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Civic imagination office as a platform to design a collaborative city

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Abstract

Bologna is an Italian city with 389,009 inhabitants and a density of 2419,87 (people per km²). The city has a long tradition for cooperative movements, and in the field of public debate and civic participation it has developed a long series of initiatives and shared actions. During the last 15 years Bologna has tried to innovate policies co-designing urban development and taking care of urban commons together with citizens. The incremental nature of the research and the implementation of new practices aimed at improving local democracy and policies has led to the creation of the Civic Imagination Office, a space completely dedicated to citizens participation and focused on the scale up of previous experimentations towards a more integrated system of co-design of urban actions.

KEYWORDS: citizen engagement, policy innovation, urban policy, co-design.

Context

The distance between top-down and community-driven processes is currently a common element in many cities: people are ever more sceptical about politics and policies and harbour a strong sense of mistrust in governmental bodies (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2018). Nevertheless, through the widespread application and acceptance of new socio-economical models, like collaborative economy or other similar practices that could also be called “mutualistic movements”, people are contributing at building services and products experimenting a peer to peer approach and demonstrating that even if they no longer trust governmental institutions are nonetheless available to take part in governance.

The City of Bologna and the Civic imagination office: an historical perspective

Working in the context briefly described above, the Administration of the City of Bologna – starting from 2004 and until 2009 – has begun to recognize citizens participation as a tool to improve the contents of structural plans and city planning, activating many initiatives both at district and city level (Ginocchini, 2009). Although a relevant experience, the approach that characterized these citizen engagement initiatives during the 2000s, became less effective and sustainable after the European economic crisis, due to increased economic uncertainties and lack of resources, distrust in politics but also changes in citizens’ priorities, needs and attitudes. To respond to this shift, the city – starting from 2010 – decided to change approach and focus more on citizens engagement for the definition and implementation of policy actions and other interventions with short and medium terms investments, concentrating on proximity of scale, community relationships, daily uses of public spaces, services and urban commons. Pursuing these goals, the Municipality has therefore implemented both top-down and bottom up tools and initiatives to support citizens’ initiatives, while also increasing their capability to have a say in the future of their own city: in 2010, through the project “Incrediboll” the city started experimenting the re-use of public buildings by setting up a competitive program to support start-ups in the creative and cultural industries with grants in the form of free space; in 2014, Bologna’s inhabitants were involved in the redesign of the civic network “Iperbole”, also creating a space for digital participation called “Comunità” (Bartoletti & Faccioli, 2016). In the same year, after citizens’ explicit claims for taking care of their own city by improving benches and public spaces at large, Bologna was the first city in Italy to adopt the “Regulation on public collaboration between citizens and the City for the care and regeneration of urban commons” (Iaione & Foster, 2016). This has allowed citizens to stipulate pacts with the Municipality to revitalize urban commons in meaningful ways, including squares, abandoned buildings and green areas. Nowadays, Bologna is trying to develop new collaborative experiences into a more organic and permanent co-production system between citizens and administration also thanks to the action of the Civic imagination office.

Civic imagination office and District Laboratories

The Office was born inside the Urban Innovation Foundation (previously called Urban Centre Bologna) and in the framework of the “Urban Innovation Plan”. The last describes Bologna’s vision towards 2020 and underlines the importance of achieving this through a collaborative approach (i.e. Civic imagination) that stresses:

- the importance of a closer and more informed relation between citizens and institutions;
- the use of different types of participatory instruments;
- proximity logic as a transversal guideline;
- the implementation of transparent and well-defined outcomes.

The Office is composed by a multidisciplinary staff, including 8 young project managers with different backgrounds in urbanism, architecture, economy, political science, art and communication, and deals with technical aspects of urban development but also community engagement and organizational issues.

The most important tool through which the Civic imagination office is trying to build a new approach towards urban policies is called “District Laboratories”, an initiative organised and managed together with the Governance Unit, the city Districts, and the University of Bologna since 2017. These Laboratories are hubs of collaboration and can be seen as spaces of relation and interaction between city staff and more or less organised groups of citizens. The intent of the initiative is to activate and manage structured collaborative processes useful to map, listen, consult, co-design, report and measure what is happening in the neighbourhoods of Bologna. To achieve these, District Laboratories use participatory

methods, open data and different types of digital tools including social media and the municipal ICT platform.

