Future Cities

Back to the Future by Hyperloop

A world without waste

Vienna: The reluctant cosmopolis

Copenhagen harbour swimming

EU cities try their own 'Ubers'

October 2016
Future Cities

As leaders focus on strategic issues, the other EU, the EU of city-states, is evolving and shaping Europe’s future from the bottom up.

By 2050 over 80 percent of Europeans are projected to live in towns or cities. If I live long enough, I’ll be one of them, and most likely you will be too.

But what will those cities look like in the future? Who will get it right and who will lag behind?

EUobserver’s 2016 Regions and Cities Magazine explores visions for future cities and learns lessons from the past.

EU capitals such as London, Paris, Prague, and Rome host millions of foreign tourists each year and shape Europe’s international identity.

The EU is grappling with difficult problems - Brexit, migration, and the economy to name a few - but despite the gloomy pall over EU affairs, lots of European cities are investing and reinventing themselves.

Many of them are old or even ancient. They can be violently different from each other and fiercely independent. Some aren’t doing so well. They compete, but they also inspire each other.

They are mini-states, where people get more involved in politics than at national, let alone at EU level. Residents protest against ugly new buildings, or about garbage collection. They share cars, create new businesses, and plan utopias.

As EU leaders focus on strategic issues, the other Europe, of city-states, is evolving in its own way.

It’s a good story that should be told.

Lisbeth Kirk
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STUDENT VILLAGES ON THE WATER

Students will soon be able to move into converted shipping containers in Gothenburg. The architects hope to spread their idea of cheap, waterside living across Europe.

By Lisbeth Kirk

With a projected deficit in Europe of more than 4 million student beds by 2025, governments across Europe are scrambling for a solution.

The Urban Rigger project in a former industrial port in Gothenburg, Sweden's second largest city, might be an inspiration.

The first students will soon be able to move into old shipping containers that have been converted into homes. They are heated by solar power and cooled using sea water. They offer a central location, a village-type community, and low cost.

"We have won our first big project in Gothenburg, in Sweden, where we are going to build 24 of these [riggers] to form sort of a student village," explains Danish architect Bjarke Ingels.

"We can actually use these containers as building blocks to create incredibly affordable apartments that have almost all the luxuries of waterfront high-end real-estate," he tells EUobserver, while showing off the first prototype, anchored in Copenhagen's harbour.

CREATING NEW HOUSING AREAS

Ingels’ Copenhagen and New York based company, BIG, dreamt up the idea together with Urban Rigger founder Kim Loudrup.

Their idea could potentially turn thousands of kilometres of untapped harbours, rivers and canals into new housing areas.

By stacking nine container units in a circle, 15 studios are created that frame a centralised common green courtyard. There is a kayak landing, bathing platform, barbecue area and a roof terrace.

The housing is also buoyant like a boat, so that can be replicated in other harbour cities where affordable housing is needed but space is limited.

Below water, there are storage rooms, a utility room and a laundry. The whole thing weighs 6 tonnes and sits 2.5m deep in the water, making it stable even when a storm passes over.

Danish architect Bjarke Ingels oversees building projects around the world, including the new Google and Lego headquarters, Barcelona football club’s Camp Nou and renovations of Manhattan’s waterfront.

Photo: Lisbeth Kirk
So far seven countries have been singled out as having a potential market for the riggers: France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

"With the right partners we can build between 200 and 300 platforms yearly, securing 2,000 to 3,000 students an affordable place to live," Kim Loudrup tells EUobserver.

The price for students would be between €500 and €800 each month, depending on the wharf rent and whether internet, furniture, bikes and other equipment is included.

"We have had 3,000 requests in just a few days," says Loudrup.

**CO-OPERATION WITH UNIVERSITIES**

Urban Rigger operates with two business models: One for private investors, who are interested in student housing with an estimated 7-8 percent return on their investment. The other model is to let the universities be in charge of the rent.

"The trend is certainly that many university cities are port cities," says Bjarke Ingels.

As ports modernise and consolidate, smaller ports sites closer to the centres of cities are closing down.

"The new container plants are often located outside the city, leaving the old sites empty," he says.

Ingels, 41, was recently described as a kind of rockstar of the architecture world in Wired Magazine.

He is currently overseeing building projects around the world, including the new Google and Lego headquarters, and renovations of Manhattan's waterfront.

In 2005, he formed BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group) from his tiny apartment in Copenhagen.

He wanted to be a cartoonist, but there was no cartoon academy. So he enrolled in the Royal Danish Art Academy School of Architecture instead and got smitten by architecture, he once revealed in an interview.

**SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

Why is Ingels spending his time on low-cost student housing when he could presumably do more profitable and prestigious projects?

"We have an idea of something we call social infrastructure for the time, it's about past infrastructures that can be used for something else when going out of service," Ingels explains.

He gives examples such as the Danish Maritime Museum, which was converted from an old shipyard, and London’s Tate Modern which was originally an old power plant.

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The price for students would be €500-800 monthly, depending on the wharf rent and whether internet, furniture, bikes and other equipment are included.  
*Photo: Lisbeth Kirk*
But he also highlights another of his projects, the Amager Bakke power station, which incorporates this dual function from the start. It is a new power plant with a roof that doubles as a ski slope.

**WATERFRONT OWNERSHIPS**

But why build it for students only, when presumably many others would be interested in living in an Urban Rigger?

"Our estimates show that there is a shortfall of 4 million student residences in Western Europe - it's certainly plenty to focus on. Right now that's our focus. What we offer is a community good as an alternative to privatising the waterfront to expensive apartments," says Ingels.

And it does not necessarily have to be university students.

"We work a little with Noma [Michelin-star restaurant] and its chef Rene Redzepi, who once said he'd like to know if we knew anything about housing opportunities. He has a number of trainee chefs from near and far who want to work with him - we even have a lot of trainees ourselves who come and stay for a year or two. It would be brilliant for us - it would be brilliant for Noma, having an Urban Rigger," he says.

"It's a housing form that could be great to live in - at least for five years."
Cars that run on petrol or diesel are meant to be a rarity by the year 2050. Progress is slow. But some Nordic cities have radical visions of how a "Hyperloop" could change that.

*By Peter Teffer*

When makers of the film Back to the Future II in 1989 envisaged urban transport in 2015, they thought cars would fly and skateboards would hover.

EUobserver would not be the first to point out that the film did not get everything right.

But that does not prevent us from dreaming up future scenarios.

Leaping ahead 34 years to 2050 - eight years after Marty McFly and Doc Brown’s Delorean - is potentially a very different picture of how people will move around.
Whether cars fly or not in 2050, only a limited number will run on petrol or diesel if promises are kept.

