

Citizen Action Monitor

Posted on March 4, 2015 | coalition counterpower, government action, leadership, political action, social action

Dozens of Italian cities empower citizen action through city-citizen partnership initiatives to improve city life

Innovative co-design approach represents serious shift in thinking in “finding solutions” to manage city projects and urban issues

No 1272 Posted by fw, March 4, 2015

“What would it be like if city governments, instead of relying chiefly on bureaucratic rules and programs, actually invited citizens to take their own initiatives to improve city life? That’s what the city of Bologna, Italy, is doing, and it amounts to a landmark reconceptualization of how government might work in cooperation with citizens. Ordinary people acting as commoners are invited to enter into a ‘co-design process’ with the city to manage public spaces, urban green zones, abandoned buildings and other urban issues.”
—David Bollier

When I moved to Windsor, Ontario in 1990, I enthusiastically responded to city council invitations to residents to participate in the annual strategic planning process and to provide feedback to big ticket projects. That enthusiasm was quickly dashed when it became clear to me that these exercises were little more than a

façade of participative democracy. As far as I could determine, public input was never incorporated in the final drafts of official documents or project plans.

Imagine, then, my rekindled enthusiasm in participative democracy at the municipal level when I skimmed Bollier's report of the Italian co-design approach to the planning and management of city projects. Click on the following linked title to read the original article or read below a cross-posted version with highlighted text to bring key ideas to the fore.

LabGov Pioneers the Paradigm of City as Commons
(<http://bollier.org/blog/labgov-pioneers-paradigm-city-commons>) by David Bollier, bollier.org blog,
February 27, 2015



(<https://citizenactionmonitor.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/david-bollier.jpg>)

David Bollier

What would it be like if city governments, instead of relying chiefly on bureaucratic rules and programs, actually invited citizens to take their own initiatives to improve city life? That's what the city of Bologna, Italy, is doing, and it amounts to a landmark reconceptualization of how government might work in cooperation with citizens. Ordinary people acting as commoners are invited to enter into a "co-design process" with the city to manage public spaces, urban green zones, abandoned buildings and other urban issues.

The Bologna project is the brainchild of Professor Christian Iaione of LUISS University in Rome in cooperation with student and faculty collaborators at LabGov (<http://www.labgov.it/>), the Laboratory for the Governance of

Commons. LabGov is an “inhouse clinic” and think tank that is concerned with collaborative governance, public collaborations for the commons, subsidiarity (governance at the lowest appropriate level), the sharing economy and collaborative consumption. The tagline for LabGov says it all: “Society runs, economy follows. Let’s (redesign institutions and law together.)”

For years Iaione has been contemplating the idea of the “city as commons” in a number of law review articles and other essays. (<http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/handle/10535/8604>) In 2014, the City of Bologna formally adopted legislation drafted by LabGov interns. The thirty-page Bologna Regulation for the Care and Regeneration of Urban Commons (<http://www.labgov.it/bologna-regulation-on-public-collaboration-for-urban-commons>) (official English translation here (<http://www.comune.bologna.it/media/files/bolognaregulation.pdf>)) outlines a legal framework by which the city can enter into partnerships with citizens for a variety of purposes, including social services, digital innovation, urban creativity and collaborative services.

Taken together, these collaborations comprise a new vision of the “sharing city” or commons-oriented city. **To date, some 30 projects have been approved under the Bologna Regulation. Dozens of other Italian cities are emulating the Bologna initiative.**

The Bologna Regulation takes seriously the idea that citizens have energy, imagination and responsibility that they can apply to all sorts of municipal challenges. So why not empower such citizen action rather than stifling it under a morass of bureaucratic edicts and political battles? (On this point, check out David Graeber’s new book, *The Utopia of Rules* (http://www.amazon.com/Utopia-Rules-Technology-Stupidity-Bureaucracy/dp/1612193749/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1425061714&sr=8-1&keywords=David+Graeber+Utopia). (http://www.amazon.com/Utopia-Rules-Technology-Stupidity-Bureaucracy/dp/1612193749/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1425061714&sr=8-1&keywords=David+Graeber+Utopia))

