

# Urbact network LINKS - Thematic workshop in Almeria

February 2011

## The social aspects of urban regeneration and eco-restoration in historic city centres



### **Abstract:**

The central question of the Almeria meeting was: “How can we (re)build sustainable historic cities with quality housing and living environments, Cities with a renewed appeal as potential living environment?”

Starting point was that cities are not only built in stone bricks, but also by social networks. We must try to offer a good quality of housing and living environment, but we must also aim for the best social environment. This we have to create together with the inhabitants and users of our cities in a participative approach.

The first questions we asked ourselves is:

- How do people want to live?
- How can we find this out?
- How can we make this match with the ambitions we have for our cities?

Of course these questions deal with a lot of different aspects and in this debate it was our intention to get much more focus on the real expectations of citizens with regard to the revitalisation of their historical city centres. In the first exercise we had to select the crucial challenges for most partners and what lessons can we learn from each other. Interestingly enough throughout the discussions the central theme of the Almeria workshop shifted towards the involvement of citizens in urban regeneration or eco-restoration.

After the thematic introduction we had a large debate about the result of the SWOT analysis<sup>1</sup> that every city has introduced on the first day. In this exercises numerous strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats were listed. This gave the different cities the opportunity to get to know each other, but it was especially interesting to see that we had lot points of common interest.

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<sup>1</sup> A SWOT analysis is a strategic planning method used to evaluate the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats involved in a subject. The present subject is our historic cities and their capacity of developing as dynamic residential environments. In a SWOT analysis you determine and analyse the present and possible future situation by identifying:

Strengths: characteristics of the city that give it an advantage over other residential environments.

Weaknesses: are characteristics that place the city at a disadvantage relative to other residential environments

Opportunities: *external* chances, trends to have the possibility of becoming a better residential environment.

Threats: *external* elements, trends in the environment that could cause trouble for becoming a better residential environment.

In the end it was decided to focus on 3 different themes to be deepened in this workshop. The selected topics were:

1. How to involve citizens in participated revitalisation and restoration processes in historic city centres?
2. Citizens and the use of their city: How to manage public spaces as vibrant places in historic city centres?
3. The relationship of citizens towards the use of cars: accessibility, alternative concepts of mobility and parking specific for historical city centres.

Every city participated in all workshops and had the opportunity to deal with all the selected themes. We were able to see how cities have similar problems, and most of the times different approaches and answers. During these debates we tried to examine what we wanted to do differently in the future and as already mentioned the participative approach became the central focus of the workshop.

### Introduction:

This workshop had the social aspects of urban renewal and eco-restoration as a central focus. If the central challenge of this workshop is: 'how can we make our historic cities attractive living environments?'. Therefore the first question we have to ask ourselves is: How do people want to live nowadays? What kind of qualities do they need for their everyday well being? According to the scheme of the workshop the following question was: How can we learn and be sure to understand well what people really want?

As a matter of fact the second question that dominated the workshop in Almeria Finally . We started with a thematic introduction on the quality of life that people are looking for. The first thing we agreed on is that the wishes of the inhabitants of our cities and surrounding suburban municipalities change depending on the phase of their life. Cities and their historical centres have a strong appeal to young people, but the attraction may reduce in the phase of the family formation and expansion.

All households have requirements in terms of typology, size, comfort, a garden or a balcony, the neighborhood, social relations, facilities and services, ... Yet one is aware that combining all these aspects into the ideal living situation may not be feasible, or affordable. In other words, if we really want to convince people of living in the city we need to determine especially those aspects that prevail, which housing conditions are 'sine qua non'.



In addition we have to ask ourselves how can our historical city centres be an attractive alternative to suburbia: Proximity (of facilities and work? , No need for a car? the vibrancy of the city? the identity, the ambiance and festivities?, the social networks?...

It is clear that the different dimensions that come into the picture are numerous. We need not only to find out how do people want to live, but also what do they really think about their cities, what are their expectations. The complexity of offer and demand of the social environment in historical city centres and the involvement of citizens into neighborhood development became the key issues of the workshop in Almeria.

## Approach

We tried to tackle this multitude of dimensions by means of a SWOT-analysis. In preparation of the workshop in Almeria each city did a SWOT exercise of it's own city. SWOT analysis is a strategic planning method used to evaluate the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats involved in a subject. The present subject is our historic cities and their capacity of developing as dynamic residential environments.