Five years ago, the European Commission said that greenhouse gas emissions in the transport sector would have to be reduced by at least 60 percent by 2050, compared with levels from 1990. To do that, it said cars using conventional fuels should be phased out of cities entirely.

There are some signs of movement in that direction.

**ELECTRIC VEHICLES**

Cities like Paris, Amsterdam, London, Barcelona, and Oslo have stimulated the use of electric vehicles by giving a subsidy.

And days before the Paris climate agreement was signed in December 2015, Germany, the UK, Norway and the Netherlands, signed up to an international group that promised to have only zero-emission cars sold on their territory in 2050.

“Looking 40 years ahead, it is clear that transport cannot develop along the same path.”

The commission said that in future, public transport must have a bigger share.

Some cities, like Tallinn, are trying to achieve that goal through offering free public transport. Wojciech Keblowski, who researches the topic at the Free University of Brussels, told EUobserver that free public transport should be seen as a social policy rather than a transport policy.
“After the shift to the use of private vehicles in the 1950s and 1960s, public transport gradually had to compete with the comfort of a car,” he said. “Authorities had to increasingly try to convince those in cars that public transport could offer similar quality. For people in lower income groups, the price of public transport is a factor. By no longer requiring tickets, you remove a stigma.”

How does he see urban transport in 2050?

Keblowski thinks there will be much fewer petrol cars driving around in cities, because fossil fuels will have become more scarce and expensive. “I think you will see SUV-like type cars driven by the extremely rich, and a very congested public transport system,” Keblowski said.

THE HYPERLOOP

A completely different mode of transport is currently being considered in Nordic countries.

It would reach speeds of up to 1,200 km/h - faster than the top speed of a Boeing 747. Its name: the Hyperloop. Its estimated development cost: €13 billion. It would reduce the journey between Helsinki and Stockholm to less than 30 minutes.

The Hyperloop, if it is built, would be a series of pods travelling through tubes via magnetic levitation. FS Links, the company developing it, says it can be used both for freight and passenger transport.

According to a KPMG study - which was commissioned by FS Links - a Hyperloop system has a “very strong case and is worthy of consideration as a potentially viable alternative” to a high-speed railway line, which is also being looked at. KPMG estimated it would take between 12 to 15 years to complete.

Although the commission in its vision of 2050 did not foresee a magnetic tube, it did note the importance of high-speed rail and argued that by 2050 the majority of medium-distance passenger transport should go by rail.

Will we get there?

The commission is not very optimistic, except about its own work. In a report published in July this year it said “little progress [had been] achieved” in the past five years towards the 2050 goals.

“Despite a relative good pace on the side of the Commission in proposing new measures, it has become evident that the follow-up adoption of the proposals by the legislators as well as the implementation have been lagging behind,” the report noted.

That means cities, regions and national governments need to step up their game. It will be 2050 before you know it. And unlike Back to the Future, time travel to redo missed opportunities is not an option, at least not yet.
A world without waste

A garbage crisis in Naples, Italy, gave birth to the "zero waste" movement, but is the rest of Europe brave enough to change the way it thinks about trash?

By Aleksandra Eriksso
after years of mismanagement by the local mafia.

The streets began overflowing. Some people set fire to bins and toxic smoke spread over the city.

"The catastrophe meant people were open to radical solutions," Ercolini said.

Naples, and other cities, embraced zero-waste as an alternative that was good for the environment, but also for the economy.

Capannori, which has a population of 47,000, created 60 well-paid jobs in recycling and door-to-door collection (the average number of people working in an incinerator is 62). The town saves €2 million a year from sales of recycled materials.

"Europe is poor in raw materials, but our cities are ‘urban ores’. We can extract precious metals from old electronics and other garbage," Ercolini said.

In 2013, he won the Goldman prize, the world’s foremost environmental award.

More than 350 municipalities in seven EU countries have already vowed to reduce their garbage to zero.

"All may not reach that goal but at least they are working in that direction," Ercolini said.

People in Treviso generate on average 53 kilograms of non-recyclable waste per inhabitant a year.

In 2014, Slovenia’s Ljubljana became the first EU capital to adopt a zero-waste goal.

**THE EU’S AMBITIOUS REALISM**

So what stops the movement from spreading throughout Europe?

The European Commission last year laid out plans for an industrial revolution. The circular economy package aimed to reform the EU economic model from a “take, make, use, and throw away”, or “linear” approach, into one in which resources are re-used, repaired, and recycled.

The EU executive wants to set the EU target for recycling municipal waste at 65 percent.

Commission vice-president Frans Timmermans told journalists at the time: “We could have also said: 100 percent. And then it would be even more ambitious. But what would that have meant in the real world? We’ve set a target which we think is very ambitious, but realistic.”

**THE CIRCULAR LOOP**

Ella Stengler, from the Confederation of European Waste-to-Energy Plants (CEWEP), explained to this publication why some waste was not recyclable.

"Materials can be too polluted, or contain substances of high concern which aren’t allowed to be recycled”, she said.

Some materials lose quality after each additional life cycle.

"Paper, for instance, can be recycled up to seven times," she said.

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Primary school teacher Rossano Ercolini redesigned the waste management system in his home town of Capannori. He now leads the zero waste wave in Europe.

Photo: Zero Waste France
According to Stengler, waste, which “despite all efforts” cannot be prevented or recycled, should be used to produce electricity and heat. It can replace fossil fuel and help countries to meet renewable energy targets, she noted.

"Energy from waste is considered about 50 percent renewable," Stengler said.

Another reason that helped make waste-to-energy incinerators popular in countries such as Sweden is the cheap cost of energy from waste, even if plants require considerable initial investment.

Many facilities are paid to receive waste.

But one Swedish official told EUobserver that the government is worried that the country has built more incinerators than can be fed.

**IMPORTING TRASH**

Sweden has for years had to import trash from other countries.

That recourse could come under pressure as the average EU citizen’s trash heap gets smaller every year and recycling rates increase.

The Commission’s sharpening of the ecodesign directive, which aims to re-design products so that they fit better into the circular economy, will also help to eliminate some waste that cannot be recycled.

Stengler said it would take years, though, before that would affect waste generation.

"We have to be careful with capacity planning and take into account waste prevention and recycling efforts. We do not want overcapacity," she said.

Sweden was a “specific case”; there is no overcapacity in Europe as a whole.

Stengler added that the lack of reliable statistics was a big issue in capacity discussions.

"Eurostat figures are based on definitions and calculations which diverge between countries," she said, referring to the EU Commission’s in-house bureau.

There were no reliable figures for commercial and industrial waste.

Ercolini, meanwhile, insisted there was no such thing as non-preventable waste.

