



Generative European Commons Living Lab – gE.CO Living Lab

INTRODUCTION

gE.CO Living Lab is a project which aims at mapping, connecting and studying, at the European level, experiences of formal groups or informal communities of citizens who manage hubs, incubators, co-creation spaces, social centers created in regenerated urban voids and providing welfare services. We call such experiences “generative commons”.

So far, the project has mapped more than 200 experiences of communities and of local public policies implemented for promoting generative commons. A pilot group of 56 cases (spread in 15 countries and 43 cities) is undergoing a survey, the results of which will be very helpful in better understanding the phenomenon at a larger scale. Such results will be relied on for issuing further policy briefs.

The project, however, is already at a stage which enables us to shed a light on a first main policy implication. Namely, **the rise of cooperation** as an **institutional mean** for citizens to implement **welfare solutions** from the bottom-up and to promote **urban regeneration** and flourishing.

Our findings suggest that generative commons have a significant social impact and that they are largely widespread in Europe. However, it is noteworthy that such a phenomenon is very little considered at the European policy level. Our suggestion is thus for generative commons to be included in the “Urban Agenda for the EU” and in policy tools alike.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

gE.CO living lab has so far allowed to shed a light on three main elements.

First, the fact that, in European urban areas, many individual and collective needs, the fulfilment of which has traditionally been conceived as an exclusive prerogative of the public, are, to the contrary, satisfied through **experiences of bottom up self-organization of citizens and local communities**.

Second, that such experiences, far from being marginal or negligible, are extremely relevant with respect to both, their diffusion and the social impact they produce. Indeed, our findings suggest that **urban commons represent the third great axes of urban welfare and regeneration**, together with (and peer to) the (better known) solutions coming from public bodies and private actors such as for-profit and non-profit organizations engaged in urban development and social innovation.

Third, the activities carried out in our project clearly show that urban commons have the characteristic of **putting together the satisfaction of one or more specific needs (or rights) with the renovation and regeneration of urban voids**, buildings or even entire areas.

These features may be better understood through a few examples.

The **Hotel Pasteur** is an historical university building located in the center of the city of Rennes, France. The building was the headquarter of the faculty of science and, then, of the one of dental medicine. When both faculties moved to the new University campus, the building remained abandoned. The building was thus occupied by a group of artists and people engaged in the cultural sector, which established a cultural center and a sort of “popular university of art and culture”. The occupation revitalized the building, which has been re-opened and became a center of cultural and educational activities. The community which had occupied the building started a long path of participatory projecting for the future destination of the building, where also institutional actors (such as the city of Rennes) took part. Hotel Pasteur is now a best practice of urban regeneration and culture in Europe and is managed through a very sophisticated participatory mechanism of governance, which sees together the community and institutional actors in the decision-making process on the use and stewardship of the good.

Another example comes from the **region of Brussels**. Due to different and very complex factors, many areas of the region of Brussels, in the last decades, have undergone massive

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gentrification processes, all this resulting in a tough housing emergency and in the urban displacement of thousands of families. The traditional public housing programs enacted by the city and by the region, especially after the shortage of resources due to the economic crisis, were not sufficient to face the problem. At the beginning of 2008 activists, associations engaged in the housing sector and many citizens started a participatory project aimed at importing in Belgium the American institution of the community land trust. The process resulted in the implementation, in 2012, of the first community land trust enacted in continental Europe. The **Community Land Trust of Brussels** is today a reality. The city can now count on this very efficient model of social housing, which innovative legal and economic features put together the participatory and democratic stewardship of land with a very sophisticated mechanism of home-ownership. This latter, allows the same subsidy to remain attached to the home, this way promoting, through one single initial investment, potential permanent affordable housing for many generations of families in need.

Very relevant experiences of generative commons can be found in **Barcelona**, Spain, a city where urban commons have played and still play an important role within both social movements' claims and the municipality's agenda.