Inside the Labs: the process

Every year Labs have a number of tools at disposal to develop citizen's ideas, including the previously mentioned Collaboration pacts, but also more traditional consultation tools on social, educational or digital policies and activities to co-design public buildings. Further, the new edition of the "Incredibol!" public bid has provided labs with a tool to help citizens develop their creative ideas, while the city also sets aside 1 million euros each year to fund citizen proposals for the transformation of public spaces, using in particular the tool of the participatory budgeting. This is however different from the traditional type, as labs are in charge of developing specific proposals in each district, thus strengthening the tool with a closer understanding of local needs.

Labs are organised in different phases that are repeated every year and coordinated by the Civic imagination office (Ces.Co.Com, 2017).

As first step, the Office plans strategic guidelines and selects the areas in which Labs should be activated, in collaboration with Municipality's sectors and Districts' representatives and officials. In the following phase, the Office meets the stakeholders that collaborate to a first analysis of the selected neighbourhoods, through which priorities, problems, resources, and new subjects are identified: with them a common framework and vision are shared for the development of the district public spaces. Finally, the Civic Imagination Office opens up the process to all citizens, working directly on the field, implementing community engagement actions to inform and activate as many people as possible, and using different tools, including digital platforms and social media, formal and informal meetings, performances, walks, bike rides, to suit different types of communities. The "imagination phase" then follows, in which a series of public workshops are lead through Open Space Technology methodology (Owen, 2008) to let everybody make proposals for public spaces improvements, and consequently the "co-design phase" is useful to organise the closer collaboration between the proposal groups and the technicians of the Administration: proper public spaces projects are finally defined with the support of facilitators and municipal officials; they all sit together to share competences and knowledge, thus collaborating at the same goal. When projects are set up, all residents, including those who are not legally recognized as Italian citizens, have the possibility to vote for one winning project in each district.

Beyond this specific process, the labs also help citizens apply to the "Incredibol!" bid with their ideas. This process, building on the relations that are established, helps the Civic Imagination office get closely in touch with the neighbourhood life and dynamics, people, conflicts, leaders and potential developments.

Conclusions

The first year of work of the Civic imagination office was devoted to an intense participatory activity: 2500 citizens engaged with 14.584 people voting for Participatory budgeting projects. Between the different outcomes produced by the Lab, 11 are projects to redesign collaboratively public buildings. Furthermore, 6 projects looking at new squares, gardens and public spaces were also voted and will be funded before the end of 2019; 12 priorities for the future of Bologna's Districts emerged and are going to be used by the administration as guidelines for future investments and policies.

However, besides these positive results, the process developed needs to be implemented further to achieve measurable improvements of the relationship between city staff and citizens and, in general, of the quality of public policies and democracy. Between other major challenges for example, the Office should work to: include younger and immigrant people; overcome bureaucratic approaches and foster a better and more conscious participatory culture directly inside the public administration; integrate better the use of different tools for different needs; find new indicators to measure District Labs impacts.

The change in the relationship between the urban administration and the citizens has been at the core of the strategy of the Civic imagination office. Of course, one cannot say that after this process citizens fully agree with all the choices of the local government, but an increase in trust has been clear looking for instance at the number of collaboration pacts implemented (signing pacts requires mutual trust). Furthermore, creating “antennas” at district level by establishing local teams and acknowledging their contribution to the work of labs has allowed the Office to have a clearer perception of the sentiment of people and an ever-open communication channel with more active citizens.

Lastly, many active citizens helped spread the word about the ongoing initiatives and became active promoters, thus showing trust in the process through direct actions. In this sense, Labs help city staff to collect community ideas on public policy issues, supporting at the same time associations and citizens to suggest and promote new projects. Moreover, an important part of the everyday work of the Civic Imagination Office is proximity activities and the creation of an ongoing relation with active citizens by means of direct emails, continued use of the main social networks, the civic network web pages as well as with public meetings and presence in community initiatives in the 6 city districts.

In a long-term perspective, the objective of the Civic imagination office will be to contaminate with its approach all the policies and interventions of the urban administration and to develop collaboration into a more organic co-production system. Indeed, the strength of District labs is based on the capacity to create permanent and inclusive spaces, mixing different tools and opening up new opportunities for citizens’ initiative and for a change in urban policy design.

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