

# Afterword

By Josyane Franc and Olivier Peyricot

Co-funded by the European Commission's Creative Europe programme, Human Cities has in the past four years challenged the city scale with passion, determination and tenacity. It has been an exceptional learning opportunity for all partners involved in this international, intercultural and interdisciplinary network. We have learned about bottom-up initiatives across Europe through our state-of-the-art research. And we have learned from each other through the experiments. It has made us question our own cities. Are there transition spaces that can be transformed into places where people like to stay and meet, as the team in Graz did for Jakomini Street, and the team in Bilbao for the San Francisco neighbourhood? Does our city have empty squares that can be made into lively social spaces through culture and gamification, as in Milan and Ljubljana? Which neighbourhoods could we transform by creating new services, by working with makers and implementing ideas based on the circular economy, following the examples of London and Saint-Étienne?

We have seen the value of experimentation as a tool. Experimentation is safe, it is reversible and can be reoriented. Failure is acceptable and leads each time to learning. It provides an opportunity for people to live through an exceptional situation they created themselves, and see what can be gained, for themselves and for others. Sharing its success enriches the community and invites further dialogue, leading to further projects.

The value of experimentation, and more broadly of bottom-up initiatives, lies also in its capacity to question. That makes it a tool fit for the current age of postmodern societies that have no place for dogmas. Perhaps most importantly, it questions the politics of the city, for instance by reclaiming public space, or focusing on tackling issues that fall within the institutional or political sphere. It allows citizens to become involved in political actions, and to put into practice, as individuals or communities, their beliefs and aspirations.

However, this occupation of the political sphere by bottom-up initiatives comes with risks. As gaps left by the withdrawal of public services are filled by such bottom-up initiatives responding to the loss of commons, these newly occupied spaces may simply be monopolised by the wealthy and well-educated, to the detriment of those already left out, such as the poor, illegal migrants and the disabled. Therefore, the engagement in bottom-up initiatives of all stakeholders is a necessity to mitigate this risk of monopolisation. Within this multi-stakeholder context, design becomes a political action and loses its autonomy. As Anya Sirota so powerfully shows with examples from Detroit, design on its own is never a palliative treatment for places of dereliction, nor a replacement for political debate and public action. Nor, even if much can be achieved on a shoe-string budget, is it a solution for a lack of finance. What it can do however, is demonstrate that a better future is possible for everyone.

When many people get involved in a neighbourhood, it is evident that bottom-up initiatives have a more positive impact than extensive physical regeneration. With little time, money and personal investment, we can achieve positive change at the level of the neighbourhood. This begs the question whether bottom-up initiatives can also provide solutions for the bigger challenges our cities and societies face. For example, can they be a solution for global warming, or secure solidarity in times of economic de-growth? If we believe they can, how can they? Is it key that we scale up successful initiatives? Or should we aim to replicate successful initiatives widely whilst retaining their small scale?

John Thackara's chapter, with its argument to see the city as a local living economy, provides a compelling framework for thinking about these questions. The commons is a concept we can all root for and indeed, civil society seems to be experiencing a turning point. Many citizens have left their passivity behind and have decided to act. But leaving the protection of the commons solely to citizens and bottom-up initiatives provokes other questions. Bottom-up initiatives are clearly filling the gaps left by deficiencies in public policies, but should they? What validates them? Is it their success or their replicability? And who validates them? Public authorities or other citizens?

These are questions that make clear that citizens can't be the sole driving forces. Large-scale projects aimed at tackling major societal issues can only be initiated by public authorities. They should be led by people chosen in democratic elections. Moreover, public authorities have the responsibility to finance the common good. But this doesn't mean that citizens should be excluded from these larger projects, or that they form the only solution. As we have demonstrated with Human Cities\_Challenging the City Scale, local networks and initiatives relying on design approaches are equally essential in tackling these major societal issues. Indeed, the solution to many of these challenges, such as global warming, lies in our cities.

In our view, policy and decision makers, from the European to the local level, could do a better job of understanding this. It is their role to provide a framework for meaningful dialogue and actions. And it needs to be done for issues on all scales, from the built environment, and urban social or cultural issues, to larger societal challenges. The next stage of Human Cities will therefore be about developing these necessary structures for action further. This will include the design of new decision-making bodies and processes, but also the reinforcing of networks and knowledge-sharing, as well as the re-activating of the commons beyond our neighbourhoods. As such, Human Cities will continue to imagine the future, bound by our practices and our common destiny.