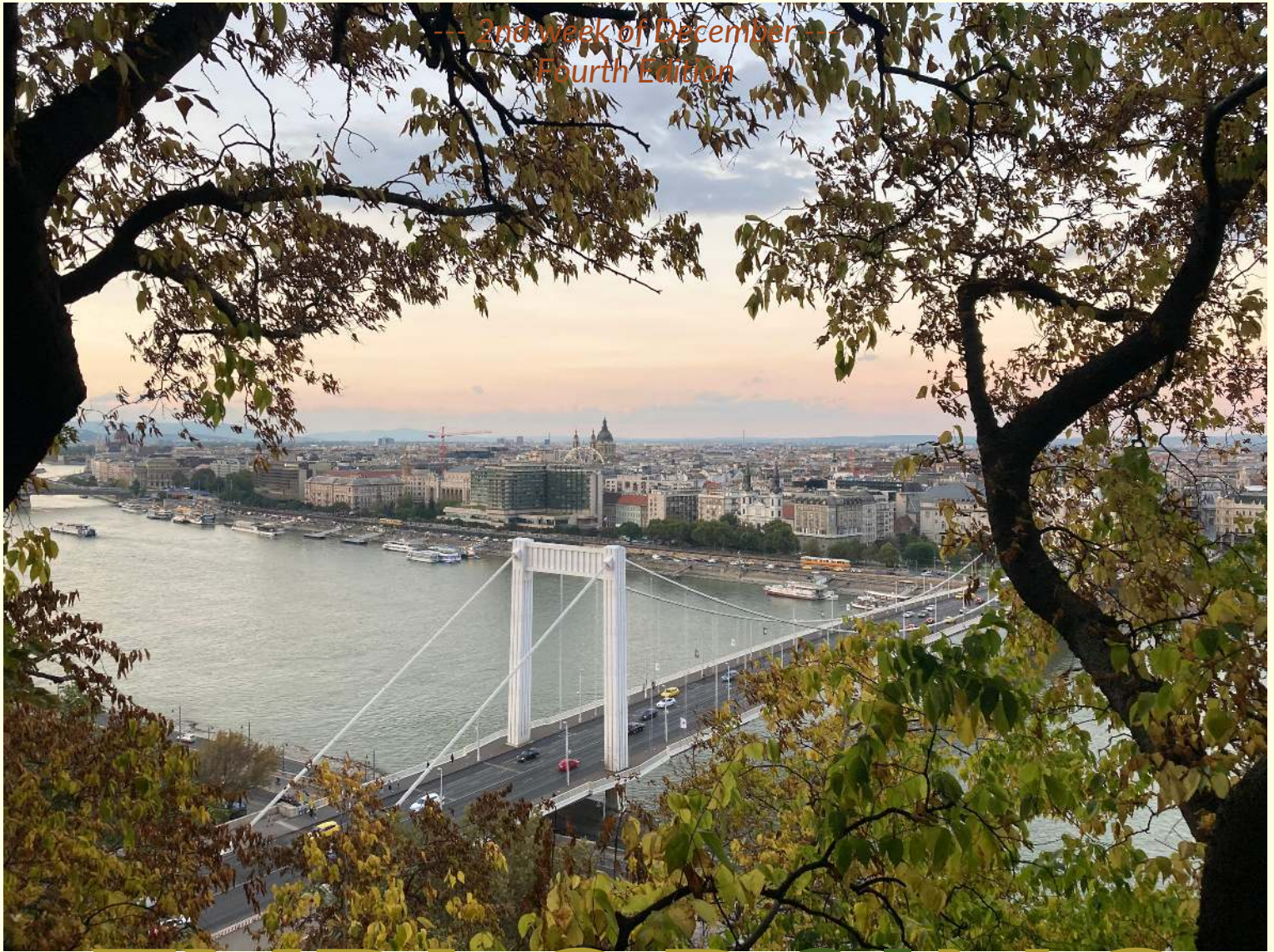


--- 2nd week of December ---
Fourth Edition



EXPLOR2ING CENTURY

Approaches of sustainable initiatives and degrowth in Hungary

HOUSING AND URBANISM

Sziasztok,

We are Tom, Enora and Perrine, three students in Sciences Po Rennes and currently trainees at Cargonomia, a social cooperative in Budapest.

We are currently facing an ecological crisis raising, among others issues, political, social and economical questions. The current system is calling for indefinite growth whereas the planet has boundaries and limited resources. So, when we asked ourselves about sustainable solutions and alternatives, degrowth caught our attention. Then we would like to learn from people who theorize about degrowth, put it into practice, but also from those who engage in ways that degrowth is likely to support.

