention of the Soziale Stadt, a federal program in Germany that dedicates resources to disadvantaged neighborhoods, which ultimately stepped in with funds for a community center in Stein—the original goal for the Geretsried project. Although the project itself was quite modest, it led to a larger impact in bringing public recognition of Stein as a community worthy of public investment.

The impact of the Actors project in Geretsried therefore cannot be reduced to the publication distribution or readership; the impact

can be read in the sense of belonging that these stories helped to facilitate. It was a method of community-building that functioned in leveraging other resources, shaping the neighborhood in concrete ways.

Fundamentally, the issues around belonging in the European city is captured by Actors projects in the ways they deal with the emotional, subjective sense of belonging, in the recognition offered marginalized residents through storytelling, in the active facilitation of ownership over community spaces and in the reflexive turn inwards, appreciating the need for a better understanding of communities. They do not provide any guidance for who belongs in the European city, but rather offer stories for how “belonging” itself puts into question the false dichotomy of insider/outsider.

#### Makeshift Urbanism

Empty spaces in cities abound. Urban sociologist Fran Tonkiss describes these “vacant and abandoned spaces” as the “physical scars of disinvestment, disuse and decline.” Cities across Europe have been faced with various forms of austerity and these spaces are often the product of larger economic and political processes. These “nooks and crannies” are

the products of a particular kind of decline, neglected by the city in visible, material ways.

Indeed, the added pressure of austerity demands a willingness to adapt. Urban space is characterized increasingly by temporary uses, which has given rise to a kind of “interstitial urbanism”—a makeshift urbanity that connects cities across scales and regions. The story of makeshift urbanism illustrates the way that Actors projects employ creativity as a response to neglected space, design their projects with an admirable resourcefulness and smartly multiply their effects through training and networks, ensuring that impacts are felt far beyond any single project.

Perhaps the ultimate illustration of such “interstitial urbanism” can be found with the Actors project VivaCidade in Aveiro, Portugal, which sought to invite residents, students and artists to regenerate a street corner that had been empty and neglected for years.

Through an extended participatory process with residents, VivaCidade developed a number of hands-on workshops for people to get involved with the regeneration of this street corner. These workshops were organized with partners from various associations who brought skills in areas like carpentry, gar-

dening, or mural painting, activities which invited participants to make something tangible with their hands, be creative in public and help transform this public space together.

The Aveiro team engaged the public in a number of creative ways: for example hanging posters in public space for passers-by to write what they would want for the construction. The posters served as a way to invite more people to participate outside of the formality of a meeting or discussion. According to team member Maria Ângela Oliveira Cunha, another successful method of nontraditional community engagement involved wooden cubes, which were distributed with “a dual goal: the communication and promotion of the project and the construction of a collective sculpture in the void with all the cubes.” And still, after the official project had ended, many of the cubes served as decor or mementos for residents across the city.

“For example, my dentist...She didn’t bring it, but she has it in the living room. In the entrance, the reception. She has the cube on her desk,” Angela said. “And so it’s fun. You see the cubes still. There were 200 cubes or something like this. So some people didn’t bring the cube, but still use it.”



Stein, an isolated neighborhood in the small Bavarian city of Geretsried, has a rich history of immigration. By collecting oral histories, the Actors project sought to foster a greater sense of belonging. Photo: Sabine Hemsdorf-Hiss

“During the period of Actors of Urban Change, there was the openness to every partner. To do it. To change ideas. To actually somehow compromise.”

In this, a symbol of the project became disseminated throughout town, a small cube of reflection and creative participation.

Speaking with the entire team, it was clear that the regeneration project demanded they find a way to reimagine this space and these creative practices were a means to do so. With the cube disseminated throughout town, visible years after, a single activity became a very tangible kind of outreach—beyond the void and into the city.

More broadly, the reconstructed corner was a site of “making” Aveiro, through collective acts of creativity. The appropriation of voids for various uses and the concomitant representation of this as a mode of urban creativity is well-established and the interim space established a kind of space of possibility. Despite the complaints about Aveiro’s lack of engagement or poor planning—or perhaps because of them—“such spaces may matter most when urban prospects are most bleak,” according to sociologist Tonkiss.