The **Ateneu Popular de Nou Barris** represents one of these historical cases. Founded in 1979 in a context of dictatorship, the Ateneu was an old factory occupied by citizens from the neighborhood claiming for social and cultural spaces in their area –one of the poorest of Barcelona. From then on, the Ateneu consolidated its own agenda and profile, and then it entered into a “legal agreement” with the City Council, being recognized as a citizens-managed centre from the very beginning of the 1980s.

The second example is **Can batlló**, an old huge factory placed in the South part of the City –another poor and historically neglected area. Can Batlló used to be a huge factory facility compound by multiple factory buildings, urban plots, small workshops, etc. which was in place until the beginning of 2000. The story is quite similar to Ateneu Popular de Nou Barris, since the civic management was achieved through the claim from the citizens in the neighborhood. The community of citizens managing Can Batlló got a legal agreement (*cessió d'ús*) from the City Council in 2011, and although the ownership remains public (municipal), management and control pertains to the community, becoming then one of the most important aspects of urban commons in Barcelona and elsewhere.

Another example stems from **Athens**, Greece. Although Greece has not been considered a prominent example of commoning due to structural and legal limitations, in the last decade the country and the city of Athens in particular has undergone serious developments in this respect. Many cases of grassroots organising have evolved covering everyday needs that pertain to urban regeneration, migrant issues, food collectives, just to

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name a few. For instance, **Communitism** is a self-funded socio-cultural project, organized in Athens in 2015. It aims at mobilizing social structures into reactivating abandoned buildings of cultural heritage. It is structured in three consecutive events that are designed to involve three broader communities: creative audience, local artists and international artists. To achieve this, they have formed a dynamic community consisting of people of different personalities, nationalities, ages, educational levels and orientations. At this time, they have been granted the use of a building in downtown Athens, which acts as a field of action for their purposes. As they connect, form synergies and learn how to work collectively, they have created the conditions for the building to become a common good: a vibrant center where the involved parties can communicate their social and artistic actions. Their experiment succeeded and, in the spring of 2018, they set up a strategy for founding a self-organized socio-cultural center. At a broader level, they are envisioning the creation of a new model for the activation of abandoned spaces that other communities can use, thus contributing to a new approach of the commons.

Another example is **Melissa**, a network for migrant women in Athens, promoting empowerment, communication and active citizenship. It aims at promoting, creating and sustaining bonds, and at building a bridge of communication with the host society. Melissa was founded in September 2014 with the direct involvement of migrant women leaders, it has members from 45 countries who live and work in Greece. It operates on the basis of a common platform, a hub where networks and individuals can meet, share their concerns and ideas, and support each other in the pursuit of their common goals. It provides a platform for networking, capacity building and advocacy and runs an innovative integration program supporting refugee women and children. Melissa's vision of society is not as a collection of isolated cells, but as a beehive of creativity, communication and exchange. Their aim is to motivate migrant and refugee women and engage them in the public sphere, in order to be the change, they wish to see. Despite the adversities that they have faced and continue to face in the current crisis, migrant and refugee women are multipliers and integrators. They are capable of making something out of almost nothing, multiplying their scarce resources in order to feed, nurture and care. What they create with their work, their dedication, their talents, their efforts and ambitions, promotes social cohesion and contributes to the host society in countless visible and invisible ways.

All these experiences are very different from one another. However, in terms of policy, they bear certain **specific common elements** suggesting that they shall be considered together.

Such elements can be summarized as follows:

