NECE

European Conference
Cities and Urban Spaces: Chances for Cultural and Citizenship Education

29 September - 1 October 2010
Trieste, Italy

Report

Workshop V:
Between Gentrification and Social Cohesion:
The Role of Cultural and Citizenship Education in Processes of Change

by Katharina Ludwig
Freelance Journalist (Germany)

Scientific Inputs:
Naseem Akhtar, Saheli Women`s Group (UK)
Frank Eckardt, Bauhaus University Weimar (Germany)

Project Presentations:
"Raval Communitari" & "08001"
presented by Nuria Paricio, Director All Raval Foundation & Elisa Covelo O`Neill, All Raval Foundation (Spain) & Christian Plähn, Director of the Documentary "08001" (Germany)
"Becoming Citizens – Engagement of young and senior citizens"
presented by Ana Claudia Leu, Project Coordinator, Euroregional Center for Democracy (Romania)

Moderation:
Jonas Büchel, bb2/city culture & communication (Latvia)

WHAT'S UP IN THE CITY?
What does unite the area of Balsall Heath in Birmingham with Barcelona' Raval district and neighbourhoods in Gelsenkirchen and Timisoara? In the current debates on urban change much focus is given to the individual resident's patterns of movement and settlement. Gentrification and segregation, mostly understood in ethnical categories, have risen to be modern spectres. But sharing the experiences from communities across Europe we see a deep lack of infrastructure, especially in the field of formal education, threatening social justice and urban mobility. Studying very closely the problems and practices of these different neighbourhoods we can find tools and strategies for tailor-made, community-made answers to this. These answers cannot compensate systemic shortcomings, but they can initiate other processes of change in our cities.

WRONG CONCERNS (Frank Eckardt)

The topics of gentrification and segregation gain lots of attention nowadays. 'But are we concerned with the wrong things?' questioned urban sociologist Frank Eckardt. Gentrification - understood as a pushing-out of old inhabitants while more privileged ones arrive, up value the area and 'turn everything nice' – continues to be mostly a U.S.-phenomenon and less of a problem in European cities; with the exception of some trendy areas in some trendy cities. Segregation, mostly understood as rising ethnical segregation, is also something rather hard to find in the data. The level of urban division along ethnical categories is stable or rather declining. And this segregation does not necessarily do morally wrong, according to Eckardt. Under certain circumstances (timely) segregation proves to be useful for new arriving migrants. It can provide for an urban niche, to come to a city and try to make a living, to experiment.

However, the picture varies a lot if we change the category from ethnical segregation to an educational and demographical one. Cities like Gelsenkirchen (approx. 259.000 inhabitants) in the German Ruhr area exemplify this. But as the issue of free choice of school vs. catchment area schooling shows, there are no easy policy answers to this problem. If children are obliged to attend the school in their residential area, those in more privileged areas with better equipped schools and better equipped pupils are in advantage; but given free choice and schooling mobility it is also the more privileged kids that gain most. The answers, it seems, lay beyond individual residents' moving and settling patterns, in a city's just infrastructure itself.

COMMUNITY CHANGE – BY WHOM, FOR WHOM, WITH WHOM (Naseem Akhtar)

The Balsall Heath neighbourhood in Birmingham, UK is another example of an urban area suffering from institutional neglect. Inhabitants here are mostly Black Asian and African, most of them did not attend secondary school and men according to statistics are expected to die nine years sooner than in the surrounding neighbourhoods. Approximately 450 street prostitutes were working the streets of Balsall Heath, a district officially written off by police and social institutions. When people were calling the police for help, community activist Naseem Akhtar remembers, they were simply told to move away. But then neighbours began to organise themselves, picketing away the prostitutes and their clients as well as drug dealers. For those women who were living in Balsall Heath (the large minority) housing and job integration programmes were provided.

While it is highly controversial whether this is a best practice example of how to deal with sex work and its side effects; Balsall Heath definitely tells a story of community self-empowerment. Residents started to cooperate with health, police and environmental offices, further resident groups like the Asian women group 'Saheli' were initiated. Resident meetings with local authorities are now regularly organised where policies are discussed and resident's priorities are put on the agenda. In a 2008 poll 70 percent of the residents felt that they can influence decisions in their locality. Even the increase of house-prices by 262 per cent or 106.441 Pound (124.1999 Euro) between April 2000 and March 2010 to Akhtar is not perceived as gentrifying development from 'outside' but rather as an internal upgrading, "a third way of neighbourhood regeneration".

'Give communities more power,' Akhtar argued for localised tax, more neighbourhood engagement and joined trainings of public officials and residents. 'Gentrification should happen by communities, for communities and with communities; not through planning, not through people who don't know what the community looks like.'

WHAT WE CAN DO WITH SO LITTLE MONEY (Ana Claudia Leu)

The project 'Becoming Citizens', organised by the Euroregional Centre for Democracy in Timisoara, Romania, is an example of how to trigger self-determined community activities even with the smallest budgets. The organisation started a 'project-in-project' to bridge the gap between the city's youth and its seniors since lack of communication among different parts of community became evident.

