

URBAN I PROJECT: WIEN GURTEL PLUS REGENERATION.

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- 1.0_INTRODUCTION

Europe is a strongly urbanized continent, where more than 50% people live in urban areas of over 50,000 citizens. Urban Areas offer several local advantages to people, workers, and young being the place of social, economical and cultural activities. But cities and metropolitan areas are also scenarios of conflicts, deprivations, exclusions and other serious problems inherent to the urban context. Social exclusion, poverty, criminality, racism are common in most European Cities.¹

Bearing these considerations in mind, the central role played by urban policies and programs in EU strategy and regional development framework is not surprising. This paper aims to illustrate the URBAN Program, one of the most important programs concerning local development, investigating strategies, objectives, actions and projects implemented in one case-study area, URBAN-Wien Gurtel Plus. It is very interesting to understand how this program was adjusted to the local context, the social and physical conditions and the different populations and how URBAN Program developed the local potential and an equilibrated regeneration development. Moreover a review of the successful application of the program aims to catch the strengths and weak points of this policy, leading to final considerations concerning the importance of the implementation of urban policies by EU for reaching a real development, the improvement of living conditions and the implementation of social cohesion objectives in difficult urban areas.

- 2.0_EU AND URBAN PROGRAMS

Starting from 1990's EU realized how important was working for the improvement of urban quality of cities; several programs and projects were created to improve urban quality in problematic and declining regions and cities, as well as neighborhood and districts. The main challenges, concerning urban and regional re-development are related to the reinforcement of the competitiveness of EU cities, to the need of facing social marginalization and to the importance of environmental and physical regeneration processes.²

The basis of the URBAN-Wien Gurtel Plus regeneration project is the URBAN I Program. The URBAN Program (Phase I 1994-1999, Phase II 2000-2006), part of the EU cohesion policy framework, aims to create the conditions for a sustainable environmental, economical and social development in problematic cities. Particularly, this program was designed to create the economical, administrative and urban planning framework for facing problems as unemployment, poverty and marginalization, segregation of migrants, criminality, and low education affecting several cities of EU.

This program was characterized by an integrated approach to face the problems mentioned above and to reach these objectives: integration of migrant populations, sustainable development, urban environment regeneration. The key innovative features of URBAN relate to the importance attributed to the local level role, both for the management of these projects by local authorities and for the involvement of local communities in

¹ European Commission (2011)

² European Commission (2002)

the creation and improvement of the projects. Other key features relate to the integration of different social, political and physical actions to face complex problems strictly interrelated in several of these areas.

An important role is also played by the partnership among different administrative levels and, in some projects, by the strong cooperation between EU and national, regional and local authorities concerning also economical issues, since the URBAN Program is based on co-financing by EU. Finally it is interesting to underline the importance of sharing knowledge and experience among different cities to spread these practices to whole Europe.

It is worthwhile providing some data for explaining the importance of this program. URBAN I (1994-1999) involved over 100 cities, with a EU contribution of 900 million euros, while URBAN II (2000-2006) involved 70 cities (over 2 million of people) with a EU contribution of over 700 million euros.³

Many of the cities involved in URBAN I applied also for URBAN II; this underlines the importance of these programs for local development and urban regeneration processes and the overall satisfaction of local governments about the methods, approach and results of URBAN Program in general. Two of the cities involved in both phases are Graz and Wien, the Austria cases.

- 3.0_WIEN GURTEL - OVERVIEW OF THE AREA

The URBAN-Wien Gurtel Plus project is focused on the Gurtel area and surroundings. The Gurtel was an important concentric boulevard built in late 19th century around the city center of Wien. In 1893 Otto Wagner, an outstanding Austrian architect, was in charge of the project of the Stadtbahn Viaduct, a railway viaduct built at the centre of the Gurtel.



Fig.1: Stadtbahn Viaduct, late 19th century.