The regeneration of the urban void in Aveiro was conceived originally as a temporary intervention, but in gaining access to European networks and support through Actors, the team decided to completely shift their approach. The municipality wanted more permanent materials and because of Actors, the team was much more willing to agree to a compromise. Aveiro team member João Pedro Rosa explained:

“During the period of Actors of Urban Change, there was the openness to every

partner. To do it. To change ideas. To actually somehow compromise. To go to a commitment that everyone could feel comfortable doing something, which is to be implemented. So during that time this was possible. And we did it. Somehow there was an advocacy coming from an external voice. The program, this European level. And somehow we were all very open to come to agreements! And Actors of Urban Change was really important for that. To set up this mentality.”

The void itself not only reflects an interim space that facilitated creative acts of participation, but also served as a catalyst for a kind of flexibility within the team. Having Actors as an “international umbrella” helped the team situate their local void in a different space, one in which people were more willing to compromise. The void became a space of possibility in multiple ways—through its situation as an interim space, through the creative approaches that engaged people with small hands-on projects and through the external voice of Actors itself that helped foster more flexibility.

#### Re-centering the Periphery

The concept of the periphery takes on multiple connotations within cities, in the wider European context and as applied to other forms of social and economic marginality. The periphery is thought here not only in the morphological sense of a physical “outskirts” of the city, but a space that is marginal in multiple senses. In its marginality—socially, politically, economi-

The Aveiro team engaged the community to work on the square in a variety of creative ways. Photo: Delio Sa



cally—the periphery is never fully incorporated into the “center.” It “therefore embodies an instability that is always potentially destabilizing of that center,” according to sociologist A. M. Simone. Its embodiment of instability and the gesture of “re-centering” echoes the long established view that cities today no longer have stable or conventional boundaries between the core and the periphery.

The Actors projects and the program itself take a different approach in re-centering the periphery: in their understanding of cultural distances, in rendering distant cities accessible as a tool of reflection and in collapsing the gap between the institutions at the center (planning and municipal offices) and the actors of the periphery through the cross-sectoral requirements of the program. The story of re-centering here occupies multiple scales of work—in the city-scape, in Europe and across sectors.

“And Actors of Urban Change was really important for that. To set up this mentality.”

In Novi Sad, Serbia, there is a significant distance between one neighborhood on the periphery and the city center. Ognjen Tomašević, a member of the Actors team from Novi Sad, aptly described the neighborhood of Novo Naselje: “It’s one of the youngest part of the Novi Sad...in the modern architecture urban design style. Many green open spaces. But, somehow, the cultural institution was skipped in those plans.”

Indeed, the origins of Novo Naselje represent a kind of housing development found in many cities across Europe faced with population booms in the post-war period and built under various forms of socialism. These housing estates, often built in the 60s, are today faced with an enormous pressure to regenerate in a context of instability and transition; many housing estates are experiencing both physical decay and social downgrading.

“[Novo Naselje] is on the periphery,” Ognjen said. “And everybody from city center or other neighborhoods considered it far. But it’s not so far—nothing in Novi Sad is far. And we’re kind of separated. And we were proud, because of that. When we were kids, we used to joke with our high school friends, that ‘you’ll need a passport to visit Novo Naselje.’”

Marko Jozić, another member of the team, agrees that, while Novo Naselje is only six kilometers from the city center and that there are plenty of buses to connect people, the distance is cultural. Residents sometimes feel “like Novo Naselje is a country. And they have their own rules and way of thinking and culture. And sometimes, the language is different. It’s crazy to understand this kind of slang,” Marko said.

This distance is most evident for the Actors team in clarifying why it is important to build a cultural center in the neighborhood. In preparation for their bid for building a cultural

center, the team conducted a study of about 2,000 people to assess the citizens' needs and collect suggestions. The study revealed how people believed that culture was important for their spiritual lives, but it wasn't important enough to get on the bus. So the residents of the neighborhood would claim that "We need culture. But if we have to go by bus 20 stations, then we will watch TV. Why? Probably because we don't need culture too much," Marko said. When the team organized film screenings on the open field in the neighborhood, however, hundreds of residents would come. These findings were critical to identifying needs and next steps for a physical cultural center in the area—and in ultimately moving Novo Naselje away from its "periphery" status and closer to the urban core.

