

Part 2

Experiments Experiments

Co-creation across Europe

By Alice Holmberg

It's early 2015 and the quest for co-creation and experimentation across Europe has begun. I'm sitting in London in the middle of winter, when all at once the gloom is dispelled by a phone call asking me to serve as co-creation expert for the Human Cities partners in eleven European countries.

The role of the co-creation expert is to develop and align co-creation practices across Europe, which is no simple feat. Firstly, because of the level of ambition of the Human Cities programme: to create lasting change in each city in the network and to do so together with citizens. Secondly, because of the diversity of the partners. This is very positive in a way, as it increases the opportunities for shared learning, expands the potential reach of experiments, and allows for different takes on similar topics. But on the other hand, it also raises questions about how to achieve equal footing and balance that with doing something meaningful in each city. To illustrate the diversity, consider Politecnico di Milano. They are intellectual heavyweights in the urban discourse and veritable grandmasters of social innovation, yet also an enormous organisation. Compare them to a smaller organisation like Belgrade Design Week who are a steamroller of entrepreneurial energy and get so much done in a single day that they seem able to warp space-time—or maybe there are simply more hours in a day in Serbia? But of course there are also challenges to being comparatively small and new on the scene. Human Cities tries to square these different perspectives—and nine others besides!

But of course organisational size is not the only parameter of diversity. There is also geographical and cultural variation. Think about Helsinki with its solid, quiet design and its strong tradition of social democracy, and then jump to Bilbao with its massive urban regeneration programme in the past 20 years, and then move on to Cieszyn, a border city which is literally divided between Poland and the Czech Republic and whose mere location is mind-boggling to anyone who knows anything about local politics. These examples from opposite ends of the spectrum underline the fact that all the partners are unique in their own way. Yet all of them are also members of Human Cities and have committed to the same goal: to create lasting change in their cities together with citizens.

It is plain to see that serving as the co-creation expert for the Human Cities network will bring opportunities and challenges in equal measure. What makes it meaningful is the possibility to challenge the city scale, put humans back at the centre of the discourse, support a diverse partnership that can achieve more than any individual or bilateral effort, and stick out one's neck and share both failures and successes along the way.

Challenge accepted.



Local residents in Ljubljana were invited to a picnic to express their visions for the future of the central public open space of their neighbourhood. © Blaž Jamšek / Photoarchive UIRS

The music of many minds

Co-creation is often equated with a co-creative event. But thinking that co-creation is an event is like thinking that music is the same as a concert. To continue the analogy, imagine staging a concert. You don't start by jumping onto the stage. First, you have to compose music. After that, you have to make people aware of it, build up a fan base, plan a tour, book a venue, sell tickets, and deal with other logistical matters before you can proceed to a stage performance with impact. Co-creation is similar. What we have to compose, or rather define, is the challenge to be addressed. Then we need to communicate this, and although it might be overly optimistic to look for fans, we do need to identify people or organisations who might be interested. As with the concert, this is followed by coordination, logistics and – only then – the grand event.

But unlike the concert, this is followed by something even more important. The actual change. Human Cities is all about taking

action. Therefore when we speak about co-creation in relation to Human Cities, we mean the whole shebang – from composing, to staging, to actually making real change. Like a band with a new release, Human Cities went on tour with co-creation. I had the pleasure of getting started a year in advance, as a type of one-woman band warming up the audience for the main gig. The warm-up consisted of briefings with each partner's project team to build local capacity and align approaches across the Human Cities network.

The co-creation framework

The aim was to create meaningful co-creating briefings for all partners individually, while keeping a common foundation throughout the network. For that reason, we worked with a co-creation framework rather than a prescriptive methodology. The framework was designed specifically for Human Cities and could be adapted to each partner's context, while ensuring common ground and comparability. In practical terms, the co-creation framework

breaks down big topics into a workable set of questions and prompts. Take context as an example. It is key for each partner to have a profound understanding of the context of their experiment. To achieve that, we separate the complex notion of context into its constituent parts, such as space, history, geography and discourse. In the co-creation framework, we then address elements of context like:

- Physical space: where will the experiment take place?
- Spatial context and history: what is currently there, what used to be there?
- Motivation: what makes the place interesting and why has it been chosen?
- What is the connection to the state of the art as analysed by the Human Cities research team?
- How is the experiment related to other experiments or cities in the Human Cities network?

The co-creation framework covers topics such as context, potential, partners, reach, impact, planning and tools. Taken together, this allows for a 360-degree review of a co-created experiment, helps with its implementation, and enables good decision-making and active thought leadership¹.

The co-creation briefings

The co-creation framework was the starting point with each partner. It was used to prompt the project teams in each city before we moved on to the co-creation briefings: two days of capacity-building onsite in each city. With our preparations behind us, the journey began with a wonderful train ride over the Alps to Ljubljana.