While this structure is quite impacting, the techniques and methods used by Wagner for projecting and decorating this viaduct lightened the heavy mass of its structure. The arches were used in new and different ways: housing, several shops and restaurants and the use of high transparency materials provided a visual continuity.

³ European Commission (2003)



Fig.2: Original uses of the arches.

After World War II, many parts of the viaduct were destroyed and several façades were replaced by closed frontages. The Stadtbahn Viaduct became a barrier between inner and outer districts, dividing the Gurtel boulevard. Restaurants and shops were replaced by storage and repair shops and the Gurtel area and its surroundings became a declining area.



Fig.3: Closed frontages.

In 1950's and 1960's, due to the growing numbers of vehicles, the Gurtel became a main arterial road; at the same time the growing importance of cars led to the reduction of public spaces around the viaduct due to the widening of the street and the creation of parking lots. The boulevard became "an island in the center of an 8-lane inner city highway"⁴.



Fig.4: Parking lots in the Gurtel.

This new condition led to a further decay of the area and of nearby districts (especially the 16th, Ottakring) with building stock disrepair, several social problems and the development of a red-light district in the areas near Gurtel. The external border of the boulevard acquired a very negative image in Wien causing a constant erosion and devaluation of the entire area and buildings. In 1990's Gurtel was a traffic nightmare, characterized by a strong environmental pollution and serious social problems; in short, was considered a hopeless case.⁵

⁴ Tillner (2011)

⁵ Tillner (2011)

- 3.1_OBJECTIVES AND GOALS OF URBAN-WIEN GURTEL PLUS

In 1994 the road traffic in Gurtel was about 85,000 vehicles/day, making it one of the most congested road in whole Europe; this 6 km transportation backbone crossed 10 municipalities.

The negative impact and effects of the presence of this urban highway were concentrated in bordering districts, especially Ottakring. This area suffered from many serious problems regarding the physical features of the district and social weak points. Ottakring was considered as a peripheral district, an "island" within the city, mostly due to the presence of the Stadtbahn, a separating element, a barrier dividing the inner city from the rest of Wien. The social decline of Ottakring was clear from the condition of public spaces, commercial structures and housing conditions. Indeed, 20% of the housing stock dated back to early 19th century with really bad conditions, while the presence of migrants was higher than in the rest of Wien (26% vs 19%) and in some areas of the district nearer to the Stadtbahn, it exceeded 40%. The social decay of Ottakring was evident, several physical and social development projects had failed and the risk of segregation and declining was real.⁶

In 1994 the City of Wien applied for the URBAN community initiative⁷. The City Council decided that the program could create the conditions for trying to solve the declining situation of the Gurtel area and represent a plan for improving living conditions in this problematic zone. The key focuses were labour market measures to support small enterprises and investments in urban infrastructures. In 1995 EU grants for URBAN and the project URBAN-Wien Gurtel Plus were approved. In 1996-1999 the project was implemented reaching successful and long-term results. Subsequently the City of Wien implemented the "Target Area Gurtel" project (2002-2007) to carry on the regeneration and development of the districts targeted by URBAN I Program.⁸

The problematic issues faced by URBAN-Wien Gurtel Plus were many: high level of unemployment, poverty, poor housing conditions, high traffic density, low education, few retail shops, high level of segregation of migrants, lack of opportunities, and so on. The City of Wien aimed at solving the sustainability problems and set up a public-private partnership in charge of the control and design of 60 projects and initiatives for improving living conditions, attracting new small business, promoting cultural initiatives, creating social advice centers, improving infrastructures and public spaces.

The planning of URBAN-Wien was built on the following four axes of priority:

- Better professional qualifications and job training
- Cultural, social and working integration of migrants
- Physical redesign of Western Gurtel (URBION, URBan revitalization of the Vienna Gurtel)

⁶ Schaeffer (2009)

⁷ Interestingly Austria was not yet a EU member state.