Fundamentally, projects like that in Novi Sad serve to re-center the distances and needs of residents in marginalized housing estates by first trying to understand them. Before drawing out plans for changing aspects of these estates, they rightfully sought to understand first why residents might feel marginalized. They take the residents as the central point of focus, re-centering the periphery by giving voice to their concerns.

Beyond re-centering the periphery within cities in which Actors projects are located, Actors as a program also re-centers the European periphery at large. In its selection of projects in places like Zugdidi, Georgia and Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, it pushes the boundaries for what is considered a "European city." Through this participation, these projects participate in a dialogue on Europe, finding common ground with teams from other cities and presenting their work in the same arenas, on the same stages.

The nature of the travel was especially noteworthy for the projects on the European periphery, to see the shared challenges that were faced in countries at the European core. Ognjen explains how this helped them to really appreciate aspects of their project in Novi Sad that they had not recognized before: "You get that feeling that you're not alone, over there. And that gives you motivation to work it through... or try to appreciate more. Some of the projects were having troubles with their local communi-

ty. But we didn't have that. Our local community is very supportive to us. They want to help us. They want to participate. So you appreciate that thing more. Because you see that things can be different. And it's not all black and white like you imagined in the first time."

This sense of empowerment, of seeing other teams in similar situations, reflecting in new ways on their own projects and feeling as though they can accomplish something greater is also echoed by Ognjen's public sector partner, Darko Polić. For Darko, one of the most meaningful moments of the Actors program happened during the academy in Krasnoyarsk, when the public sector partners were brought together: "I realized that we had the same problems. In Krasnoyarsk. In Bologna. In Novi Sad. And of course, how to overcome those problems is different, of course, depends on democracy level in certain countries. But because I had inspiration again, like every time, that something can be changed. Because—it could be depressing here... nothing is changing. It's every day, the same golden cage around. But I cannot see the change there. And life needs change. I need change."

As is evident with the Novi Sad team, the cross-sectoral partnership of Actors projects is a defining characteristic of the program. It is an aspect that often brought together people that had never worked together before. Doing so often created far greater mutual recognition—it at times re-centered the marginalized parts of the city, excluded groups within the city, or brought attention to projects that the public sector may have never funded themselves. Indeed, the public sector partner was often a source of official recognition that pulled projects onto a larger stage.

The cross-sectoral partnership re-centered the neighbourhood of Novo Naselje in the broader work of Novi Sad. This could not be more evident than in the role of their project in the city's successful bid for the European Capital of Culture 2021. When Darko was invited to join the municipality team to prepare the bid, he made sure that the work being done by the Actors team in Novo Naselje was also a key part of the bid. Their proposal for the European Capital of Culture was about

"We need culture. But if we have to go by bus 20 stations, then we will watch TV. Why? Probably because we don't need culture too much."



Novo Naselje, a district in the Serbian city of Novi Sad, doesn't have spaces for culture. When Team Novi Sad organized film screenings on the open field during their time at Actors of Urban Change, hundreds of residents would come. Photo: Novo Kulturno Naselje

"building bridges" and included the construction of the cultural center in Novo Naselje as one of the concrete outcomes of becoming the selected city.

The resources that came with the winning title would be accompanied by a chance to welcome a bigger audience, to situate Novi Sad as a European Capital, rather than a small city in one of the newest members of the EU, on the edge of its borders. It re-centers the periphery. Perhaps more important, however, would be the concrete impact that this would have in their neighbourhood. Through the European Capital of Culture, resources would be made available to build their cultural center in Novo Naselje. The Actors program provided very little in financial resources,

but it brought together a team and helped support the survey and publication that would be leveraged for an enormous recognition.