He recently convinced Capannori’s local paper mill to look for ways to transform non-recyclable pulp into plastics. The research project receives EU funding.

"Not many things stand between us and a world without trash," he said. "We need to change the way we think about waste, some innovation and, maybe, some brave politicians."
THE STRESS HORMONE AND EU GARDEN CITIES

With 80 percent of EU nationals soon to live in towns, questions on ideal cities are more pressing than ever, but for some - London, a European model - is making mistakes based on old utopias.

By Andrew Keenan

European town planners still borrow from the “garden city” ideals of the 19th century, but they might be doing more harm than good.

When Syrian refugees in the Zaatar camp in Jordan lost hope of going home, they rearranged UN containers to make courtyards, where they put plants, running water, and song birds.

Being close to nature is one of the oldest human instincts and has proven health benefits.

The English word “paradise” comes from a Persian word meaning “enclosed garden”.

The earliest European cities, as seen in murals in Herculaneum in Italy, had gardens. The Roman writer Martial also talked about “rus in urbe”, meaning “countryside in town”, the idea that a good city had natural elements.

THE LONDON MODEL

Modern London, which is, until Brexit, the EU’s largest and fastest growing city, has for a long time acted as a model for other towns in continental Europe.

It has preserved many green spaces: courtyard gardens and royal parks in the centre and a “green belt” around its core. In one new project, a private
firm is creating a “garden bridge” on the River Thames.

But for Paul Cheshire, an urban economist at the London School of Economics (LSE), the green belt is making life harder for ordinary residents.

He noted that most of the belt, which measures more than 2,000 hectares, is privately owned and closed to the public. Many of London’s city gardens are also privately owned and closed to the public.

Meanwhile, the retention of undeveloped land has driven up property prices, forcing ordinary people out and making their lives harder.

The EU estimates that there are 34 million urban residents at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and for Cheshire the “obsession” with green spaces in urban areas creates “huge welfare losses”.

“To try to create an urban utopia is a recipe for throttling the life out of cities,” he said.

Matthew Beaumont, a scholar of utopian literature at University College London (UCL), agreed.

“We’ve reached a tipping point in London, where the centre is being emptied because ordinary people can’t afford to live there,” he said.

**BANLIEUE CITY**

“It will become a ‘banlieue’ city like Paris, with tourist sites at its heart and working class people who have to commute from the periphery and who don’t live alongside middle class people.”

He said the Garden bridge was a “perversion” of utopian visions.

“It will be privately owned land with access controlled by security guards and with constant CCTV surveillance. It won’t be a Londoners’ bridge for normal people,” Beaumont said.

He said that two 19th century books shaped London’s modern development.

The first, Looking Backward, was published in 1888 by Edward Bellamy, an American journalist.

It imagined Boston, in the US, in the year 2000 as a geometrical, iron-clad, and mechanised structure that was designed to produce an “industrial army” of workers. In one example, individuals had no

According to UN criterion, there are only two megacities within the European Union, those of Paris and London. Istanbul and Moscow are also megacities.

Photo: Lisbeth Kirk
umbrellas, but when it rained, huge canopies unfolded to convert streets into arcades.

The second, News from Nowhere, was published in 1890 by William Morris, an English artist.

It imagined a future London that was a cluster of green villages with artisanal economies and no modern transport. In a touch of satire, the Houses of Parliament had been converted into a dung market.

The books inspired the "garden city movement" - the idea that towns should be orderly and utilitarian, but with natural elements.

It still shapes EU thinking. Out of the European Commission’s last eight awards for EU “green capitals”, four cited access to natural places as a main reason for the prize.

The LSE's Cheshire added that when Vienna tore down its old walls in the mid-19th century and replaced them with broad, leafy avenues, it added a new element to the European ideal - the green belt, a strip of undeveloped land engirdling the city.

NEW WALLS

Recalling Vienna, he said that green belts were like “new walls around our cities”. Pointing to Auckland in New Zealand, he said its London-inspired green belt had made its real estate among the priciest in the world - even though there is hardly a shortage of land in a country where sheep outnumber people.

There is scientific evidence that being close to nature is good for people.

Catharine Ward Thompson, a professor of landscape architecture at Edinburgh University, said that the instinct shown by the Zaatarí refugees is part of the human body's evolutionary history.

She said the hormone cortisol is an indicator of broader hormonal functioning, especially in response to stress. In healthy people, its levels are high when they wake up, then fall after half an hour.

When her staff collected saliva from people in deprived urban areas in Scotland, they found that cortisol patterns were more distorted in those who had little access to green space.
This may explain findings by other scholars that, for instance, women with access to nature have healthier babies.

Researchers in Spain have also found that children exposed to natural microbes have better immune systems.

Ward Thompson added that being in green areas appears to reduce stress through what she called “soft fascination”.

“If you felt stressed, where would you go? Not a busy street or a dark room,” she told EUobserver. “Trees swaying in the wind. Waves falling on the shore. Dappled light through trees. We find these natural variations in patterns fascinating. They engage us, but we don’t have to concentrate. We find them relaxing.”

Nowhere has William Morris’s utopia been built. But China, which, according to EU figures, has six of the world’s 30 largest cities, has gone to the other extreme, with unhappy results.

**CHINESE DYSTOPIA**

When EUobserver asked Edward Ng, a professor of architecture at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, what EU planners could learn from China, he said: “Maybe not to make the same mistake China is making with its rapid, but inhuman development that is environmentally and socially unfriendly.”

Ward Thompson echoed her LSE and UCL colleagues, saying that London’s “gentrification” is “a problem” and that deprived urban areas must have attractive green places.

Cheshire noted that some EU towns have adapted the old model with positive results.

Copenhagen, for instance, has “green fingers” (green spaces on radial lines toward the centre that do not block outward expansion) instead of a green belt.

But for Cheshire, the way that towns shape people’s financial lives is more important than cortisol or soft fascination.
His views are backed up by an EU study, out in September, which said that most “discussions concerning the quality of life often turn to cost of living” instead of green spaces.

The report said that many EU cities had the “urban paradox” of a minority of increasingly well-to-do people who live beside “a large number of disengaged people who remain outside the labour market”.

“The distribution of income and wealth in the EU has … become increasingly concentrated in the hands of global businesses and the very rich and these developments are particularly visible in urban areas,” it said.

Beaumont noted that 2016 marked the 500th anniversary of the publication of Utopia by Thomas More.

People in More’s book, which established the genre, loved gardens, but their crowning achievement was eradication of financial inequality.

When asked which lesson from More could make EU cities better places to live, Beaumont took aim at the values of global business. “More’s traveller [narrator] was astonished that Utopians didn’t value gold and made chamber pots out of it. I’d like to see some of the things that we value today, socially, politically, radically devalued,” he said.

