Over the last 10 years, Cluj-Napoca has been the only growing city in Romania. As a natural consequence, the city’s cultural life has been constantly evolving, a process also driven by the European Youth Capital title given in 2015 and the candidature to the European Capital of Culture for 2021.
This cultural effervescence has positively influenced community, cultural operators and decision makers, its effects being visible in the increased use of cultural venues and public spaces, with more than 2,500 events yearly.

One distinctive competence of the city lies in its multi-dimensional cultural profile and historically layered landscape, which is fed by a strong university centre, generating both creators/ producers and consumers. In the context of many emergent bottom-up initiatives in the field of culture, the local administration, open-minded towards change and dynamism in the cultural and private sectors, faced a rapid challenge in enabling an open and cooperative environment, raising community trust and encouraging civic involvement. This is how the Innovation and Civic Imagination Centre emerged, offering citizens the opportunity to become active participants in the life of their own community.

The case study’s approach

The Cluj-Napoca City Hall inaugurated the Centre for Innovation and Civic Imagination (CIIC) in October 2017, with a debate on the contest for solutions to rehabilitating a local park.

The centre is a place where local government representatives, citizens and specialists from economic and academic fields meet and discuss the challenges and necessary urban transformations of the city. It is a communication, research and promotion tool, as well as an open place for debates at the disposal of experts from different fields and any citizen willing to participate. The centre coordinates and guides complex networks of participatory governance, including academia, NGOs, trade unions and professional associations. The Innovation and Civic Imagination Centre sets a suitable context for debating ideas and planned projects, as well as developing innovative solutions based on the creative potential of Cluj community representatives.
Participatory approaches and social inclusion in cultural heritage

Impact and results

After just 1.5 years citizens are much more aware of the opportunities for enabling public participation and community empowerment concerning urban planning and development.

The Innovation and Civic Imagination Centre has deeply impacted the way public administration addresses the process for preparing and developing large-scale urban intervention projects. Discussions during the debates were focused on the following themes: public contests for the rehabilitation of public spaces (parks, squares, Someș Riverfront, Citadel area), redevelopment of strategic streets, as well as the relation between museums and the urban space.

The year 2019 has started with some debates on two different aspects: one focused on the elaboration of a Masterplan and Zonal Urban Plan for a large-scale development area (Sopor) and the second one, a citizen panel, focused on EU Cohesion Policy and the future of Europe.

The Cluj-Napoca City Hall, together with EUROCITIES, invited experts, citizens and young participants to discuss the cohesion policy of the European Commission and to extract a series of proposals to be presented to the Commission by EUROCITIES regarding the future steps to develop a better cohesion policy and a better European future for communities.

The process of co-designing and co-creating solutions with the local community has given birth to new ideas and innovative projects, valorising the creative potential of the Cluj community to develop urban innovation policies.

Another visible result after just one and a half years of functioning is improved awareness of the opportunities for enabling public participation and community empowerment concerning urban planning and development.

Planning and sustainability

Under the slogan ‘Imagine the future of the city’, the Innovation and Civic Imagination Centre aims to become a permanent laboratory in which to develop and test various forms of collaboration and partnership between local actors, in order to support participatory practices and to encourage discussions on urban innovation projects.

Transferability

- Create levers, such as public calls and debates oriented towards a pressing urban problem, for bridging the gap between three key groups: administration, experts and citizens.
- Communicate public intentions in terms of urban projects by pursuing a multidisciplinary approach. Create dialogue by including different points of view coming from architects, urban planners, and developers as well as community organisers, local representatives and civil society.
- Address socio-cultural clashes by introducing facilitators to analyse the dynamics of the local context.
- Offer support for local citizens or ‘the usual suspects’ to get familiar with the legal and normative local framework (in terms of planning and decision making).
- Offer support to local communities to understand the planning and urban development process step by step.
- Open up participative processes to encourage the development of projects and ideas by organising public calls and debate and selecting the most relevant projects.
- Set suitable communication channels and appropriate messages together with a clear definition of the meetings’ objectives and expectations (‘Why are we here?’).
- Follow up on the public meetings by analysing and processing the collected information (a centre manager should be in charge of logistics and content).
Management level and partners

The Innovation and Civic Imagination Centre is entirely managed by Cluj-Napoca Municipality, but it works as an independent structure with responsibility for promoting the participatory system of governance, based on the quintuple helix: public administration, private sector, universities, NGOs and, most importantly, citizens as end users and beneficiaries.

Budget and financing

As the Innovation and Civic Imagination Centre is still a public administration-led structure without any permanent location, it functions more on a soft level, by dealing with community involvement in the local co-planning and co-design processes. The Innovation and Civic Imagination Centre is entirely funded by the municipal budget, and organising its meetings and workshops costs €10,000-€15,000 per month. The location for hosting the meetings is set in the Casino building, a publicly owned urban culture centre in Cluj-Napoca.

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Useful links

https://primariaclujnapoca.ro/cetateni/centrul-de-inovare-si-imaginatie-civica/