



ReBLOCK

Launching Newsletter of the

RE-Block project

REviving high-rise Blocks for cohesive and green neighbourhoods



Connecting cities
Building successes



RE-Block

**1st Transnational Event
in Budapest, Hungary
(10-12 April, 2013)**

Representatives of the ten RE-Block partner cities met in Budapest for the 1st Transnational Event (containing 1st Steering Group meeting and Launching Transnational Urban Hub), which took place from 10-12 April, 2013. *„It is a great pleasure for me to welcome the representatives of nine European countries in Hungary. The Local Government of Budapest XVIII District is honoured and proud to be the Lead Partner of the RE-Block project, and please allow me to express my sincere joy that we can work together as partners in the near future.”* started his speech Mr. Attila Ughy, the Mayor of the District, the Representative of the Lead Partner.

This Kick-Off Event aimed to officially launch the second phase of our network and to create a common understanding of project's objectives and intended outputs, as well as a common spirit for the project work. Also, partners agreed on the methodology and guidelines of operating the forums of transnational exchange and learning, and committed themselves to actively participate in them. In his welcome speech Mr. Ughy emphasized: *“All partner inputs, experiences, good practices, as well as methodologies – whether they are well-functioning or under development – are needed for the RE-Block partnership in order to be able to reorganize the living environment of our unfairly neglected housing estates.”* It means that the RE-Block partnership faces a very demanding year, so that what was decided together could be achieved by the next transnational event in April 2014.

Once partners established the ULSGs and its work plan set, the planning process of Local Action Plan will start. 10 Peer Review Sessions will be integrated into the process of action planning between May 2013 and January 2014. The main focuses of the Launching Transnational Urban Hub (TUH) Event were to specify the content and method of these Peer Review Sessions and the TUH Platform.

During the Sessions a group of qualified experts of the relevant field (Knowledge Ambassadors/KAs) delegated by partners will visit the Peer Review city and will assist the host partner's ULSG to develop solutions for the urban rehabilitation of the target area in the first draft of a Local Action Plan.

The good cooperation between project and ULSG coordinators, Knowledge Ambassadors and the Lead Expert is crucial for the success of the RE-Block project. In this challenging process, ideas, experiences, lessons and knowledge have to be shared and utilised for the benefit of the partner cities!





**with Dr. Iván Tosics, Sociologist,
Urban Researcher, the Thematic Pole
Manager of the RE-Block project**

There have been many surveys and researches on housing estate rehabilitation; the number of URBACT projects in this topic is also high, what is the innovation value of the RE-Block project compared to these ones? Why is it different, what makes this project different?

A few of the earlier URBACT projects dealt with energy-oriented regeneration of residential buildings or with social housing problems. The speciality of the RE-Block project is its strong orientation to integrate the *physical* and *social* aspects. Project partners have recognised that long-lasting results can only be achieved if the residents of their deprived housing area are involved into the renewal of the estate. Moreover, there is a link between the level of physical renewal and the change of the social structure of the estate. It is not easy to find that level of physical regeneration, which means substantial improvement of living conditions, enabling most of the original residents to stay in the neighbourhood.

Methodologically I found two novelties in the RE-Block project. One is the appointment of *Knowledge Ambassadors*, linked to the two main topics of the project (physical vs. social renewal). This method aims at bringing together expert representatives of the project partners along well defined problem areas. This sounds good, though attention has to be paid to avoid the separation of the two topics from each other (which would be against the integrated approach).

The other methodological novelty is the idea to define *10 Spin-off projects*, one by each city, linked to the Local Action Plan (LAP), selected with the help of a thematic expert. These projects will be presented at the final conference as concrete ideas for EU funding. I found this idea an interesting attempt to bring closer the Local Action Plan (developed in a bottom-up way with the lead of the Local Support Group) to the realities of EU funding in the given country. The involvement of an independent expert, not linked to the project at all, ensures a kind of „outside look“ to the LAP ideas. Here attention has to be paid that this expert makes enough efforts to get acquainted with the EU funding programmes of the given country and selects the project idea according to the given framework.

