

The initiative is based on a “City of Commons” background study presented in Imola during a workshop in December 2011. After the workshop the idea was presented to the city of Bologna, and its mayor subsequently decided to run an administrative experimentation program. Local residents were supported in managing three urban commons (public squares, a section of the arcades “portici”, and a public building, all in need of cooperative place-making) by city officials and a local partner.



The aim was to test experimental partnerships between the city and its inhabitants. Based on the results and best practices generated by this experiment, the mayor of Bologna appointed 3 city officials and 2 external experts to draft an innovative piece of local regulation, which could be submitted to public consultation and review by some of the most prominent Italian administrative law scholars. At the end of February 2014 the draft was presented in Bologna and successfully submitted for final approval to the city council in May 2014.

The project was awarded the medal of representation of the President of the Italian Republic, and several cities in Italy started to adapt this contract.

1.1 Collaborare è Bologna and the Bologna Model

Actually it has become a model in Italy and abroad, with more than 60 municipalities following Bologna. Since 2014, the mayor of Bologna has organized a series of workshops, together with active citizens, to identify priorities for urban regeneration in each part of the city. These workshops constitute the so-called “[Collaborare è Bologna](#)”, a project based on the regulation on public collaboration for urban commons. Its aim is to serve as a mutual learning laboratory for any city official, public servant, expert, scholar, activist or citizen who wants to get involved into the advancement of the social, political and urban transition towards the “Co-Cities” paradigm. The new regulation together with workshops and similar initiatives are generally referred to as the “Bologna model”. Some of the strategies stemming from the Bologna model come from city leaders down to citizens, while others flow from the bottom-up.



This model entails two main concrete results: first it creates a clear pathway for individuals to volunteer on projects requiring municipal assets or cooperation; second, it defines the kind of support public authorities can offer to citizens or civic groups.

Today more than 130 agreements have been implemented to clean up city streets, parks and squares, remove graffiti, and carry out other forms of public space maintenance, together with social activities such as training older people in the use of computers and social media, helping victims of violence, and teaching migrants Italian and cooking.

2. Urban Commons and Grassroots Initiatives

The Bologna example clearly shows how, despite a lack of attention on the way public spaces are being tackled, it is possible to transform them into resources for community development thanks to grassroots initiatives. Grassroots initiatives are based on citizens getting together to address those issues left unsolved by public administrations. Urban commons can be compared to grassroots initiatives as they both rely on collective management of public spaces and are both initiated and supported by collective actions. They are generally composed of 4 underlying elements: repurposed public spaces, collective governance, hands-on action, and resulting benefits supporting community and urban developments. The benefits of both grassroots initiatives and urban commons result from collectively repurposing underused public spaces as a resource for community development, and result in social, economic, and environmental benefits.



3. Social Street, Bologna

A clear example of such a grassroots initiative is provided by the project launched by the residents of via Fondazza in Bologna. They decided to take concrete action to create a network of solidarity between neighbors, thus generating a “social street” model. The idea of a “[social street](#)” was born in September 2013 thanks to the Facebook group “Residenti in via Fondazza- Bologna”, which was created to promote and enhance social relationships among neighbors, to combat loneliness caused by a depletion in social interactions, and to take over the control of common urban spaces. Its main goals are to foster cooperation among neighbors living in the same street, to exchange knowledge and professional skills, and to reach common shared goals (further info [here](#)).



The main features that characterized the movement from the very beginning are the use of Facebook (wide and free) as a tool to pass from a virtual scenario to reality; the choice of using a closed group to avoid any commercial or political influence; territoriality seen as the decision to limit single groups to a limited territory thus fostering the deconstruction of other identity categories like social classes, interests, age, political or religious beliefs, or geographical origin; a free service to promote a culture of giving without any immediate counteraction the independence of the model; the absence of a structured hierarchy as every individual belonging to the group can take action if in compliance with general guidelines; an inclusive approach since the group and its initiatives focus on what is relevant for people and what can aggregate them, thus avoiding discriminatory attitudes, language, and actions.



Excluding any economic, political and legal structure showed to be very effective and set itself as the real innovative feature of Social Streets, differentiating it from any previous experiences promoted by associations, committees, or other structured bodies. Today more than 450 groups have started similar projects both in Italy and abroad, showing the need to develop social interactions free from any political or economic aspect.

4. 596 Acres, Brooklyn



Grassroots initiatives like Social Streets stem from the action of single individuals, as per via Fondazza, or from civic groups fostering projects designed and aimed at providing citizens with tools or information relating to how they can participate in managing public assets.

This is the case of [596 Acres in Brooklyn](#) which was born when its founder, Paula Z. Segal, obtained a spreadsheet of all the publicly owned vacant land in Brooklyn and created a map of it to distribute, thus informing people about the hidden lots disseminated throughout the city neighborhoods. To inform people, 596 Acres used a poster highlighting vacant public land in Brooklyn, and its website used as an interactive tool.

As word spread, New Yorkers started to look for information on vacant parcels in their communities, on how to gain access to particular pieces of land, or how to protect community land resources under threat.

This is how 596 Acres started to act as an advocacy program to provide neighbors with information and resources to take active part in shaping the New York urban landscape. Today its website developed into a sophisticated interactive tool, supported by signs and other printed materials, giving visibility to vacant lots across NYC. These materials go hand-in-hand with ongoing organizational and advocacy work to strengthen local campaigns that transform cities one block at a time. 596 Acres' activities clearly demonstrate how a civic group or association can concretely fill the gap between policy and the people in a way that neither the government nor other non-profit projects can. They connect people and initiate campaigns to legally get access to public assets, giving citizens a concrete chance to get involved and make real change, thus literally transforming people's relation to power.



On their side, while 596 Acres remains an active on-the-ground advocacy organization in New York City, they also have ongoing connections to an emerging international network of community land access advocacy groups.

Conclusions

These three examples are just a representation of dozens of similar initiatives launched and implemented by citizens around the world. They demonstrate how civic society has started to take action and re-gain the power it had delegated to politics and public authorities, and highlight the need to make real change and challenge the current development system to find one that is more human and sustainable. In this sense, a renewed sense of democracy and political opportunity are inspiring citizens and local authorities to develop new governance paradigms that are based on horizontal subsidiarity, collaboration and polycentrism.



These principles contribute to a re-orienting of public bodies away from a monopoly position in using and managing common goods towards a shared collaborative governance approach in which all actors are decision makers and co-partners of a shared “commons”. In this sense, “commons” are not only identified as a right, but also as the assertion of the existence of a common stake, without the need to exercise monopolistic public regulatory control over them.