HARD FASCINATION

Cheshire added that more and more Europeans are swapping country life for city life for cultural reasons.

“The city is the single most marvellous invention of mankind”, he said. “People and companies become more productive if they go to big cities, there’s a richer choice for consumers, and much more fun”.

“If you live in a small town, you can watch the local football team play at the weekend. If you live in London, you can see the best football in the world or listen to the best music, but there has to be a large enough audience to support such things,” he said.

Beaumont went further, saying that some people loved even the stressful side of cities.

In his recent book, Nightwalking: A Nocturnal History of London, about people, including writers such as Charles Dickens, who used to explore the British capital after dark, he said night-time London could be menacing, but felt like home to “the lost, the lonely … the sleepless, the homeless - all the city’s internal exiles”.

Most London gardens are private, but help to drive up property prices because the land cannot be used to build on.

Photo: Tracy Lee Carol

Soft fascination: Trees in place of old Vienna walls gave rise to the green belt model.

Photo: Douglas Sprott
Vienna:
A reluctant cosmopolis

Vienna excels in quality of life surveys due to its local government, but Austria's capital may need to show more openness to foreign influences if its success is to endure.

By Joseph Boyle

Two-year-old Florence rides in her pushchair past kindergartens, schools and playgrounds, all paid for by Vienna’s city government. She zig-zags through streets lined with grand apartment blocks, many of which are government owned. Finally she arrives at her childminder, paid for by the city administration.

Big government is Vienna’s ethos, and a major reason that Austria's capital ranks so highly on so many “quality of life” surveys.

“Vienna has a long tradition - 200 or 300 years - of having a strong public sector,” the city’s urban planning director Thomas Madreiter tells EUobserver.

“In the US, the people might think: 'I have a problem, I’ll find a solution, I’ll fix it.' The tradition in Vienna was more: 'I have a problem, I’ll take it to the city administration and ask them to find a solution.'”

In Austria, local governments have genuine power - Vienna’s city administration is one of the world’s biggest landlords. It enforces a rent cap and, as private landlords have to compete, rents are kept low across the board. Not surprisingly, Vienna gets top marks for affordable housing in life-quality indexes.

The city administration, bolstered by high taxes, is also able to fund efficient and cheap public transport and healthcare, and help ensure crime rates are low - all of which are measured by the surveys.

The Quality of Living survey by consulting firm Mercer has placed Vienna at the top for the past seven years. The Liveability Ranking Overview from think-tank Economist Intelligence Unit puts Vienna in second place behind Melbourne.
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RICH IN CULTURE AND MONEY

These surveys are designed to advise multinationals on the levels of compensation they should offer their staff. Using them to evaluate a city is like appreciating a tune by looking at the sheet music. Nevertheless, the surveys can be self-fulfilling. Vienna’s finance chief boasts about the indexes in her annual report. Expats frequently refer to the “amazing quality of life” even if they are struggling to find work or facing other hardships.

Vienna’s tourism director Norbert Kettner is also not shy of using the surveys: “It’s another anchor for us. Even people who don’t really know much about Vienna, they know about these quality of life surveys.”

He lists an impressive range of other “anchors” - Vienna is the biggest university town in the German-speaking world, one of Europe’s fastest-growing cities, one of its youngest, and the only capital city with productive vineyards.

He does not even resort to Vienna’s staples - the palaces, coffee shops, operas, nearby ski slopes, forests, mountains, rivers or anyone by the name Strauss.

That said, culture is certainly one of the main reasons for Vienna’s international fame and fortune.

Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, director of the Museum of Applied Arts, explains that Vienna has a disproportionately high level of culture because of its history as an imperial centre serving tens of millions of people. “In the US you would need to be a city of 6 million to offer a comparable quality of cultural life,” he says.

It also helps that the city is rich. It benefited hugely from the fall of the Iron Curtain and the accession of eastern European states to the EU.

Sabine Ohler of the Vienna Business Agency says Vienna re-established itself as a hub between east and west, and much investment followed. Now, more than 200 international firms and organisations like the United Nations have offices in Vienna, and the service sector is by far the most important for its economy.

HISTORICAL MELTING POT

The administration, economics and culture of Vienna appear to map a perfect city. But Vienna is not a utopia.

Just like in any other city, petty gripes can sometimes drown out the big picture. Your correspondent is not consoled by life-quality surveys when, day after day, people refuse to help lift Florence’s pushchair up or down the precipitous steps of the city’s old-fashioned trams.

More seriously, there is resentment over increasing immigration - the city of 1.8 million people has added 250,000 residents in the past 15 years, most of them immigrants.

Some traditions die hard in Vienna - like the introduction of debutantes during the annual Opera Ball.

Photo: Grifflendor/Wikimedia Commons

The Prater theme park helps to give Vienna a playground atmosphere during the summer months.

Photo: Joseph Boyle
The far-right Freedom Party (FPO) won more than 30 percent of the vote in last year’s city council election, doubling its share in the space of a decade.

Vienna is not like London, Paris, Amsterdam or Brussels, which have large communities from former colonies in Africa and Asia and a myriad of small businesses bearing the names of their foreign owners. Apart from the large Turkish community clustered in the west of the city, foreigners are not such a visible presence. Expats often complain that Viennese are largely uninterested in hearing from outsiders.

“Many people have not recognised that it is a multicultural, cosmopolitan city,” points out tourism chief Norbert Kettner. “This is ridiculous. The city has always been a melting point. About 150 years ago, only half the city spoke German.”

Both Kettner and planning director Thomas Madreiter are advocates for immigration. They say they want Vienna to become more international. “Not only in demographics, which it is already, but also in the mindset, which it isn’t always,” says Kettner.

If the FPO takes power in the coming years, Kettner’s vision will surely have holes punched in it. Vienna may also slip down the rankings in the quality of life surveys, particularly in the “political stability” category. If that stage is reached, though, Viennese people may have other things to worry about.

Vienna tourism chief Norbert Kettner. “Many people have not recognised that it is a multicultural, cosmopolitan city.”

Photo: WienTourismus/Peter Rigaud

The historic centre of Vienna is dominated by palaces, museums, and spectacular architecture like St Stephen’s Cathedral, which needed almost total reconstruction after World War II.

Photo: Bob Usher
Copenhagen is one of the only cities in Europe where the harbour water is again clean enough to swim in.

The city has built three popular harbour baths – a new type of city-beach for locals to swim, sunbath, and cool-off on hot summer days.

During the last decade, the harbour baths have also become popular with tourists. They are the most visible result of a deliberate decision in the municipality to move polluting industry out of the harbour, and to clean all waste water before it reaches the sea.