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- **Self-organization by one or more groups of citizens, resulting in formal or informal structures** (e.g. Hotel Pasteur is now organized in an association, but at the beginning it was an informal occupation; the community land trust of Brussels is legally structured in a foundation and an association etc.).
- **A certain degree of participation and democracy within the decision-making processes of the organization** (eg: the general assembly of Hotel Pasteur is open to all and the occupants follow specific democratic rules for taking decisions; the model of governance of the community land trust is a well-known best practice of democracy and participation, resting on an open assembly and on a board of directors which composition allows the participation of all the stakeholders of the trust).
- **A certain degree of institutional innovation and creation of new institutional structures.** With this respect, an example could be, again, the one of the community land trust. Through a very innovative mechanism of dissociation between the property of the land and the one of the improvements insisting on it, the CLT is in fact capable of distributing (home-buyer after home-buyer) the plus-value acquired over time by the estate, ensuring, by this, perpetual affordable housing. Another example is to be found in the French experience of Plateau Urbain. Plateau Urbain is a French organization which helps to revitalize urban voids undergoing processes of redevelopment. Since such processes may last many years, Plateau Urbain cooperates with the owners of the buildings (often public entities) and with local social entrepreneurs, in order to create temporary uses of such spaces for the time needed for their renovation. This way, such buildings do not remain abandoned for a long time, and are made available for satisfying temporary needs of local social enterprises. Something similar is done in Brussels by a very active network: Communa.
- **The community, organized through participatory processes, enacts activities aimed at satisfying individual and collective needs** (going back to our examples: right to housing and inclusive urban governance for the CLT; access to culture and art, free spaces of working for young artists with respect to Hotel Pasteur; inclusion of migrants and gender equality for Melissa etc.).
- **These activities result in the regeneration of both specific buildings and urban voids, often abandoned and unused** (think of Hotel Pasteur, but also to the temporary uses implemented by Plateau Urbain and Communa) **or even of entire urban areas** (many evidence exist on the role these experiences have on the area where they are located, increasing the sense of community, enhancing the quality of life of the neighborhood, promoting inclusion, avoiding gentrification etc).

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For quite a long time, public authorities have been reluctant in promoting and considering these experiences. In some cases (especially in those situations where generative commons took the form of illegal occupations), local authorities strongly contrasted and opposed them.

However, our findings suggest that, especially in the last ten/fifteen years, this attitude has changed considerably and that public authorities are more and more willing to promote, protect and foster generative commons.

This very significant shift can be explained by the following factors:

- **Public authorities are starting to realize that generative commons can often promote urban regeneration and welfare in a very effective way, and at a cost often lower than the one needed by traditional tools of public or public/private intervention.** An example, here, is again the one of the community land trust: it is proved that, due to its sophisticated mechanism, the same amount, if invested in a CLT, helps serving up to 60% more beneficiaries than in traditional mechanisms of social housing. Another interesting example, under this perspective, is the one of the ex Asilo Filangieri. The Asilo Filangieri is an historical public building located in the center of the southern Italian city of Naples. It remained empty for quite a long time until, in 2012, a group of citizens decided to occupy it to start a path of participatory governance of the space. Within the space many activities and projects were organized, things which fostered the aggregation of many people around the stewardship of the building. The assembly which undertook the governance of the building (which was – and still is – open to all) built up a democratic process to come up with a “charter” of rules and principles for the management and protection of the estate. On its side, the public owner (the municipality of Naples) realized that the practice carried out in the “Asilo Filangieri” had a positive social impact greater than the municipality could have created itself resorting to traditional public tools and resources. For this reason, the municipality decided to legitimize the process by incorporating the “charter” (“declaration”) written by the community into an administrative act (a deliberation of the city council), this way giving effects to its provisions and legitimizing the possession and the stewardship directly carried out by citizens.
- The example of Asilo Filangieri introduces another important point. Namely that, most of the times (although not always) **generative commons lay in public buildings which could not be differently regenerated due to the lack of resources of public administrations.** This phenomenon is very widespread, to the point that certain cities, precisely because of that, have decided to use generative commons as a general strategy for the management and regeneration of public

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spaces, making them a guideline of local public policies. This is the case, for example, of the city of Grenoble, in France, where a permanent assembly of the commons, involving citizens and local organizations, was directly promoted by the city council.

