Cultural projects and public participation: effects in sustainability

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The present paper proposes to discuss the relevance of public engagement and cultural development for urban sustainability through the analysis of two projects: Schenckman Arts Center in Orleans, Canada and International Festival of Street Arts in Palmela, Portugal. Based on fieldwork conducted in both cities, the paper focuses on the ongoing analysis of the effects of participative practices among cultural projects in the sustainability of small and medium sized cities.

In both cases, the citizen’s engagement in culture seems to have an important role in a more balanced development of the territory. Citizens engage themselves in dynamics animated by the artistic communities leading to a cycle that starts demanding more conditions for culture to develop, then promotes more involvement in the cultural activities and finally inspires very dynamic cultural productions led within regular dialogues with the community and local agents. This cycle shows the relevance of citizen’s engagement for social innovation and cultural and territorial development.

The research gave special attention to the potential of social transformation of these projects and its relation with public participation and is part of the ongoing PhD project that focuses the strengthening of social, civic and political participation of citizens as one of the main challenges that the governance of cities faces today. It raises the question of how these dilemmas have been dealt with in small and medium-sized cities trough a comparative research between Portuguese and Canadian cities. Trying to unravel the potentials and limitations of forms of citizens’ involvement, the research explores its implications for the territories development, particularly in culture and sustainability.

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