⁸ Sha.ke (2010)

- Monitoring including exchanges with other European cities and establishing the necessary public images for the project.⁹

For a better understanding of the impact of these transformations and the key role of these projects for whole Wien, some data on URBAN-Wien Gurtel Plus will be provided: 130,000 people involved on a 63 km² area, 32 million euros of fundings (10 million by EU, the rest by Local, Regional and National government).¹⁰

- 3.2_PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS

URBAN-Wien Gurtel Plus was a comprehensive and many-sided initiative comprising several projects; thanks to EU fundings, 60 projects of different kind and typologies were implemented. I will describe three projects (Gurtel regeneration, Urban-Loritz Platz and Yppenplatz), which are important to understand the different kinds of social and physical transformations implemented by the City of Wien.¹¹



Fig.5: Localization of the projects.

Probably, the Gurtel regeneration is the most important project due to the visibility and the change in perception of the district. The project aims to recreate the original functions, aspects and uses of the Otto Wagner Stadtbahn Viaduct project. To reach these objectives, Silja Tillner, the architect and urban planner in charge of the transformation project, developed several micro-scale projects for improving the conditions and the perception of this strong urban element. So the Stadtbahn was no more conceived as a barrier, but as a permeable and active urban structure able to attract different populations into the district. The fields of action were many and the project for the Gurtel boulevard and the Viaduct had different objectives: safety regeneration of the area (social monitoring), preservation of the qualities of the project (green potential, flexibility, different uses), elimination of the deficits (illegal parking, poor lighting, interrupted pedestrian paths and cycling routes), creation of attractive open spaces both for the residents and for commercial use, development of different temporary and permanent activities (markets, concerts, restaurants, bar, clubs). The

⁹ Tillner (2011)

¹⁰ European Commission (2011)

¹¹ Bundeskanzleramt Österreich (2006)

final goals of the project were to increase the use of the area in Gurtel to guarantee social control and a safety environment: Gurtel was seen as a lively avenue of cultural and entertainment venues for the entire city.¹²



Fig.6: Gurtel Boulevard today.

Urban-Loritz Platz was another important project for the physical regeneration of the Gurtel area, focused on an important transport junction. The square is a public transport node - underground, buses and trams - which wasn't spatially coherent but divided into several micro-spaces by tramlines. The paths are incomplete and for passengers, moving from different means of transport was difficult. The transformation aimed at giving a coherent shape to the square, redesigning this public space to eliminate its functional defects. As for the Gurtel regeneration project, also here the architect in charge was Silja Tillner, who designed an attractive contemporary urban space, which improved the accessibility of the districts outside the Gurtel. The project aims at reorganizing the traffic patterns of the streets, improving pedestrian paths and cycling routes to speed the slow connections to the underground station and give an ordered shape to this public space. A large part of the square is covered by an imposing steel structure with a membrane roof giving a general unity to the area and covering the waiting areas. The final goal is the regeneration of the whole Gurtel area through the improvement of the "main door" for accessing the area, transforming an incoherent public space into a major public transport hub.¹³



Fig.7: Urban-Loritz Platz today.

¹² Tillner (2011)

¹³ Bundeskanzleramt Österreich (2006)

The third project, Yppenplatz, is a soft urban regeneration. Yppenplatz was an important market square (15,600 m²) located within Ottakring, where social conflicts between different populations and low quality of facilities were present. Starting from 1990's, market structures and stands started to be dismissed, causing the decline of this public space; several projects were proposed, but never realized. URBAN I, with the related project (1997-2001) was a new starting point for improving the quality of the square. A key factor for the success of this project was the participation and involvement of the citizens, who were asked to develop proposals and projects for restructuring Yppenplatz. Several actors were involved (citizens, municipal departments, planners, experts, district representatives) in the projecting phase but the implementation phase was strongly criticized by the citizens who pretended they played only a minor role. In any case, this project is considered as a successful example of participation of the inhabitants to the development and regeneration of a district. The new functional concept for Yppenplatz was organized around some principles such as the improvement of quality of market stands, the development of a playground for children, a new organization of commercial traffic and the creation of a square. A three-dimension public space was implemented, with commercial and market activities on the east side, cultural and social services in the center, and a recreational and meeting-place system on the west side.¹⁴ Moreover, some art and entertaining events were set up for the Area, as "Soho in Ottakring", an art and performance event with the direct participation of the citizens.¹⁵ This project aimed at increasing the attractiveness of the district, the identification of local residents, the improvement of the quality of open spaces and life, and the social cohesion within the district. The final goal of Yppenplatz regeneration was the economical and social renewal of the area,



Fig.7: Yppenplatz today.