This series of weekly papers are aimed to discover different fields of degrowth by interviewing people more or less related to it. Today, for the second edition of *EXPLOR2ING : Approaches of sustainable initiatives and degrowth in Hungary*, we are talking about urbanism and housing with Levente POLYÁK, urbanist at the KEK : Hungarian Contemporary Architecture Center and member of Eutropian.

LEVENTE POLYÁK

How would you introduce yourself?

I'm an urbanist, by training but especially by what I do. I'm working on connecting different initiatives and people in the city to make it more inclusive, accessible, sustainable and liveable. I work with a series of organisations to make connections and create new synergies and collaborations. One plus one is more than two, it is a new quality born by collaboration.

"One plus one is more than two it is a new quality born by collaboration."

What is the common thread of your career, between urban planning and your former studies?

First I studied architecture here at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics, I left because I found it too technocratic.

I had an Erasmus in Paris and then I went to New-York for a one-long year internship at the city planning department, which was an amazing experience. And then from New York I actually went back to Paris, where I did two masters in parallel at l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and l'Ecole d'Urbanisme de Paris. Then I came back to Hungary and did a PhD at Central Europe University. Meanwhile I was teaching a bit in the Technical University, and then in Vienna at the Technische Universität of Wien... I studied a lot of things, also anthropology and community sciences for example, but I had to focus at some point, that's why I have a degree in Urban sociology.

So in a way I combine architectural thinking, urbanism, sociology and that's pretty much what I have been doing in the last two decades. It's most the last ten years that I'm really focusing on this kind of community led urban transformation and development.



Could you say that your urban approach is different from a classical approach? What criticisms could you give to the classical urban approach?

There are many classical urban approaches. The very classical is more like: "let's build big infrastructures and then everything will be nice". It doesn't really take into account how people live. This centralized idea of the city doesn't understand the differences and ways people actually use space.

On the other hand, the alternatives are seen very much as market driven development which actually only takes into account what individuals want. So it responds perfectly to their needs, and it generates new ones, but then we get another kind of city which is again completely useless and unliveable. So, in a way, what I'm trying to promote, it's a community led approach: you know how people function and you don't wanna force things on them that they cannot or don't want to do. You also try to animate people in a way that they recognise more the social animal that is in them. So, simply they start building connections and bonds with each other, the neighborhoods, the city and function a bit differently. Not so much in an individualistic daily routine, but in a more connected, conscious and constructive one.

Could you present your organisation, the KEK?

I've been involved in KÉK for the last 15 years. We're a foundation that works on exploring issues of architecture and urbanism, organising conferences, festivals, walks, research projects, workshops and all kinds of activities with both professionals and the broader public. Currently I'm mostly working with Eutropian, which is an organisation based in Vienna, Rome and Budapest.

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We work a lot with community initiatives across Europe, with municipalities, EU problems... So we do a lot on building networks and creating all these exchanges.

What motivates you to continue this way?

On the one hand, it's nice to do something that is useful and you see the results, that people's lives are changing. On the other hand, it's also nice to work in an international network, to be able to learn constantly. Sometimes we are able to be a bridge between something that happens elsewhere and something that happens here. It's nice to be part of international-local communities, so be in a work environment with people that are engaged. It's not being in a multinational company where you separate your personal aspirations and your work.

I think it's great to do things that you are interested in, you believe in and when you share the values of your work. Of course there is a danger: where do you draw the limit? Because it's not a 9-5 job in the office, work remains in your life and is part of the way you function. I guess this is what happens when your work is something that you love and you are interested in.

BRING THE COMMONS INTO THE CITY

We read about some of your work “ The Power of Civic Ecosystems”* and “Funding the Cooperative City”*. Could you briefly go back to these notions of “civic ecosystems” and “cooperative city” which seem to be at the heart of your projects?

Before starting, I would just present “ Cooperative City” , which is an online magazine that we have run for the last 5 or 6 years when we travelled a lot. We discovered a lot of initiatives and community projects across Europe that nobody really knew outside their direct environment. We made a lot of interviews, and wrote articles to tell their stories and share it. It's a way to inspire people and connect them when they have something in common. The book “Funding the Cooperative City” came from our work in Budapest where we have been working since 2004 on reusing empty buildings for community and cultural spaces.

It was always about the recognition that people need spaces where they can meet.

