CAN LOCAL ASPIRATIONS CHANGE THE WORLD?

New Years' photo essay by Iván Tosics

tosics@mri.hu

31. December 2017

1. Growing difficulties

There is a growing number of problems observable in the world and in the EU. Just to name a few: rising inequlaities between people („The top 1% controls 46% of world's wealth." Oxfam), emerging housing crisis (growing homelessness while 11 million flats standing empty in EU countries), growing differentiation between and within cities (new urban crisis marked by renoviction as the result to the return to cities), international migration..., etc.

https://ipolitics.ca/author/jeremy-kinsman/ (originally: http://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/2016-07/22/content_26180007.htm)

The EU is a lame duck in this situation, threatened by the multitude of crises and the leadership disputes in some of the key countries. On national level the dominant and threatening trend is populism with right wing, or simply pragmatist, parties capturing power – in some countries even creating conditions under which it is increasingly difficult to change them with the usual democratic tools.

Is there under such conditions still any hope for a better future…? Can the local level, the cities do anything to change the dominating trends…?

2. Innovative answers of cities

The following cases, all based on experience learned in URBACT project meetings, show a few examples, how the normal functioning of local government can be changed in order to increase the public good, to create better outcomes for the whole of the city.

2.1 Innovating urban planning in peripheral city areas: Antwerp

Antwerp is in the forefront of European cities which want to innovate their planning system to better adapt to the changing circumstances. The starting point is the Labo XX ('Labo twenty') project, initiated by the city in 2012, to generate changes in the city's twentieth century belt – the area that lies outside the ring motorway. The historic central area of Antwerp has already been renovated and

the expanding city wants to avoid its further densification – thus the focus is now on the transitional belt, which lies in between the historic core and the suburban areas.

The transitional belt is a densely built up area with very mixed functions, largely privately owned buildings and plots, which were never on the „radar" of the municipal planning authority, as not having substantial ownership here. In the lack of experiences with planning in such areas, the city has first established a research team studying the historical development of Antwerp and gathering statistical information. Then urban development projects have been initiated that experiment with processes, the government's role, financial products, etc. In this exploratory phase the city has changed its traditional approach – instead of building visions for the area, the emphasis was on discussions with the present stakeholders. City planners and government representatives participated in many „research-by-design" workshops, learning through the dialogues the actual situation and the opportunities of the area.

The Lageweg area (one of the case study areas of Antwerp in the URBACT Sub-urban project, see http://urbact.eu/files/suburbanlageweg) is part of the transitional belt, dominated by private ownership of a high number of owners with small plot sizes.

Source: City of Antwerp http://urbact.eu/files/suburbanlageweg

Source: https://assets.antwerpen.be/srv/assets/api/download/942d80b1-af6c-4d80-bbbb-e8c4264dceec/Pilotproject_de_Lageweg_LoRes_EN_WithCover.pdf

Isabel Michiels (http://urbact.eu/transforming-planning-urban-fringe-expert-opinion) describes the approach to Lageweg as follows. The city decided to proactively intervene into the status quo, determined by dropping economic activity and vacancy of space. The city organized mind opening dialogues to explore collective ambitions for the area. Co-creative design tables weres set up around an interactive scale model of different scenarios in order to build collective trust. Also a safari tour has been organized, a guided walk with all the stakeholders showing a brochure of possible future scenarios in one, five or twenty years' time. Finally an adaptable spatial and financial calculation model, which was paid for and therefore owned by the owners, was developed to test the feasibility of several options. The model made clear that selling the property at the moment is not profitable and therefore working together and developing a plan together is financially more rewarding than developing separately.

Recently 9 out of 10 private landowners signed a declaration of engagement to work and invest together in the project. The next step will be to work on an agreement to create a "bank of land properties". This joint venture will allow to work across property borders and make an effective plan for the whole area that will allow for phased development.

Compared to a classic linear planning process, where each moment has a specific purpose, where tension between stakeholders is a nuisance and the dialogue with the stakeholders takes place after

the making of a vision, the vision in Lageweg was shaped during the dialogue, the tension was turned into a productive way of working and each moment had several purposes.

