Rent-free space allows innovative ideas to flourish

Chemnitz has adopted a novel business support model pioneered by Bologna to stimulate its cultural and creative industries. By giving local makers space, funds and support to unleash their talents and start their own businesses, the city aims to boost the sector and its ambition to become a cultural capital.

A study visit to Bologna as part of the Culture for Cities and Regions programme inspired Chemnitz to adopt the Italian city's model for promoting creative activities. Here the Chemnitz team saw thriving initiatives such as a disused cellar converted into a concert venue with a bicycle park and an old bus terminal transformed into an art gallery. The team also saw that, like Bologna, Chemnitz has a lot of unused space and a desire to revitalise urban districts through cultural development.

> The team behind Bologna's IncrediBOL! project has been so supportive, answering all our questions and talking to our stakeholders to build trust in what we're doing. This European spirit of cooperation has made it all so much easier for us.

Strong support

Back in Chemnitz, a project modelled on Bologna's IncrediBOL!, and benefiting from the Italian team's guidance, gained political support. Led by the city and Chemnitzer Wirtschaftsförderungs- und Entwicklungsgesellschaft mbH (CWE - Economic Development Corporation), the project brought together municipal departments with a stake in its mission, such as urban planning and culture. Another project partner, Kreatives Chemnitz (Creative Chemnitz), a local non-profit lobby group for the cultural and creative industries, added value through its strong city networks.

The project was named KRACH - Kreativraum Chemnitz (Noise - Creative Space Chemnitz), to reflect that where there is noise there is energy, activity and creativity. It offers space free of charge for three years as well as a start-up budget of €2,500 plus free advice on business, law and marketing. The one significant change made to Bologna's model relates to the spaces. As well as offering unused municipal spaces, Chemnitz persuaded private landlords to offer empty rooms rent-free to support the city's creatives.

cities in action
July 2018

where: Chemnitz, Germany
what: collaboration/cooperation/
       innovation
when: 2017 - ongoing

Innovative proposals

To find people who could fill these spaces with noisy, daring and commercially-viable creative activities, an open call was put out to local, national and international changemakers via Facebook, lobby groups, media and events. Proposals could be for a start-up or for a new business less than four years old. To remove barriers to entry, the application process was made simple. Applicants were asked to send in a project outline, a basic financial plan and a CV - in any form, conventional or creative. They could also say which of the available spaces, featured on the project website, would best suit their idea.

> "KRACH is a true asset for the city of Chemnitz. With its straightforward and unconventional approach, it offers space for ideas as well as innovation and supports entrepreneurial spirit

Babette Sperling, KRACH winner 2018, Stroh zu Gold

Over 50 applications were received by the closing date in January 2018. They were then judged by an international jury. This included, among others, the head of IncrediBOL! and representatives from CWE, partner departments, EUROCITIES and the local and regional creative industry lobby groups. Their task was to identify the most innovative proposals, evaluating each on the basis of feasibility, skills, professionalism, sustainability, social interest and connection to the city and district. The landlords also had a say in the selection of their future tenants.

Vibrant businesses

The 11 winners represent a wide range of activities, from upcycling to fashion and software design. For one young graduate, the project means being able to move her business making industrial style lamps from discarded concrete and copper tubes out of her home into a professional space. For another group, access to the right space has enabled the establishment of a creative coffee hub. Based on a coffee roasting company, the idea is to open a café and shop where products are served and sold and creatives can gather and find support and inspiration.

The competition has given the team behind a new app the chance to realise their dream of revolutionising music by providing digital versions of sheet music that can be edited on tablets and smartphones. Giving young artists the chance to take the first steps in their career is the goal of another winning idea which is setting up a subscription service for quality art prints. Meanwhile, a new performing arts centre aims to enliven the local cultural scene by giving local and international actors and producers the space they need to rehearse and perform.

Success factors

As they set out on their creative journey all these winners can ask for help with things like business planning and marketing strategy from successful creative companies, many from the regional creative industry lobby groups. Once a year they are asked to write a report on their progress, so the landlords who donated their space stay engaged with the project and feel invested in the success of their tenants. These reports will also be collected and published as a final project report.

These are just two of the carefully-considered features of the KRACH project that have set it up for success. Asked to name other reasons why the project works so well, the Chemnitz team identifies five more. The involvement of interdisciplinary municipal teams. The establishment of an active network among the winners, which has lead to mergers and collaborations. Enabling landlords to meet their prospective tenants at the start to allay any concerns. The role of the local and regional lobby groups in quickly building grassroots trust in the project. And, of course, continuous enthusiastic support from Bologna.