Ultimately, in travelling to new places and learning to see institutions as people, Actors facilitated shifting perspectives and relationships that have had lasting impacts on the alumni, their work and their cities. These cultural peripheries are spaces where Actors projects shift the focus towards the needs of residents. The Actors projects and the program itself transforms geographies of understanding, attention and, importantly, serves to leverage resources as a result. These efforts helped to turn a marginal neighborhood into a capital of culture.

# City Toolbox Interview



During the Urban Hackathon at the CityToolbox Festival in Aveiro in 2018, participants designed and built small interventions to promote cycling among youth in the city. Photo: Delio Sá

CityToolbox (CTB for short) is a project created by six Actors of Urban Change teams from the first round of the program (2013-2015): Athens, Aveiro, Berlin, Lublin, Maribor and Zagreb.

In 2017, they launched an online learning platform where young people taking action for positive change in their cities can discover tried-and-true tools which they can apply to their own context, as well as share their tools with others around the world. The idea behind the platform is simple: “change it yourself”—anyone should be able to transform their city.

[www.citytoolbox.net](http://www.citytoolbox.net)

We spoke to four team members—Dr. Kaja Pogačar (Maribor), Marta Klepo (Zagreb), Matthias Einhoff and Miodrag Kuć (Berlin)—about their experiences over the past two years, how the platform has evolved so far and their future vision for the project.

*You met during your time as Actors of Urban Change. How did the frame of Actors shape or influence CityToolbox as a project?*

**Marta:** I think it was more of a moment of having people who do similar things and having a conversation with them and having another perspective of what you do. Most of us felt like Actors was an important moment for us and we wanted to continue having this group of people and bouncing off ideas with all of them. We wanted to continue working together because after the whole year we became like a family. It was important to us to find a frame where we could continue not only on bilateral projects, but all together also.

**Kaja:** It was a really strong experience at Actors of Urban Change and we really wanted to share it with others who are involved in the same spheres and getting active in the field of urban change, so we could share our knowledge but also connect with those who are in similar situations. This is also obvious now that we've seen many Actors from the second and third generation who would like to join the CTB platform.

**Miodrag:** Through the Actors program, we structured our projects and made them more solid. This allowed us to make them transferable to other contexts, which is one of the main features of the CTB. We also got to know each other well and built trust, which was a good base for the collective work that came afterwards. It made cooperation much easier.

**Matthias:** The Actors program allowed the CTB Team to meet and get to know each

other in the first place. Without it, CTB would not have happened. CTB is like a digester of the outcomes from Actors—it takes the outcomes and translates them into an easily accessible story and manual and attracts potential users to these stories. It's simply very closely related.

When our team joined the Actors program, we saw it pragmatically as an opportunity to economically strengthen our plans for our project, but we soon realized that the qualities of the program are rather about capacity building and networking within a diverse group.

*How has your collaboration changed over time from your time at Actors and beyond? Did you encounter challenges?*

**Kaja:** We applied for an Erasmus+ grant; in these years we were mostly involved in creating a platform in order to expand the number of projects and actors. So it was more about growth—not just the initial teams of 6 partners but to grow to a larger community. We're still working on this topic of how to address other potential actors.

**Marta:** As far as difficulties are concerned, staying in touch is a bit of a problem. Especially because we are 6 partners with completely different backgrounds and realities, but we somehow manage. It's a bit of a miracle. Because when you compare it with other projects and how they function, after a while there's this kind of, “okay, I think that's enough”. And getting 6 teams together is always a challenge. But we've periodically managed to do that. Collaboration also changes because we change. We change through the collaboration but also we change completely independently. Some of us are a bit more experienced, some of us have other things on our minds, like education. We're developing our projects and ourselves, professionally, so this reflects on the collaboration because we bring new elements to it.

We started with a digital platform—there was the idea to have physical meetings but we didn't have the full budget that we applied for—but now we really want to focus on this and including as many young people and students as possible so we can share our ideas and spread them around. It's a bit of a shift.