In a SWOT analysis we can determine and analyse the present and possible future situation by identifying:

- Strengths: characteristics of the city that give it an advantage over other residential environments.
- Weaknesses: are characteristics that place the city at a disadvantage relative to other residential environments
- Opportunities: external chances, trends to have the possibility of becoming a better residential environment.
- Threats: external elements, trends in the environment that could cause trouble for becoming a better residential environment.

We were looking only for the most important issues of all four aspects. But in the end we came up with 227 different aspects that had to be divided into 17 different categories.



*The aspects mentioned were quite diverse:*

- *The presence of guidelines for eco-restoration of historical buildings*
- *The presence of a place dedicated to participation*
- *The availability of public spaces which is now occupied by cars*
- *The lack of respect for the cultural value of the built heritage*
- *The lack of equipment and spaces for teenagers and young people*
- *The image of a city of knowledge (e.g. the presence of important university)*
- *The possibility of transforming the historical city centre into a barrier-free quarter (as an reaction to the demographic change)*
- *The strong roots and sense of ownership of the local inhabitants.*
- *The Concept of a 10 min city: Compact city*
- ...

We divided the issues mentioned under 17 categories :

- 1.Housing: quality, comfort and price
- 2.Social and demographic mix
- 3.Historical and built environment
- 4.Neighbourhood aspects
- 5.Public space
- 6.Facilities & (conflict) of functions
- 7.Mobility, parking & proximity of functions
- 8.Participation/Activation/Belonging/(cultural) identity
- 9.Events
- 10.The vibrancy of the cities
- 11.aspects of overall decline
- 12.security/Safety
- 13.Education
- 14.public Interventions & urban renewal
- 15.The competition with suburbia
- 16.Location in a regional context
- 17.economic problems on a national scale

The variety of issues that were raised proves that the challenges that we face in our cities are diverse and complex. Of course it is not possible for the Links network to deal with all these problems. After going through the different Swot exercises and comparing the different cities in the network we used these exercises to define what we can realistically learn from each other and what we want to learn from each other. In this exercise we ended up with nine different topics:

- **How to involve citizens in participation processes**
- How to manage economic resources for regeneration processes
- Expertise for guidelines for low-energy construction & eco-construction
- **Citizens and the use of their city: how to manage public spaces as vibrant places avoiding too much conflict of uses**
- The creation of awareness for and promotion (through events) of the cultural heritage and value of historical city centres
- Cultural marketing and branding
- **The relationship of citizens towards the use of cars: Accessibility, alternative concepts of mobility and parking and transition of atmospheres between in & outer city**
- Experience in renovation in historic buildings and sustainable issues
- Expertise in planning policy & interaction with built heritage



The workshop in Almeria had the main goal to cover the social topics of urban regeneration through eco-restoration therefore we decided on three central themes, as indicated in bold above to be the discussion subjects in our workshops. The workshops had two basic questions:

Why do we want to work on this theme?

How do we want to work on this theme?

## 1. How to involve citizens in participation processes in historic cities?

### *a. Why do we want to work on citizens' participation?*

The answers that were put forward on this question were quite diverse. The first idea is that it is a basic right, we live in democracies, and so the citizens' voice has to be important for local authorities. It can even be a tool of pressure. So we can use citizens' participation to empower people.

Most of the participating cities were convinced of the practical advantages of a participative approach. Citizen's involvement can improve the quality of the way we work and final result of our projects. Starting from a technical or political vision citizens' participation can help us to integrate & revise it.

An important aspect that was often mentioned throughout the Almeria workshop was the correct identification of the needs of citizens and other city users. It was considered a very difficult challenge to find a way of identifying which needs should be given the highest priority. To find a way for balance of uses that fit the real needs.

If we go a step further a participative approach can be a way to give citizens a larger involvement in projects and a larger sense of community. So we can even use citizens' participation to improve the feeling of belonging in their neighborhoods even for the creation of a sense of identification with their city or their neighborhood and a renewed involvement and activation. This is something we clearly saw in the example of La Chance. For many cities these elements were considered the ultimate goal because a sense of belonging and activation is considered the key elements in community building.



A last opinion was that good participation processes can lead to better understandings in both directions and a larger support for policy and administration, in success but also more understanding in failure.

Here we can roughly recognize again the two different ways of looking at our cities, neighborhoods, urban projects, etc. In the first approach we see participation mentioned because of its importance to work in a correct way, implement the correct project, plan, design, ... In the second we see that it is mentioned because we want to work on community and community building. Of course both aspects are valid, and once again we see that cities are build by bricks but also by social networks.



