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Incubators of Public Spaces; a digital agora to support and empower self-organised participatory processes in urban (re)development

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ABSTRACT

In this short position paper we will introduce how the recently established recognition for formal citizen participation in urban planning is being by-passed by an emerging movement of active citizenship. It is this kind of self-organised participatory process that the *Incubators of Public Spaces* project aims to support and empower through the creation of a digital platform.

We will first give a brief introduction on the general need for more participation in planning policies and the more recent shift towards a DIY mentality. Therefor the specific case of Brussels will be given as an illustration. Subsequently, we will argue how *Incubators* aims to facilitate and stimulate this novel self-organised practices through the development of ICT tools. As a digital agora, the tool is intended to support the co-creation of an agreed vision for positive change and individual actions. Finally as an initial step for the *Incubators* project, three concrete cases in cities across Western Europe (London, Brussels, Turin), will function as Living Labs for the development and implementation of the digital platform.

Author Keywords

Self-organised participation; co-creation; urban (re)development; digital agora; crowdsourcing; crowdfunding; living labs.

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ON PARTICIPATION & SELF-ORGANISATION

Since the clear call for more participation in the 70/80's the need to implement participatory processes in formal decision-making has gradually become evident. Participation is recurrently listed as one of the key attributes for good policy [6, 16], while UN-HABITAT [14] stresses the need for a good urban governance to entail citizenship and civic engagement. This civic engagement has recently – since the global crisis – been booming in Western European cities. People are no longer only demanding to gain voice in decision-making processes that are set up from above. They take up initiative themselves and act to respond to their own needs [7]. Especially in the field of urbanism this DIY (Do It Yourself) mentality is taking off [10].

This upcoming need for participation that goes beyond merely informing and involving citizens is also clearly emerging in the Brussels context. Starting from the 70's the city has a strong heritage of citizen protest against huge modernist urban (re)development plans. These 'luttres urbaines' (urban struggles) [5] showed a strong and active resistance movement. Despite their rather negative approach this populist movement managed to establish a first turning point in the Brussels Town planning [9]. Since then, several participatory mechanisms – like the obliged public inquiry for gaining building permits and the sustainable neighbourhood contracts – have been incorporated in official planning procedures. However, currently these urban planning tools are being criticised as they empower Nimby(Not In My BackYard)-effects to block further development while the private market is gaining control. The need for a more democratic model emerges [8]. Simultaneously civic agents get into action themselves and collectively underpin a significant shift on the notion of participation in making city. It is based on this DIY approach for (re)developing collective spaces Moritz

[11] argues for a second turning point hypothesis in Brussels urban planning. Not only for the Brussels' case, it is clear the established participation mechanisms do not manage to really go beyond tokenism while civic agents undertake action to climb up to the highest scale of Arnsteins' ladder of participation [1] to a form of citizen power.

As the notion of participation is shifting to embrace self-organisation [2], new tools to support these DIY practices outside the dominant planning mechanisms are desired. It is our argument that the development of the *Incubators of Public Spaces* project could support and empower civic collectives, professional agents, associations and individuals that look for ways to organise themselves in the realisation of creative interventions.

A DIGITAL AGORA

The development of digital technology can affect participation in urban planning, as such, ICT tools are seen as a window of opportunity for citizen participation that also embraces the notion of self-organisation [13]. It is from this view point *Incubators* wants to create a digital agora to contribute to the improvement of the quality of urban spaces and the plans, projects and policies effecting on them. The *Incubators* digital platform pursues to support and empower all involved stakeholders to co-create urban space. For this the method of the Urban Europe JPI funded project (started in October 2014) will link an agreed vision for positive change and individual actions. Thereby the self-organising approach, through active co-creation, can encourage and exploit the dynamics of the urban systems, towards more socially resilient places [3].

Starting from an understanding of urbanisation as a comprehensive result of government plans and a plurality of individual and collective micro-interventions the *Incubators of Public Spaces* project focusses on the gradual (re)development of urban spaces. The research aims to advance digital tools that look beyond the mere design-events through supporting sustainable processes. The creation of a digital agora will offer opportunities for individuals, collectives and small businesses to take part in the processes of self-organisation, crowd-creativity and crowd-funding. The digital tool aims to facilitate the whole process, thus ranging from co-creation of scenarios through empowerment and evaluation, up to funding and producing the initiatives, in order to blend the bottom-up, open, creative process of space making with the top-down strategic planning attitude.

Through three Living Labs [15] in cities across Europe (from London, over Brussels to Turin) the project aims to develop and implement ICT-tools to empower citizens and in urban planning usually marginalised groups to co-create,

evaluate and co-fund scenarios and discover new ways to produce and support these.

3 LIVING LABS AND A PLATFORM

Within their specific socio-spatial and political context the three Living Labs will explore processes of co-creation on urban spaces. It is the intention of each case to unfold its own particular and context-based configuration and to look for its potential to develop through a self-organised participatory process.

London

The London Living Lab will find ground in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, a 200-hectare site served by excellent transport links from all over London. Simultaneous with the development of the master plan for the Olympics Games of 2012, the regeneration of the area was planned: a master plan to ensure long-lasting benefits after the Games was made from the beginning.

Currently, a number of fringe master plans are being developed to connect the Park with the surrounding urban and social tissues. All these master plans invest into public realm projects. *Incubators* is contributing to the master plan which will bring in the area a new UCL campus within agreed vision/s for change, committed to innovate public spaces, aiming at new social uses of the spaces, assigning functions and meaning to them.

