

## PROMOTING THE RIGHT TO THE CITY FROM BELOW: EXPERIENCES OF CO-CREATION IN EUROPE

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Historically, social movements and neighbourhood associations have shaped the territory through their struggles and demands. Today, the municipalist movement is creating unprecedented possibilities for achieving the right to the city, not only through government proposals but also due to a new approach to the demands made by urban movements.

The co-creation of cities can throw up dangerous examples, such as the administration committing to collaborating with the private sector, legitimising the privatisation of public space or the commercialisation of buildings, equipment and resources. However, co-creating the city from a rights perspective in partnership with civil society requires thinking about and designing engines of change for cities as common goods.

A favourable correlation of forces in the municipal government is fundamental to this, but many other battles are fought outside the institutions. On the one hand, it is difficult to implement certain changes solely through the will of the local government because the opposition is formed not only of political parties, which can be stood against, it also includes powerful lobbies and business groups with great advocacy capacity and access to the media, and significant influence on public opinion. Nevertheless, the spaces of day-to-day coexistence, where debate is generated and opinion disseminated, are also of the utmost importance. Without “conquering” these everyday spaces, victories cannot be achieved that represent steps forward in guaranteeing the right to the city. Organised civil society is essential to this. Civil movements can form a counterweight, denouncing the attacks on the right to the city while at the same time proposing radical proposals for change. The challenge for municipalism lies in giving space to rights-protecting social initiatives that come from outside the institution and putting them into practice without co-opting or leading them (beyond government forecasts and plans).

On the other hand, communities taking rights into their own hands is a reality in many cities, where social movements create opportunities to guarantee a dignified life, generate a caring economy, stop evictions or create feminist spaces. However, it is extremely complicated for citizens to prompt legislative changes that bring about improvements with universal application without

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municipal support, given the legal challenges and procedures necessary for their approval. Joint efforts by the public administration and civil society become necessary, with both leaving their comfort zones. The result of combining the two spheres should be virtuous, with the possibilities each institution and movement had when acting alone multiplying.

The experiences we have selected are based almost entirely on citizens' demands, meaning the proposal is developed at the level of the people. In some cases, it is a historical demand made in one particular place, while others are situational – struggles that arise in response to a specific opportunity, or as an alternative to an unpopular proposal. Each of the four European experiences examined exhibits a different relationship between civil society and local government. In all of them we have considered the importance of working towards the right to the city for everyone, taking into account the right to difference. In the sections that follow we will present a housing measure in Barcelona (Spain) that was promoted by civil society and approved and executed by the city council, and promotes social mixture; the reconversion of Tempelhof Airport in Berlin (Germany) into a park that is accessible to all citizens, thanks to a citizens' law approved in a referendum; water remunicipalisation in Terrassa (Spain) in order to manage it publicly and democratically, led by a citizens but pushed through by the municipal government; and finally, the creation of a cultural centre for young people jointly managed by the citizens and the municipality in Zagreb (Croatia).

## I. Barcelona: the 30% measure for more affordable housing

Since the economic crisis broke out in 2008, movements for the right to housing in Spain have proliferated in response to the housing emergency.<sup>1</sup> Following decades of a lack of protection, only a broad set of measures, regulatory changes and public policies with medium and long-term results will improve citizens' access to housing.

### How did the 30% measure come about?

One of the main demands the movement for housing rights put on the table was the need to increase social and affordable housing in the city. In February 2018, five organisations submitted a motion to the plenary session of Barcelona City Council that contained four specific measures related to increasing the affordable housing stock.<sup>2</sup> The motion was approved with a large majority and the citizens' victory was celebrated as such. Many were aware that motions are too often merely symbolic agreements that lack any practical impact or further development. However, in this case, the motion's approval was only the starting point for the achievement of more affordable housing.