The harbour baths are open 24/7 and many people living in the city centre have taken up the habit of a morning swim before heading to work.

There is no entry fee. Anyone is free to jump in and enjoy the feeling of pumping blood, tickling skin and the salty taste of sea water.

SWIMMING AROUND PARLIAMENT
A 2-kilometre race in the canals around the Danish parliament in August saw a record 3,600 participants this year. Some 230 came from abroad to take part.

For swimmers, the race offers a very different perspective of the city and its old parliament building, Christiansborg. For tourists, who gathered on the city's bridges and wharfs, clapping and photographing, it offers the unusual sight of swimmers splashing in city canals.

"The water is really clean, I saw streams of small fish and jellyfish," Julia Winklewski told EUobserver.

Winklewski, a teacher in Werder near Potsdam in Germany, saw TV clips from last year's event and decided that she wanted to participate in the swim around the Danish parliament.
What kind of Europe will the next generation of Europeans be living in? Will they live in a prosperous, open and friendly Union with opportunities for everyone? Or will they be confined to a Europe divided by walls, restrictions and differences?

The future of Europe will be in the hands of the next generation of Europeans, but right now that generation faces immense uncertainties.

We, the European Socialists and Democrats, want the European Union to give young people a clearer, brighter future by promoting:

1. **Jobs and training opportunities for youth.**
   **HOW?** By extending the Youth Guarantee – a European programme that guarantees young people an appropriate job, apprenticeship, traineeship or an opportunity for continuing education within four months of finishing their compulsory education or leaving their previous job. We want to make the programme permanent, increase its funding from €6 billion to €20 billion, and raise the age limit up to 30.

2. **More international exchange programmes for young Europeans.**
   **WHY?** Because Europe is changing. More and more young people are studying in different countries and graduating with more knowledge and experience, developing their full potential. The Erasmus+ programme helped a lot with that. Now we want to extend the Erasmus+ international exchange programme also to high schools and vocational training.

3. **Culture within everyone’s reach.**
   **WHERE?** All over Europe young people should receive support to create and access culture. We will introduce European Culture Cheques, which will provide young people with free access to cultural events and venues and will support young artists in their creative process. We all need access to culture, because art can change people for the better.

4. **Good childcare for all Europeans.**
   **WHEN?** Right now, because children are our future and the most fragile members of our societies. The current economic crisis is threatening some of the basic needs of children in the EU. We support the Child Guarantee initiative and we want European and national policies to address these needs of all children, so that they have access to free health checks, an affordable place in quality childcare and a healthy meal at school.

These are the 4 pillars of our EUROPEAN YOUTH PLAN. Will you support us?

Sergei Stanishev,
President of the Party of European Socialists
"The water is really clean, I saw streams of small fish and jellyfish, when passing Knippelsbridge," Julia Winklewski told EUobserver. Photo: Lisbeth Kirk

"I started the training in April and here I am," she smiled, with the sun flashing off her newly won bronze medal, confirming she had completed the race.

The swim took her a good hour. It was something she did for herself, as the event is not competitive.

The bronze, silver and gold medals are hung around the neck of all swimmers according to how many years they have participated in the race, not the time it took them to finish.

From 10am, groups of 65 swimmers in wetsuits and identical swim caps step forward every five minutes and jump into the harbour water. Lifeguards are posted along the route in small inflatables or balancing on paddle boards.

When the race ends at 4pm, the lifeguards gather as a small flotilla behind the last swimmer, who is given a special treat and escorted to the finish line.

The water temperature is 20°C in August, but in winter the harbour can be covered by ice.

Despite freezing temperatures, winter swimming is a popular activity among Danes. Some 11,000 people are registered members of winter swimming clubs around the country, with many more on waiting lists. Swimming is believed to improve people's health and their quality of life.

"The water is clean, but maybe not at the bottom if you go deep," warns Lars Vallentin Christensen, head of sport events in VisitCopenhagen. But it is getting better and now forms an important part of a bigger plan to make Copenhagen into the Green City with the Blue Harbour.

Photo: Lisbeth Kirk
"When I arrived in Copenhagen to study some 20 years ago, I joined a kayak club and we had garbage floating around that we tried to avoid with the kayak," Vallentin Christensen recalls.

"It was really a nasty, smelly harbour back then. You had big ships coming in, spilling oil and there were polluting industries in the harbour. Trash was simply thrown overboard."

Public investment in cleaning the waste water in the harbour and the canals has brought new value to the city.

"The number of people with their own kayak is growing, you have people standing on paddle boards, all kinds of rowing, motor boats and even electric boats. You see a lot of people with no experience of sailing or water sports at all, now they take the family on a picnic on a boat. It holds a lot of opportunity and is a big change for a lot of people living in the city," says Christensen.

As head of sport events, he has just released the good news that Copenhagen will be hosting stand-up paddle and paddleboard world championships.

"This year it is hosted in Fiji, it has been in California several times and Hawaii, but it is the first time it is going to be in Europe. They chose us in Copenhagen, because of the clean water and the things we do for the environment," he says.
WHY DON'T WE JUST DO IT?
"Copenhagen swim started by coincidence," admits Mads Kamp Hansen, head of the leisure department in Copenhagen municipality.

"It was back in 1999, when we were in the process of renewing our sewers and cleaning all our waste water before letting it out in the sea."

One day at a meeting in the municipality it was noted that now the harbour water was so clean that you could actually swim in it.

Hansen explains: "We sat and looked at each other and someone asked: 'So why don't we do it?'."

"Two young architects called Bjarke Ingels and Julien de Smedt, who almost nobody knew at the time, were tasked to construct the first harbour bath. It is the one that we have on Islands Brygge."

One of the two unknown architects, Bjarke Ingels, was earlier this year named one of Time Magazine’s 100 most influential people. He is now working on super-ambitious projects such as Google’s HQ and Manhattan’s waterfront.

The Copenhagen harbour baths have improved quality of life for the city’s inhabitants and are a popular attraction for tourists. It’s like having a beach in the city centre. But more is coming.

New areas in the harbour will soon be marked with wires and swimming will be allowed in these dedicated areas to offload the pressure on the three permanent sites.

Also facilities for kayaking, paddling and rowing in the harbour will be upgraded.

"Now we are aiming to make the access to the water easier for kayaks," Kamp Hansen says.

As most cities in the world, Copenhagen is also expected to grow.

"Within the next 15 years we expect to be some 120,000 more people in the city, which is 20 percent more than today. But it has also to be growth with life quality," Hansen said. And with possibilities for physical activity.

"Copenhagen swim started by coincidence," admits Mads Kamp Hansen, head of the leisure department in Copenhagen. Enjoying the clean water in the harbour has become such a success that three permanent harbour baths have been built, with more to come.