Slovenia: city & heritage

Community – active spaces – participatory process

Ljubljana opens one's eyes to the complexity of European culture. Once part of Yugoslavia on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain (at least if one uses Churchill's original definition of the Iron Curtain), Slovenia is now an independent state and a member of the EU. Slovenians are culturally adjusting to the new reality, but parts of the built environment remain unchanged. Thus walking around Ljubljana is like talking a stroll down recent Slovenian history. This level of readability in a city is fascinating for a visitor. But what is it like to live here? Do the built environment and cultural landscape adapt to emerging realities? Or vice versa? Excitingly, our Slovenian partners chose to work on this very theme, i.e. the relationship between people and the heritage around them. They focused on a neighbourhood built during the socialist period and aimed to activate public spaces in a way that would enable local residents to feel ownership of both process and place.

¹ The full framework is available under <http://www.thatssomething.dk/work.html#human-cities>

France: city & connection

Human-centric design – momentum – urban drivers
place-making

It is sometimes said – jokingly though not without a grain of truth – that when two Frenchmen meet they say hello to each other, but when three Frenchmen meet they start an association. The country boasts a lively civil society, but that also means there is a dense web of interest groups that can easily become entangled.

In Saint-Étienne, the local government has already undertaken a paradigm shift in urban planning, moving from an industrial past to a creative present and future. As a result, civil society has been thriving – or you could say running wild. It is exciting to see that the French partners dared to address exactly that: the lack of coordination between the many different initiatives related to public space. The aim is to connect, unite and create common ground for collective impact in the city.

Finland: access to the city

Circular economy – social innovation – service design
policy making

Helsinki is the Nordic representative in the network. The city is strongly committed to the idea of democracy, not only as a system of government but also as an egalitarian principle running through Finnish society. Democratic notions, in particular about equal access, also underpin the Finnish Human Cities experiment.

As a quirk of the Finnish education system, there is a large number of pupils in temporary school buildings at any one time. This is the unintended consequence of school buildings being kept to a very high standard and undergoing frequent refurbishment. During this time, they are not fit for use and pupils are accommodated in barrack-like structures instead. Some of these barracks are close to Aalto University. The great idea of the Finnish partners was to open up their campus to pupils and make their facilities and infrastructure accessible – not to the general public quite yet, but at least to a part of the public who would make very good use of it. But how would all of this work exactly?

Thoughts along the way

Although I still had a long way to go on my co-creation tour, it seemed to me that a thematic pattern was emerging. In the cities I had visited so far, it was easy to see that the Human Cities partners had committed to a shared paradigm, yet made it their own. This created a diversity of perspectives and provided an excellent framework (or at least an excellent set of questions) to understand what the idea of Human Cities could mean in different contexts. What needs do people have in different cities? What is missing and what is already there? What types of initiative tend to be particularly popular? How do people engage? What role does the urban realm play in public life and what can we achieve by transforming it? Thematically mapped, the themes that arose during the co-creation briefings seemed to lie within the parameters of humans and cities, values and tools.



Alice Holmberg wears eye-tracking glasses to evaluate Jakomini Street. © FH Joanneum

Italy: city & theatre

Cultural development – societal commons – activism – bottom-up

Hitting the road again, it was time to visit our Italian partners in Milan. They had decided to take an action-focused approach to their experiment and had already started to collaborate with a strong local partner, a theatre. Using the power of performance, as well as various other tools and techniques, they wanted to bring new life to a large but little-used public space.

Poland: city & identity

Place-making – societal commons – entrepreneurship

The Polish Human Cities partner is based in Cieszyn. A river divides Polish Cieszyn from Czech Těšín—but since both countries are in the Schengen Area, you can easily cross the border on an evening stroll without noticing that you’ve gone from one country to the other. Not surprisingly, a history of border disputes and the current political division have diminished Cieszyn’s importance as a regional centre. This was the challenge our Polish partner initially wanted to tackle: how could a once-thriving market town rediscover its economic vitality despite (or perhaps thanks to) its dual identity?

Austria: non-commercial gathering places in the city

Societal commons – cultural development – place-making
creative spaces

In the heart of Europe, our Austrian partners had chosen a challenge that is critical for countless other cities: making sure that public space is truly public and non-commercial. If that one could be cracked, the beautiful city of Graz would be a model for everyone else to follow. During our co-creation session, we worked onsite in Jakomini neighbourhood and focused on monitoring and understanding change. To achieve that, we had a world premiere with yours truly serving as guinea pig. Exciting! Imagine eye-tracking glasses like the ones that are used to test user interfaces. In Graz, glasses like these were combined with a camera in the same headset. This allows you both to “look inside” at the movement of the eyes and to “look outside” at the streetscape through which the person wearing the headset is moving. Combining these two datasets allows you to see what the person was looking at. It was a fascinating experiment and a novel way to use technology to monitor and evaluate change in the public space. By getting people to walk through the streetscape with these rather chunky specs, you can do a before and after com-



Launch workshop of the Ici Bientôt initiative in rue de la Ville, together with cultural associations, shopkeepers and urban planners of the neighbourhood. © Ici Bientôt / CREFAD

parison of what catches their attention, how many times they stop, where they spend most time, and so on.

