SEiSMiC’s new view on public space

In cities, public space gives room for social interaction, the building of relationships, the sharing of infrastructure and opportunities for mutual learning. A key debate in urban development concerns access to and the use of public space. What are the individual’s rights in public space? How should public space be developed in communities with different lifestyles and requirements? What’s the right balance between public and private space and how can we ensure sufficient access for all? Social innovation can help address these challenges in creative, new ways.

In the SEiSMiC national networks, several approaches have been tried and lessons learned.

Austria

Project participants met in Vienna this fall for a theoretical discussion followed by field visits to several newly developed, very different public spaces. A car-free extension of an old shopping street, for instance, has alleviated noise and pollution, but it encourages little social...
interaction besides shopping. By contrast, a project along a central Danube canal has turned a once seedy strip into fertile ground for a variety of activity, including seasonal pop-up businesses and public sculpture. The strip’s masterplan made it eclectic by design, and a new municipal staff member helps add spice to the area by helping creative entrepreneurs through permitting processes. The city hopes to establish a similarly vibrant public space in a long-ignored area near a disused rail station. The lesson seems to be that disused areas offer interesting opportunities for enterprising cities.

The UK

The national network has focused on the role of public space in promoting social innovation. The UK network adopted a definition of public space that includes privately owned space that serves a public purpose. A recent meeting on the topic produced three key messages: 1) Spaces that respond to the needs of social innovators are important for society. 2) New business models are needed to capture and maximise social value and impact. 3) There is a need for innovative governance and financing frameworks that support such spaces.

Germany

In Germany, representatives of civil society met with city authorities in Wuppertal to discuss collaborative forms of urban development. Several cases of co-created urban space were presented, including the transformation of a former industrial compound into a flourishing cultural institution in Schwerte and the conversion of an abandoned retirement home to house temporary residents (refugees, hotel guests and artists) who encounter one another on an equal footing in Augsburg. All were good examples of collaboration between civil society and urban administrations.

Hungary and Sweden

In Hungary, interest runs high on how to utilise the many empty lots and vacant buildings in central Budapest. Community groups want to meet with property owners — particularly city and district governments — and work out agreements to put this space to public use, for instance as community gardens and gathering spots or offices for social enterprises. In this area, Sweden provides good examples. Several initiatives around the country focus on making temporary use of underused real estate, including a Stockholm project targeting commercial space that’s temporarily dormant between rental contracts. Municipal support and encouragement helps innovative spaces thrive. In fact, several cities have dedicated staff to liaise with civic groups with interesting ideas for empty space. But even more important than the city’s support is the initiative and vigour of the groups behind these projects.

Italy

In Italy, perennial discussions about public space flared up in 2013, when a comprehensive treatise on the topic was adopted in Rome at the Second Biennial of Public Space. This document, which will feed into global-level debates of the UN, proposes a universal definition of public space; suggests priorities for the use and function of public space; and makes recommendations for its management. The document is available online in English (keywords: Charter of Public Space, Rome).

City encouragement helps innovative spaces thrive