Photo: Lisbeth Kirk

The Copenhagen swimming race passes through the canals and around the Christiansborg castle, where Denmark’s parliament sits.

Photo: Lisbeth Kirk
In Europe, more than on any other continent, city dwellers, visitors and urban planners are likely to pass by centuries-old buildings and protected monuments.

In a world of urban transformation and smart technology, European cities are solidly anchored in their past. But it would be a mistake to think that the Old Continent is not fit for the future.

Many urbanists say that there is a "European model of city": old and dense urban areas, smaller than on other continents, where the centre still mixes residential and economic functions.

But it is not a static model.

"We may focus on the historical parts of Brussels, Rome or Berlin to fix our image of these cities. But it is naive, it is our ‘tourist view’," said Antonio Calafati, a professor of urban studies at the academy of architecture of the USI (Università della Svizzera italiana), in Mendrisio.

"In Europe too, the parts of the urban fabrics that can be easily adapted are much, much larger than their historical parts," he told EUobserver.

"Secondly, European cities grow by adding new neighbourhoods. And new neighbourhoods can easily incorporate the new technologies of environmental sustainability and the new practices of community participation and socialisation."

European cities, more so than cities in the US or the emerging world, have to adapt to how the digital revolution might shape urban geography.

CLEAR FUNCTIONS
In the past, cities were developed by building new parts to replace older parts, said Aleksi Neuvonen, head of research at Demos Helsinki, a think tank. Their function was clear: high quality housing, office areas, commercial areas.

"It’s not so straightforward any more," Neuvonen told EUobserver.
"The economic power is slowly changing. The division of labour is not as clear as it was. We don't just have a few important players, small actors have a significant role too," he said.

Traditional urban planners are being faced with new micro-economies, such as car and apartment sharing.

The newcomers "don't see the point of spending a lot of time in long planning", Neuvonen said, adding that "there should be more platforms where different actors gather and find solutions".

More and more people shop online and work from home and "places don't have a clear function as they had before", he said. We "don't know what the outcome will be" for the shape of cities and their social fabric.

CITIZEN DRIVEN DEVELOPMENT

European cities also differ from elsewhere in the world by how they apply the concept of "smart cities". Smart cities is the name given to the use of new technologies and data to improve infrastructure, mobility or energy consumption. "European cities differentiate themselves from the approach in US and Asian cities, which are more infrastructure-centred, techno-centred," said Stephane Cagnot, an urban expert at the Dedalle agency, a think-tank on urban innovation in Paris.

"In Asia and the US, citizen participation is put aside. The focus is on control, like control of mobility, or city-centre management," he told EUobserver.

He cited the example of Buenos Aires, where a so-called Centralised Transit Command Station manages the car and pedestrian traffic of the whole urban area.

As a European counter-example, Cagnot highlighted the Confluence project in Lyon, France, where a former industrial area in the city centre has been redesigned by local residents.

In the smart community, human initiatives and social links are more important than technology to improve urban conditions.

The Confluence project includes a fleet of self-service electric cars for residents and people working there.
People are encouraged to have plants, fruits and vegetables on their balcony, to work in a community garden or to buy at the local market, which sells only products coming from a 30-kilometre radius.

Residential buildings are equipped with local energy management systems to adapt energy consumption to evolving conditions and reduce the use of energy.

Some buildings create more energy than they use thanks to photovoltaic panels and changes to the heating generation and distribution systems.

The European model for smart cities, Cagnot said, is more focused on people and how they live and move.

LOCAL PLAYERS
In large cities, he said, areas with offices, shops and residential zones are "close to each other but often don’t share the same logic. The question is why and how inhabitants move to other parts of the city."

The other issue, he added, is "the issue of animation" of the community: "The smart city is where there is a real network of local players. You don’t decree citizen participation."

These preoccupations are closely linked to the identity of European cities, whose aspect and spatial organisation evolved during centuries. "European cities are civitas, the role of citizenship is central," Antonio Calafati insisted.

"Quite differently from other world regions, extreme poverty and deprivation are understood as unacceptable in European cities. The role of cities as a social integration device - and the key role of public spaces - is a further dimension to consider when discussing the European model of a city," he said.

This, he added, plays "an even more important role than the features of the urban fabrics [how urban areas look like] to identify the ‘European model of city’."

Pedestrian streets link to shopping.

Photo: Kristoffer Trolle
REVITALISING DEMOCRACY

ACTING FOR YOUTH EMPLOYMENT, MOBILITY & ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The Assembly of European Regions (AER) is the largest network of regions in wider Europe, gathering regions from 35 countries, working for a peaceful and prosperous Europe. AER is the place to be for regional stakeholders across the European continent. We stand strong to promote a Europe that embraces its diversity to thrive in a global world.

In 2016, AER is targeting its actions to “revitalise democracy” which has delivered results in the fields of growth & jobs, participation & inclusion and securing the future of regions. Our work on youth is particularly relevant as we believe that Europe’s future depends on giving our young people the tools to develop their entrepreneurship spirit and to improve their chances of finding quality and sustainable jobs. The AER Summer Academy (16-20 August 2016, Østfold-NO) and AER’s very own international youth mobility programme, Eurodyssey, have successfully provided answers and inspiration to young people and regional politicians. The AER Youth Regional Network continues to involve young people from across Europe in a culture of dialogue and exchange. AER will be present at the European Week of Regions and Cities with a workshop on “EU Regions - Partners for Youth” (12 Oct. at the CoR, workshop 12B75).

Join us to support young people in your region.
To discover all AER activities, visit our website.
Europe's rare youthful villages

Some villages in the EU are bucking the trend by attracting young people. But unless there is outside funding and local action, Europe's countryside will be full of ghosts.

By Nikolaj Nielsen

Dorpen, Heede, Neulehe, and Wippingen. Few people have ever heard of them.

But the small German villages near the Dutch border in the Emsland district have policy experts scratching their heads.

Unlike almost every other village in the EU, young people actually want to live there.

The average age in these villages hovers around 40, another anomaly when compared to other places where old people far outnumber the young.

Werlte, a larger town of some 9,900, has an average age of 38.5, according to figures from 2014.

Theresa Damm from the Berlin Institute for Population and Development think tank, says good local infrastructure and an engaged community are among the factors for their apparent success.

"We often find that it is the people who are living there and how engaged they are in the matters of the town," she said.

A handful of other similar success stories are found in eastern Germany.

But overall, the German trend appears to follow the same pattern as everywhere else in the EU.

GHOST TOWNS

Earlier this year, Italy's environmental agency, Legambiente, warned that some 2,500 Italian towns are at risk of emptying out entirely.

