Urban competitiveness and social innovations

The 6th event to mark AEIDL's 30th anniversary took place in October 2019 in the autonomous region of Trentino-South Tyrol (Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol) in northern Italy. The field visit explored issues of urban competitiveness, cultural production and social innovation. Cross-pollination, belonging and the 'culture of co-' were red threads running through the trip, which began and ended with interventions at railway stations.

Justin Toland, AEIDL (25/10/2019)

These words formed a key part of 'You are, but you are not', a trilingual audio drama created by the Dutch geographer Kolar Aparna and the Italian artist Beatrice Catanzaro as a site-specific walk through the city of Bolzano/Bozen. This was no ordinary guided tour, as the 10 people taking part in a field visit to Trentino-South Tyrol to celebrate AEIDL’s 30th anniversary soon discovered. Donning headphones at the city's train station, the intrepid travellers were taken on a journey along Bolzano's 'borders' - to a park known locally as a 'hotspot' of trouble and violence - as a way of confronting issues of local and international migration and of changing negative perceptions.
At Bolzano/Bozen railway station, preparing to listen to ‘You are, but you are not.’

The audio guide was commissioned by Lungomare, a cultural association based in Bolzano formed by Angelika Burtscher, Daniele Lupo, Roberto Gilgiotti and Lisa Mazza. “We wanted a project with no image, no visual reference. With plural perspectives, plural narration,” they explained. A week of intense dialogue, interviews and walks through the city with refugees ultimately led to the creation of the guide, which is a kind of permanent soundtrack for the city. ‘You are, but you are not’ addresses such vital questions as ‘what does it mean to host somebody?’, ‘who is the other?’, and ‘how does each of us position him or herself?’

Founded in 2003, Lungomare’s approach to culture is interdisciplinary and often looks to start a dialogue with the local territory. “It’s important to reflect our surroundings,” they say. Trentino-South Tyrol has only been part of Italy since the end of the First World War and Bolzano province remains predominantly German-speaking. “When language groups meet each other there is space for tension.”

One way of defusing that tension and diffusing new approaches to the city as a social space is through conviviality. To celebrate its 10th anniversary in 2013, the non-profit opened the Lungomare Gasthaus, a temporary space for thought and action with a trattoria, cinema, workshops and so on. This provided a framework for national and international artists, designers, musicians and thinkers to reflect on Bolzano’s present.

Since 2015, much of Lungomare’s work has focused on the impact of migration. As well as experiencing the audio guide, the AEIDL team learned about the association’s most recent major project, the School of Verticality, in which the Netherlands-based artist Sophie Krier created a public programme of listening to and learning from situational knowledge to answer the question: “Where on Earth do we belong?”

The project included actions such as ‘Weaving Gardens’, which saw a loom installed in a public garden to allow people to weave fabric depicting stories and memories of the garden. “There was an interesting exchange of knowledge because many newcomers [to the region] know how to weave,” noted Lungomare.

Another aspect of the School of Verticality were two collective narrative and reflection workshops focusing on landscape, landscape management and farming: ‘Breaking Bread’, in which participants made bread plaits typical of the region by mixing local dough with dough from another part of the world; and ‘Seeding Stories’, which connected people’s personal biographies with the stories of the seeds they brought to a seed swap market.
Lungomare’s projects are discursive, not just art for art’s sake. “We want to make culture in a certain way; to connect cultural issues to societal aspects as well,” they said. “These are not political projects but they give a value to encounters, to different cultures.”

They bring in outsiders like Sophie Krier as a way of interrogating the local situation: “To the guest we say ‘we give you this context and we like to share your reaction to that context’.”

After 16 years, is there a risk that the five partners in the cultural association will become jaded? “We keep the energy because we interact each time with different people. Every new guest brings his or her own energy.” Having said that, after three “very intensive” projects, Lungomare is thinking about different formats for its next project: “the issues will be the same, but maybe in a shorter format – not extensive but very intensive.”