### What is it?

Every newly constructed or completely renovated building of over 600m<sup>2</sup> in Barcelona must contain 30% of social housing. That means the price is fixed by government decree (below the market rate). Based on the premise that while the real estate market brings great profits, the needs for

1. Over 644,000 families in Spain were evicted between 2007 and 2018, according to the General Council of the Judiciary.
2. The five organisations are: the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca, the Federación de Asociaciones de Vecinos y Vecinas de Barcelona, the Sindicato de Inquilinos, the Asamblea de Barrios por un Turismo Sostenible and the Observatorio de Derechos Económicos, Sociales y Culturales (Observatori DESC).

housing are acute, construction companies and housing developers are obliged to make part of their supply available at affordable prices. This has two purposes: to make housing available in the city at below the market rate, and to distribute it across all the city's districts, a commitment to greater social cohesion and less spatial segregation.<sup>3</sup> This is fundamental for the right to the city: this affordable housing will not be located in a poor neighbourhood in the suburbs but across the city. The promotion of regulations and public policies that fight segregation, that are committed to social mixture in cities and avoid the formation of neighbourhoods with very limited resources as well as closed, elitist communities also goes some way to respecting the right to difference.

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### **How did the collaboration between the city council and civil society come about?**

Once the municipal motion was approved, the five organisations promoting it – formed into a “development group” (DG) – asked to meet the municipal government to begin its processing, which involved modifying the General Metropolitan Plan. They also convened a working group with the various parties so that they could move forward together, as well as meeting with the municipal groupings separately to secure their votes in favour. The council made economic and legal reports available to the DG and political parties, and enabled meetings with experts that allowed informed decisions to be made.

The municipal government accepted the DG's leadership at all times. It was the DG who called the meetings of the working group and presented the results of the consultations with experts to the other parties. This is very important point, as it showed that civil society was promoting the measure rather than the government. Appropriation by the city council and partisan distrust were thereby avoided. As the council's head of urban planning acknowledged, this measure would not have been approved if it had been a municipal initiative.

### **The urban procedures**

Initial approval came in June 2018. Some political parties who had participated unenthusiastically in the working group were surprised at how fast it reached this point. Voices emerged demanding more time for other actors (especially private ones) to participate. The construction sector and developers used various means (the press, the positioning of certain important actors, etc.) to show their opposition to the measure, saying that it infringed regulations and would ruin the sector financially. But the city council, urged by the DG, kept the proposal on the table. The negotiations for its approval took two forms: the DG held rounds of meetings with parties and the city council shared the legal and economic arguments it possessed. Finally, the measure was given initial approval, leading to a participatory process. During this time, the DG promoted meetings within social movements, discussions with experts, press conferences and so on. For its part, the city council responded to the allegations made by citizens and interest groups and obtained extra reports to ensure the measure's viability, which was questioned by some parties.

3. Barcelona City Council calculations estimate that if the rate of construction and rehabilitation of recent years is maintained, between 300 and 400 affordable homes will be available each year.

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Finally, provisional approval was granted and the government of Catalonia had to ratify the decision with final approval. That government, from a different party to the one leading Barcelona City Council, introduced several impediments that delayed the measure's implementation for several months. Here too, the dual dialogue from the municipality and civil society was key.

### Some lessons learned

The first conclusion of this experience is that without the collaboration between Barcelona City Council and civil society this measure would not have seen the light. That the initiative emerged from social groups with significant community and media recognition facilitated a correlation between the forces in support that enabled its eventual approval. It is also true that it would not have been possible without the efforts the municipal government made in terms of technical work, reports, speed of processing and ceding centrality. However, the process was not without tension: the media and several parties repeatedly claimed that the measure was proposed by the mayor, completely ignoring the fact that the DG made the proposal and led the process; and on occasions the city council took advantage of the measure in its electoral campaign.

## II. Berlin: Tempelhof Airport becomes a park

The Berlin Tempelhof case is paradigmatic for three reasons. First, because it repurposed no less strategic infrastructure than an airport. Second, because different elements of the right to the city entered the fray: housing (municipal initiative) *versus* public space and green spaces (citizens' initiative). Finally, there is the major historical significance of the place due to its use during the Nazi era, which undoubtedly plays a role in the project as a whole, as historical memory is a crucial aspect of cities (Best, 2014).