In 2011- 2012 we were deep in the economic crisis. With the KEK we built a program, called “Lakatlan”. We focused on the vacant spaces to open up for community projects. It was meant to make spaces available for a short period but, we realised that if you want to secure spaces for communities in the long-term, we need to think about financial and economic issues. It is not anymore about matchmaking, finding the place, the right legal form and making a deal with the municipality, it is also about raising money and building up a financial project.

We started to look into new financial models in community spaces after taking part in a event in Oslo, in 2013 where we met a multi-million euros community led project. We were inspired by them about raising money issues, creating economic and legal models to exclude speculation, or embedding decision-making in communities etc. We built-up a series of workshops and invited people from across Europe to discuss. Based on this research and a lot of meetings we made in Europe we created the book “Funding the Cooperative City” and a series of videos.

This financial topic is continuing, now we have some projects on European scale about an ethical investment fund that would help initiatives across Europe. At the same time, we had a project with the URBACT programme at EU level which is a knowledge exchange network with citizens of different cities. It's about opening spaces for NGOs. We are also focusing on how certain spaces can be more embedded in the neighborhood , more rooted in an economic, social and environmental context and how they can create extra-value from new connections. That's how we brought this notion of ecosystem, usually used in biology or through business incubation, in the book “The Power of Civic Ecosystem”. The goal was to think about methods and rules that could help NGOs or civic initiatives to grow with the help of other organisations.

For example there is the issue of small shops against online commerce giants. So can we try to link them in a way that the entry threshold would be much lower? Or organise together services, for example, storage space?

And if we go beyond one sector, we could raise these issues on a neighborhood level, create a network of organisations and initiatives to bring knowledge and that would benefit everyone. Thus "The Power of Civic Ecosystem" was written as a methodology book for municipalities, local organizers to straighten local networks.

Does this kind of program have a vocation to be durable and could it be extended to all districts?

In the LAKATLAN program* we worked with the Budapest municipality. We had two kinds of objectives. One was responsible for opening spaces to the citizens. The other was about building a system that would bring shops back into life by opening them to civic initiatives or new companies. This required collaboration of all districts and the sharing of their available properties... The urbanistic strategy was to make it easier and cheaper at the whole city level. But in practice we didn't get very far. Usually districts are struggling with real estate. You have many departments (urban planning, social issues...) but the power really belongs to the real estate property department. And usually they are playing very safe, they are not incentivized to do something with their empty properties.

"A system that would bring shops back into life by opening them to civic initiatives or new companies."

If you are the municipality, you have a lot of costs such as association fees for your basements or shops in buildings. We estimate that in every district it's millions of euros per year just to pay after the empty properties. So you can lose a lot of money without questioning it whereas if you want to spend like 10 000 euros for renovations, this is much more difficult to get done.

We've been trying to make this situation transparent and make them understand that if they move a little bit of money they can be more proactive and they can renovate spaces they cannot rent because of their very bad conditions. So there are many mechanisms, and we have to overcome all these administrative and legal issues.

We are still trying to do that through different programs with the KEK.

Could you present us the Hungarian and Budapest situation regarding housing?

Hungary is one of the countries in Europe that has the lowest percentage of public housing. Less than 7% of the housing stock is in public ownership. People are mostly living in their own property or renting from private owners. Budapest is not doing much better.

In the early 1990's a lot of state housing was privatized. Indeed, when it was all given to the districts, they immediately tried to privatize them because they had financial problems and they didn't believe in their capacity to manage. That's how people could buy their apartments for about 10% of the estimated market value. If some housing is now owned by the public sector, the large majority of the housing stock is privately owned, mostly by a lot of Hungarian families.

But the poorest, most disadvantaged people, remain without property and municipalities are stuck with the lowest quality of housing stock, and they don't have resources to renovate them. Furthermore, the housing price has been growing crazy (140% growth since 2000). It's very unaffordable to enter the market.

So now the city is creating a system to have private owners rent their apartments, through a public agency. The city guarantees monthly revenues to private owners in exchange for housing prices a bit under market price. This strategy program for people who have needs would require the establishment of a social rental agency, but it hasn't been launched yet.

Do you think that giving more power to municipalities could be a long-term solution, in the same vein as the municipalism movement?

Yeah absolutely. National legal frameworks are really suffocating and they don't leave a lot of space for municipalities. Of course we should make sure that there is transparency, but in order to innovate you have to change the laws, which is very complicated.