Daniele Ietri on urban competitiveness
The programme for the visit to Trentino-South Tyrol was organised by AEIDL board member, Luca Bizzarri, who is Director of the Office for Youth Policies and Foreign Languages of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano. “The aim was to focus on specific territorial actions made by professionals that go beyond a mere social innovation approach in favour of developing a more in-depth and on-the-ground approach, focusing especially on the topic of urban competitiveness,” he explained.

What is urban competitiveness?
Urban competitiveness refers to the degree to which a city, or urban region, in comparison with other “competing” cities, is able to provide the jobs, income, cultural and recreational amenities, degree of social cohesion, governance and urban environment to which its current and targeted new residents aspire.

In this definition, in contrast to most of the others who study urban competitiveness, the GUCP stresses two elements:
• the lack of a single variable such as productivity or per capita income or their growth, in favour of a more holistic conceptualization of what it means for a city to achieve competitiveness; and
• the locus of decision-making with regard to the definition of success in planning for competitiveness enhancement must be lodged in the aspirations of local residents rather than in those of a set of local authorities or external consultants.

To provide a context for the visits, Luca invited Daniele Ietri from the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano to give a presentation to the guests from AEIDL at Lungomare’s HQ. Professor Ietri is a geographer
specialising in theories of urban competitiveness. He is a member of the Global Urban Competitiveness Project (GUCP), a group of 18 scholars active in the study of urban economies.

In a wide-ranging talk, he introduced the local development context in Italy, as well as definitions and factors of competitiveness. Professor Ietri then outlined some of his own work in areas including urban competitiveness in an aging society, and the economic resilience of second-tier (medium-sized) cities.

Of particular interest were his assertion that rather than being a burden on society, today's healthier, wealthier, educated and mobile seniors are contributing to urban competitiveness in the EU as an affluent audience for culture, participants in education and residents of city-centre apartments. Professor Ietri also highlighted research suggesting that Europe's smaller cities were more resilient than larger ones both before and after the economic crisis. They are often greener and more socially cohesive than larger cities.

"If you want to be competitive, think of your residents and your future residents," he said. "Tourism can't be a solution for everybody." For local development in rural areas, that means connecting with the diaspora of former rural citizens and ensuring that suitable infrastructure is in place. "There are benefits of being half an hour from a competitive small city," he noted.

**Campomarzio turns the Crisis into an opportunity**

The second day of the field trip began with a visit to Campomarzio in Trento. This studio of architecture, urban planning, analysis and visual communication was set up in 2012 by five young architects (Pietro Ambrosini, Michele Andreatta, Alessandro Busana, Daniele Cappelletti and Enrico Lunelli) who work in collaboration with a philosopher/sociologist (Teresa Pedretti). Operating at the intersection of architecture and research, the goal of the six is to rethink the role of architecture and urbanism. "We started as a cultural society; in 2018, we became a cooperative company." they explained. "We don't get any public funding – that's a conscious decision. We need to be independent. We want to be free."

This freedom has given Campomarzio the opportunity to present new visions of Trento and Bolzano. They presented three of their projects to the visitors from AEIDL.

**Another way of solving a problem**

The first was a collaborative project with urbanists and others to propose a new vision for a square in front of Trento's castle that was being used as a car park. "We had no work so we did something for free...The collaboration was bottom up – a bunch of people getting together and producing proposals to influence policymakers.... We reconstructed the history of the square going back over 100 years, including all the planning proposals. Then we organised a public debate and asked what can we do to be sustainable in an urban way? The municipality wanted to put the cars underground. We wanted to
put the people underground – a subway to connect the square to the castle. That was 10 times cheaper. In a period of austerity we tried to think of another way of solving the problem,” they explained.

“We produced a small book and gave it to municipality of Trento and asked them to organise a competition. It was a ‘bomb’ because nobody had tried to do anything like that in Trento before. Campomarzio’s intervention had a positive effect: “for the first time all the stakeholders - museums, bar owners, etc. - got together round the table.” And eventually, the municipality agreed to organise an architecture competition for proposals to remove the cars from the square. Campomarzio won the competition, although their proposal is still subject to final planning approval. But for them, the biggest victory was being able to influence the city's policymakers to take action. “It was the first architecture competition in Trento since 1989. That was our main achievement.”