Reports of so-called ghost towns are becoming increasingly common.
Last year, the mayor of Sellia, an Italian village in Catanzaro, even signed a tongue-in-cheek decree that banned people from dying.

Young people are moving away or have already quit villages, leaving behind elderly people, who die with no one to replace them.

In Germany, many move to big towns like Cologne and Frankfurt in the west or Leipzig and Dresden in the east. Few return.

As the population drops, investment in infrastructure gets cut and jobs disappear.

The east of Germany was hit hard following the fall of the Berlin wall. The youth went west, settled and had families, leaving behind a so-called diminished generation in the east.

The negative imbalance between the two halves has since more or less recovered. Cities in the east were well financed after reunification. Universities developed and living conditions improved.

But the future of villages in all of Germany remains precarious. Companies won’t locate or set up shop in places where there is no skilled workforce.

And Germany’s large migrant inflow last year is no replacement.

People seeking international protection gravitate towards large cities, attracted by jobs, and proximity to friends or fellow communities.

"The areas that are struggling now will continue to struggle with population decline and the migration flows won’t change that," said Damm.

WALES, A FARMER, AND A PUB
On his farm in central Wales, 66-year old Tom Jones tends to cattle and sheep.

His story and the story of a village pub show how EU funding can help combat the slow death of Europe’s countryside.

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Jones employs two people full-time and another person part-time to help tend to the 360 hectares he shares with his wife.

"I've been farming for 45 years," he says over the phone.

Like many of his peers, he receives payments from the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

"Welsh farmers depend very heavily on the … payments," he said.

Farmers in Wales pocket around €240 million a year in EU money for their own businesses.

But another part of the CAP money goes to help rural development, with nearly €1 billion set aside for new projects between 2014-2020.

Jones is also the vice-president of the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA), a partly EU-funded group.

He said the EU money is a lifeline, and helps to “provide employment to advisers, support people, trainers, people who are sons and daughters of farmers who live in the countryside”.

Last year, locals saved a pub in the village of Bryngwran on Anglesey by securing a WCVA loan. The pub is now being run as a non-profit enterprise.

Jones says it would have folded without outside expert help. He noted that similar investments, coupled with community action, are needed to protect Welsh villages.

"Empowerment is what the rural development scheme brings. That’s why it’s so valuable but it’s not always appreciated by politicians," he said.

EU FUNDING GAP

Jones, unlike many of his peers in Wales, did not vote for Brexit.

When Britain leaves the EU, probably at some point after 2019, the British government will have to find a replacement for CAP to keep other farms and pubs from dying.

But those who stay behind in the EU are also likely to face funding gaps.

Sixteen years ago, the EU divided the CAP into two pillars. One for farmers and another for rural development. But Helene Moraut, a policy expert at the EU’s body for sub-national authorities, the Committee of the Regions, says the move has had an adverse effect on villages.

Dwindling investment is a drain, she said, noting that some rural regions in Europe still lack internet access.

"As we have fewer and fewer farmers it is necessary to create other sorts of jobs, but there is no investment in this area," she said.

She says only 10 percent of the regional development fund is actually being used in rural areas.

"It is completely unfair that for 90 percent of the territory, you have 10 percent of the budget," she said.
The past year has been an “annus horribilis” for Brussels. First, terrorists from the city were linked with the Paris terrorist attacks in November, causing authorities to lock down the Belgian capital for three days resulting in over €350 million losses for local businesses.

Then in March, suicide bombers killed 32 people in twin attacks on Brussels airport and a metro station in the EU district.

A city that was best known for chocolate, waffles, and a statue of a peeing boy was suddenly splashed all over the world’s media as a hotbed of jihadism.

City authorities and PR people reacted by launching a raft of increasingly surreal campaigns to lure back visitors. But publicity stunts will not work unless policies are changed and Brussels becomes a city that people feel more comfortable and safe to visit and to live in.

At present, the blunt truth is it is failing on both counts. In terms of overnight visitors, Brussels
doesn’t feature in the top 10 European cities or top 20 worldwide. When it comes to liveability rankings, Brussels languishes in the bottom half of most expat league tables.

So what can be done to make Brussels better serve the needs of its people and to make it a worthy capital of the EU?

MISSING VISION
Firstly, Brussels needs an ambitious vision for the future that has the backing of politicians at all levels and people from all communities.

Just as Barcelona was transformed, largely for the better, ahead of the 1992 Olympics, Brussels should aim to become Europe’s greenest, most connected and dynamic medium-sized city by 2030 - when it hopes to become the European Capital of Culture.

Plenty more fine ideas for turning this chaotic, car-choked city of 1.2 million into a more liveable capital can be found in Connecting Brussels, a thought-provoking book by Pascal Smet, the minister for mobility and public works.

PUT PEOPLE FIRST
Secondly, Brussels needs a transport policy that puts people, not cars, first.

At present, Brussels is asphyxiating. The capital has seized up over the past year as tunnel collapses, heightened security, and increasing traffic volumes have brought large sections of the city to a standstill.

To reduce road traffic, the Brussels region should introduce a tax on all cars owned by non-residents entering the centre of the city.

This would help halt suburban sprawl in Wallonia and Flanders, encourage the 250,000 people who drive into the city every day to live in it instead of just profiting from its infrastructure, and push commuters to use the regional train network.

The federal government also needs to scrap its generous subsidies for company cars, which account for half of all new cars bought. The saved money should be used to build a new metro line to the south of the city and create more dedicated cycle paths and car-free lines for all trams.

Montpellier, a quarter of the size of Brussels, has laid down 64km of tramlines since 2000, so there is no reason why Brussels cannot.

To dissuade car drivers from entering the city centre, almost all roads inside the inner ring road should be pedestrianised.

Brussels used to be known for its chocolates, waffles and a statue of a small boy peeing but was suddenly splashed all over the world’s media as a hotbed of jihadism.

Photo: wikipedia

The tens of thousands of EU officials who benefit from the city’s services should pay their taxes into the Belgian state coffers rather than the European Union’s.

Photo: Guillaume P. Boppe
City authorities have already made a bold step towards this goal by creating a car-free zone in the historic centre, which officials claim will be the second biggest in Europe after Venice.

However, the plan needs to be extended to take in squares like Place Sablon - currently one of Europe’s prettiest car-parks - and the packed, narrow lanes around Place St Gery.

ARCHITECTURAL JEWELS
Brussels has some of the world’s most astonishing architectural jewels. However, many are inaccessible.

If cities like Prague, Florence and Paris can provide monuments that double as breathtaking viewing platforms, why is it not possible to go to the top of the gold-encrusted Palais de Justice dome - which has been covered in scaffolding since the early 1990s - or the spire of the magnificent Hotel de Ville on the Grand Place?