It would be more efficient for municipalities to have more autonomy defining how you use your taxation, how you use certain kinds of tools... Then you could actually create a strategy.

On top of this, there is a specific context in Hungary, we have a government who is trying to take revenge on the municipalities because opposition parties took over cities at the last local elections. It's a full-scale war between the government and local municipalities.

"There is a specific context in Hungary, we have a government who is trying to take revenge on the municipalities because opposition parties took over cities at the last local elections."

Could co-governance, related to the notion of commons theorized by Elinor Ostrom*, be a solution? Should this third way of governance be favoured over the market and the state intervention?

I think co-governance would be one of the requisites of the commons. This notion is always difficult to explain because you cannot translate the word "commons" in Hungarian. You can call it "commons" or in other ways, but the whole idea is that you have a sphere that is a public sphere, with elected representatives and the administrative mechanisms underneath, and you have a private sphere. But there is a third sphere that is somehow maybe more participatory and can be a new dispositive to use properties in a more flexible and inclusive way. A civic community space could be much more engaging for people and give more space for experimentation than a public municipal service. People will be willing to contribute and it won't remain a top-down thing.

In France for example it has been traditionally very top-down with strong cultural and social infrastructure. But in the last 5, 10 years there has been a lot of opening up and much more appreciation of what is a bottom-up. The idea is that you can engage people to shift from being consumers of a space that is given to them, into prosumers or active contributors of something they can shape together. And that's a completely different relationship, it's cheaper, more engaging, more empowering.

"The idea is to engage people to shift from being consumers of a space [...] into prosumers or active contributors of something they can shape together."

Although there will always be a state and the market, you can have this in-between space, where citizens have a much bigger say about the resources than going for the election every four or five years... If you can on a daily basis contribute to the discussion and also take care of resources, then you will be more connected. If fair and big enough then I guess you have a better society.

It can't be that nice to have a completely state controlled thing (especially a Hungarian or Russian state) or a completely market controlled society where everything is abused for short-term profits.

Of course the State will be there and has important functions. But in front of this very centralised thing commons have to inspire, and can contribute in maybe localising some functions. They can plug-in to states by understanding much better what is needed and possible locally. At the same time the market can be efficient, compared to the state, in motivating people for certain ambitions. So they are not separate. Our social democracy is about compromise between the state and the market and the commons are also something that can be built on the achievements of the market and the state.

"Our social democracy is about compromise between the state and the market and the commons are also something that can be built on the achievements of the market and the state."

But don't you think that there is a challenge to change people's mindsets about "commons" and "private property"? How can we change mentalities on a larger scale?

I think it depends on what we talk about. Many of these common and physical spaces will be local somehow, so based on people who know each other...

For the level of the city it's a matter of responsibility, control and overseeing the situation. Of course if you have 10 people it's much easier to set up rules than if you are 2 million, but even there will be a lot of surprises and ideas... For this you need to establish and write down rules, design co-governance, mechanisms and structures. You have to design certain principles, keep people to stick to those rules and re-design them if they are no longer valid according to the community.

And then if we talk about other common assets like natural resources, I think people are hopefully more and more respectful. They are more willing to contribute, to see how the forest on the corner looks, to share green spaces....

What about its application in the countryside, in rural areas, about bringing back participative democracy?

I think there is a big challenge in rural areas. If you look at any election maps, rural areas have been super regressive and reactive and they are not doing well, except in the hinterlands of Budapest or Balaton, the leisure countryside. There is a deep injustice in the connection of the city and the countryside. What Cargonomia is doing is crucial by creating direct links between the city and the countryside through their short food chain distribution. It's about giving back a little bit of dignity to rural work.

In smaller communities you have less access to a diversity of information sources and you are more exposed to propaganda and manipulation. In the countryside of Hungary, I guess people inform themselves by TV and they hardly have internet use. Their education level is also lower. So there is a big democracy and knowledge gap between cities and rural areas. I think it might be through economic justice that the dignity of the countryside will be brought back.

"There is a deep injustice in the connection of the city and the countryside."

DEGROWTH AND URBANISM

We haven't yet raised the question of urbanism in a finite world and finite resources. So what should urbanism look like in the future according to you?

I think that we should be re-using a lot of spaces instead of expanding the city. We should use what is already there. We have a lot of industrial spaces, transportation areas that are not used anymore. We should also facilitate the use of public transportation, cycling, better access to natural areas, and the Danube... It's all about the "15 minutes city" notion everyone talks about. Most of the days, I'm not really leaving my five or ten minute area. So you can have urban centers where you find everything. But then again you have to think on a more global scale, dealing with the cargo management, the lost miles, connections with railway stations, and some soft mobility for the last mile distribution.... All these issues.