The conceptualization of “city as commons” represents a serious shift in thinking. Law and bureaucratic programs are not seen as the ultimate or only solution, and certainly not as solutions that are independent of the urban culture. **Thinking about the city as commons requires a deeper sense of mutual engagement and obligation than “service delivery,” outsourcing and other market paradigms allow.**

But consider the upside: Instead of relying on the familiar public/private

partnerships that often siphon public resources into private pockets, a city can instead pursue “public/commons partnerships” that bring people together into close, convivial and flexible collaborations. The working default is “finding a solution” rather than beggar-thy-neighbor adversarialism or fierce political warfare.

To Iaione, the Bologna Regulation offers a structure for “local authorities, citizens and the community at large to manage public and private spaces and assets together. As such, it’s a sort of handbook for civic and public collaboration, and also a new vision for government.” He believes that “we need a cultural shift in terms of how we think about government, moving away from the Leviathan State or Welfare State toward collaborative or polycentric governance.”

Besides more public collaborations, the Regulation encourages what Iaione calls “nudge regulations” — a “libertarian paternalism” that uses policy to encourage (but not require) people to make better choices. The term, popularized by behavioral economist Richard Thaler and law scholar Cass Sunstein in their book *Nudge*, is seen as a way of respecting people’s individual freedoms while “nudging” them to (for example) save enough for retirement, eat healthier foods and respect the environment.

The Regulation also encourages “citytelling” — a process that recognizes people’s “geo-emotional” relationships with urban spaces in the crafting of rules for managing those spaces. And it elevates the importance of “service design” techniques for meeting needs. Thus, information and networking tools, training and education, collaboration pacts and initiatives, and measurement and evaluation of impact, all become more important.

For a lengthier treatment of Professor Iaione’s thinking and the Bologna Regulation, check out Michel Bauwens’ recent interview with Iaione (<http://www.shareable.net/blog/interviewed-professor-christian-iaione-on-the-city-as-commons>) at the Shareable website. Iaione explains how his studies of the tragedy of urban roads (<http://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/ulj/vol37/iss3/7/>) and experiments in Bologna led him to develop the theoretical framework for local public entrepreneurship (http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1110&context=law_globalstudies), which is the basis of the CO-Mantova project (<http://www.co-mantova.it/>) and the idea of the city as a commons.

Iaione sees commons-related policies as ways to tap into the talents and enthusiasm

of an emerging new social class – active citizens, social innovators, makers, creatives, sharing and collaborative economy practitioners, service designers, co-working and co-production experts, and urban designers. Conventional governance structures cannot effectively elicit or organize the energies of these people. Thinking about the “city as open platform” works better.

With the CO-Mantova project, in Mantua, LabGov has been trying to develop “a prototype of a process to run the city as a collaborative commons, i.e., a ‘co-city.’” It is building a new kind of collaborative/polycentric governance with five key sets of actors: social innovators, public authorities, businesses, civil society organizations, and knowledge institutions. **Although it is a formal, institutionalized process – a public-private-citizen partnership – its beating heart is the trust, cooperation, social ethic and culture among the participating parties.**

The goal is to build peer-to-peer platforms – physical, digital and institutional – to advance three main purposes: “living together (collaborative services), growing together (co-ventures), making together (co-production).” The CO-Mantova project may soon start a CO-Mantova Commons School.

An exciting aspect to LabGov is its reconceptualization of the catalytic role that universities can play. LabGov is a nonprofit based at a university, but it works with all sorts of outsiders. Instead of considering the university, industry and government as the only important players, LabGov subscribes to “a Quintuple Helix approach” (expressed in LabGov logo) where the university “becomes an active member of the community and facilitates the creation of new forms of partnerships in the general interest between government, industry and businesses, the not-for-profit sector, social innovators and citizens, and other institutions such as schools, academies, plus research and cultural centers.”

There are so many urban commons projects emerging these days that it would be great to assemble them into a new network of vanguard players. In the meantime, I will be closely watching the progress of LabGov and the Italian cities that are boldly experimenting with these new modes of governance.

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