**Putting integrated mobility on the agenda**
Campomarzio's next project was an integrated mobility plan for Trento, influenced by the ‘Just City’ theory of Susan S. Feinstein. “If you are in the suburbs you feel excluded. Public transport is a way to social equality - infrastructure is a powerful tool for producing a just city,” they believe. They had dozens of meetings with people from the suburbs in the process of developing their unsolicited transport proposal.

![Campomarzio's proposal for a new integrated transport network for Trento.](image)

“The project is based on the creation of two tramways: one that runs down in the valley from north to south, and a circular one ('The Ring') that connects the hills and city centre. The key is to reuse useless infrastructure, like a piece of the highway and an old railway that runs on the hill. So we created a sort of vision for the city to 2026,” they explained.

Again, the announcement of the proposal was a key part of Campomarzio's practice. “We make public presentations because if we just presented to decision-makers it would stay on paper,” they said. “I think we put the mobility theme inside the public debate in Trento. We rescheduled somehow the agenda of the policymakers here. Some politicians started to believe in our vision. Then after three years a group of citizens formed an organisation to push this idea to the next level. We are not involved in the citizens' committee: they use pieces of our research but they mix it up a bit. It's a city project now - everyone talks about 'The Ring' – it doesn't belong to us any more.”
Welcome to Bolzanism

Since 2017, Campomarzio has been engaged in projects to change the narrative around social housing in West Bolzano (Bolzano Orvest). The first ('Bolzanism') "again started from the desire to reduce the gap between people and architecture professionals," they said. Campomarzio created a temporary travelling exhibition in the courtyards of social housing developments.

The aim was to reconnect individual history, micro-history and collective history: "Let people participate in the different visions of social housing and at the same time collect the micro-histories to build a narrative — the history of the social housing." This was done in the form of a game: 'Do you know the history of your house? Who designed it? Why is it like this?'

In each housing complex, Campomarzio began with a party: "We knocked at every door and said come over. There was a theatrical presentation to tell the story. Then we left the exhibition for a couple of weeks, dismantled it and moved to another complex... Some people came from one complex to the presentations at another. That was completely unexpected but it was exactly our goal."

Something that came out of 2017 project was the difficulties around the reception of new migrants in social housing in West Bolzano. Their arrival created issues around use of space, waste management and so on. For Campomarzio, this problem was an opportunity. And the solution? 'Welcome to Bolzanism', a welcome kit for migrants "made with people for the people".

The kit included, among other things, a map of West Bolzano with practical information (e.g. cultural facilities), information about waste collection, and a Time Bank guide with contact details for local residents offering services (painting, cooking etc.). "The aim was to develop a kit that could describe the building and the life of the building," explained Campomarzio.

Mountain culture

As well as "experimental research" of this kind, Campomarzio also took the visitors from AEIDL to see some of their built architecture: a viewing platform and a children's playground/seating area in the mountain village of Geroli, some 40 km from Trento in the Terragnolo Valley. The playground is both a useful facility and a message of hope that there is a future for a village threatened both by extreme depopulation and by plans for a new motorway running through the valley.

Also in Geroli is Il Masetto, a former hunting lodge now converted into a cultural centre, guesthouse and dining space six months of the year. The AEIDL team stayed overnight in these beautiful and tranquil surroundings. Il Masetto's cultural programme was included in the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018. Again, it has a strong focus on interdisciplinary work with a strong sense of place. "We invite people like Campomarzio here to do workshops and to stay for a week to do site-specific work ending in

Children's play area in Geroli, designed and built by Campomarzio.
a particular event,” explained the centre’s founders and managers, Gianni Mittempergher and Giulia Mirandola. “We wanted to develop a vision for the territory from within, not have one imposed on us from without,” they said. This is very important in the context of the struggle against the extension of the A31 motorway through the valley.

