Sharing knowledge in Communities of Practice

Urban Arenas for Sustainable and Just Cities

The experimental, academic project UrbanA, funded by the European Commission under Horizon 2020 from 2019 to 2021, investigated the topic of Sustainable and Just Cities. The project centred around four co-creative spaces, known as Arena events, and also established and still nurtures a "Community of Practice" and its own Knowledge Commons.
By Duncan Crowley and Tom Henfrey

The main idea of the *UrbanA* project, short for *Urban Arenas for Sustainable and Just Cities*, was co-creatively distilling and sharing knowledge generated by former research to develop actionable solutions to make cities more just and sustainable [1]. In course of the project, four co-creative spaces, known as Arena events, were convened in different European cities in person and/or online. Each Arena had a different focus, building on the previous event. Complimentary to the Arenas was the creation and development of the Community of Practice (CoP). A key part of the CoP was the Knowledge Commons, in the form of a co-created Wiki. Although the academic project ended in December 2021, the *UrbanA* adventure continues. The CoP continues to work with a group of nine experimenter projects from around Europe.

UrbanA's Sustainable and Just Cities "Community of Practice"

UrbanA took up the challenge of synthesizing and brokering knowledge for sustainable and just cities generated by prior research and innovation projects, and translating this knowledge into action by empowering city-makers and city-thinkers across Europe. The project consisted of a particular 7-partner consortium including the ECOLISE network (European Network for Community-Led Initiatives on Climate Change and Sustainability) and 3 of the member groups of that network; DRIFT (Dutch Research for Transitions), FCUL (Faculty of Sciences of the University of Lisbon) and ICLEI (Local governments for sustainability), who led the project. Further academic support came from Barcelona's Urban Environmental Justice Laboratory (BCN), ALU Freiburg (ALU) and the Central Eastern University (CEU), then based in Budapest. The intention was to create hybrid events for each Arena, merging online and physical participants together in a blended format. This happened for the first event, but due to COVID, the final three were all online. The first DRIFT-led Arena focused on mapping approaches to urban sustainability and justice, the second (BCN-led) explored (in)justice challenges in urban sustainability, the third (ALU-led) focussed on governance arrangements for sustainable and just cities, and the fourth and final (ICLEI-led) centred on policy actions for sustainable and just cities. Each Arena event had between 50 and 100 participants, including the consortium team acting as facilitators and a core group of 25 *UrbanA* fellows, who were a diverse set of European based "city makers" who agreed to participate in each Arena and contribute somehow to the wider ecosystem during the 3 years.

Alongside this macro process, the Lisbon team led a similar micro local process, bringing together participants from nearly 30 different urban groups to explore what the project theme meant in a city that in 2019 had been deemed by some commentators the new European capital of gentrification and evictions (Rodríguez 2019). A co-created walking tour led by local housing activists through streets recently cleared of local families finished in a municipal resource centre for an afternoon of group dynamics and dialogues to identify common ground. Artistic graphic capture processes harvested insights from the dialogues on a giant canvas, a process that was to be developed further in each Arena. These insights fed into the first Rotterdam Arena in the following days. Lisbon findings were shared through academic publication (Crowley et al. 2021) and *UrbanA* social media communications.

With ECOLISE leading the communications work package, accessibility and a strong visual identity were key *UrbanA* concerns. Care was taken with language, so as not to alienate more non-academic audiences, whom the CoP worked with locally.

UrbanA's final output was the creation of 17 keys to unlock Sustainable and Just Cities, which were divided into 4 clusters. Working alongside artist Carlotta Cataldi (carlottacat.com) since the Barcelona Arena, each key got its own image and story that appeared on the new ICLEI created site. With the leading themes explored in each Arena being degrowth and feminism in Barcelona, doughnut economics in Berlin and intersectionality in Brussels, the 17 keys are an accurate and vibrant representation of this wonderful three yearlong discussion.

Building a Community of Practice

A key component of *UrbanA*'s endeavour was the establishment and nurturing of its CoP, an open network of individu-

als committed to taking constructive action on urban inequality and ecological unsustainability in the ambition to create more just and sustainable cities. Wheatley & Frieze (2006) inspired *UrbanA*'s CoP, which is driven by their philosophy to "act locally, connect regionally, learn globally." Their proposal (image 1) is composed of three Stages: 1) Networks (Discovering Shared Meaning and Purpose), 2) CoPs (Developing New Practices Together), 3) Systems of Influence (New Practices Become the Norm). Identifying networks as "the only form of organization used by living systems on this planet", they see them grow and transform into active, working CoPs, that enable change, through emergence.

UrbanA's CoP has varying levels of engagement, represented as a series of concentric circles (image 1), project consortium members, *UrbanA* Fellows (who committed to attend all four Arenas contributed by writing blog posts, hosting online events), other Arena participants; those following the project and its outputs, and finally, all those whose lives are indirectly touched by *UrbanA*'s contributions to urban sustainability and justice.