2.2 Creating space for experimentation about future activities: Nantes

The centrally located Ile de Nantes was always in industrial use. Problems started – as in many European cities – in 1987 with the closure of the shipyard and the port areas. The island became inaccessible for people while private developers came up with a growing number of project ideas (to build new hotel, big international congress centre, ...). However, in 1989 the newly elected mayor – Jean-Marc Ayrault, who stayed as mayor till 2014 – stopped all project planning and asked to rethink the island as the centre of the whole Nantes metropole.

Following the idea that industrial heritage has to be kept, but in new functions, in 2002 a public company (Samoa) has been created and started the project to build a large, moveable Elephant – offering an object what previous ship builders could work on. This created an incentive for Nantes people to come on weekends to the island, which was no mans land earlier. Another public initiative was, in times when no one wanted to build on the island, to build up the Palais de Justice here.
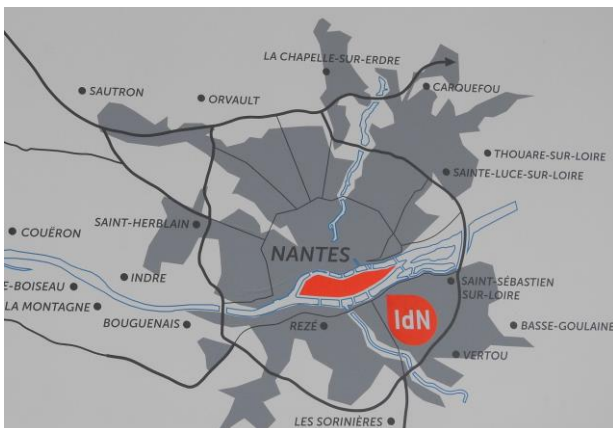
Source: La Samoa, Société d'Aménagement de la Métropole Ouest Atlantique (Nantes)

The area is over 80 hectars, and the city authority has the right of first refusal over the whole area. Samoa can thus buy land, rezone and resell it with a fixed project idea and pre-determined conditions. In that way the model can be understood as a public sector led real estate increase taxation programme – where the main goal is to upgrade the island along public interests.

The following two photos – taken at the Nantes meeting of the URBACT Refill project – show a building which was owned in 1989 by a private company, used as warehouse; later as go-kart racing circuit. It was cheap to buy it, as it was surrounded by industrial wasteland. This is a very valuable area of the Ile de Nanates, being centrally located and having nice view. In a normal market process this would have already be built in, as most waterfront areas of other cities. Nantes makes it differently: instead of starting here a quick and final redevelopment, this will be the final area to be rebuilt.

The Industrial Hall here has been kept and transitory uses have been installed. In the first hall small 12, 24, 36 sqm cheap rental places were created for innovative creative and cultural companies while the next building has places for the social and solidarity companies, a third one for media companies... The place was opened in 2012 and the first use was meant for 12 years. This is also part of the tempered urban planning: it needs time to find out what should be the next use. SAMOA

offers recently temporary use office spaces to 180 small companies. There is a waiting list, thus the project is successful.

Photos by Iván Tosics

The Nantes approach (described in an illustrated way in http://urbact.eu/file/17457/download?token=uobu2KWr) is based on stable political leadership and institutional background, created for the purpose. This gives enough time to understand the 'feeling' of the island, developing strategic ideas, avoiding 'tabula rasa' developments according to the demand of the given moment. The agreement in the basic principles, however, does not exclude to change orientation time to time. In the first few years to change the image was important, in a second phase to connect and develop some areas, while recently to answer the challenge of the innovation economy. Accordingly, the newest idea is to develop an innovative district with larger parks along the rivers.

An important aspect of this approach is the strategic role of temporary use agreements. The city recognized that empty buildings in public ownership are essential to keep the momentum for creativity. SAMOA is recently buying derelict property on the island, not for demolition but to be able to offer empty spaces for innovative companies.

2.3 New approaches to enhance urban commons in Genova

Genova is one of the Italian cities (besides e.g. Bologna, Naples) which introduced a new strategic program, called "Reclaim the spaces", for urban development based on the idea to activate "urban commons", vacant or underused buildings and sites in order to reactivate the residents of the city.