And why should visitors only be allowed into the royal palace - where the king no longer lives - for six weeks a year, and to the royal greenhouses at Laeken only two weeks a year?

ATOMIUM IS OLD NEWS
Thirdly, as well as opening up old buildings, Brussels needs to build some new ones that trumpet the city’s ambitions, inspire tourists to visit and put the city on the world map.

In the last 25 years, Spain alone has given the world the City of Arts and Sciences in Valencia, the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao and another Frank Gehry masterpiece - the City of Wine complex in the Rioja region.

In Brussels, the last interesting building to be erected was the Atomium. That was in 1958.

FREE WIFI
Fourth and last, city authorities could help make Brussels more dynamic and competitive, cutting its shameful, 20-percent unemployment rate in the process.

They could provide free, city-wide wifi in all public spaces - as in San Francisco - allow Sunday shopping on all Sundays, not just once a month, and lower tax rates for small businesses setting up shop in the centre.
These are just some of the simple measures that should be taken to revitalise a city full of creative talent that is being held back by antiquated rules, disjointed government, and overbearing bureaucracy.

**EU OFFICIALS TO PAY BELGIAN TAXES**
However, it is too simple to blame Brussels’ woes on the authorities - whether Belgian dysfunctionality or the fact that the capital is divided into 19 administrative fiefdoms.

If the capital is to thrive it also needs the active participation of locals, over half of whom were born abroad or to foreign parents.

If these mainly non-Belgian citizens pay their taxes in the city they should also be allowed to vote in elections for the Brussels regional government.

Likewise, it is only fair that the tens of thousands of EU officials who benefit from the city’s services pay their taxes into the Belgian state coffers rather than the European Union’s.

With its lousy weather, lax attitude to law enforcement and disregard for urban planning - look ‘Brusselisation’ up in the dictionary - Brussels is easy to criticise.

**BRUSSELS IS A WORLD-CLASS CITY**
But despite its faults, Brussels is a world-class city. Its centre is compact, beautiful, and packed with curiosities, arresting street art, and some of the finest squares in Europe.

Its neighbourhoods are stuffed with art nouveau gems, beech forests, and effortlessly hip hangouts like the Parvis St Gilles.
It is an Epicurean’s dream, with some of the tastiest beer, chocolate, and cooking on the planet. It has a vibrant art, dance, theatre and film scene that dwarfs most cities its size.

It also remains one of the most affordable capital cities in Europe with excellent schools, hospitals, and transport connections.

It is within two hours of Paris, London and Amsterdam - three of the world’s most visited cities - and gives easy access to the historic cities of Ghent, Bruges, Antwerp, and Leuven as well as the rolling hills of the Ardennes.

To be fair to Brussels, it is also a city that is getting better, not worse.

Brussels should aim to become Europe’s greenest, most connected and dynamic medium-sized city by 2030 – when it hopes to become the European Capital of Culture.

Photo: Lisbeth Kirk

The historic centre has been spruced up. The areas around Place Flagey and Tour et Taxis have been revitalised after landmark buildings were rescued from bulldozers, and new post-industrial museums and galleries are sprouting up near the once derelict canal area.

Even the EU district - an urban desert that is an embarrassment to Brussels, Belgium, and Europe - is slowly improving with new bars, hotels and public spaces.

This is not to say that Brussels can rest on its laurels.

If cities like Strasbourg, Montpellier and Bordeaux can transform themselves by building new tramlines, banning cars from large chunks of the centre, and creating spectacular new public spaces in the process, Brussels can too.

Brussels needs a transport policy that puts people, not cars, first.

Photo: EUobserver
EU CITIES TRY THEIR OWN 'UBERS'

As some places struggle to deal with the impact of firms like Uber and Airbnb, other cities are embracing the change and seeking to learn.

By Eszter Zalan

Frustrated that they no longer really knew what was happening in their own neighbourhood, Gáspár Horváth and a group of friends clubbed together to set up an online platform to share information - and anything else from ladders to a helping hand - with others in their area.

Two years later, more than 40,000 people in Hungary are using the platform called OurStreet.

"You don't have to buy everything - you can share with others, sharing is the value in itself, ownership is unnecessary," Horváth told EUobserver.

He sees the site as fulfilling a public function, to create a more liveable community, and thinks such platforms could be an ideal communication channel between the local government and citizens.

Horváth is among a new generation of entrepreneurs attempting to bridge the gap between the sharing economy, exemplified by firms like Airbnb and Uber, and the old world of government bureaucracies.

Cities have reacted to these changes in technology and economy in a variety of ways - some have banned or restricted both Uber and Airbnb. Others have welcomed them as a boost to the economy. But some experts are looking closely, and hoping that cities learn deeper lessons from these so-called disruptors.
“It’s a wake-up call in areas where there has been no innovation, for example the taxi industry. They introduce whole new ways of collecting customers,” Dorthe Nielsen, policy director of Eurocities, a network of European cities, told EUobserver.

The “secret” to the success of these companies is that they don’t have assets themselves, and they provide the right platform for sharing. Smartphones make them easy and fast to use, while the market is global, so they can expand on a massive scale.

“For cities it is more interesting if a service pulls together resources from a neighbourhood that built communities,” she said, “these have real added value to the cities.”

She cites examples of smaller car-sharing services emerging in cities where Uber was banned.

DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

Eurocities is overseeing research into the possibility of using digital platforms to improve public services and will hold its annual conference in Milan in November on the subject.

“Digital platforms are fundamentally changing public administrations, by incorporating ideas from citizens in places like Utrecht, Ghent, Bologna, Copenhagen or Amsterdam,” Nielsen said.

These platforms are used to test citizens’ wishes, or to assess what are the core issues important for locals. Some local governments use it for example to decide on the use of public spaces.

“Local governments are usually not very innovative,” says Alanus von Radecki, at Fraunhofer IAO research institute in Germany, who studies urban engineering and development.

But he highlights some who are making headway. For example, Eindhoven and London are tailoring services based on data monitoring, and providing open data to their citizens.

MORE SHARING

And there is more to come.

Radecki thinks the next possible sector where online sharing services might come up is energy. A loosening of regulation on sharing renewable energy resources in Germany by 2018 means people will be able to rent out energy from one day to another.

Nielsen thinks the next sector where the sharing economy could thrive could be health, with care for elderly people for instance enhanced by a web-based community.

“These tools are likely to continue to develop to connect people. We can look forward to a more inclusive, more connected, more shared, more fun city in the next five to 10 years,” Nielsen said.

For that, she added, city leaders need the power to support and regulate such initiatives so that they can benefit local communities.
Regions and cities for sustainable and inclusive growth