*b. How do we want to work on citizens' participation?*

Participation is often mentioned as a very important element our city planning processes, whether this concerns spatial or social planning. But as often as it was mentioned it was pointed out to be a continuous challenge in our everyday work.

In the group discussion we were at the same time considering methods in a very detailed and concrete way. At the same time we were discussing about how participation should be tailor-made and every participation process should have a different approach and an individual "design".

The cities of the Links network identified that participation should be tailor-made. We need a different approach in function of issues, stakeholder groups and for different phases of the participation process. This requests us to be imaginative and creative in developing different approaches for the citizens' participation.

In the workshop the city of Anderlecht pointed out, that they have a team, located at a participation house, that can give expert support specifically for this. It was mentioned that if participation is such a challenge and if we think it is really that important, such a support can give a great input.

In the thematic introduction we have learn that there are a lot of different methods to find out which are the citizens opinions: meetings or hearings, surveys, polls, interviews, ... but it is in the processes that we use the greatest creativity. There we might reach the greatest involvement and learn the most about our fellow citizens: workshops, focusgroups, street-visits, open house events, Neighborhood presence (Fairs), visual techniques, ... A very important factor is the accessibility of information, communication and participation. All of this must happen on an easy-access and very understandable level. Several cities mentioned that it is important to come close to citizens in their own neighborhood and with individual approaches. In some places they also made use of new media used such as Wikipedia (Kilkenny).



Another important aspect that was mentioned was that participation is not something that should just come at the end. A project has different phases, and it seems that the partners of the Links network believe that a participative approach is necessary in every step of the process. Even from before a project starts.

One challenge we have to face is to learn how to deal with short-term high expectations. We must also be able to deal with different opinions. We can have as many ideas, as we have groups. We must learn to choose and select priorities.

A specific aspect that came several times into the focus on the Almeria workshop was the importance to work with the young people. This is not only an easy way to approach communities, but this also ensures possibilities for future community projects and can therefore be seen as an education for future responsibility towards the community. This was shown very clearly in the example of La Chanca.



*c. How can these ideas be translated into local action?*

The first step we must take is to identify the stakeholders, not only citizens, but all actors who use the city or have an interest in the revitalization of historical city centres. Depending on content of the participation and identified stakeholders we must design the participation process:

- Who do we want to involve?
- At what moment?
- With which goal?
- And how?

A strong point of attention we found that all participants had in common was the engagement of the political level in these processes. All partners acknowledge the importance to engage policymakers from the beginning to the end of the process. Even though this is not a guaranteed factor of success, which was also shown in the example of La Chanca.

So if we know that the city is not only built by stone bricks, but also with social network. We must not only care for the design of the built environment, but also for the design of the participation process!

**2. Citizens and the use of their city: how to manage public spaces as vibrant places in historic cities and avoiding too much conflict of uses in town centres**

*a. Why do we want to work on our public spaces?*

The importance of good quality public space was noticeably an important topic for different cities of the network. Public space is clearly a central aspect of city life, and maybe more so for historic cities where the decor is often very characteristic.



In the debates we had about this topic one of the first aspects was that we should be aware that there are many different kinds of public space. We always refer to central squares or parks, but also streets or a playground in a residential area are a part of the cities public spaces. It was found important to identify these different kinds of public space with their own identity as a place. But often also to give identity to the surrounding neighborhood and the city as such. It is in the public space you have the potentiality to find the city to be at its best. That's why many of the partner cities want our public spaces to be vibrant, not only to attract people, but also to attract a mix of activities, a mix of uses and also day & night, of course in balance with other present functions and in balance with the context.



We want public spaces in our cities that give light and air to our cities, Green spaces and (blue spaces) water, to break with the gray structures of our cities. It is in the public spaces where people can live the city, where people can spend their time, can have interactions with each other and can relax. An important aspect for successful public space is whether they are user-friendly. It is important that in public spaces slow mobility gets the space it deserves. This means accessible and safe for everyone, youngsters, elderly, mothers with pushcarts, ... we want them to be barrier-free. In this perspective we are very interested in the plan for barrier-free cities in Freiberg.

