Chapter 24

Boosting Entrepreneurism as a Product of Urban Creativity and Governance: The Almada Idea Laboratory Project

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to describe and reflect on the experience developed in a metropolitan territory that ambitiously wanted to articulate entrepreneurship, creativity and urban governance. In spaces marked by economic and social crisis the requirement to mobilize synergies between local actors is even more pressing. From the municipality’s leadership, Almada Idea Laboratory Project sought to involve university professors and students to generate creative ideas as well as business hosting centre for the installation of projects with greater viability and the community in general that had the opportunity to assess and discuss the product of this effort. The council offered its urban space as a living laboratory. Ideas, business opportunities and, above all, the possibility of creating and strengthening links between actors, often distant, proved a very successful experience both in objective results as in the formation of useful social capital to develop new projects.

1. INTRODUCTION

It has always been expected of cities that they be competent in dealing with innovation and development processes. They are required to do so whilst advancing social readjustment, urban improvement, active citizenship and entrepreneurial competitiveness. Technology and creativity, given the infinite opportunities they provide, have now become a trump card in the hands of cities that have become adept at using them appropriately in terms of time and scale in their response to both general challenges and those relating to the creation of jobs and enterprises in particular.
Given the hectic speed of modern life, one could be forgiven for thinking the concept of the creative city is decades old. Slowly, albeit more slowly in some cities than in others, the perception is growing that creativity can be the key to a future in which they can set themselves apart economically, i.e. built a different future. The studies, projects, expectations and initiatives have multiplied. All regions, at all scales, no matter the constraints, seek to implement this seductive concept that brings qualified employment, “refreshed” identities and new investment opportunities.

Many cities have set out on the initial part of the course and found the learning curve to be long and slow, with a considerable number of setbacks and a limited number of insignificant gains. But this process has shown that a good, consensual and mobilising idea needs a lot more for realisation than simple discourses or exclusively voluntarist actions and attitudes, which, when one considers the targets not achieved, may end up demobilising the key agents of entrepreneurism.

When one imports these convictions to the urban context of Almada, a lot is still to be done, although some changes are already taking place. Creativity has broken with preconceived ideas and surpassed the boundaries of the expectable. It has shown the way for a city that wants to return to the centre; for an urban aesthetic that ranges from the iconic object to the abandoned industrial ship; it has challenged technology to look to improving urban everyday life for residents and other users in a rational and economic approach; its aim is a city that attracts artists, researchers and professionals through the conception of innovative and economically viable urban products in terms of public space, urban furniture and diverse facilities.

2. CREATIVE AND INNOVATIVE CITIES

There is a process of urban and, above all, metropolitan consolidation in course. And this is not only because, as the most recent global statistics show, for the first time in the history of humanity more than one half of the population lives in cities (UN, 2005). The urban mega-regions not only absorb a high percentage of the total population of the territory they are a part of, but also have the capacity to generate financial and economic weight that can be many times greater than their demographic relevance or spatial dimensions (Fujita, Krugman, & Venables, 2001).

For example, a look at the world’s 10 largest cities shows that they account for one-tenth of the globe’s population. If one shifts the analysis perspective to economic importance, one finds that whilst the 10 most important cities make up “only” 416 million people (i.e., 6.5% of the world’s population) they account for 57% of patented innovations and for 53% of the most-referenced scientists worldwide (Florida, 2008). Hence, what we have here are not just demographic giants but, above all, highly developed economic/financial machines.

Some of these cities today are political, financial and manufacturing hubs with a huge capacity for reinventing themselves, given the power of attraction they exercise over those who wish to succeed in these areas. The laws of physics, which have traditionally been invoked by some territorial models – various gravitational models, Christaller’s Central Place theory, amongst others – continue to prove useful in explaining the self-subsistence of the urban power of attraction based on the game of demographic and economic mass.

It is in this context that a number of convictions and instances of consensus emerge as to what the challenges are that cities face (Harvey, 1990, 2005; Sassen, 1994, 2001; Lo & Marcotullio, 2000) and how only through a strategic response or, if one will, medium/long-term planning, can one guarantee their structured and coherent affirmation (Bourdin, 2011; Rasoolimanesh, Badarulzaman, & Jaafar, 2012). We consider it particularly appropriate to include in this prior reflection the proposal advanced by Ferrão, which argues that