

“Trust the People”

Civic Engagement and Collaborative Imagination in Bologna, Italy

Epilogue

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“I wouldn’t have wanted to be living in any other city,” said Deputy Mayor Matteo Lepore, reflecting on the spring and summer of 2020.¹ In his estimation, the city’s social and health infrastructure, though strained, had demonstrated exceptional resilience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic—thanks at least in part to the municipality’s investments in civic engagement and “civic imagination.” Collaboration pacts, neighborhood labs, and the online community connected through Iperbole, gave the city a readymade roster of individuals who had already shown initiative in helping their fellow residents, as well as some sense of their interests and skills. During lockdown, city workers facilitated contact between volunteers, nonprofits, and people in need of services, and devised a special permit that allowed volunteers to leave their homes to collect, drop off, or deliver necessities. While Mayor Virginio Merola convened a group of experts and influential residents to begin planning for the economic and social recovery of the city, Lepore focused his attention on the cultural sector.

Cultural Support

Together with Director of Culture and Creativity Giorgia Boldrini and the cultural commission of the city council, Lepore organized question and answer sessions and webinars for workers in the arts and culture sector. To secure aid for these workers at the national level, Lepore convened officials responsible for arts, culture, and sports from all fourteen of Italy’s major cities and worked with the Ministry of Culture and Sports to raise funds and awareness of the sector’s unique needs. A special edition of Incredibol! invited applicants to propose projects that would support recovery, like a music club that received €20,000 to set up a video recording studio and streaming platform to move live performances online.

The Office of Culture and Creativity worked to ensure the annual citywide, summer-long series of music and dance performances, films, and sporting and social events called Bologna Estate (Bologna Summer) could go on in 2020. Moving over 3,000 events outdoors brought some logistical challenges, but also restored life and tourism to the city. Even in rain, residents and visitors from neighboring cities and towns gathered under umbrellas for meals and events. For all the challenges that COVID-19 presented, Giorgia Boldrini noted that it brought people together in new and unexpected ways. Five music venues that had long been in competition united during the summer of 2021 to create an open-air music festival, supported by the municipality. “Two years ago, this would have been impossible,” said Boldrini.²

The School of Collective Action

In May 2002, with its “proximity approach” on indefinite hiatus, the Civic Imagination Office made hundreds of phone calls to gather data, map needs and activities, and identify gaps in every neighborhood. Based on this data, the office issued a new call for proposals.

The leadership at the Civic Imagination Office wanted to support projects that embodied or encouraged not just *civic* imagination but also *collective* imagination. They sorted applicants’ proposals by theme and invited them into five virtual classrooms to collaborate on their projects. They could then submit their refined work as “strategic” projects for awards up to €30,000 or “experimental” projects for up to €5,000. Bologna’s choice to use pandemic relief funding from the European Union in this way was unique. Grantees would receive technical support and learning opportunities through 2023, building key capabilities like fundraising, advocacy, communication, and active listening.

Among the projects and initiatives the Office of Civic Imagination supported as the pandemic shook community life were the “Ethical Delivery Shipyard” which brought together local shops, restaurants and others to create an alternative to the big delivery platforms; two maker-spaces to help residents of all ages learn new skills; and projects to support city-owned senior centers transitioning to their new status as Case di Quartieri (Neighborhood Houses) hosting networks of voluntary-sector groups.

Participatory Budget 2020

The pandemic had disrupted 2019’s participatory budget process, leaving one million Euros unused and available for the subsequent year. In October 2020, the city unveiled a revamped version that invited residents to vote for their preferred neighborhood project and their top priorities for public investment. One million euros would be allocated for selected projects and one million for future projects that advanced the chosen priorities. Each district lab presented its own agenda based on three years’ worth of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis with thematic priorities for the entire district and more detailed priorities for specific neighborhoods. Turnout during the voting period was mixed, with steady or increased numbers of voters in two districts and lower turnout than was seen in 2018 in the other four.ⁱ After the results were in, the labs held public planning meetings with district presidents to begin developing action plans around chosen priorities.

A News Stand in Barca

Matteo Lepore announced his candidacy for mayor in March 2021. Of all the projects that had emerged out of the chaos of 2020, the one that Lepore most often referenced in his campaign involved a news stand in the Barca neighborhood. Barca had a significant population of young adults and families, many of whom were relative newcomers like Antonio Cardelli, an architect originally from Naples. For as long as Cardelli had lived in Barca, a woman named Pina had run the local news stand. Pina knew everyone in the neighborhood and everything there was to know about Barca. In 2020, she

ⁱ For an overview of communication and outreach efforts associated with the 2020 participatory budget process, see <http://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/bologna/grandi-progetti-urbani/strutture-ospedaliere/45-uncategorised/2503-bilancio-partecipativo-attivita-e-strumenti-di-comunicazione-messi-in-campo>.

decided to retire, leaving the future of the news stand—one of the few businesses that had remained open throughout the pandemic—up in the air.

A group of sixty local families formed a cooperative to purchase the news stand and enhance it as a community asset. In addition to selling books and periodicals, the co-op sought to preserve the invaluable services Pina had always provided. Her news stand had functioned like a reference desk for the community, and without her recommendations for a handyman or electrician, Cardelli explained, the neighborhood stood to lose some of its sense of interconnectedness. The “cooperativa” wanted to preserve and grow that sense of community—to serve as a hospitality hub for newcomers, a referral service for residents, and a provider of support and activities for children and youth.

“We’re an autonomous enterprise,” said Cardelli. “We have our own structure. But we have the city’s seal of approval, and there is constant dialogue between us and the comune.”³ Ninety people joined the cooperative, making a commitment to come together for the benefit of the community. To Lepore, these neighbors and their enterprise embodied the spirit of “civic imagination.”

Coda

Matteo Lepore was elected mayor of the metropolitan city government by a large margin in October 2021.⁴ To demonstrate his commitment to both the people and the principle of subsidiarity, Mayor Lepore relocated his office to one of the city’s six districts for one week each month on a rotating basis. He chose a meaningful site in each district as his home base, met with local officials and cultural leaders, and visited historically underserved neighborhoods within the district to check on the progress of targeted projects. He also reserved three days each week to meet directly with residents. Whether the locals had ideas for improvement or just wanted to make sure someone in the comune heard their complaint, they no longer had to travel into Bologna’s walled interior. They had an official invitation in their neighborhood: “Dillo al sindaco!” (“Tell it to the mayor!”)⁵

Endnotes

¹ Matteo Lepore, interview by Gaylen Moore and Elisa Tragni Maloney, June 30, 2021. All other references from this interview.

² Giorgia Boldrini, interview with Gaylen Moore and Elisa Tragni Maloney, July 14, 2021.

³ Antonio Cardelli, interview with Gaylen Moore and Elisa Tragni Maloney, July 7, 2021. All additional quotes from Antonio Cardelli are from this interview.

⁴ Federico Trastulli, “Comunali 2021: Crollo dell’Affluenza Vince l’Astensione. Grandi Città Disertate, ‘Tiene’ l’Effetto Incumbent,” October 5, 2021, Centro Italiano Studi Elettorali, <https://cise.luiss.it/cise/2021/10/05/comunali-2021-crollo-dellaffluenza-vince-lastensione-grandi-citta-disertate-tiene-leffetto-incumbent/>.

⁵ Email correspondence with Michele D’Alena and Silvia Sassu, March 2023; Fondazione Innovazione Urbana, *Le Comunità Al Centro*, 2022, p 48, https://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/images/2022_Lecomunitaalcentro/2022_Lecomunitaalcentro_web.pdf.