



VITALITY OF SMALLER CITIES IN EUROPE

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Francesca Bonnemaison Library

Barcelona

A conference highlighting urban innovative practices in nine smaller to medium sized European cities that significantly contributed to the vitality of these cities. These cities all participated in the URBACT Programme, a programme of the European Union that supports integrated urban development in Europe.



Conference on the Vitality of Smaller Cities in Europe

Barcelona, October 25th, 2018

A. Context and Policy Challenges

“The past development of a city is no guarantee of [its] future development.”

Jane Jacobs
- *The Economy of Cities* (1969)

At the time in the 1950s and 1960s when Jane Jacobs made her incisive observations about city life and the local economy in cities, she did not emphasise ‘innovation’ as we would today. However, in her writings, she often referred to the need for cities to change to be able to grow economically mainly by creating ‘new work’ in response to the needs of the city. Today we would refer to this as a need for urban innovation. The need to sustain the vitality and viability of small cities¹ within the context of the immense pull factors exercised by large cities, is the focus of a conference planned by URBACT to take place in Barcelona on the 25th of October 2018. The challenge is interpreted from the perspective of the ability of small cities to change in response to these factors by leveraging their own strengths and creativity.

Three URBACT III Action Planning Network projects are presenting practices and learning from their partner cities at the conference. All three projects focused on the vitality of small cities and large towns in Europe. In the **RetailLink Project** the impetus for retailers in the city centre and other stakeholders to understand and respond to global retail trends, technology and consumer preferences was fostered. In the **Agri-Urban Project** the possibilities were explored for small cities who have local economies with strong agricultural traditions, to change and improve their output with innovation in production and marketing accentuating trends in wellness, organic farming and quality of urban life. In the **City Centre Doctor Project**, the partner cities worked together to improve their understanding of the factors that influence the vibrancy/liveliness of city centres such as increased mobility and liveability as well as other factors such as the design and use of public spaces and the diversity in the social, cultural and economic make-up of the city centre.

Often the media spotlight is on the larger better-known cities as the major focal points for urban economic development. The assumption is that with the potential for agglomeration and significant infrastructure investment, larger cities will always have distinct advantages over smaller cities. This thesis however does not take in account the spatial distribution of local economies in functional urban areas clustered around smaller cities that make up the bulk of the urban settlements in Europe (OECD²). It follows that for a growing European economy, the health and wealth of these smaller cities and their connected hinterlands should carry as much importance as the competitiveness of our larger cities. In this regard the Pact of Amsterdam (2016) states: “The Urban Agenda for the EU acknowledges the importance of Urban Areas of all sizes and contexts in the further development of the European

¹ Vitality is a measure of how busy a city centre is, and viability is a measure of its capacity to attract ongoing investment for maintenance, importance and adaptation to changing needs as per [Northern Ireland Planning Guidelines](#)

² The [OECD-EC harmonised definition of cities](#) (2012) define small cities as below 100,000 population.

Union. A growing number of urban challenges are of a local nature but require a wider territorial solution (including urban-rural linkages) and cooperation within functional urban areas.”

To showcase practical elements of such local economies and their importance for themes of the EU Urban Agenda such as *Small- and medium- sized Urban Areas and polycentric development*, *Jobs and skills in the local economy* and *Urban Mobility*, the conference will be structured to present city case studies from the participating networks on the following themes:

- 1) Reviving experiential retail that will enliven city/town centres
- 2) Creating attraction through community engagement in public spaces of the city centre; and
- 3) Strengthening the local urban economy through developing and showcasing local produce.



These case studies also emphasise a method of co-creation of policies and interventions that has been developed in the URBACT Programme, which imparts a discipline to engage stakeholders and most importantly local citizens in every stage of planning and implementation. The added value is that the Programme also facilitates city-to-city learning with a series of ‘transnational’ visits in each project that enable participants to engage in peer discussions and develop a deeper understanding of shared issues as well as to utilise opportunities for examining relevant local good practices in host cities.

The conference is thus a platform for the capitalisation of the learning in the three projects which is presented in a thematic format that helps smaller cities to compare and associate with cities across countries and in specific geographical contexts. It is also a unique opportunity to seek synthesis across all three projects by exploring the capacity of smaller cities to progress with strategies and actions that deliver on the Urban Agenda of the EU.

1) [Reviving experiential retail that will enliven city/town centres](#)

Small cities in Europe in the past decades widely adopted a retail model that followed the US trend of building large out-of-town retail and leisure complexes. This caused a fragmentation of the local retail offer and altered their urban retail landscape, which traditionally was concentrated in the centre. These out-of-town retail malls are typically car-centric and designed for ‘all-you-can-buy’ consumption in one place.