### The airport's closure and the alternatives

The plans to close the airport date back to 1996, due to pollution, noise, its proximity to the centre, and its limited capacity. Added to that was the commitment to creating a single large airport in Berlin, as part of the urban planning of mega-infrastructure.<sup>4</sup> In October of that year Tempelhof definitively closed its doors, but endless possibilities were available for the 300,000m<sup>2</sup> now vacant.

Without a clear plan from the public authorities, the old airport began to be used for bike rides, picnics and kite flying. By the time the Senate of Berlin began to design urban development proposals,<sup>5</sup> Berliners had already made their own through various initiatives, such as "Squat Tempelhof" in 2009.<sup>6</sup> The following year the Senate masterplan was announced, which supporters of the referendum thought would make housing more expensive and gentrify the surrounding neighbourhoods. The city, known for its relaxed atmosphere and social activism, was beginning to feel urban development pressure. The fight for Tempelhof became a battle between two contrasting ways of living in the city: the exclusive, competitive city versus the city that is open to everyone.

4. The disagreement about the airport's closure carried over into a referendum in April 2008, when the arguments in favour of keeping it operational (mostly related to business opportunities in the area) won only 21.7% of the votes. This first vote was an early sign of the people's predisposition to having a large open space instead of an airport.
5. The proposal was made by the department of urban development and environment of the Senate of Berlin, which is a city-state.
6. "Squat Tempelhof" was one of the many initiatives that advocated keeping the airport space undeveloped. Thousands of people were called to occupy the fields of Tempelhof to demand that it be kept as it was.

## The “100% Tempelhofer Feld” proposal

In September 2011, “100% Tempelhofer Feld” launched a powerful campaign to preserve the park as it was. The municipality proposed to build homes: social housing for 4,700 families, but also luxury housing, a large library, offices and a shopping area. After collecting 185,328 signatures, 100% Tempelhofer Feld proposed a legislative initiative to be voted on via referendum along with the European elections. The text proposed keeping the airport area in its current state, without modification, as a green recreational space and urban landscape. The referendum group opposed private investment, speculation and the economic growth of the city without attending to the most vulnerable social strata. In relation to housing, they argued that while the housing crisis existed, there was a lot of empty housing in the city. The housing plan proposed was greatly distrusted, as it was seen to risk gentrifying part of the adjacent neighbourhoods and privatising part of the park.

In May 2014 the referendum took place, with 65% of voters approving the law proposed by 100% Tempelhofer Feld. From that time on, respecting the new law, which prevented construction in the park, the municipality brought various participation processes to the table. Specifically, a care and maintenance plan was produced that covered the park’s conservation, history, sport and management. Although various voices say that this was a highly participatory plan using joint decision-making, critics point out that it was top-down planning and bottom-up use (Schalk, 2014: 138).

## Reflections

Like the other examples, Tempelhof Airport is a citizens’ struggle that became a reality. In this case, the city council’s role is intriguing. Although it initially took a position contrary to that of the groups promoting the referendum, it subsequently confirmed the winning option and contributed to citizen participation, leaving 300,000m<sup>2</sup> in the middle of the city unbuilt upon. What is the value of Tempelhofer Feld? On the one hand, such a large natural space is important for tackling pollution and environmental destruction (among the arguments made by 100% Tempelhofer Feld, the ecological gained importance). On the other hand, some authors cite the Berlin character, which loves openness and freedom. Tempelhof is now a meeting place for all kinds of people, without barriers. People of different socioeconomic statuses, origins, cultures, sexes and sexual orientations can enjoy many acres of landscape and free activities, without any restrictions. Tempelhofer *Freiheit* (freedom) represents an advance in the city’s social cohesion, a shared space for recognition and enjoyment. Shared leisure areas in public space that allow the expression of differences and social mixing are extremely important for progressing towards the right to the city for everyone, especially in a context of the privatisation of public space and limits on social practices in the streets. It is a space that is non-private, collectively managed and whose use is shared.

