



The Urban Lab of
Europe!

CASE STUDY

REPORT

Democratic Transitions
for All

PROJECT

A Place to Be-Come
📍 Seraing, Belgium

TOPIC

Urban poverty

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A Place To Be-Come, Seraing, Belgium

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1. What has the project been about?

The project's context

The A Place To Be-Come project focusses on reconnecting people in less affluent neighbourhoods with local opportunities and green spaces. Its main objective is increasing social inclusion in these areas through a combination of nature-based training, promoting and co-developing spaces with residents, and enabling them to have a greater role in the planning and development of their local areas.

The problem in Seraing was that parks and green spaces in less affluent neighbourhoods were not well maintained or used very much. Green spaces had a poor appearance and poor reputation among many of the locals. And they were often 'fear spaces' – areas where people were afraid to go at all, or only at certain times, due to the nature and character of the space, how it was used or how it was presented.

The project's goals and vision

The city identified an opportunity to use engagement in parks and nature as both a way to increase opportunities for residents to engage positively with their local environment and to create a greater sense of belonging and connection with the place they live.

Coupled with this, the creation of a local 'creative hub' would provide a focal point for citizen-led actions and projects, as well as a community meeting space and source of support for activities. 'La Ruche' (literally translated as The Hive) was a physical space set up within the neighbourhood, providing temporary space for projects, a space to meet, and a place where community project support was available from a dedicated facilitator.

In general, participatory ways of working were not well established in Seraing and part of the aim became about seeing what might be possible in the city.

The links to Just Transitions

An overarching aim was to turn residents into more than simply users of the city and its services – to help them become contributors to the city and its local fabric. It was about both enabling the community and about the city administration acknowledging the potential sharing of power and roles that are possible (and/or necessary) for this. Whilst small steps, this was laying the groundwork for deeper community engagement in the future or replication of the practices in other policy domains and other areas of the city.

A key theme of the projects was about regenerating parks and green spaces and helping residents reconnect with nature and take a more active role in its promotion and maintenance. Again, whilst small scale, this did provide a basis to build on for wider and more meaningful engagement with citizens on green transition issues.

2. What solutions for Democratic Transitions have been found?

Citizen-led activities in the 'La Ruche' creative hub

Once the temporary creative hub had been refurbished and opened as 'La Ruche' the project worked to engage local people and local groups in being part of the growing community of interested stakeholders. In addition to 'ad hoc' exchange and meetings, APTBC launched a call for projects, whereby anyone could submit an idea and get access to space in La Ruche to develop and/or deliver their idea. They effectively invited people to 'bring their interests' to La Ruche. The aim was to make La Ruche a point of contact within the neighbourhood, although this was difficult to achieve at first.

The problem with 'projects'

Overall, the localities at the centre of the project are disadvantaged neighbourhoods, with a high risk of poverty and exclusion and low social capital. This means that the local residents are typically a long way (in their thinking) from participative engagement methods and mindsets.

In this regard, 'doing projects' isn't the way most people think. Likewise, traditional participative methods that mimic or follow municipality processes often lack accessibility from a citizen's point of view. People don't normally think and work this way; they don't see their locality or neighbourhood through the same lens as a city administration. There's an interesting point here about how policymakers present 'participation' and about how they can sometimes wrongly assume what it means to people and what might actually motivate them. It is important that policymakers put themselves in the shoes of local residents.

Engagement in decision making therefore cannot normally be direct - the path to participation is longer and may require some finesse.

Making connections

At the beginning, it was difficult for the project to reach people – at least in a way that they would engage with. Methods like flyers and posters were tried but didn't work. There was low trust and respect from residents and so they simply didn't engage - those (more passive) approaches didn't do enough to build the necessary trust for deeper engagement (and to overcome the entrenched behaviours of viewing the city administration as something remote and unapproachable).

Because it was in a low-income area, people wouldn't go through the La Ruche's door at first just to see what was there, because it was perceived as a space for other people, not them. A specific example is that people could go there and get a coffee but some felt they didn't have money to spend on a coffee – and they didn't realise that it was a free service / space. It was hard to get the message across when there was no trusted route for communication.