The focus of the CoP extended beyond the needs of the group to include an explicit commitment to advance the field of practice and share findings, resources and knowledge more widely, especially with those doing related work. Accordingly, *UrbanA* emphasized the use of co-creative processes to share knowledge widely and in an accessible way, including the *UrbanA* publication *URBANA City Zine* (2019), monthly newsletters, a LinkedIn group, a blog on Medium, multiple social media channels, and 17 podcast episodes. It also began a series of 12 Community Conversations (CoCos): Participatory online events to bring together people with a passion for urban sustainability and justice to connect, learn and discuss, as well as local side events that engaged the CoP with situated struggles and initiatives in specific local communities. DRIFT and Rotterdam based partners created two film nights followed by a World Café: *PUSH – The Film* about the global housing crisis and *Tomorrow* about ecological solutions from sustainable communities. Five side events were "nested events", where *UrbanA* invited the CoP to participate in wider conferences, festivals and movements including the *The Nature of Cities Festival* and the *Cities for Change* summit, organised by the Amsterdam city council. Eight communities, or projects, came together for this last event to explore questions about regeneration, including Global Ecovillage Network, *UrbanA*, Fridays for Future, Communities for Future, Degrowth, Transition Network, Doughnut Economics & Regenerative Practitioners.

With the academic stage of *UrbanA* ending in 2021, funding from the Robert Bosch Stiftung, a founding partner of ICLEI, allowed the CoP to continue for another year. A call was put out for micro-funds and peer-learning. From 110 applications, 9 projects were selected to engage in experiments together to exchange and connect on themes such as community engagement, intersectionality or conflict resolution. The CoPs communication space on LinkedIn currently has 375 members and the CoCos will continue until spring 2023.

A knowledge commoning approach

A key early decision in the implementation of *UrbanA* was to organize the knowledge co-creation process as a knowledge commons that could potentially persist beyond the lifetime of the project. Commons are resources of some kind that are shared and governed in common, via a set of social and relational processes known as commoning (Euler 2018; Federici 2018), whilst knowledge commons are shared information resources, governed by a community of users according to an agreed set of rules, conventions and procedures (Hess and Ostrom 2007). In the case of *UrbanA*, the resource is translocal knowledge on sustainable and just cities compiled and synthesized over the course of the project and beyond. As a platform we adopted MediaWiki, a well-supported and widely known open source software application for online knowledge co-creation in wiki format (through its association with the Wikipedia knowledge commons, for which MediaWiki was originally developed). The user community initially consisted of members of the UrbanA consortium who developed the first release of the approaches database based on the mapping process, later opening up to the wider *UrbanA* CoP. Rules-in-use were developed emergently over the course of mapping by members of the *UrbanA* consortium. They include the editing guidelines of the Wiki on Sustainable Just Cities as well as facilitation methods and conversational principles during the community conversations, meetings and Arena events. Consortium partners introduced other CoP members to the wiki and clarified rules-in-use at the first Arena event, and at several dedicated online workshops both in the run-up to the event and following it.

The decision to create a knowledge commons was both ethical and methodological. Commons are increasingly recognised, in both theory and practice, as having greater potential to promote, and embody sustainability and justice, when compared to state-led and market-oriented mechanisms, both in general and specifically in cities (Bollier/Helfrich 2019). Creating a knowledge commons, in the context of *UrbanA*, was in part a response to contradictions between our commitment to sustainability and justice, and the constraints we observed and experienced as a consequence of pressures associated with the professionalization – and hence commodification – of knowledge production (Bollier 2007). By creating a resource that was not necessarily limited by the time boundaries of *UrbanA* itself, we hoped not only to map knowledge from previous research, but at the same time to create a legacy for our work that could persist into the future.

Commoning and peer-to-peer exchange among and within different circles of the CoP allowed these circles to create and distribute shared value, at the same time opening the possibility for new cycles of commons-based knowledge production through new and wider dissemination, uptake, application and further development of *UrbanA* findings (e.g. by CoP members). By adopting a commoning approach to knowledge co-

creation, to the degree possible within the remit of the project, the wiki can easily be duplicated, transferred or shared to enable longer-term co-creation and database-making for the CoP and other communities focused on the intersection between sustainability and justice in cities. To enable this, the consortium agreed to license wiki content for free re-use and remixing under Creative Commons, one of a number of mechanisms for legal recognition of intellectual property as a common resource (Bollier 2015). At this time of writing, the *UrbanA* Wiki on Sustainable Just Cities has seven co-created databases of: Approaches, drivers of injustice, governance arrangements, projects and initiatives, people, resources and keys.

Annotation

[1] For more information about the *UrbanA* project visit the following resources:
Web: urban-arena.eu
Keys: sustainablejustcities.eu/keys
Blog: medium.com/urban-arenas-for-sustainable-and-just-cities
Wiki: wiki.sustainablejustcities.eu
CoP: linkedin.com/groups/13794274/

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