

## **Case study: Giardino dell'Ardiglione - Florence**

### **Theme: Is a place sufficient to make community?**

#### **TELL US ABOUT THE ARDIGLIONE GARDEN EXPERIENCE. HOW WAS IT BORN?**

The Ardiglione/Nidiaci garden is one of the few garden areas of Florence's historic centre. It was donated by the American Red Cross to the people of the neighbourhood in 1920, and for a century was the place the children and adolescents of the city's poorest district grew up in. A neighbourhood today under siege by overtourism and evictions.

The building and a large part of the garden were appropriated by a real estate speculator in 2012.

This gave rise to a strong movement in the area, after demonstrations and constant lobbying, the Municipality gave a group of citizens the keys to the surviving part of the garden. First as a "convention" with the citizens' Association, then in 2021 the citizens obtained a "shared governance agreement" with the Municipality. In the same year, the Municipality built a roofed area in the Garden, where a great number of activities are organised.

#### **WHAT ACTIVITIES DO YOU CARRY OUT?**

We are gardeners, not architects: architects come with a plan, which they apply to a space. We come with a space, where unexpected things grow all the time: chance meetings lead to activities we never thought of carrying out.

A lot goes on. children's yoga, after-school and summer centres, various courses, clothes exchange corner, vegetable garden, and simply the place where all the families of the district can celebrate their children's birthday parties.

A very original activity is "mens sana in corpore sano", four young philosophy graduates invented an extremely successful initiative: high-school students in Italy have to spend a certain number of hours in educational activities outside school. Our philosophers organised a "Platonic academy" where young people learn to debate seeking the truth, avoiding confusing having different ideas with moral judgement; then the "Bianchi" team of the so-called Historic Football teaches the same students forms of non-violent wrestling as a method for conflict management.

Then an educator and an opera singer introduce very small children to music through games, while gym courses bring together people over 65, also affording them an opportunity to socialise.

## **YOU TOLD US ABOUT A SHARED GOVERNANCE AGREEMENT, CAN YOU EXPLAIN FURTHER?**

In 2001, a reform of the Italian Constitution led to the introduction of Article 118 which among other matters lays down that public institutions “favour the autonomous initiative of citizens, individuals or in association, in the performance of activities in the general interest, on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity”.

Legal scholar Gregorio Arena interpreted this in a revolutionary way to mean that there can be a “third way” between public and private, where citizens can take the initiative “in the general interest” (and not only in their own) and public institutions must help them to do so: this led to the introduction of hundreds of local “shared governance agreements” (patti di amministrazione condivisa) where active citizens and institutions decide together how to use a place as a commons.

Each agreement is drawn up separately, to fit local needs, and is negotiated between the parties.

## **DOES THIS ALLOW YOU TO HAVE A DIRECT RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LOCAL INSTITUTIONS... WHAT FORM DOES IT TAKE?**

Self-government is a powerfully political act, and for this very reason we stay out of party politics, seeking peaceful and practical relations with both the governing party and the various oppositions.

Also, behind every elected politician, there are public officials who know matters much better than the politicians, and know what can and cannot be done.

## **FROM AN ECONOMIC POINT OF VIEW... HOW DO YOU WORK?**

Non-profits may not sell services or assets to “make a profit”, and most of their activities must be on a pro bono basis. However, our kind of association (a “social promotion” association) may sell services or assets to members in order to cover operating costs.

The Association keeps the Garden open for all, members and non-members. However certain activities are for members only.

Members – who pay a 10 year fee - for example can organise birthday parties for their children in the roofed space paying a contribution of 90 euro.

The Association also organises specific activities for members only, paying a professional to carry them out: for example a family may pay 100 euro for a music course for children, out

of which the Association pays 60 to a professional, 20 to buy musical instruments for the course and keeps 20 to cover general expenses.

The general expenses include insurance (both for the association itself, and for the roofed area); consideration for those providing courses and other activities; a contribution for three homeless men who take care of the garden; payment to a cleaner and the costs for organising events.

The space is granted for free by the Municipality which does its part by paying utilities and caring for major maintenance work.

### **AND INTERNALLY, HOW ARE YOU ORGANISED? HOW DO YOU MAKE DECISIONS?**

Formally, governance belongs to the General Meeting of Members of the Association, who elect a Board. However, the Meeting is convened only once a year, and only to elect the Board and approve the Financial Statement. Real governance is a combination of the formal (the Board) and the informal (people who come to the garden or live in the district and have ideas and projects or want to help out from time to time).

### **DO YOU CALL YOURSELVES A COMMUNITY? WHAT HAS MADE YOU AND MAKES YOU SO?**

Our community is not “the Garden”; the Garden is the focus, the free space, for a community which is the whole neighbourhood.

A key moment in becoming community was when parents began to demonstrate together to get back the Garden from real estate speculation: commons are often born out of a conflict.

The Garden has been and is today the focus for the whole district, the place where families of very different background (the Florentine craftsman, the Egyptian cook, the British painter) experience spontaneous “inclusion” as they care for the kids together; it is also the place where the local inhabitants of older generations spent their childhood and youth. A network is woven which ends up by covering the whole district, across cultures, generations, political opinions.

We definitely enjoy a very positive reputation both in the neighbourhood and among those who know us in the rest of Florence.

**IN THE LAST MONTHS YOU HAVE WORKED A LOT ON THE THEME OF THE MEMORY OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD THROUGH AN EXHIBITION. CAN YOU TELL US BRIEFLY?**

The project “Oltrarno si racconta” was an idea of the “gruppo di acquisto solidale” (community purchase group) which meets regularly at our garden. For many months, a team collected oral interviews with craftsmen and others of the district. An attempt to build the easily ignored grassroots history of Florence.

**TO CONCLUDE.... WHAT ARE THE MAJOR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES?**

A very important point: Nobody would like to plant a tree in a public garden, and see it vandalised a week later. And there is no amount of finger-waving and preaching can prevent that. At the same time, we don't want to close our doors and become private.

Luckily, we found a document which said that the garden is not a “public garden”; it is a “space for education”, like a school courtyard. Which means with rules, for example smoking is forbidden; yet all children are allowed in, and with children, those accompanying them; and with those accompanying them, people organising activities for those accompanying them, so in the end we can let in everybody, but with rules.

CRITICAL ISSUES: It is not always easy to involve the hundreds of families who use the Garden, and general meetings are attended by small numbers of people. We would also like to provide more support for families and individuals going through hard times.