*You started bringing your tools from a digital platform to real live action with the CTB Lab format, which you brought to the Kypseli Municipal Market in Athens in October 2018. How is this changing the project?*

**Kaja:** This was the initial idea, not just to have it written as a manual but to bring into real life experiments and actions. We all come from this working perspective—it's not a philosophical thing but mostly a hands-on approach. This is proving the concept—the CTB Lab in Athens was the second time we could support and implement some of the tools that were presented in the platform. We're also looking at new places where this could possibly happen.

**Miodrag:** Before the tools became 'digital' they were real projects anyways. We structured them as a set of actions and recommendations and so we could condense them and get to the point, so to speak, without losing the specific message or quality of every tool. Offering them as an online step-by-step manual also simplified them and made them more accessible for the people that don't have the experience we build on during the project.

**Matthias:** It tells us that our hypothesis—that these tools are transferable—was right. There was some justified critique, that every space is unique and needs uniquely developed methods. Our first adaptations show that this is only partly true. We've seen some beautiful transformations of existing tools.

*After two years of Actors and two years of City-Toolbox, what do you see as the most significant outcome so far?*

**Kaja:** That we still have the energy to continue and really engage in that. There is an internal need that you continue with such a project, especially when you don't have the financial frame around it. The platform is being updated, new tools are being uploaded. It's still alive, still developing and has the potential to grow into a much bigger thing. We've been talking about possibilities to offer summer school packages for students, collaborating more with universities and municipalities. There's a knowledge we can offer. What we are addressing are serious topics. How to change the cities of today? We have many problems in cities that are not properly addressed and solved, so I think this is the major motivation bringing us forward.

**Marta:** And creating a community is really important. Active people who actually reflect on their cities and urban issues nowadays and actually do stuff.

**Miodrag:** I would say the use of the CTB platform itself and the first CTB Lab which we did in Athens last year. (Re)using the tools in other contexts helped us not only to close the loop (from original tool to online tool to repeated tool), but also to practice applying them to very different scenarios with new groups of people.

*What makes a tool a good tool to change a city for the better?*

**Miodrag:** First of all, it's pretty hard to evaluate a tool because of multiple outcomes—some you can measure, others you can't. Having said that, a good tool is simple in its form but can trigger a larger process in urban development and not just improve a single location. A good tool also builds the capacity of the people using it, because of the intensive, practical knowledge transfer that comes with it.



For the first CTB Lab in Athens, the CTB team collaborated with Impact Hub Athens to bring two tools from Berlin to the newly reopened Kypseli Municipal Market.  
Photo: Panos Georgiou

**Matthias:** If a tool creates better and equal opportunities for all citizens to experience positive social interaction, personal well-being and a greater understanding of communal wealth, then it's a good tool.

*Has there been anything surprising or unexpected in how CTB is being used?*

**Marta:** All of the tools, if you can translate them to a new context, they're always different. So I think surprises are expected, as funny as that sounds. It's not something that you just put somewhere else and then it works. You have to have a lot of local knowledge and expertise to be able to pull it off. I'm talking about Portugal, Athens, where we have these experiences from.

**Kaja:** It's also difficult to have control over what happens, because you launch an idea, an inspiration and we're just hoping that some people use it so they can become more empowered. In the future, we want more than inspiration; we would like to support the network, but also to discuss the problems of

today's cities, how citizens can be involved in changing them, we should talk more about it. That's why we also introduced this idea of the lab which is not only implementing tools in selected environments, but to have more of a conference-type of format where we discuss these topics.

*Have you noticed changes on how active young people are shaping their cities nowadays?*

**Kaja:** What we did in Maribor—doing small actions in courtyards, some interventions on the streets, some street art—it looked so marginal, maybe ten, five years ago. It looked like some kind of hippies doing crazy things. But I think this has changed a bit, because there are so many initiatives nowadays trying to do similar things. There's power and relevance in that scene. What we see nowadays are a lot of small initiatives trying to make a change in their different spheres and it has some relevance. In our case, we moved from activism to politics. It's not just being loud and visible but to have more power to co-decide.

**Marta:** But I also see another trend, which is that similar methods are being used in commercial ways, which is maybe not as we intend them to be used. It's something to take into consideration. I've seen that happen to a couple of projects that were very cool, underground, bottom-up projects that became like a fashionable night out with drinks to buy. It's something to think about.

