

NEWS- LETTER N°2

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USER

Changes and conflicts
in using public spaces

Connecting cities
Building successes



EDITO

WELCOME IN MY BACKYARD



The city of Copenhagen hosted the first USER seminar. Mr André Just Vedgren, vice chairman of the District Local Council Amager West, comes back on the seminar topic. He puts it into the perspective of the evolutions occurred in Sundholm district, where USER experimentation takes place.

On April 18th and 19th, I was very pleased to welcome delegations from 9 European countries as well as roughly 50 Danish experts, civil servants, citizens and students to join the important discussions of dysfunctions and conflicts in using urban public spaces. It was definitely two days of interesting inputs and sharing of knowledge across national boundaries and planning traditions.

Changes are an imperative of city development, and our district has faced big changes as everywhere else. For the last half century, our district has changed from being a suburb to Copenhagen, with a fenced social institution and open land in the 1950s, to becoming an area of growth and new living during the 1960s and 1970s.

The paradigms of planning and building big concrete projects, with all needs and services covered within the area, were introduced in the district. Starting out as a beautiful dream, the idea proved itself wrong. Development in most such projects during the 1980s and 1990s turned out to host more and more social problems with an increase in the rates of unemployment and crime. The various challenges of social, cultural and economic matters in a small area led to insecurity among the residents. Getting involved often meant trouble. This led to residents not wanting changes – a well-known phenomenon in planning called NIMBY – Not In My BackYard.

Integrated urban renewal in Copenhagen focuses on physical as well as social changes. When working with the development of places and spaces, it is equally important to create networks, activities and meeting places. The goal is to support the link between people, the knowledge of one another, the feeling of belonging and the interest in the next-door neighbour or beyond.

Our aim with the USER project “Sundholm – including You!” is to create beautiful public spaces with a broad and well founded community spirit. The hope is that people living here in the future will say “Welcome In My BackYard”.

André Just Vedgren, vice chairman of the District Council of Amager West.

WHAT'S NEW IN USER?

THE LOCAL SUPPORT GROUPS ARE UP AND RUNNING



In the first few months of the project, the cities each launched their own Local Support Group (LSG). The first meetings held presented the USER Project to the local partners, presented the trial site (or finalised the choice of site) and defined the work focus.

These kick-off meetings took a variety of forms, reflecting the diversity and richness of the USER partnership: there were broader conference-type gatherings, select «core group» meetings and even a barbecue for the city of Dresden!

So, the cities have completed the first step of their local trial schemes: set up a basic working group (which will develop over the course of the project) and target a pilot site for the LSG to work on during the project.

The next steps will be to:

- › identify the work focus,
- › closely observe how the target public spaces are used, and the problems and opportunities involved.

This will then serve as a basis for constructing an action programme.

THE USER NETWORK'S FIRST EUROPEAN SEMINAR

The second highlight was of course the USER project's kick-off European seminar! The members from the network's nine cities met in Copenhagen, Denmark, on 18 and 19 April.

The seminar addressed the subtopic of «friendlier public spaces», so we worked on the «changes, problems and conflicting uses of public spaces».

The objectives were to :

- › Build common knowledge from the experts' contributions during the conference, site visits and especially the USER member cities' experience;
- › Work on methods for observing public spaces to understand the conflicts and malfunctions, and identify opportunities for positive change;
- › Jointly devise methods for trying out new practices at each city's pilot sites.

The two-day seminar programme included an open conference attended by around 100 participants, a visit to two public spaces in Copenhagen, and workshops for USER members to discuss their local initiatives.

The seminar was well attended, drawing around 30 participants from the nine USER project cities, including an urban planning officer, European project officers, associations and four municipal councillors. Four experts addressed the open conference: Fernando Barreiro (lead expert), Barbara Allen (CSTB, a French public research establishment in the construction sector), Camilla van Deurs (Gehl Architects, Denmark) and Peter Williams (Means Consulting, UK).

This first seminar, which took place in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, reflected the partners' strong involvement, keen interest in other cities' experience and collective desire to exchange experience with other cities and local stakeholders. Getting users involved in building urban projects is clearly one of the partners' core concerns.

A report presenting the seminar's outcomes will be available on the USER website :

<http://urbact.eu/en/projects/urban-renewal/user/>

WHAT THE USER NETWORK TEACHES US

COME AND LOOK FOR ANSWERS...
AND LEAVE WITH QUESTIONS!

The main aspect to consider when assessing the quality of public space should be the intensity and quality of the social relationships it is capable of generating. This is why it is so important to understand and resolve conflict about how our public spaces are used, so that we can make these collective places friendly and welcoming.



At the Copenhagen seminar, the open conference and site visits gave us an opportunity to examine the following points in greater detail :

- › The need to know exactly how these spaces are used, so that we can determine what can and should be changed in a public space;
- › Is it a good idea, and does it work, to dedicate a public space to a specific type of user? If so, how do these spaces fit into urban interactions?
- › A public space that works well is: friendly, safe, shared, accessible, suitable for everyone, clean, etc. How can we turn these ideal features into objective indicators for analysing public space?
- › How should we bring about a change in the way public space is used? Use incentive methods (i.e. generate a conscious change of usage through information) or directive methods (i.e. generate an unconscious change by installing new facilities)?

As we can see, this USER seminar raised more questions than it answered! Throughout the project, we will be constructing answers to these fundamental questions.

Because that is what it means to share experience: we cannot duplicate what other cities are doing, but we can challenge our own practices in the light of what we have seen done elsewhere.

A METHOD FOR STRUCTURING USER'S WORK

During the seminar, we also started to structure a common methodology for conducting local initiatives. To allow subsequent comparison, the cities will have to use a common framework to structure their trials, while at the same time using their own methods to carry them out.

Under this methodology, which the USER partners are still finalising, we will structure our local trials in a

multiple-step process over the duration of the project and beyond :

- 1 Identify the pilot sites;
- 2 Identify and observe the way the target public spaces are used;
- 3 Identify and understand the causes of any malfunctions and conflicts, and identify the obstacles to positive change;
- 4 Define and test the initial solutions to the usage problems identified;
- 5 Define and implement an action plan based on the results of the trial;
- 6 Build on the knowledge gained through the process.

NEXT STEPS

The next step for the USER network is the second experience-sharing seminar, which will be held in Riga on 4 and 5 July 2013.

The discussion topic will be «safer public spaces».



We will try to ascertain what has to be done to make users feel safe in public spaces. Besides crime and security, what other factors make people feel unsafe? How do the urban quality and good management of public space influence users' feeling of safety? What are the solutions for enabling different people to cohabit peacefully without tensions? Do confined public spaces necessarily make people feel more anxious than wide open spaces? All of these questions (and many others!) will be covered in Riga, in the light of our discussions at the first seminar: we think it is essential for users to feel safe for a public space to be experienced as a friendly space.

HERE IS AN OUTLINE PROGRAMME FOR THE RIGA SEMINAR:

THURSDAY	04 JULY	MORNING:
		Learn and share : USER members and the Riga LSG discuss with an expert on the subject
		AFTERNOON:
		Discover in the field : test the diagnosis method while walking around the city of Riga's pilot site
FRIDAY	05 JULY	MORNING:
		Local practices: each city shares its experience of local activities
		AFTERNOON:
		Project events: prepare the workshops in small groups of three cities (next step in the USER network's transnational gatherings, autumn 2013)

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