- 4.0_FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

URBAN-Wien Gurtel Plus was a successful regeneration process which re-activated and regenerated a "hopeless case"¹⁶ in Wien. The ability to move and solve jammed situation is without doubt one of the key factors of the success of this policy. Though having different characteristics, the projects are all very interesting. Three different approaches to transformation are to be noted: while Gurtel regeneration is

¹⁴ Reuse (2008)

¹⁵ CCCB (2011)

¹⁶ Tillner (2011)

essentially characterized by a top-down approach, without taking really into account local needs of people, Yppenplatz is the opposite. Actually the transformation of the market square was led by a bottom-up approach with a strong involvement of the citizens (at least in the project phase) for the overall objective of improving urban and living quality in the district. The third project, Urban-Loritz Platz, could be considered as a neutral approach, for the infrastructures-related kind of transformation, with the objective of improving accessibility and basic conditions of bordering districts. These different kinds of approaches are surely necessary, for improving the overall quality and image of the outer districts, some further considerations can be made. Indeed while Yppenplatz was a successful example of regeneration process due to the strong participation of the local community, the Gurtel regeneration was considered by the local citizens as imposed from the municipality, without consulting them. This problem is related to strong top-down approach of this transformation, that attracted in the boulevard high-level functions, such as bars, clubs, restaurants and art galleries. Also Urban-Loritz Platz is essentially a top-down transformation but, for its strong public utility character, it was widely accepted by the local inhabitants.

From these considerations, it is that avoiding as much as possible the top-down approach to urban regeneration is necessary for reaching a successful transformation in accordance with the local needs of the inhabitants; transforming in a bottom-up way, consulting local communities and inhabitants, setting up a strong and real participation of local citizens, allow a better sharing of the results of the transformations. Furthermore high-level transformations, such as Gurtel regeneration, highlight the risk of gentrification, with consequent expulsion of local inhabitants; this causes their, at least partial, opposition to these kinds of process. It is fundamental to underline the connection between all regeneration and transformation projects and the local needs of the existing populations, considering local contexts, involving resident populations and respecting the identities of the districts before considering the needs of visitors or other populations.

From a general point of view, URBAN Program was able to change the approach to this kind of situations, changing the way of planning in Wien. Promoting and supporting principles and ideas (participation, public-private partnership, sustainability) are fundamental more for the renewal of local planning framework than for the economical support. These policies can act as trigger points of blocked situations, activating resources and giving support for the improvement of declining districts. These EU objectives are fundamental for the overall goal of improving urban conditions in Europe.

In conclusion, there is clearly a need for some practical EU policies in the urban context in order to be recognized by the citizens not just as a distant supranational entity, but as an active actor and facilitator also at a local scale. A fundamental issue, lacking in other EU policies, is the translation of general principles into practical actions. This is one of the strengths of URBAN Program, capable of activating and promoting regeneration in over 100 disadvantaged neighborhoods all over Europe. Surely, this policy could be improved, focusing more on participation and resident-oriented transformations with a bottom-up approach, keeping a real focus on local needs, contexts and populations, avoiding gentrification. But in most cases the overall goals and objectives of this policy and its practical implementation were really successful. Now URBAN I & II have been dismissed, but it is fundamental to bear in mind the importance of urban and local policies promoted by EU for the improvement of urban conditions all over Europe, and keep developing new and effective urban policies to carry on this approach.

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