City Mine(d) contribution to Katarsis
March 2008

City Mine(d)

City Mine(d) is a platform for urban interventions. Emerging in 1997 from a wide network of community activists, artists and campaigners, its approach has since been the subject of study by renowned academics, who looked into the methodology for its impact on urban governance, its pioneering role as initiator of bottom-up growth coalitions, or its innovative ways of creating an urban public sphere. Since 2002 City Mine(d) consists of 3 local grassroots organisations in Brussels, Barcelona and London. As a way to bridge the divide between locally-anchored work in deprived urban areas and the trans-national context that shapes the lives of people who live in these areas, City Mine(d) pioneered a unique way of organising, which combines the flexibility of a network structure with the legal protection of an umbrella organisation. A non-profit organisation in 3 countries, City Mine(d) refers to itself as a platform, because it provides a facility to do art and grassroots projects in public space with a wide variety of cultural, social and civil society actors. In this way, City Mine(d) empowers local actors and makes their projects happen, but also positions them in a trans-national context.

Current activities

In 2006 City Mine(d) completed a trans-national action-research called Generalised Empowerment. Described as ''a challenge put to those regulating cities, to artists, activists, academics as well as to young entrepreneurs'', it used specific component of citizenships -the economic, cultural and political aspects of it- as rallying points for local networks in Brussels, Barcelona and London.
MICRONOMICS is a result of this action-research. MICRONOMICS is a programme that addresses the top-down understanding of the economy in which the majority of citizens are consumers, and whereby the success of creators is measured only by their financial turn-over. It wants to open up a discussion about the economy that takes into account exchange, education and happiness in addition to money.
Also following the action-research, City Mine(d) organises KRAX in Barcelona, which for the second year in 2008 brings together grassroots knowledge and experience about citizenship and action in public space from places as diverse as Mumbai (India), Caracas (Venezuela), Tokyo (Japan) and Buenos Aires (Argentina) in addition to a variety of European cities.

Geographical and political context

City Mine(d) 's work is situated in urban in between spaces it refers to as ''cracks''. It chooses the places for their evasion from formal and informal regulation, which makes them hotbeds of

creativity and innovation. City Mine(d) looks up cracks in a physical sense -of derelict buildings of empty pieces of land- virtual sense -radiowaves and internet sites-, and in an institutional sense -practices or ways of organising which legislation does not cover.

Through its work, City Mine(d) aims for a change on the very individual as well as the metropolitan level. On the individual level it wants to contribute to what is called positive freedom - the freedom of choice from a wide set of options and the capacity to make that choice free from coercion-; on the metropolitan level it promotes a more active form of citizenship, through building networks that become alternative growth coalitions from the bottom up and recognised as stakeholder in urban regeneration.

Contributions to social innovation

Projects like Limite Limite have shown the potential of urban interventions in urban development.
Limite Limite was a landmark building, the start of a local coalition and a trademark for the Brabant neighbourhood in Brussels from 1999 to 2004. Limite Limite turned an urgent need for green space into an opportunity to bring stakeholders together and to put the Brabant neighbourhood on the Regional agenda. Architect Chris Rossaert designed a highly visible 9-metre high translucent tower that protruded into the street, and that served as a meeting and exhibition space. Through Wijkpartenariaat local residents were involved in design and building process. APAJ, apprenticeship training that prepares local unemployed for jobs in the construction industry, trained a number of its students through raising the tower. Construction and use of the building served as a catalyst to bring together disparate groups in the neighbourhood. JP Morgan Guarantee Trust Company financed the structure, but also took responsibility in keeping the new network together. A number of local high schools -Vlekho, Sint-Lucas, Social Highschool- participated with their students in one or more stages of the project and local shopkeepers also took a place in the network.

In addition to their visual impact -a contribution to the forging of collective identity in parts of cities where this is often absent- and the empowering potential of their network-building capacity, initiatives like the ones taken and supported by City Mine(d) make two more important contribution to social innovation, namely their experimenting with organising and setting up constantly new and temporary structures and decision-making models; and their shuffling of power relations.

Because of their collective, diverse and ephemeral nature, urban initiatives, like squatters movements before them, are obliged to constantly come up with fair, inclusive and yet engaging decision-making procedures. Although often inspired by already existing activist ways of collective decision-making, their

application to a constantly changing reality make them new and an inspiration for more formal ways of civic engagement and direct forms of democracy.

Finally, City Mine(d) notices that the political status quo with its inherent disenfranchisement is often not challenged by the elected opposition or through community leaders. Initiatives from the wider society seem better positioned to unsettle the current situation and shuffle power relations. Parallel to the way large corporations like Sony and Nokia managed to harness the innovation going on in open source communities, public authorities could be more aware of the social innovation taking place in urban conflictual and unregulated spaces. The projects that are being developed in the cracks in the city very often combine a challenging political ambition with tactical forms of innovation, making them an inspiration both for content and form of politics practiced.

An example City Mine(d) was involved in was Fondation Legumen, initiated by Nathalie Mertens in 1997. The project consisted of organising an allotment on a derelict piece of land right at the heart of Brussels. By doing so it challenged the stalemate between the owners of the land speculating on more favourable real estate conditions, and a local government unable or unwilling to confront the negative consequences caused by the derelict site. By organising a vegetable garden the site became a subject of public interest, and the conflict was made more dynamic. Furthermore, the project was a rare example in the culturally fragmented Brussels of an initiative that crossed language barriers. Keeping the project in the public attention required continuous or tactical innovation, which gave rise to project like the free open air cinema PleinOPENair still existing to date.

Although projects like Fondation Legumen manage to break through a stalemate and contribute to political change -the site was redeveloped and now houses the National Theatre- such a direct impact on governance is rather exceptional. This is because the distance between the formal structures and initiatives like this is still very large. A dialogue between the two will always ride the very thin line between collaboration and cooption.

City Mine(d) LAB

The same is true for the relation between these initiatives and academia. If we want to link experienced and scientific knowledge; that is mobilise the knowledge built in the streets and allow it to be unlocked in universities, and conversely allow the knowledge universities develop to seep through to activism and grass roots activities, we will have to build new interfaces, new facilities. Since this is a big concern of City Mine(d), it is currently setting up City Mine(d) LAB, which will function as an interface between academia and activism/the field/grass roots initiatives. It consists of a library, presentations, tutorials,

masterclasses and workshops. City Mine(d) contributes a decade of experienced knowledge from its own projects, a network of similar initiatives from North and South America over Europe to India and Asia and the online facility to collaborate through http://krax.l-atlas.net/ ; it is currently looking for academic institutions to contribute and use the facility.

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