Brave New Alps/La Foresta
Terragnolo is one of the valleys connected to the hub town of Rovereto for schools, services and culture. Bianca Elzenbaumer and Fabio Franz are academics and cultural activists who moved to another of these valley ‘spokes’, Vallagarina district, in 2015. The AEIDL team met the pair of them in La Foresta, a ‘cultural academy’ they help to set up in a long-disused building in Rovereto train station.

Bianca and Fabio have been collaborating on projects under the name Brave New Alps since 2005. As their website says, “Brave New Alps combines design research methods with radical pedagogy, feral approaches to community economies and lots of DIY making and organising.” In 2012, they registered as a cultural association in what they say was “an attempt to explore what legal and organisational framework can support an eco-social design practice that wants to operate beyond the market”.

Arriving at Il Masetto.
Bianca Elzenbaumer from Brave New Alps presents La Foresta.
Following their relocation to Vallagarina they began to explore ways of achieving this goal in the local context. “We were interested in how we can cultivate other values and find a mode of solidarity and cooperation. And how we can work with nature differently,” they explained.

After forging links with a range of local organisations and individuals, they began to look for a space to hold discussions and activities. They found an abandoned warehouse in Rovereto near a hotel housing asylum seekers. In late 2016, the warehouse became the Quercia Lab, a temporary meeting space for migrants and locals, with a kitchen, cinema, craft activities, and so on.

As Brave New Alps’ network grew, they chanced upon an advertisement by the Italian railway company, FS, encouraging people to set up community academies in disused spaces at railway stations. In 2017, they applied to take over part of Rovereto train station and were pleasantly surprised when their proposal – La Foresta - was supported by the Municipality of Rovereto.

La Foresta is an open network of associations, informal groups, social cooperatives and individuals. The name of the community academy has a double meaning: ‘foresta’ means both ‘forest’ and ‘the foreign woman’ in Italian. The aim of La Foresta is to provide a shared space where network members can develop individual activities, as well as possibilities for encounter, making in common and forging new alliances.

The Municipality of Rovereto signed a nine-year lease with FS to implement a social/cultural project in a 150 m² indoor space, plus 100 m² outdoors. The community academy has been developed through co-design involving the original network, brought together by Brave New Alps, and the local authority. Over a period of several months, they worked hand-in-hand to formulate strategy, governance rules and programming.

The municipality also put out a call for additional participants in the academy. “A few joined: two cooperatives, a big cultural association, several individual citizens. But this second stage didn't produce that many strong social bonds within the group,” said Brave New Alps. “This division between those who were there and those who came afterwards now, one year later, is starting to dissolve. But this is something interesting for local administrations to understand. How can these groups coming together be supported without knowing too much? It's a tricky thing,” they believe.

Nevertheless, they see the co-design process as having positive aspects too. “There is a division between the local administration and self-organised groups but when we get together and find a way to work together it works really well. In the spatial planning process we were given a lot of trust. Our wishes were implemented in the technical drawing.” The building is set to be converted into a convivial reception area, a kitchen/education space, a workshop and an area for events, with the outdoor space becoming a garden.
However, renovation work has been delayed. So in order to maintain the enthusiasm of the network, La Foresta has been developing a project to produce locally-sourced fizzy drinks in collaboration with a fair trade producer. The first bottles of ‘Comunità Frizzante’ pop will be available before the end of 2019.

La Foresta is working on a project to make local fizzy drinks.

**New hubs of knowledge**

Throughout the three days of the field trip, there was a lot of interest in AEIDL’s possibilities as a European knowledge hub on local and sustainable development. For instance, Brave New Alps said, “It would be great to see how others do things, especially on the legal and economic side. Can AEIDL build a European network of community actions in spaces in train stations?”

As well as opportunities for future networking, the field visit was an opportunity to deepen understanding of cross-border realities in a specific context, and to share ideas about alternative economic models, integrated territorial development and ways to cope with demographic changes. “These meetings help us to define more and more what is sustainable development,” concluded Luca Bizzarri from AEIDL.
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