

Social trust: An invisible glue for better urban planning

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Buiksloterham is an old industrial waterfront area north of central Amsterdam. Gas and oil producer Shell used to be located here, as was an airplane factory, shipbuilder and other assorted manufacturing. But the companies have moved out, leaving an empty site with polluted soil. Amsterdam city planners took a novel approach: they opened Buiksloterham to bidders for temporary use, with the site development criteria of building structures without foundations (due to soil issues) and fixing up the area. Rather than imposing a detailed urban plan for the area, they established “rules of development”, which allowed

latitude in terms of construction, but made requirements regarding mixed commercial/residential use, and the height and density of buildings.

For one innovative project, De Ceudel opened small business offices and studio space, as well as a café, in revamped houseboats. Former squatters and artists have established cultural spaces here, attracting creative businesses like MTV, who moved its European headquarters here. The area welcomed its first residents in 2014 and approximately 3,000 homes will be developed over the coming decade, many of them self-built as part of the city’s active “do it yourself” (DIY) approach to housing.

Buiksloterham’s rehabilitation benefitted from high social trust in the Netherlands, which makes for collaborative planning and smoother redevelopment processes. It reflects the country’s history of careful water management, which has bred a culture of co-operation and consensual decision-making, involving citizens and other players. This is called the “polder model”, named after the low-lying land reclaimed using dykes and canals, without which large parts of the Netherlands would simply be under the sea. The polder model also helps explain today’s Dutch planning model in which each level of government has near-autonomous oversight of its own area of planning interest, rather than classic “top-down” decision-making.

This culture of social trust and collaboration has enabled Amsterdam to adopt more flexible approaches to land-use planning, encouraging temporary, do-it yourself and even experimental land use. The confidence that there will be opportunities along the way to negotiate and develop solutions to problems that might arise allows for inventiveness.

The degree of social trust in a society is a major factor in how well, or badly, the system works. The higher the social trust, the smoother the process is, while places where such trust is lacking have a much bumpier ride. This affects planning culture and impacts everything from day-to-day work practices to the number of appeals (and delays) which planners must deal with.

Prague’s state planning legacy

The Czech Republic is a country that has much lower levels of social trust than the Netherlands: there, trust in others lies below the OECD European average at 5.3, versus 5.8 out of 10, according to our study. Historical relations also loom large here, though not as beneficially as in the Dutch example: under the old Soviet-led regime, planning was highly intrusive. In the early days of the new parliamentary republic—the so-called “wild 1990s”—there was backlash against this intrusion. Massive privatisation of formerly public lands followed and foreign investment flooded into the city, particularly into Prague’s historic core. Corruption and opaque processes eroded trust between developers, residents and public officials,

and has coloured relations between these groups to this day. As a reflection of this, recourse to appeals and litigation in the development process are common.

Prague, which is in a period of growth and investment, is trying to rebuild these relationships. At play are large-scale brownfield redevelopments of land not currently in use. Potentially, they can transform entire neighbourhoods.

Trust helps

How can cities with lower levels of social trust improve the planning process? One answer is to win more trust back. Open, transparent and meaningful public engagement is therefore critical. But as strategic or detailed land-use plans are only adopted every several years, it is important to engage local people on an ongoing basis. This needs to be done at the neighbourhood level, particularly when there are major changes happening in a community. It is also important that planning be made more responsive across the board. One thing that can help with this is for cities to regularly evaluate and report on key indicators and trends—it needs to be open to adjustment and improvement along the way, and residents and businesses should be part of this process.

To learn more about our work on the governance of land use, see:

www.oecd.org/gov/governance-of-land-use.htm

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