

Shaping the city

The question ‘how do citizens shape the city?’ is an invitation to take a closer look at urban development from the bottom up. Why do we, the organizers of this learning journey, find that question important?

It is beyond debate that citizen engagement is a crucial ingredient for thriving urban futures. The complexity of 21st century urban challenges, ranging from mobility to inclusion and sustainability cannot be left to planners and politicians alone. The world over, citizens are demanding more engagement and control beyond the ballot box. Technology offers unprecedented potential for collaboration. And yes, critical citizen engagement is also key to challenging the neoliberal drive to turning living cities into efficient gentrified corporate profit centres.

The vast majority of urban strategies for citizen engagement are confined to instrumental forms of citizen participation: Politicians and planners are in the drivers-seat and engage citizens, on their terms, as **users and choosers** in their plans and their policies. Think of consultations on infrastructure projects, and feedback mechanisms for services. Instrumental participation also includes shedding public tasks to families, volunteers and civil society organizations as for example the British governments is doing under the banner of its Big Society. Results are mixed. For every case of success, there are ten tragedies of miscommunication, conflict and manipulation. It’s not so much a lack of willingness. Rather, it’s a story of two conflicting logics: the life world of citizens versus the Kafkaesque world of systems, so easily seduced by promises of big data, smart technologies and corporate fixes.

Seen from the bottom up such forms of engagement are not only festivals of frustration. They also overlook the multitude of ways in which citizens act as **makers and shapers**. Citizens shape their cities every day, with their aspirations, their movements, actions and interactions. They self-organize and mobilize, express themselves through media, arts and culture. And where ‘business as usual’ is no longer an option to address our toughest social and environmental problems, citizens also generate new and fresh impulses, through critique and through alternatives. Think of a global wave of social start-ups, the emergence of a sharing economy, living labs, makers’ spaces

and so on. Success is by no means guaranteed and such initiatives often don’t stand a chance without some support from government. But the upshot is that here citizens are in the driver’s seat.

So what does it all add up to? How does top-down meet bottom up? What conditions need to be created to unlock the potential of citizen action for thriving urban futures? This much we know: though habits die hard, the 20th century way of urban planning is on its way out. The imminent arrival of Wikitopia, a city without hierarchy and central control that is fully self-organized and constantly adapting to its changing context, is unlikely. The future is somewhere in the middle, but nobody knows what it looks like, nor do we know how to get there.

In the absence of blueprints, learning and experimentation become all the more important. Internationally, there is no shortage of best practices and emerging progressive policy frameworks of citizen engagement that need to be shared. That’s why the roving circus of international conferences on urban development needs to pay much more attention to how citizens shape their cities. Better yet, so much could be gained by opening up processes of international learning and exchange to active citizens themselves.

This evening learning journey is one such attempt. Tonight we will explore our questions by immersing ourselves in four cases of Graz’ rich civic life that demonstrate ongoing experiments of citizens as makers and shapers of their city. We’ve asked all case-facilitators and their teams to enable you to play with their burning questions. We hope you’ll learn from each other and establish connections for future exchange. Who knows, you may have crucial pieces to their puzzles on offer. Even more, in the process you may pick up some pieces for your own puzzles as well.