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## III. Terrassa: the remunicipalisation of the water supply

Although access to water is a human right, its management in most large cities has been handed to private companies, controlled by three large global corporations: Suez, Veolia and Bechtel. In Terrassa (Catalonia,

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Spain), for 75 years, Mina Pública d'Aigües S.A. held the water concession (Bagué, 2019: 18). Ownership is public but management private.

Access to water plays a central role in urban struggles, with the Cochabamba Water War (Bolivia) a paradigmatic example. In Europe at present, demands around water focus, on the one hand, on access to basic supplies and, on the other, on service management, and the two are closely related.<sup>7</sup> Over the past decade various studies have been produced on water and its private management. The municipal movement's more active sectors have, over the last five years, questioned the privatisation of public services and placed the need to bring its management back into public hands back on the political agenda.

### The citizens of Terrassa get organised

It is in this context that irregularities detected in the concessions and fifty of them coming to an end in the Barcelona metropolitan area combined with the recent 15-M movement and the incipient municipalist “institutional activism”. The “Taula de l'aigua de Terrassa” was created in 2013, a proposal by citizens to return the water supply to public hands. As Mina's concession ended in 2016, a number actions were launched. For example, an attempt was made to influence the 2015 municipal elections through the “Pacto Social por el Agua Pública” (Social Pact for Public Water), by challenging the parties directly about the remunicipalisation of water. At the same time, the Taula focussed on the study and technical documentation of the process of recovering the service and raising public awareness about the opportunity for the public, democratic management of water in the city through talks and debates.

### The role of the local administration

Gradually, the municipal plenary session began to lean towards remunicipalisation, a consequence of the Taula's advocacy work, the amount of social support and the work done on public water with other cities through networks. Far from remaining on the margins, Mina Pública d'Aigües S.A. responded in several ways: through the mass media, by preparing appeals to be heard in the courts, and by generating fear among the company's workers, among others. In 2016, the municipality created commissioners for water and participation to promote public debates and a participatory process. The citizens presented two municipal motions in 2017 and a large demonstration was organised. Finally, that same year, the change in the way the public water service in Terrassa was managed was approved.

### Citizen control of water

Next, a citizen monitoring stage began, with the creation of an observatory that will continue the joint work between the administration and the organised citizens – with voice and vote.<sup>8</sup> This is crucial, because the management, as well as being public, should be democratic, and include the participation of the residents. The observatory facilitates the degree of citizen control of the water. This is a key point in the new water model: the demands are not fulfilled when a basic service such as water is (re)municipalised – civil society must participate in its subsequent governance. Otherwise, nothing guarantees that municipal management meets the requirements of being democrat-

7. In addition to the human right to water and sanitation, access to basic supplies also forms part of the right to adequate housing. The rising costs of housing and of water, electricity and gas mean vulnerable households struggle to pay bills. The result is energy poverty. The large companies that provide these services, which accumulate vast profits over their financial years but refuse to accept defaults from clients with scarce resources, are extremely opaque.

8. Observatori de l'Aigua, <https://www.taigua.cat/observatori-de-lai-gua/>

ic and public. For this reason, for example, a budget large enough for everyone interested to participate – whether they have resources and experience or not – is proposed in order to avoid making a democratic body elitist. In short, the right to difference is taken into account, considering the formation and dissemination of information to be essential, as well as facilitating the involvement of actors who are less involved in the process of defending this universal right.

#### **IV. What place do culture and young people have in the right to the city?**

Different issues intermingle in this debate: on the one hand, there is the situation of young people and adolescents with few job opportunities and an urgent precariousness. On the other are regulated education systems little given to innovation, which stigmatise or limit forms of artistic expression. Alongside many other elements, the result is that the public space also becomes a place of learning and leisure. Adult perceptions of young people often tend towards suspicion and even rejection, especially when it comes to racialised youth. But young people undoubtedly need spaces outside schools and secondary schools to develop their cultural interests, socialise and experiment. The exercise of the right to difference again emerges in this context, out of the need to consider the city young people yearn for. In the absence of specific proposals and as a result of the exclusion of their needs from the planning of the city, young people use spaces in their own way. Taking their claims into consideration, which are frequently linked to urban art and culture, can lead to virtuous synergies for the city as a whole.