Brussels

The Living Lab in Brussels is situated at the currently unused *Josaphat Ancienne Gare* site. This cleared railway yard is a zone of regional interest, for which two municipalities and the overall regional government are about to finalise its *Schéma Directeur* (a strategic development plan). This plan outlines the political vision for the future development of this 25ha area as a dense and sustainable quarter. Simultaneously a grassroots collective individuals got interested in this land as it is one of the last public ground reserves of the Brussels Capital Region. The Commons Josaphat group envisions a future development *en bien commun* (in common good) [4,12] and aims to bring their vision into practice in an open and participatory manner and in respect to the outlined vision of the *Schéma Directeur*. In this particular case the participation process is self-initiated by citizens that seek to establish a co-creation and co-management of this future quarter. At this stage, citizens already set up temporary uses and organise events. One of these symbolic actions being a picnic (see Figure 1) that transforms the site into an ephemeral and open platform for community building and discussion. At the same time the collective works on a constructive and transparent debate with the political decision-makers. The *Incubators of Public Spaces* digital agora aims to facilitate and stimulate this self-organised participation.



Figure 1. March 2015, *picnic the commons*, an open debate on and about the Josaphat Ancienne Gare site and its future development is organised by the Commons Josaphat collective. Photo: Sarah Oyserman.

Turin

The Turin testing ground of the research is the social housing neighbourhood *Mirafiori Sud*, which was built by *Ges.Ca.L.* (Workers' housing management) in the mid Sixties. The complex is located just south of the Fiat Mirafiori factory, at that time one of the biggest automotive plants in Europe. With the boom of the automotive industry, between the Fifties and the Seventies, the population of Turin increased very rapidly, from about seven hundred thousand in 1951 to about one million and one hundred thousand in 1971, so, the primary need was to quickly provide the largest possible number of housing.

The outcome of these conditions is a very banal urban environment, intended to simplify the design process, to reduce the costs and to save time. The high-rise housing blocks are made of panels of precast reinforced concrete, and host only three types of flats (total number of flats is about 2.400). The final result is practical, but rather repetitive, although the main problems are the lack of social *mixité*, the aging population, the poor energetic performance of the buildings, and the low quality of public space.

In this area, Mirafioiri Foundation has already begun some crowd-mapping processes, in order to highlight problems, and find solutions to the citizens' needs through bottom-up participation activities

Starting from this base, *Incubators* works on some steps (see following paragraph) through the application of a kind

of *library of architectural solutions* to a number of specific problems.

Incubators

The specific contexts of these sites, the local policies, the co-governance for place making and the profile of the involved stakeholders will be implemented through the Urban Templates of *UrbanGen* software (Turin Polytechnic, USPTO Patent pending).

Through this basis the *Incubators* platform will support: (a) open innovation contests; (b) face-to-face public co-design workshops, using screening, smartphones, tablets, PCs; (c) virtual public workshops on the web; and (d) crowdfunding activities. The platform aims to enhance these key activities into one integrated system.

The *Incubators* face-to-face public and virtual workshops on the web go through four main steps: (1) crowd-creativity; (2) co-visioning and social storytelling; (3) self-awareness of sustainable living and mobility, and finally (4) crowdfunding (see Figure 2). The system enhances the factors that motivate, encourage and enable the actors to reach common understanding and to coordinate actions by reasoned argument, consensus, and cooperation rather than strategic actions only. In this way *Incubators* aims to contribute to the self-organisation of places and distributed participation in planning and decision-making. It benefits from the possibilities of the digital age to improve participations processes

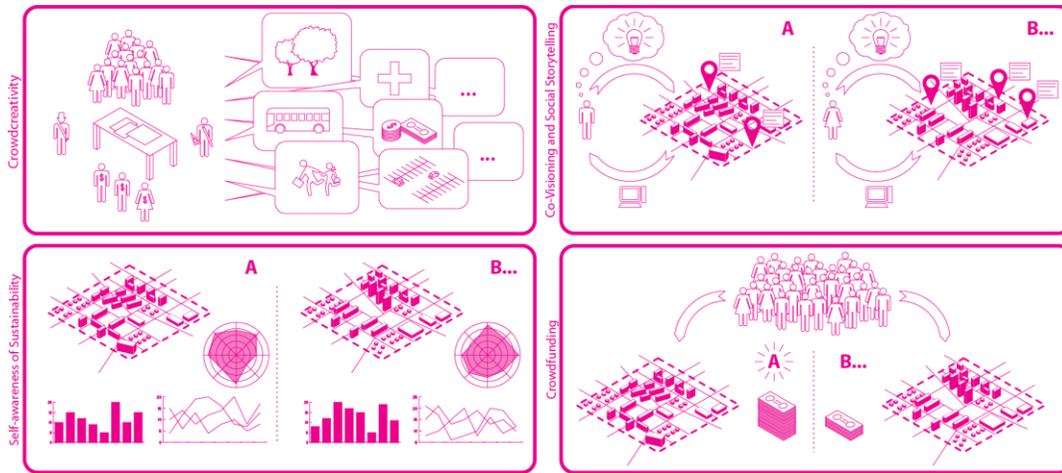


Figure 2. Incubators schematic workflow diagram

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