Their research and the small amount of money available made them think of micro-projects, organised by the citizens themselves. A competition of small projects to foster cross-generational partnerships for 200 US-Dollar (145 Euro) was initiated. Students from middle and high schools in Timisoara were encouraged to take part in the competition and engage in joined teams of students, teachers and representatives of the Citizens' Consultative Committee (CCC). Once involved participants started to take their own action and found ways of additional funding. As Ana Claudia Leu had it in her presentation, the perception changed from 'What can we do with so little money?' to 'What can we achieve with so little money?'

Projects aimed at environmental protection, neighbourhood history, or at helping the elders in the Adult Day Care Centre. One project of somehow symbolic character was 'We communicate, socialise and succeed!' Community mailboxes were installed in a park and on a local school's fence and two mini info points were set up. They collected citizens' suggestions and complaints while at the same time disseminating information about the CCC's activities.

HOW TO UNITE A MILLION MICRO COSMOSES (Christian Plähn)

With a similar aim but different tools video-documentarist Christina Plähn pointed at the lack of communication among communities, its individual members and groups. For his film "08001" Plähn followed a multitude of people living in Barcelona's Raval-district. Raval has its name from its position 'outside the city' in Middle Ages, historically it was the place to receive new-arrivals. Today it unites approximately 48.000 inhabitants, half of them migrants, with a life expectancy seven years below the Barcelona average. But Raval has experienced a process of strong urban upgrading, as it is housing two major museums of modern art, the upper house and became a point of interest for short-term and long-term tourists. Often the district is described as split into a richer northern part attracting new crowds and a southern part with the traditional inhabitants, but the picture seems to be more diverse. 'This is the moment where the five-star-hotel and the prostitutes are neighbours', Plähn characterises the situation, 'in this little place there are a million micro cosmoses. It is not just rich people and poor people, it's everything in between. And everybody claims 'This is my area!'.

In his documentary Plähn observes the everyday life of various residents and unites them - football fan, musician and person selling beer on the street, cleaning woman and fireman, museum visitor as well as homeless person outside of it – 'in one virtual day'. For future documentary projects Plähn suggests that this act of bringing together should already take place during the filming and by the means of the film making process itself. For example protagonists could be asked to portray their neighbours and vice versa and thereby become visible for one another.

BRINGING IN THE NEW NEIGHBOURS (Nuria Paricio / Elisa Covelo O'Neill)

The Raval[(s)] festival, every year organised by the Tot Raval foundation in Barcelona, is a lively example of making members of a community visible to one another and interconnecting them in new ways. It is the core event of efforts that Tot Raval pursues all year long: in 2001 the foundation started as an umbrella organisation for 60 member organisations such as the Islamic Cultural Council of Catalonia, the National Library of Cataglonia and the A. Rosa Sensat Teachers, the museum of modern Art MACBA and a Pakistani workers organization. It replaced the patron

structure typical for foundations by a 'plenary' that reflects the neighbourhood's diversity. Monetary contribution to the endowment is not a prerequisite for membership, new member organizations are constantly sought. Together they realise a range of micro projects, like reading activities for children or career support for young people and women. These projects involve in sum over 180 local organizations, enterprises and service providers.

Last year, however, the organisers of the Raval[s] festival experienced a new division within the district: for the first time new neighbours protested against the festival to be held on its usual venue, in the Rambla de Raval. One day before the event the city hall informed the organisers that they had to move all their activities to another area. Elisa Covelo O'Neill sees a new conflict rising: 'Gentrification again – the new neighbours don't want noise, they don't want to be bothered. These neighbours have a lot of access to media, to politics - they are higher classed. What they say is quite important to city hall.' 'It is a complicating issue' commented Nuria Paricio their aim not harden frontlines among residents. 'We are knocking doors and try to integrate these new neighbours as well. What we try to do is involve them in the process from the beginning.'

URBAN INTERVENTIONS

Urban communities today are confronted with a delicate situation: on the one hand without enough empirical justification much attention is given to the negative effects of gentrification and segregation, which finally leads to blaming the residents for their free choice of movement and settlement and playing neighbours off against other neighbours. On the other hand the data-based segregating effects of institutional withdrawal, that are most prominent in the field of formal education, strongly reduce an individual's social and hence also geographical mobility - but are widely overseen, if not ignored.

Projects of cultural and citizenship education can not compensate for these fundamental systemic shortcomings; but they can help to strengthen the voice of residents to raise their demands and their priorities. Cultural and citizenship education (including community self-organisation) can offer tools for better communication among communities and from communities to authorities. These tools have to be based on practice, not theory alone, and have to include informal learning aspects of residents to find tailor-made, community-made answers to problems. The benefits of thinking in urban categories are that we can focus on different and maybe smaller entities than city administrations, that coalitions can be developed on the spot, where communities feel the need. These urban spaces – no matter if districts, barrios, corners or niches – may be a more flexible political terrain with a deeper grounding to intervene.