#### **Zagreb (Croatia): the experience of POGON**

At this point we would like to look at the experience of setting up POGON in Zagreb, a co-managed centre for young people and independent culture, which was finally established in 2009 after years of struggle. It was conceived as a response to the lack of spaces for cultural creation in the city, especially for young people, and its set-up was the direct result of political advocacy and civil society activism (Peračić et al., 2016: 132). The key was uniting cultural and youth demands, initially embodied by two national networks in those spheres, a local platform, and cultural clubs. This coalition designed a campaign to influence the 2005 municipal elections with a document signed by the participating political groups, public debates and protest actions.

Despite a poor initial relationship with the municipal government, the persistence of the struggle, including protests such as the occupation of part of the factory that would eventually house the centre, brought the proposal to fruition, just before the coming local elections. A collaboration began between civil society (Operation City Alliance) and the city council to jointly manage the centre and, in the old factory (Jedinstvo), the centre now hosts exhibitions, concerts, festivals, theatre and dance among other things. The programming and projects carried out at POGON are managed by Operation City Alliance, with civil society responsible for designing and preparing the centre's daily activity. The positive reception of POGON, both in Zagreb and internationally, has encouraged municipal support in terms of financing the reconstruction of the space and its operation.

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### Some conclusions

From the case of POGON we learn, first of all, that social mobilisation can effectively achieve its objectives, even if means four years of protest actions, political advocacy and communicative work. Had it not been for those four years, POGON would not exist today. Secondly, combining youth organisations with cultural movements is a useful way to combine art with youth concerns. POGON plays an important role on the cultural – and international – scene and, in that sense, it is a commitment to social cohesion, the involvement of young people, not only as spectators but as creators, managers and decision-makers on the cultural scene, promoting dialogues and driving out prejudices.

### V. Conclusions: co-creating the city?

While the right to the city as devised by Lefebvre contemplated high doses of democracy and social participation in urban life, weaving government-civil society alliances in representative systems is not easy. Frequently, the co-creation of public policies is the result of social victories following years of struggle. On other occasions they are opportunities – created by citizen power – for local governments to implement measures that are more progressive or aimed at certain groups that would otherwise never be approved and that act on the right to difference. It is key to recognise that cities are diverse and that opportunities must be given for the expression of their various manifestations, and that some undoubtedly enjoy more privileges than others, whether because of origin, gender, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic situation or any other reason. Increased affordable housing, municipal management and citizen control of the water supply, public spaces without barriers for different cultures and ages to enjoy, and cultural initiatives that facilitate young people expressing themselves are all examples of this.

Creating broad, plural platforms, hybrid spaces with working capacity, is as necessary as it is complicated. Social organisations have a major influence on public opinion and the media, as well as on social acceptance, when proposals arise from the street and not from the “offices”. The more popular the movements are, the more willing governments will be to open up decision-making to them that were previously the institution’s exclusive competence. Co-creating cities requires both the administration’s technical, personnel and economic resources, and respect for civil society’s leadership and management.

Risks certainly exist, such as appropriation by the public authorities, identification of the initiatives’ promoter movements with the governing party, and complaints of cronyism when a citizen proposal is accepted. Also, by spending a lot of time working on a proposal with the administration and handling more technical information, the movements may become more professional and even elitist. On the other hand, constant dissatisfaction is likely to take hold in the movements, considering the steps taken by the administration to be insufficient.

The experiences described show commitment to cities as common goods, in favour of the right to housing or water, to public space and the rights of young people. These undoubtedly represent progress towards the right

to the city and it is shared progress that follows debates and popular mobilisation, ensuring that cities are spaces where privileges are limited and universal rights prevail. Cities are the epicentres of profit, but also the homes of working people. The experiences described seek to improve life in those homes by ensuring their right to the city.

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