Shared Spaces according to City Mine(d)

As City Mine(d), we are deeply convinced of the need to design infrastructures specifically dedicated to encouraging the intersection of activities relating to social innovation, cultural production and education. These spaces must welcome and mobilise all the urban players concerned, including citizens, artists, local residents, social organisations and educators.

Shared spaces

These spaces are sometimes called 'shared spaces' and can be found all over Europe. Some of them focus more on artistic production, while others work on social welfare, human rights, social impact or critical thinking. However, they share common characteristics that clearly distinguish them from more traditional cultural institutions and social organisations. To name but a few: they appeal to a very diverse audience, aim to be as accessible as possible, operate in a spirit of co-creation, co-production and co-responsibility, create a comfortable and non-judgmental atmosphere, and combine production with critical thinking and an agenda for social change.

European recurrence

As part of a Europe-wide benchmarking exercise, a few years ago City Mine(d) took a closer look at 15 of these cultural centres across Europe. The exercise confirmed some of the lessons that City Mine(d) was already learning from its own practice of setting up temporary hubs in Brussels and, to a lesser extent, in Barcelona, London and Madrid. More recently, City Mine(d) has joined a European network of spaces of this type, called OASis. It brings together 19 'shared spaces' in cities ranging from Lisbon to Tbilisi, and from Warsaw to Yerevan.

Brussels' absence

Despite the density of its cultural and artistic fabric, Brussels still lacks a centre where the boundaries between communities, ages and social differences can be crossed. Existing micro-centres are struggling to survive under the pressure of a booming property market, political incentives to cater for a specific audience or the more general polarisation of society. At the same time, the city needs these places more than ever. Bringing people together to debate and build the future requires a room with a roof that does not restrict discussion in advance. A shared space can be the starting point for discussions that offer new perspectives, new points of view and new practices.

3 lessons

What do successful shared spaces across Europe have in common? City Mine(d) has learned three key lessons from its experiences:
- Firstly, you need TIME. Temporary use of buildings is an affordable starting point, but its short-term nature prevents shared spaces from reaching their full potential. It limits investment, depletes spaces and hinders the long-term trust needed for community engagement.
- Secondly, an ECOSYSTEM needs to be put in place. When a single organisation initiates a shared space we have found that the audience is not as diverse and the initiating organisation tends to become the curator, which runs counter to the co-creative spirit of a shared space. Spaces that form a node in a network of initiatives and organisations are much more likely to reach a wider and deeper audience.
- Thirdly, the shared space needs an IDENTITY - it can't be all things to all people. For both users and visitors, it is important to manage what is expected and what is possible. This requires clarity of purpose - what the space is for - as well as procedures - who does what and who is who.

Opportunities

We feel that there are unique opportunities to create a new shared space in Brussels. Despite an unfavourable political and social context, many practices are still trying new approaches to social innovation, cultural production and education. They are now integrated into secondary schools or universities, cultural institutions or remain in the shadows. Yet they continue to connect and come together, but not in a sustainable way. Brussels has an ecosystem in search of a building. In addition, by 2030, when Brussels aspires to be the cultural capital of Europe and also celebrates the country's bicentenary, cultural activity should intensify and gain in visibility and recognition. Finally, for City Mine(d), the European OASis network of which it is a member is a springboard that gives it access to experiences from all over Europe.

These opportunities can crystallise in a building, if the initiators give themselves enough time, involve the ecosystem and forge an identity that appeals to a broad and diverse public. In other words, a building on which a longer-term programme can be planned could well be the keystone of a truly accessible, non-judgemental and co-creative social and cultural centre.