- **Both the aforementioned factors became extremely relevant after the economic crisis of 2008 and also during the current Covid-19 emergency.** Now, many generative commons are investing their resources in order to find cooperative-based solutions to the main issues the current crisis has posed (shelter, food, care of kids due to the school lockdown etc.). We have deepened this latter aspect here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCBN0VVrr5A>
- In many cases, generative commons became extremely relevant for the life of the neighborhood or the city, aggregating hundreds of people of very different age, class, ethical background etc. in different activities. In other words, **generative commons can be fundamental for the social cohesion if entire urban areas and, because of that, are often supported by a widespread political support by citizens.**

The steps undertaken by public administrations around Europe to promote and protect urban commons took very different forms. Such forms and the main issues connected to them are extremely relevant and will be the subject-matter of an autonomous policy-brief.

For the purposes of this brief, some elements need, however, to be highlighted:

- **Almost all the public policies aimed at promoting and protecting generative commons are taken at the very local level:** most of the time at the municipal level, sometimes at the regional level.
- **They can take the form of a general policy applicable to more (or possibly all) generative commons in the territory or of a specific agreement between local public authorities and one specific experience.** With respect to the first line of policy, two interesting examples can be found in Portugal, Italy and Spain. In 2010, the **City Council of Lisbon**, aware of the urban inequalities in the city, identified seventy-seven Priority Intervention Neighborhoods and Zones (BIP/ZIP, original acronym in Portuguese). The program is a model of participatory governance that consists of the development of actions implemented by the civil society itself in the BIPs/ZIPs, with the financial and technical support of the City Council. Through this program, the City Council is trying to reinforce the socio-territorial cohesion of the municipality by mobilising citizens' energy in the search for solutions that can continue into the future. The interventions can be

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related to the improvement of the appearance of the neighborhood, the creation of services and activities for the community and visitors, the restoration, re-zoning and occupancy of public space, the promotion of the citizenry, the prevention of risk-related behavior, etc. To date there have been five editions of the program. General local policies aimed at fostering and promoting the commons are very widespread also in **Italy**, where they often take the form of “municipal regulations on urban commons”. Such regulations, which have now been adopted by more than 200 Italian cities, provide for a framework which allows formal and informal groups of citizens who are willing to undertake the direct, participatory and open management of a public space to sign a specific agreement with the municipality. With such an agreement, the municipality recognizes the role of the community in the regeneration and stewardship of the good, and frames the main legal issues arising thereof. These regulations have proved very effective in fostering the bottom-up urban regeneration of public spaces such as public empty buildings, parks, urban gardens etc., and many very innovative experiences and best practices of urban governance which can be found in Italy stemmed from agreements signed in the framework of local regulations on the commons.

In this line, the **City of Barcelona** passed a municipal ordinance setting up and protecting the “communitarian management framework” called “Patrimoni Ciutadà”. According to the Spanish and the Catalan legal system, “communitarian-management” is a quite innovative formula enabling citizens and neighbors to manage, control, arrange, run, and decide which kind of activities and which kind of management they want for their “citizen heritage”, mostly referring to old urban voids and important historical buildings. Although this might constitute a “de facto” social practice taking place in various municipalities from long time ago, this is the very first time this “customary” practice has been translated into formal legal norms.

- **The common ground of these public policies is to set forth a new way of conceiving the relationship between public administrations and communities. Indeed, they implement a relationship which is not vertical (or top-down), but rather authentically horizontal and inspired to the principle of subsidiarity.** Put in other words, these policies enact a legal regime which is based on the peer collaboration of communities and public bodies in the management and stewardship of the public space. We call this kind of agreements **public-civic partnerships**. This phenomenon is extremely relevant, since it overturns the traditional underpinnings of administrative and public action, which sees the only possible alliance with the private sector in terms of “public-private partnership”, where the private partner is usually a market stakeholder set up in the form of an incorporated actor. Public-civic partnerships arising from the co-

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management of urban commons show how the public can find an ally in another form of non-public actor: local communities and groups (even informal groups) of citizens. Precisely because of this innovative strand, the concept of private-civic partnership has started to be debated both in legal scholarship and administrative practice. However, publications on the matter are not as many as it could be expected. This is mostly due to a lack of a reasonably comprehensive database of the main experiences enacting this innovative way of urban governance, which being very local is, of course, likewise very scattered. This is one of the gaps the database set forth by the gE.CO project aims at filling.