Facilitation and support are key

The key success came with the appointment of a 'facilitator' whose role was to connect with the community, to lead activities at La Ruche and to help give people the confidence to propose doing things in La Ruche and in the wider locality.

This facilitation was key. In the early stages, the facilitator was going round both local groups and council teams talking to them about La Ruche, what was happening there and what was on offer. Sometimes this was awkward and uncomfortable, with people not really knowing why the facilitator was talking to them or what it was all about, but gradually this direct approach built trust and confidence and hence greater levels of engagement.

The call for projects also attracted local organisations to get involved, which added a useful diversity to La Ruche. However, it also created another challenge.

Avoiding unintended consequences

Local organisations are always looking for offices/space to locate in (which is part of what La Ruche offers) and therefore well-known organisations can propose and respond to the calls for projects as they have the capacity and capability to bid. They also have motives that are more about securing funding or space – so the whole place could end up being filled with ‘professional bidders’ rather than a healthy mix. It proved to be an ongoing challenge for the facilitator and the team to maintain this balance and to ensure that the calls reached everyone and not only active local organisations.

Supporting people to engage

In this regard, the project team commented that, “if we don’t have this role, then we miss the point.” Meaning that without the enabling support of the dedicated facilitator, citizens struggle to get involved and respond effectively to calls for ideas/projects - they don’t feel that it’s for them or don’t know how to make proposals. However, the facilitator was able to help with this, and provide input to help people shape their ideas into a proposal. The team observed that people often need, if not full ‘support’, then at least encouragement to get involved.

The tone and approach of the facilitator also helped to make La Ruche a safe space, with convivial activities and somewhere that people felt they would have a pleasant time if they were there. The facilitator on the one hand brings skills and capacity, but also helps engender a feeling of trust with the local community and builds a bridge between people and the ‘semi-formal structure’ of La Ruche as a creative space and community.

Using training in green space management to foster interest

The team worked with a Belgian NGO that focuses on biodiversity to train people - who are unemployed and on benefits - in the skills of managing and maintaining parks and green spaces. This focussed on creating employment for people from the neighbourhood, helping them gain skills and get back into the labour market. This led to certification for the trainees as a gardener. The training also focussed on introducing more biodiversity to the green spaces, re-wilding, avoiding cutting grass, and creating a different mix of vegetation.

Because they were recruited from the local area, they also became ambassadors for the work they did, helping promote respect for the park amongst their peers and in the wider community.

They also created a presence in the park, which helped promote greater respect for the space (which was also being improved in quality by them) and therefore helped visitors to feel safer using it, making the park less of a ‘fear space’.

Resistance to change

Another challenge was that some city employees were not very interested in working differently at the start. This resulted in either indifference to the project or active resistance in some cases. This is by no means unique to the city of Seraing – this situation is seen commonly across Europe (and is also not limited to public administration!). However, where input or support from certain city departments was needed, this caused difficulties or delays in the early stages. For example, training up local people in nature management and gardening, to help support park management, required input and a changed approach from the city’s parks department, if these new ways of involving the local community were to be implemented effectively.

Whilst this didn’t immediately create problems for the project, there were some challenges along the way, and it posed a particular risk for the sustainability of the initiatives beyond the project end date, when it would rely more heavily on ‘business as usual’ in the city departments, rather than the bespoke project team.

Alongside the work to develop and promote the parks, the project also ran a large number of workshops for the community on a wide range of green outdoor activities. This included things like growing vegetables, caring for flowers, basket making, etc. These helped to further create an appreciation for biodiversity as well as greater awareness and skills amongst residents, enabling them to engage with nature and green spaces in a more positive and active way. This also helped residents to reclaim the parks, while engaging more actively and enjoying the outdoors.

Small steps demonstrating potential

The project did not achieve any real collaborative decision-making in terms of 'governance'. But the activities and projects in La Ruche became increasingly self-directed by citizens. This demonstrates that it is possible to change how people work in Seraing and in communities and highlights that citizen interaction can be about contribution to the life of the city, not just about being users of services and facilities in the city.

Keeping it going

A challenge for the future is that La Ruche was created in a temporary space, and the lease will end with the project. There are plans to relocate to a new building, which shows a positive commitment. However, the challenge for the future is this relocation of La Ruche and whether it will survive this change.