*Participation has become somewhat a mainstream of urban development—and is often being critiqued as a nice try that doesn't really work as municipalities don't take it seriously enough. How are the tools on the CTB any different from that?*

**Miodrag:** Although it's been hyped in urban development for some time, participation always existed—it's a part of a city's constant change. Nowadays, it has been rather institutionalized and depoliticized, which unfortunately makes the whole process consensus-driven. I personally miss some productive conflict in it, so our tools have this rebellion character, with clear expectations from authorities and other stakeholders. Participation in urban development has to be much more dynamic.

*What does it actually take for people to change their city for the better?*

**Miodrag:** Beside being qualified or experienced to start change, people should be passionate about something, which is sort of a precondition. After that, different local factors define the way they can develop their actions. It's not the same if the desire for change comes from a deep frustration, or from hobby-like citizen 'engagement'.

**Matthias:** In the first place, you need to have reliable institutions. Democratically elected local representatives and access to public services. Sounds trivial, but is not a given everywhere in the world for sure. If you have robust structures, then it's a

matter of detail in how the institutions function. How equally accessible and inclusive they are and how transparent they operate.

What I mean by inclusiveness in this context is having access to your representatives, or space for civil society and individuals to develop their ideas and live their lives. This is a fine balance between reliability and freedom.

*What can universities and municipalities do to encourage young citizens to become change-makers in their city?*

**Miodrag:** Universities don't have a monopoly over knowledge production anymore, which is good and bad at the same time. It's much easier to produce practical knowledge outside academia today, but at the same time, universities have started depending on entrepreneurial logic. Because of that, students are not being taught (enough) to develop a critical view on their own environment, but preparing themselves for the job market instead. So extending academic knowledge with concrete actions based on a concrete challenge is something that CTB is trying to promote. Meaning taking responsibility for something instead of passively writing a paper about a case study.

Municipalities on the other hand have different set of problems, like work overload, ageing, fiscal-gaps and so on. They rarely have any time for grassroots initiatives. If they are not an obstacle, you could say that they are already contributing. Of course, we have very different municipalities today and this situation could be changing.

**Matthias:** Offer accessible entry points for practical action, create the space for experimentation, with the potential for sustainability and impact, make decision making transparent and allow for those with aspiration to enter the political or decision making arena—don't underestimate the necessity for a strong civil society.

*What's the vision for CTB? What do you hope it will become?*

**Kaja:** It would be great if we could become a large international platform that can support the community in networking, mentoring, teaching—there are some ideas that this could become a teaching platform—more in the way of informal teaching, the kind of knowledge that universities mostly still don't teach, if the professors don't have this kind of experience and knowledge—we could contribute with new, fresh approaches. We need to find a sustainable financial scheme for this. But in the meantime, we have time to crystallize our ideas, define where we really want to go. It's a good in-between stage.

**Marta:** We're already planning our next locations for the CTB lab, we want to have a broader view and see how this could also function intercontinentally. It's still not a huge network, but it's growing.

**Kaja:** We want to organize the lab once or twice a year, moving from one city to the other, promoting both practical experience and dialogue.

Also, there's some functionalities we want to add to our digital platform. For instance, people who work on similar projects, say, urban walks. If there's one tool already presented with this content, then others involved in the same topic could upload a follow-up with their approach and this could grow into a small community within the platform. It could have many subgroups. We have a lot of ideas and a lot of work to implement them.

*What's your message to the next generation of Actors of Urban Change?*

**Kaja:** We invite all of the new Actors to contribute their knowledge to the platform, to join the City Toolbox community and to even get more active beyond that. We're open to proposals to improve and shape the platform.

**Matthias:** Use your time to connect to your fellow Actors as much as you can. Have drinks together, don't go to bed early. And start thinking about post-Actors collaborations in time!



The practical tools offer simple steps that members of the CTB community can test in different locations and contexts.  
Photo: Delio Sá

# ACTORS OF THE CENTRAL



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