Estonia: mindfulness in the city

Behaviour change – human centrality – urban futures

Next, we returned to the north and travelled to the capital of Estonia, Tallinn. Together with our Estonian partners, we jumped straight into one of the biggest conundrums of modern urban life: pace. The idea of the experiment was to react to the frenetic pace of modern life and to complement our busy public spaces with ones that are quiet, peaceful, and enclosed. This is a big idea and could do wonders for our well-being! But where should we position these time-decelerating pods? And how can we make sure that they're public, yet closed?

Serbia: beacons of aspiration in the city

Flow spaces – human centric urban futures – desirable futures

Crossing the continent again, we travelled south to our Serbian partners in Belgrade. Developing the positive power of culture and cultural identity seemed like a particularly relevant thing to do here—partly because of the direct link to design and partly because the city had suffered from the negative effects of conflict until recently. The idea of the experiment was to provide a positive and proactive counterweight. It had elements both of stepping back from urban busyness and of throwing oneself into it, by withdrawing to envision desirable futures and then leaping back into the thick of things to make them happen. Take that!

Spain: participatory change in the city

Participatory process – place making – social innovation
circular economy

Appropriately, the final stop on the tour was Bilbao, the city with the iconic harbour development spearheaded by the Guggenheim Museum. Our Spanish partners wanted to explore the question: “what happens 20 years later?” They had already started a con-

versation about urban spaces to uncover overlooked gems, i.e. projects and initiatives that had been quietly successful. This encouraged us to look at the San Francisco neighbourhood, which seemed to be on the verge of major change. Could this be achieved without destroying the local elements that functioned well? And how could the community be mobilised to play an active role in this change and benefit from it?

The end of the tour

After a year and a half of touring across Europe and crossing the continent from east to west and north to south, the Spanish sunshine seemed like a good concluding image for the brightness and warmth that the Human Cities partners had been bringing to their work. Viewing the Human Cities network as a whole, it's noticeable that no two partners chose the same focus. This provides us with a range of perspectives of what human cities are all about and what themes are worth exploring: heritage, identity, access, connectivity, art, commons, participation, mindfulness, aspiration and so on. All in all, Human Cities makes for a rich tapestry of how and what you can work on in the public space.

It was a privilege for me to work with each partner. It required me to focus deeply on the experiment in each city as well as connect them as Human Cities. I also believe that the involvement of a co-creation expert had a number of benefits:

- It introduced a neutral outside perspective which helped facilitate discussions that were strategic, constructive, and that took into account local priorities.
- It added a sense of urgency to the process by forcing everyone to move away from long timelines and vague agendas and get things done within deadlines.
- It enabled knowledge to be shared across the network, which allowed us to develop a common understanding of methodology and tools and how these could be applied in different contexts.

The unique role of a co-creation expert for the Human Cities partners has been every bit as diverse, meaningful and exciting as I'd expected. As the experiments proceeded, many of the expected problems melted away and some valuable insights emerged. The most fascinating findings in my opinion were as follows:

Commonality

The first and perhaps most inspiring discovery is that the Human Cities partners have more commonalities than differences—despite the apparent diversity.

Complexity

Public space is a heavyweight topic to grapple with in all our partner cities. Making changes in public space means addressing almost all aspects of society: politics, infrastructure, culture, ownership, commerce, civic society—and even the weather!

Perspective

Interestingly, all the partners felt that their context was unique and uniquely complex. Whilst there is a lot of truth in this notion, it can be stifling. The Human Cities network had a great mitigating effect, as each partner was directly confronted with other partners' equally unique and equally complex contexts. I expect this to be a powerful legacy of the programme.

Co-creation

Finally, there is the relationship to co-creation itself. In places like Finland, France and the UK, co-created urban development has been in vogue for a while. In other countries like Poland and Estonia, the co-creation craze has not yet hit. And in some of the former socialist countries, the notion of community-based development even has an old-fashioned ring to it. The different approaches are striking and underline the value of international collaborations like this.

This co-creation expert confidently concludes that co-creating is neither harder nor easier in any one country than anywhere else. Challenging the city scale takes tenacity and determination no matter what country you're in—but it helps to have collaborators to help with the work, co-visionaries to support the agenda, and fellow travellers to accompany you on the journey.

Travelling to Human Cities, whether in real life or in this book, will present you with fantastic perspectives—and a great deal of passion!



Cocreative workshops in Bilbao brought together representatives from various local organisations and residents. © UrbanBat