

Reflections and key findings after visit to Ghent

Back from an interesting transnational meeting in Ghent, Belgium, thinking about lessons learned, reflections, inspirations.....

Something that impressed me, is the effective system that the city developed over the last 10 years (or maybe more!?) to facilitate the dialogue between the local administration and the citizens. It is basically based on the figure of the “neighborhood manager”.



The neighborhood manager is a civil servant, one for each neighborhood of the city, who is in direct contact with the neighborhood and its inhabitants, who is well aware of the local needs and aspirations and acts as a sort of facilitator between local bottom-up demands and the different sectors of the administration. Especially during the field-trips, we could have a direct perception of the work that they do and of the quality of the relations that they are able to establish with the people. I felt that this is a very effective (and democratic) method to overcome the barriers existing between the inhabitants and their local governments, often perceived as inaccessible bureaucratic apparatus or - as it too often happens in Latin Europe - accessible only through “patronage” mechanisms. I think that it would be very useful to transfer this “good practice” also in Naples.

Moreover, during the meeting a wide range of legal instruments were presented to support/regulate citizen initiatives. From one side, in Ghent it is very clear the transition from an old form of intending participation (talking around a table) to a more contemporary one (doing things together: co-design, co-creation and co-management). On the other side, the impression is that everything, even the smallest initiative, must be regulated by a complex set of agreements, city regulations, permits to use the public space.....there is so much bureaucracy!

If there is something to learn from the “good practice” of the urban commons in Naples, is that cities need some space to let spontaneous/informal initiatives develop freely. Strengthening self-organization and the capacity of local communities to cooperate - even independently from (or even against!) already established schemes and rules - makes cities more lively and creative and strengthens community ties and solidarity.

Walking among urban gardens in the neighbourhood *Bloemekeswijk*, it occurred to me an analogy between ecosystems and the commons. Even among the most productive agricultural and grazing lands, you always need to leave some space for the wild nature to flourish spontaneously, in order to make ecosystems more diverse and therefore stronger. Even within the cities, it is widely recognized nowadays the need to leave some space to - what Gilles Clément calls - the “Third Landscape”, “undetermined fragments of space left over by the control and exploitation by man to landscape evolution, to nature alone”, that can be considered as “a privileged area of receptivity to biological diversity, the genetic reservoir of the planet, the space of the future”. Similar to the “Third Landscape”, the Urban Commons could be intended as a place where urban diversity is preserved and interesting experimentation and innovations can develop spontaneously, prefiguring possible future transformations of the city. In order to do this, we would probably need to think more in terms of “how to allow” things to happen and “how to support spontaneous/informal initiatives” in their development, rather than on “how to regulate” them from the very beginning. Facilitative vs regulatory approach!

The case of Naples stresses also the fact that Urban Commons should be intended first of all as a social process and, under this perspective, they could afterwards be analyzed for the innovations that they introduce in the “legal-administrative framework” of the city.

In the case of Naples, vacant buildings first started being used informally by the local communities for social, political or cultural purposes, and only after they were formally recognized by the local government as a “common good”. The regulation of “civic use” was elaborated by the local community itself through an intense participatory process, and only after, at the end of the whole social process, it was adopted by the local government.

I think that in the next transnational transfer activities, it should be better stressed this key point: urban commons are first of all a social, cultural and political process, therefore it would be interesting if each city could make clear the vision underlying its “urban commons policy”, before thinking to rules, regulations and other legal schemes.

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