

Summary:

Creative urban development – Sense of place and centre concentration in Porsgrunn, Norway

The objective of Porsgrunn's planning project "creative urban development" has been to draw on culture as a driving force in the urban development. The project has provided temporary cultural events (like Grenland Friteater's performance "Sense of place") and a new salient cultural infrastructure in the town centre. Two factors were important for the launching of the project: timing (the town's bicentennial) and extraordinary regional financial support. The project depended on a solid institutional support, a reorganisation and mutual trust relationships across knowledge and politics, and across public and private (commercial as well as cultural) actors. The shift of focus on what urban development is about, has been crucial, from "jobs and parking spots" to urban life and housing environments in vital urban centres.

How towns and cities develop and the driving forces behind, are increasingly addressed. Urban development is not something just happening. Neither is urban development solely something to be drawn in public planning offices. There is no single will to indicate "here the town shall lie". Rather, new actors with new perspectives and values have been involved in urban change processes that now are seen as crucial for more vital and liveable towns and local communities. Urban centres attract new inhabitants as well as developers. For traditional planning the urban development has been more pluralistic and less predictable – and maybe more creative?

When a small industrial town like Porsgrunn (150 km southwest of Oslo) launches a project to realise "creative urban development", the objective is to draw on *culture as a driving force for the urban development*. Three years later the urban centre has gone through an urban regeneration with an aesthetic improvement; people have moved to the centre, urban flats are built, strolling along the riverside is open for all – and the municipality of Porsgrunn won the Urban Planning Prize 2006 for its centre plan, due to (as quoted from the Prize Jury), "*the active use of cultural and artistic activities in the planning and implementation of urban development measures*".

It is not a new phenomenon that social and cultural events are used as an *active reshaping* of towns and cities. World exhibitions, large sport events (Olympics, World championships), international Expo's, new cultural monumental buildings (Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, national opera in Bjørvika/Oslo) are examples of events and edifices cities explicitly have used to add something new to the city – new establishments or an impetus to a radical reshaping of the urban structure.

Barcelona has used large events to reshape areas that today make up the city's unique character. Oslo and Lillehammer are Norwegian examples where a special event like Olympic Games (Oslo 1952, Lillehammer 1994) is saliently present in the physical urban structure.

The launching of creative urban development in Porsgrunn has enabled *temporary cultural events* to take place, like the theatre group, Grenland Friteater's, spectacular "town stroll performance", called "Sense of Place. At the same time a salient *cultural infrastructure* has been built along streets, squares and by the riverside. The initiative has two main explanatory factors: the right timing and access to extraordinary financial support. The momentum was when Porsgrunn was going to celebrate its bicentennial as a town. At the same time particular regional development funds made it possible to arrange the one-week performance of "Sense of Place", over the three years period.

The objective of the project was to focus on creative development projects of particular transfer value for other towns and municipalities. The interaction between cultural development and the physical improvement of the urban space was particularly emphasised. Also participatory processes were seen as important. Several single projects and events were gathered under the umbrella project of "creative urban development" over the project period.

Some of the most salient, physical and therefore permanent impacts of the creative urban development project in Porsgrunn are all the physical regeneration in the town centre and the investment in a cultural infrastructure that in any case will last, for a long time. The town has been through an aesthetic transformation and has been (re)filled culturally. It is not only a temporary urban scenery, but a *permanent urban scenography*. When the town now actually has been renewed, it is not likely that it will not be maintained properly.

At the same time a solid public *institutional setting* has been organised to follow up and continue the ideas and arguments from the creative urban development projects. It is based on mutual trust relations, in a network actors knowledge and politics, across cultural and planning, across market and planning mechanisms, across local and regional administrative levels. What characterises institutional settings are their permanence and predictability, more practico-inert fields, dependent of time and trust to be built, but hardly dissolvable and de-constructed.

As important are probably new interpretations and the discursive shift in the *framing of urban development* and what the main factors to be stressed are. It does not only concern "jobs and parking spots", but even more urban life, living environment in vital urban centres. The new ideas of cultural and creative aspects as important for the urban development were launched; across an enhanced urban network of politicians, planners, developers and (other) creative people. Finally, the new ideas and arguments have been materialised physically and institutionalised within the municipal structure in new forms of interaction across different actors and agencies.

Of the lessons to learn from this urban planning project in Porsgrunn, there are of course some factors and features that are unique and quite context specific for the town of Porsgrunn and not easily transferable to other towns. On the other hand there are lots of factors that are only apparent in this particular town: like for instance ugly and worn-out urban centres, empty brown fields ready to be

transformed, committed planning and cultural professionals, investment-willing developers, and new possibilities to see the relationships between urban and cultural infrastructure and between physical and socio-cultural factors. Many towns and regions will also have inhabitants and politicians who are proud of and want to back their own town – and see that the soft values of today will be the hardcore values of tomorrow.