*b. How do we want to work our public spaces?*

Seeing the previous chapter it is logic that this happens in a participative approach, with relevant stakeholders in function of the type of public space and with involvement during the programming, realisation and use. Different steps were identified:

Step 1 Identify the different public spaces in our cities, and acknowledge or determine the different identities/functions/uses for different public space: Squares, Parks, Streets, Public buildings

Step 2. Each public space has its own different stakeholder, we must identify them and engage them: (residents, users, shops, bars, ...), if we involve these partners than it is best to integrate the political level along with them.

Step 3. With all relevant targets groups and stakeholders we want to come to a shared diagnoses. This because we believe in involvement during the programming, realisation and use.

For this shared diagnosis we have to take different steps:

- a. Identification of real needs
- b. Give priorities
- c. Identify the (desired) character
- d. Vision & programming (incl. functions)

Step 4. Organise the design process in this way that you have the largest quality in output. This might be via a competition if we think this is relevant depending on the scale of the project. The main issue is to have a greater quality of design. One of the qualities that is thought to be very important that public space has a certain room for flexibility and that the design allows new functions to be fitted in later.



### **3. The relationship of citizens towards the uses and ownership of cars: accessibility, alternative concepts of mobility and parking and transition of atmospheres between in & outer city**

#### *a. Why do we want to work on mobility for sustainable urban development?*

The car and the use of the car have a huge impact on our cities. A large part of citizens, including children, mothers and elderly people are limited due to the high degree of private cars and motorbikes and to the central place a car has in our cities. The presence of the car in our public space damages the public space, both physically and in terms of use. Due to its environmental impact it determines to a great extent how our cities are healthy and safe. But it was said that it is not only because of safety and health we should work on urban mobility. Pedestrian city centres makes life in the streets more vibrant and thus increase the economical turn over of activities in the city centre.

Urban mobility is resource consuming; it takes time and money, and of course there is a freedom of choice. But in this freedom of choice public transport, slow mobility and private transport by car should be on the same level in cost and in speed.



*b. How we move towards socially more sustainable mobility patterns?*

In the discussions we had there were two different aspects. On the one hand there was a debate linked with urban planning, the localisation of functions, the organisation of mobility and transport, but simultaneously we were also discussing that we need not only to change the way we design our cities, but we also need to educate the people who use the city, to start using it in a different way. Of course both aspects go together.

If we want services and amenities to be accessible we have to keep this into account in our urban planning systems and for example promoting mixed use neighbourhoods. But a better town planning also includes the implementation of better mobility plans. We must give priority to slow mobility and public transport. Specific for our historic cities extensive pedestrian areas in the city centres can have great benefits. By consequence we have to be more restrictive about the use of cars for inhabitants and for visitors.

The Links cities want to work on the place of the car in the city. Diminishing parking places in the city centre and making it more expensive in combination with providing parking places at the edge of the city centre and frequent (and if possible free) public transport to the city centre. At same time they want to redesign the city centres for public transport, cycling and walking, so they can start stimulating people to leave their car at home. Build streets and walkways for pedestrians and bikes, making access difficult for cars. And simultaneously it is important to have different measures to dissuade the use of a car, for example admitting cars only for residents and as guests in the city centres, decreasing allowed car speed at 15-20Km/h, road pricing, free pass on public transport for those who give up driving.



As it is mentioned above, we will not succeed if we only work with spatial and infrastructural aspects. We also have to make people understand that they will have to use their city in a different way. Once again it was mentioned that one of the key actors are kids and youngsters: starting with them will give more chances for the future

### **Conclusion:**

We had the intention to work on the social aspects of eco-restoration and revitalisation of historical city centres. We have acknowledged that the first challenge we often have to deal with is the identification of our target groups. Who are we working for? What are their needs? How can we reach them?

The first thing we have to do is look to identify our partners (citizens, users) to activate and involve them in our projects/processes.

In the Almeria workshop we were discussing throughout different sessions about this challenge. The question we now have to ask ourselves is what can we do with these exercises. Every partner realises that he can improve the way things are happening in their city. But it's not always in our own hands to make these kinds of changes; nevertheless we can make some contribution and work on some aspects mentioned.

So, each one of the partners has to clarify what he can improve in his own city with these lessons learned. The Links network offers the possibility to reflect about different aspects.

- The Links project has the intention to create an online platform where online discussions can take place and ideas be reflected upon
- We know there are a lot of publications and manuals on methodological aspect. The links network will strive for sharing this documentation online.

Now it is time for the cities and their local support groups to look for policies they can implement and this will also feed the online debates on the virtual city marketplace of the Links network.