City departments will take on the running of the new space, rather than the project team and this also poses a risk. The new 'caretakers' are committed to working differently to support La Ruche in the way it has been during the project, but this does require a shift in working practices and mindsets, and this may not be easy or quick. Ensuring the right facilitation will again be key, and this may be harder for the city staff to achieve from within their organisations.

There is also a sense in the project team that many of the people who came there did so in part due to its physical location, and the relation with their home / neighbourhood spaces. They fear that they may not visit it so readily in its new location. There would however be an opportunity to engage new people in a new location, but this will create a transitional period that will need to be managed to ensure that the new La Ruche location flourishes like the original one.

Driven by the people

The core focus with most of the project activities in La Ruche was about people and about them leading and shaping things for themselves. This takes time and was only achieved in a limited way but the project did give people the time and space to pursue the things that interested them and gave them encouragement and support where needed.

The project team specifically observed that "people often need (if not support) then at least reassurance" to participate more, i.e. they sometimes just need someone "to hold their hand" to help them see what they are capable of and that their idea is worth pursuing.

All this creates some element of different expectations around what contribution citizens could make. This type of support in theory can lead to small behavioural shifts – at least in terms of mindsets and expectations. It's a very gradual process, behavioural change is often incremental and often over a number of years.

People participate in ways that work for them

One small example is that of a local resident who lives across the street from La Ruche. She saw things going on there and started going over to see what was happening. She always brought and offered food. But she never wanted to get involved in anything else - just wanted to be part of the community in the space. Bringing food was her way of contributing to the community and was a way for her to feel comfortable being involved. So, whilst she didn't want to propose projects, she was much closer to the activity that was going on at local level - and this therefore leaves a smaller leap to being more involved or at least being able to contribute something more should she wish to. It's a small step but one that needs to be taken to get closer to more inclusive and participative governance.

The green workshops and training also provided the first steps towards fostering a deeper engagement in green issues and in the city on the part of residents. As with the projects in La Ruche, whilst this is not yet creating more collaborative decision making with citizens directly, it is starting to show that some different ways of working and thinking are possible with green spaces in Seraing, which wasn't the case (or at least wasn't evident) at the start of the project.

3. What can cities learn from the A Place To Be-Come governance?

Keys to success

- Support and encouragement from the dedicated facilitator role was key. Getting the right mindset and approach in this role was what made it work - a particular approach and skillset.
 - People contribute in a way they feel comfortable with. 'Doing projects' isn't for most people. This begs the question: does participation have to be 'led' and structured?
 - It's about people and their values, mindsets, and approaches.
 - Community initiatives can rarely be done entirely by community volunteers or people who don't experience this as part of their job. Particularly in the earlier stages when things need a bit of focus and drive, when it's not quite clear what the thing is and when it's still developing, when there are specific logistical and organisational/political challenges to overcome.
 - Citizens are often very capable, but not always confident operating in new or different ways, especially when 'projects' etc. are not their normal way of life.
 - Facilitation of these processes is key to bringing people into the 'new' system when they aren't used to working or acting in that way. This is true for both the public (citizens) and for the local administration!
 - By helping people to gain skills in something, they can become more connected to it (e.g., parks training).
 - Even if not directly participating, people seeing that things are going on locally creates a sense that the place is alive and more vibrant. 'Passive' participation can therefore also be of value.
 - Synergies and mutual support from people to each other can help things to become more self-sustaining - people reinforce each other.
 - It's always a fragile system – it depends on the behaviours and culture and is down to the individuals involved – if critical people move on or change focus, the whole thing can deteriorate or collapse. It needs constant feeding and watering.
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4. Scaling up and replication potential

The project team noted that what was achieved in the project was new for Seraing and provided a learning opportunity for future projects. Regardless of whether the changes stick within the neighbourhood, the team feel the project demonstrated that the city is capable of working a different way and these approaches could be used in other areas of the city.

The lessons from La Ruche provide options for replication in other cities, although it should be noted that it's not 'what' the model was, but 'how' it was implemented that made it work. The style of facilitation and support, the values that were demonstrated, the tone that was set, were all critical to success. Simply 'setting up a creative community hub' is not enough.

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