In Italian cities substantial amount of empty or underused public properties and spaces can be found: churches, monasteries, military barracks, ancient warehouses, etc. These can not be regenerated with traditional top-down methods any more as there is much less public money available than 10 years ago. New partnerships have to be established, a new governance model for regeneration, based on subsidiarity and co-recognition of commons, accepting different cultural approaches and promoting collective learning (https://cooperativecity.org/2017/11/21/urban-commons-learning-from-italy/).

An important part of the process is the temporary use of space, until the final functions can jointly be clarified. In Genova the starting point is the announcement of a given site, calling for ideas from NGOs, cultural associations, non-profit organizations, informal groups, citizens (excluding private companies and interests). Decisions are made on political level, taking the proposed functions and

also the security of space into account. A private law agreement is signed between the municipality as the owner and the selected entity as the user, specifying the activities and the management obligations. The Genova law is very similar to the Bologna one, which was probably the first of this kind of local legislations (the 2014 Bologna law is available in English on http://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Bologna_Regulation_for_the_Care_and_Regeneration_of_Urban_Commons).

This new approach to activate empty or underused buildings, if applied in a proper way, can bring big advantages both to the city and its residents. As illustration an example from Naples can be mentioned (http://urbact.eu/sites/default/files/media/good_practices_section1.pdf). The Ex Asilo Filangieri is a building from the 16th century which stayed empty since the 1980 earthquake. The building was squatted in 2012 by a collective of cultural groups. A few years later a temporary use agreement was signed between the municipality and an open community with undefined borders, that is entrusted to organize non-profit cultural and social activities in the building. The municipality has recorded 3800 activities (trainings, cultural events, etc) during 3 years to which the municipality contributed with €315 th per year. This is a very modest cost, compared e.g. to the public costs of €1.200 th per year to run the Palace of Arts. Besides being four times cheaper for the municipality, the activities in Ex Asilo Filangieri led to many positive externalities, developing citizenship and self government in a deprived area of the city.

The pictures below show the Genova example of the URBACT network Second Chance: the Ex Caserma Gavoglio.

First picture: http://www.genova24.it/2013/06/gavoglio-in-consiglio-regionale-sel-il-ministero-della-difesa-ceda-gratuitamente-la-caserma-52141/ The other three pictures were taken by Iván Tosics.

The Caserma Gavoglio is a former military base, in which military functions were terminated in 1980 with the abolition of compulsory military service in Italy. It is a huge area (46.000 sqm, 15 buildings) in a very central location, close to the main railway station – however, having been fenced around and totally inaccessible in the last decades to the population living around.

The 2010 state law enabled to transfer state property to local level for free. In December 2016 an agreement has been signed to transfer the property to the Municipality of Genova.

In the late 1990s discussions started about the potential redevelopment and use of the area. Since 2014 temporary use agreements were signed for some of easier accessible parts of the area, however beyond the first building still everything is closed (the municipality is afraid to open the gates, as homeless people would move in.) Recently debates are going on with the very active resident groups about the potential future uses. Private redevelopment options, e.g. shopping mall, are excluded. The opinions are very different for the moment: the residents would prefer the demolition of most buildings, allowing for the creation of parks and the improvement of mobility links, while the municipality is for keeping as many buildings as possible and create employment: start-ups, etc.

The municipality is actively using the URBACT and also the Horizon 2020 programme to get ideas for the redevelopment of the Caserma Gavoglio area (see http://urbact.eu/file/17346/download?token=FjBa0Is6).

2.4 Radically changing local policy to make the city more equitable: Barcelona

The two pictures below were taken within two years (in 2013 and 2015) and illustrate the dramatic changes in Barcelona: Ada Colau, who was the leader of the movement against housing evictions, became suddenly the mayor of the city.

http://www.abc.es/espana/20130329/abci-colau-asalto-consulados-201303291326.html 29.13.2013

http://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/barcelona-colau-gana_0_391261460.html 24.05.2015

Since May 2015 the city government is led by Barcelona en Comú (radical left) and many social community activists have got important political and administrative positions in the City Council. The changes are described by the mayor as follows:

The citizens have noticed a change in the political agenda, in the way of doing things, with a much closer politics (....). We have put social issues above all other concerns. We have activated a neighbourhood plan for intervening in the most vulnerable areas with a budget of 150M€. We have tripled the public aids for renting. We have tripled the resources for employment plans. We have also

increased the investment in housing fourfold. We have imposed fines of over 300.000€ to banks with empty dwellings. Than we have put forward the regulation of rents, which is not part of the powers of the City Council, but we have put if forward to other administrations. We have clearly changed the priorities of the city" (Ada Colau, Nació Digital, 10/04/2017)

These are real changes, not only cosmetic. Of course Barcelona is a rich city, and could afford to spend a bit more on social issues – however, what happened is much more: a total reorientation of the local political agenda. From September 2017 also a pilot project on unconditional basic income has started, with UIA support.

The following two pictures, taken at the Barcelona meeting of the URBACT Urb-Inclusion project) show the Besós area, one of the key intervention areas of the Neighbourhood plan 2016-2020.

Source: Iván Tosics

As the main aim of the new city leadership is to reduce inequalities, the regeneration of the Besós area is a logical step, being the poorest area in whole Catalonia, with 11 years lower life expectancy than in better neighbourhoods. The Besós area has 114 thousand residents along the river thus the metropolitan coordination is very important with other municipalities on the other side of the river. Co-responsibility, co-creation and co-production with NGO-s are considered of key importance, with the aim that neighbourhoods get back self-consciousness and become able to keep people who are doing better and would usually leave the poorest areas.

The combination of the EDUSI social integration strategy for the Besós area and the neighbourhood plan 2016-2020 leads to visible changes, with a lot of public space improvement and green area development (http://urbact.eu/sites/default/files/urb_inclusion_baseline_study.pdf).

3. Fearless cities: launching the first international municipalist movement

Besides the four cases briefly descibed above, there are plenty of other examples on similar disruptive changes in European cities. Descriptions can be found e.g. among the URBACT Good Practices (http://urbact.eu/good-practices/home), the Urban Innovative Action cities (http://www.uia-initiative.eu/en/uia-cities) or in the Cooperatice city collection (https://cooperativecity.org/articles/).

Ada Colau is not the only radical city leader aiming for more just urban living. However, her deep conviction about localism, that the city can be considered as a fundamental battlefield from which to build political alternatives to neoliberal austerity, makes her unique, putting her into an informal leading position on international level.

" … (I've always been felt) a strong commitment with municipalism and with the idea that we do not only must replace people in power, but we must also change the ways of doing things. We must open the institutions. If there is a place from where you can do this, it is the city."

All in all, it was very logical that Barcelona was the host of the Fearless Cities conference (9-11 June 2017), the first international municipalist summit to defend human rights, democracy and the common good. The following short summary is based on the notes of two participants, Laura Colini and Tessza Udvarhelyi (http://varosszolidaritasdemokracia.blog.hu/2017/07/05/varosok_felelem_nelkul_a_municipalista_mozgalmak_elso_vilagtalalkozoja).

The organizer of the summit was Barcelona en Comú which considers itself as a political platform that combines active citizens in different areas along the goals and values commonly set: social justice, participatory democracy, equality, ecological sustainability and the right to the city. Some 600 people participated in the summit from 180 cities, 60 countries and 5 continents, and 170 volunteers that worked in the organisation of the summit. The energy of all these committed people for social justice was extraordinary.

In one of the sessions concrete tools for participatory democracy were shown through the examples of those local governments – Zaragoza, Madrid, Barcelona, New York and Belo Horizonte – which already started to use such tools in practice. For each of these cities there was a common endeavor to create municipal structures that would enable citizens to have a substantive influence on local politics also in the periods between two elections. Examples brought up were the following:

- digital platforms where residents can make concrete urban development proposals;

- monthly meetings of local government representatives where people can report back on their work and identify the next tasks;

- participative budgeting;

- inter-city cooperation in issues (eg refugee reception) where the national government does not adopt policies which would be acceptable for the the cities and/or does not take their opinion/interest into account.

All the presenters emphasized that the participatory processes need to be well planned to avoid that people get tired of endless conversations and not seeing tangible results. Moreover, citizens have to be trained and encouraged to participate, not leaving important decisions to be made by the leaders only.