According to Stefano Bartolini and his "Manifest for happiness" *, degrowth is about "ventilating the city, slowing it down, pedestrianising and greening the city". What do you think about these statements? Are verticalization and sharing houses* ways to make it possible?

Yeah I think we can do more things in less space and we need to. For example, in the XI district, there are a lot of housing. It's quite dense, with many buildings and a lot of urban services as I was saying. And still we have green spaces and we wake up with birds so we have a good quality of life.

But this requires thinking about combinations. Some municipal offices or school buildings are only used 4 or 5 hours a day, what about the remaining half a day? Can we try to open those spaces to other things in the afternoon? Can we think about infrastructures that we already have in a way that gives opportunities for more activities? This district is growing a lot, new people are moving, so this kind of thinking would be properly necessary.

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We could re-use existing spaces, and try to do things like eco-cohousing but would it be enough to move toward a sustainable housing transition?

Actually, Budapest's population is declining. It was 2M in 1980 and now 1.7M, so that's a 15% percent decline. We don't necessarily need much more housing, we need a better use of what we already have. For example, there is the whole Airbnb problem. Before the pandemic we had around 10 000 apartments listed in Airbnb. If you give back these 10 000 apartments in the market or maybe 9 000, it's actually a very big change, that can house 20-25 000 people. We might need some regulation on this point.

What is your opinion about degrowth?

It's a very ambitious but very logical idea about how to solve some problems of the planet and society are facing. It's also a very insensible approach when it comes to understanding human psychology. Human movements always tended toward something better and something bigger in a kind of linear development. It's very difficult to sell people, "It will be better for you to have less opportunities than your parents".

I think this is a generational crisis right now. Your generation will know a future that is less rich in physical goods and even in adventures, because experiences are also polluting. So how can we make your generation accept that it's gonna be different and that the level of goods you can buy is going to decrease? About reducing the production and consumption, if you all do it together in the same time then we can do it, but if you are doing this alone....

On the KEK website, we can read "One of the most important challenges of our age is to integrate technological innovation into the architectural and planning practice". Do you think technological innovation will help us in the future, regarding the ecological crisis coming really soon?

Some people in KEK are particularly akin to using data for better understanding of how people use the city.

You can have a lot of knowledge about user behavior with technological tools like the walkability or the attendance level of areas. It's about raising awareness, how people understand the consequences of their choices, how they work... Technology can make the city more transparent and you understand your choices better.

There are externalities on the environment caused by technological innovation, do you think that it can be a way to reach a sustainable society?

I don't think that technology will be the main way towards a sustainable society. Technology offers us a kind of interfaces or platforms where we can change our imaginary. So you can create all kind of incentives instead of taking the car and then you can reward behaviour and one of the ways to do this is through technology. But while it gives us some tools, I don't share the technological optimism of Elon Musk, who wants to solve climate change by technology because there is always a side effect. Also, most of the innovation are resulting from for-profit initiatives, we need to keep inspiring people towards a community benefit.

What would you like the world to look like in 50 years?

I think Europe is in a kind of bubble, especially central Europe because we have very little connection with the "developing countries". This homogenous society is closing the eyes on migration and most other global challenges. So I hope we will live in a global society that is a bit less conflicted. Maybe richer countries will realize that the only way to keep their quality of life will be through a degrowth pattern, to give up some of the achievements, gains, and share with the developing world. I would like to live in a world where you don't have radical differences in the way of how you can live in Europe or in Africa. You know I have a child now and I don't want to worry for the future of my child or grandchildren. I would like to think that we could find a way to balance the use of resources and make it socially and economically sustainable. And I hope we will still be on the Earth.

REVIEW OF INTERVIEW AND ANALYSIS

The exchange with Levente Polyák made possible to question the future of housing and urbanism in theory and into practice. Here are some concluding remarks and analysis on this week's topic.

Expectations:

- We wanted to discover the Hungarian situation of housing, mobility, and urban planning.
- We were curious about the relationships and power issues between municipalities, government, and stakeholder in the implementation of projects like the Lakatlan program.
- We wanted to have his opinion on the notion of co-governance of the commons theorized by Elinor Ostrom and its feasibility in Hungary.
- We were interested in his views on degrowth regarding housing and urban planning in the future.