In general terms, our findings suggest that:

- The support given by public authorities to generative commons is fundamental for their flourishing;
- Such a support needs to go in the direction of the empowerment of local communities, and this, especially, to avoid to turn this bottom up experiences into drive of gentrification;
- With this respect, laws or local regulations embodying these needs, when existing, can be very helpful and effective.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The policy implications and recommendations connected to the emerging phenomenon of generative urban commons, described above, are wide and scattered.

At this stage, we want to highlight the need for European institutions to consider the phenomenon in its policies concerning urban areas.

In fact, our findings suggest that:

- Generative commons, although in a variegated and heterogeneous matrix, amount to a very relevant and widespread phenomenon at the European scale, which describes a **new proactive model of urban governance and innovation**.
- The establishment of generative commons is a **very effective strategy to make European urban areas more resilient and inclusive**, and proved to be an extremely important way to promote welfare and urban regeneration, especially in periods of crisis.
- **The promotion of generative commons** by public authorities is very relevant for their diffusion, stability and implementation.

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- The nature of generative commons calls for an authentically “glocal” policy structure. The more effective way to promote generative commons is through policy promoted by local authorities.

These instances are emerging even the level of European Institutions, where they can especially be found in the framework which is conducting to the adoption of the new Leipzig Charter.

Indeed, the approach taken by the new Charter:

- Stresses the idea of the “co-creation” of the city between citizens (local communities) and institutions;
- Highlights the strict connection between this idea of co-creation of the city and the production of welfare services;
- Upholds that this phenomenon is able to promote more inclusive and sustainable cities and highlights its important role with respect to many urban issues such as poverty, pollution, urban marginalization, housing etc.
- Recognizes how all this calls for an integrated methodology of public policy, which sees its cornerstone into local public bodies.

However, this awareness does not always correspond to a clear and deep understanding of the phenomenon and to precise lines of policies directed to its promotion.

Projects such as gE.CO are fulfilling the first gap.

The second gap, however, needs to be overcome through the translation of the awareness emerged in the process of drafting of the Leipzig Charter into the inclusion of generative commons into existing European policies on urban areas.

An example, could be the inclusion of generative commons into the European Urban Agenda for the EU.

Great benefits could derive from crossing the UA with Generative commons:

- **The European Urban Agenda has proved to be very effective in fostering best practices at the local level** and thus, it could be very important in supporting local administrations in the promotion and protection of generative commons;
- **UA reflects a very local-based picture, being updated with regards of urban transformations, thing which is consistent with the phenomenon of generative commons;**
- **UA** includes not only public administrations’ efforts, but represents also citizens’ participation and, this way, it **translates the idea of the city as a living body**, where citizens can actively transform the urban space, idea which is at the cornerstone of generative commons;

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- **Introducing generative commons in the UA could open a debate around the public-civic partnership** as legal tool to be formalized as something different from the public-private partnership.

It has also to be highlighted that:

- The Urban Agenda mechanism of functioning is grounded on **three pillars of policy making** and implementation which appear to be particularly useful in the promotion of urban commons, namely: i) better regulation; ii) better funding; iii) better knowledge.
- Many experiences of generative commons, as we have seen from the examples developed in this brief, carry out activities in fields covered by the EU agenda (inclusion of migrants and refugees, housing, urban poverty, circular economy, jobs and skills in the local economy, sustainable use of land, etc).

Since generative commons are a crossing phenomenon, it has to be highlighted that they can often be integrated into existing tools without the need to implement new lines of policies. For example, regarding the Urban Agenda for the EU, generative commons could be easily integrated into many of the partnerships already in place, such as Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees, Housing or Urban Poverty.

To conclude, in the light of all the elements stated in this brief, **we strongly recommend including generative commons in existing line of policies on urban areas, such as Urban Agenda** for the EU and policy-tools alike.

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