Another session discussed the challenge, how to build up an election campaign for bottom-up agreed candidates. All the campaign examples shown were launched on the basis of civic initiatives and were embedded in wider movements or initiatives, into which parties were invited as supporters or participants, but were organized and led by volunteers who were fed-up with the ruling power and wanted to get real influence over the future of their settlement. Each campaign example focused on the importance of personal connections with voters, community meetings and co-creation of the programme. In each case codes of ethics were set up to organize the campaign – and also beyond, to be followed by those who got eventually into power in the local government. All of the campaigns were implemented through crowd funding, in which transparency played a very important role.

In her closing speech of the summit Ada Colau emphasized the importance of the municipal level as it is there that the democratic change of politics is possible. Nation states are slow, authoritarian and patriarchal. Against this municipalism is a must, a moral obligation. The municipalist network has to be ambitious, generous and courageous to link together people from different cities. It has also to be pragmatic and open to different experiences and also to contamination. „We do not have mediation or economic power, our power are the people."

4. How far municipalism can reach in changing national systems and capitalism itself?

The cases analysed in this writing and the high spirit of the summit raise the hope that municipalism can achieve decisive changes on national and even global level.

On the other hand there are analysts who say that municipalism is good for nothing, neither state policies nor the basic rules of capitalism (e.g. the contradiction between capital and work) can be changed from below.

I do not agree fully with either of these extreme statements. Let me finish with some thoughts about these views and a suggestion for a more balanced approach.

Many people believe that municipalism can become game-changer. As Jelle de Graaf of the Pirate Party in the Netherlands has put it: „When you open up and actually talk to people, instead of yelling one-liners at them, radical policy is possible. … By empowering the commons, and focusing on all those co-operations and active citizens who are already working on green-initiatives, radically green progress is possible with the support of the people. By going at it together, in an open dialogue, long-abandoned progressive policy goals that seem impossible to achieve in the traditional political arena suddenly turn probable again. … The municipalist movement shows us there's a viable alternative to both the extremism of the far right or the political stalemate of the traditional parties. An inclusive, sustainable and just future starts at the local level." http://piratetimes.net/a-just-future-starts-at-the-local-level/

However, there are serious difficulties on the way to expand the municipalist movement, which are also acknowledged by the main proponents of the idea themselves. As Ada Colau said in an interview:

'The tools are very tiny and the expectations are great. How can the City Council of a city that is globally located on the map of the relevant cities in the world, which attracts migratory flows, capital flows… how can it manage a power that it does not have? The City Council does not have the power of the city. It is a very small portion of power.'

Recent tendencies in European politics are not promising at all. Nation-states are stronger than ever and in an increasing number of EU countries the governments are changing towards populism, nationalism with growing role played by extreme right wing political forces. The Europeam Union seems to be a lame duck at the moment, not strong enough to change these tendencies and also unable to strengthen the role of the sub-national level in policy making.

Theoretical thinkers, like Iván Szelényi, are also not optimistic. In his view Lefebvre and Castells believed in a bottom-up revolution as the result of growing inequalities. For a few years, in the course of the great financial crisis, there seemed to be a hope that some (at least) refoms can be achieved in the regulation of capitalism. However, by today the crisis is over and the capital-led global macro-structures are dominating again.

In my opinion municipalism, as a system of local decision-making, might have quite limited reach in changing national political systems or the present mode of economic production. Municipalism as a movement, however, is indispensable to achive any changes in these directions. There are already signs that basic aspects of the housing systems can be changed, approaching the right to housing through limiting evictions and pushing for affordable housing. There are also promising experiments going on to radically change the unjust welfare systems on the basis of unconditional basic income models.

It is not easy to change things on local government level – the case of Barcelona clearly shows what limits the new leadership has to face. It is even more difficult to expand the new approaches from the local to the national and to the global level. This can not be achieved in isolation, the concertation of the efforts of like-minded local political leaders and their followers is very much

needed. After the decline of the anti-globalization movements, the new start from below, municipalism, is a promising sign that sooner or later more just states and economic systems can be achieved. The road is long and there is a difficult journey ahead of us – but this is the only way to go.