This trend in retail has resulted in the downgrading of the city/town centre retail offer which is by its nature more dispersed and less coherent than a competing retail offer ‘all-under-one-roof’. To add to these challenges, the significant economic downturn of 2008 led to a large increase in the number of vacant retail units, especially in city and town centres, resulting in less investment and losing customers. Despite the recent recovery in European economies, retail activity in these city and town centres have not returned to the pre-crisis levels. This is the challenge the RetailLink Project took on.





In the RetailLink Project, a set of core influential factors and recommendations have been identified to help small cities develop strategies to adapt to global retail trends and new consumer habits. Ten partner cities learnt how to analyse local consumers to better understand their needs, preferences and expectations of their city retail offer. Accordingly, they are reshaping their local retail propositions with new and upgraded tools and stronger local partnerships that involve the retail businesses as well as culture, leisure, sports and gastronomy agents of the city.

The aim is that with improved retail experiences and recreational activities, the potential increases to attract more people to the city centre. Project partners assisted retailers to create attractive shopping experiences, while also supporting local entrepreneurs to initiate new business and social activities to drive regeneration of the commercial centre.

2) [Creating attraction through community engagement in public spaces of the city/town centre](#)

The common spaces and public places in city and town centres are increasingly recognised as the focal points where residents can meet in person with surprising and unpredictable experiences. Both Jane Jacobs (1961) and Jan Gehl (2010) observed these happenstance meetings as an 'it' factor making cities more vibrant. These experiences can be curated.

In the City Centre Doctor Project partner cities developed 'beta-actions' – i.e. temporary installations and activities to demonstrate new uses and opportunities for people-place interactions – that were evaluated by residents as to the type of changes required to improve such public spaces and ultimately to generate more liveliness in the city/town centre.



The beta actions followed on from the initial place analyses where the city centre teams (ULGs) used surveys and place observation tools to establish baseline information. The analyses were used to stimulate discussions with residents and stakeholders on ideas to increase liveliness/vibrancy. The project partners used a placemaking approach working with locals to start and evaluate beta actions.

The premise is that through engagement of citizens and stakeholders, changes can be made to the appearance and social/cultural use of public spaces with profound impacts on the sense of place and community among residents and hence nurturing a stronger attachment to the city or town centre.

Attachment will hence translate into increased footfall boosting the local economy which in turn could lead to job creation.

3) [Strengthening the local urban economy through developing and showcasing local produce](#)



The Agri-Urban project presented opportunities for partner cities to rethink agri-food production in small cities that have a relative specialisation to their area (e.g. type of produce or specific food processing methods), with the goal to increase transparency in the European food system, to strengthen the rural-urban relationship and to increase jobs in the sector.

The impact is also wider with market supply links between small more rural cities and nearby larger cities thus underpinning regional economic development.

The concept of "Complementary - Farming" is used to describe the integration of farming and food production into an organisation for social, education or cultural reasons. Partners in the project examined making policies that incentivised developing local food processing industries as well as promoting the integrated vision of sustainable food production as a basis for sustainability of small cities and large towns. Innovation with local food production opened many new possibilities for entrepreneurs and beneficiaries, resulting in lively debates in the Agri-Urban Project on new local initiatives and opportunities.

B. Urban Agenda of the EU

The framework for the future sustainable urban development in Europe is outlined in the Urban Agenda of the EU. During the conference, the participants will be asked to reflect on how their projects, as portrayed in the case studies, also contributed to implementation of the Urban Agenda for the EU. A select few themes were identified for further discussion namely:

- Using an integrated and participatory approach to identify city challenges and develop responsive actions.
- Improving urban mobility especially with measures to reduce car-dependency and making cities more walkable and cycle-friendly.
- Promoting the opportunities for local entrepreneurs in small cities and large towns to improve skills and create more jobs.
- Establishing effective urban governance mechanisms, especially to facilitate timely and appropriate responses to the challenges experienced in city and town centres.
- Understanding the needs of small and medium-sized urban areas and how polycentric development in a region can address these needs.



C. Policy Questions

The presentation of city case studies from the three projects together with contributions from guest experts will provide content for participants in the conference to examine questions such as:

- Why is the vitality of some smaller cities much higher than in others? Is it luck, serendipity, geographical good fortune, 'better' people?
- What are examples of the practical ways for smaller cities to compete with other cities (including larger cities) on product, retail offer and attractiveness of the centre?
- How can smaller cities implement selected good practices that improved the vitality and viability of other cities?
- Who should be involved in smaller cities to start and drive processes of change that can lead to improvement of their vitality and viability?
- How can European institutions and programmes help smaller cities to deliver on the intentions to improve their vitality and viability?
- How can the specific challenges and opportunities related to the vitality and viability of smaller cities be strengthened in the Urban Agenda of the EU across all the Programmes?

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