Remarks:

-Global learnings regarding housing and urbanism-

- We learned more about the housing situation in Hungary and Budapest. Indeed, there was an extreme privatization, and now cities are facing difficulties in ensuring access to housing for the most disadvantaged people.
- It appears that there are real needs to create connections between the cities and rural areas and enhance rurality in Hungary.
- "One plus one is more than two". There are always opportunities to create synergies.
- We should develop the reuse of existing buildings and spaces for new purposes, There is an issue to optimize urban space.

- Levente Polyák opinion and what we want to highlight -

- He pursues projects on many scales. It's always about making connections, synergies at city levels but also at European scale.
- Co-governance of the commons could be a good civic initiative and encourage citizen participation according to Levente Polyák. However, he believes that we will always need the state and that the market will not disappear soon. So we need to combine their achievements.
- Regulation and rule-making are relevant tools we could use to change people's mentalities and behavior. These decisions should be taken in communities.
- In the opinion of Mr Polyák, degrowth is an inspiring objective and he recognises that it can be pursued. Nevertheless its concrete application seems unrealistic regarding the challenge of convincing the younger generation to change their lifestyle.

New questions / challenges:

- If tomorrow's housing is living in smaller spaces and co-sharing, how could we change mentalities and rethink human relationships when we have known consumerist happiness and individual freedom?
- To what extent should we rethink the place of technology in favor of social issues in a sustainable society?
- How can we concretely think of new links between rural and urban areas? How can we recognize the specificities of each without one taking over the public debate?

APPENDIX

- Notions -

Municipalism : "a movement advocating direct democracy and subsidiarity power at the local level, often at the expense of -or in a confederated form as a substitute for, the state." *Exploring Degrowth*, Pluto Press, 2020

Commons : "Economic goods both rivalrous in consumption and non-excludable" <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/t/tragedy-of-the-commons.asp>, from Garrett HARDIN's work "The Tragedy of the commons", *Science*, 1968

- Resources -

Valyo Smart City Budapest : "Valyo is an independent organization of citizens of Budapest, who share the enthusiasm for the river Danube and want to make the city a better place to live. The name of our group Valyo originates from merging the Hungarian words for City (Város) and River (folyó)." <https://smartcitybudapest.eu/content/valyo.html>

Cooperative city magazine : "Cooperative City Magazine is a project run by Eutropian, based in Vienna, Austria. The company is working with various European cities and partners in order to improve the urban tissue, involve citizens and defend their rights to the city". <https://cooperativecity.org/cooperative-city/>

KEK - Hungarian Contemporary Architecture Centre : "The Hungarian Contemporary Architecture Centre - KÉK is an independent professional organisation founded in 2006 with the aim of opening new perspectives in architectural and urban thinking in Hungary." <http://kek.org.hu/en/>

Lakatlan Program : "The Lakatlan (Vacant City) program was launched in 2012, aiming at finding innovative solutions for the community-based regeneration of vacant urban properties." <http://kek.org.hu/en/projekt/lakatlan/>

"Funding the Cooperative City: Community Finance and the Economy of Civic Spaces", Daniela PATTI & Levente POLYÁK (Eutropian Research & Action), *Cooperative City Books*, Vienna, 2017, 244 p. https://cooperativecity.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Funding-the-Cooperative-City_Community-Finance-and-the-Economy-of-Civic-Spaces.pdf

"Governing the commons : the evolution of institutions for collective actions", Elinor OSTROM

« **La décroissance comme projet urbain et paysager** », Serge LATOUCHE, *Études de lettres* 1-2 | 2013, online 15/06/2016, <http://journals.openedition.org/edl/507>

"Manifesto for Happiness - Shifting society from money to well-being", Stefano Bartolini, 2014

"Small is necessary - Shared living on a shared planet" Anitra NELSON, *Pluto Press UK*, 2018,

"The Power of Civic Ecosystems: How community spaces and their networks make our cities more cooperative, fair and resilient" , Levente POLYÁK, Sophie BOD and Luca SÁRA BRÓDY (Eutropian – Cooperating for Urban Justice), *Cooperative City Books*, Vienna, June 2021, 320 p., <https://cooperativecity.org/product/the-power-of-civic-ecosystems/>

"Towards an urban degrowth: Habitability, finity and polycentric autonomism", Federico SAVINI, 12/01/2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0308518X20981391>

URBACT programme : "It has been the European Territorial Cooperation programme aiming to foster sustainable integrated urban development in cities across Europe". <https://urbact.eu/urbact-glance>