You have previously taken part in researches, projects, which were concerned with the Havana housing estate. A study visit took place during the kick-off meeting; did you feel any change? If yes, what are these changes? What is it that changed compared to your earlier experiences?

Compared to my earlier experiences from 10-15 years ago it can be seen that a lot of efforts and investments were put into the regeneration of the physical

structures. We visited large buildings, which were energetically renewed and we saw many new playgrounds and nicely renovated public spaces. However, for me, as a sociologist, the social changes and the impacts of the physical improvements on the composition of the residents and on their lives are at least as important. In this regard, it is more difficult to get impressions within the few hours of a study visit, without having the time and opportunity to talk to the residents. In any case, I hope that the RE-Block project will help the municipality *to better connect the physical and social aspects of the housing estate regeneration* together.

There are very few Hungarian tenderers in the URBACT programme. It is not only that they are not considering submitting a proposal as a Lead Partner, but they rarely appear among partners as well. In your opinion, what is the reason for the low activity of Hungarian towns/cities?

In the earlier rounds of URBACT calls there was a higher interest among Hungarian cities and the country had the highest number of cities among all new Member States, performing the not-at-all easy task of being a Lead Partner. However, by the third round of the URBACT calls there has been a significant drop in the interest of Hungarian cities to participate. In my opinion, this is mainly due to financial problems. The decrease in the budgets of the cities does not allow the pre-financing of expenditures any more, even if at the end of the process almost all costs will be reimbursed by URBACT. Most cities would prefer to get advance payment from the programme, to be able to financially bridge the long period between the claiming and the receiving of the funding. I would say, this is a realistic claim, which should be considered seriously by those who decide the rules of the programme.

One major benefit of URBACT projects is that they point out that traditional structures are not necessarily those that work well for such a complex task like urban regeneration. As a mandatory component of the Programme, a so-called URBACT Local Support Group needs to be set up, whose members - who are basically all local actors - should be involved into every stage of the planning process. How can you motivate the members of the group? How can you maintain/assure their long-term commitment?

The motivation of the Local Support Group members should be based on their real and active involvement into the debates of the Local Action Plan. According to the usual planning procedure of local governments, debates should remain “internal”, and information shall be communicated only when almost all decisions have already been made, at a later stage of the process. Contrary to this “closed working method”, the Local Support Group offers a broader approach, especially if the city succeeds in getting the most important actors on board. This is the reason why the details on the Local Support Group’s work, including the mapping of stakeholders and selection of ULSG members, constitute important part of the URBACT method and are also part of the training activities.

An important additional aspect of motivating ULSG members – but secondary compared to the real involvement into the LAP planning process – might be to set up knowledge exchange between the ULSG members of the different project partner cities and initiate their active participation in the URBACT Summer University. These activities also depend on the language skills of the ULSG members.

Although experiences with ULSGs vary, there is a growing tendency that ULSGs continue to meet even after the close down of the URBACT project or at least some of their members continue to meet regularly. This depends largely on the municipality, how open it is for outside advices and how effectively they managed the work of the group.

In your experience, what are the most effective methods of knowledge transfer, and which of these should be used in this project?

Knowledge transfer is a difficult process with many impediments. During the three years of URBACT projects there are many opportunities to learn examples, good and bad practices from the project partner cities. I think concrete examples (e.g. during study visits) with detailed background information and explanations are very important. Sometimes there is much more to learn from failures, unsuccessful projects, thus the openness between the project partners is one of the prerequisite for knowledge transfer. It has to be noted, however, that knowledge can never be simply transferred from one place to another; this process always needs an adaptation phase. Thus the role of the Lead Expert and the officials of the local government are crucial to understand the knowledge itself (e.g. a good practice) and to adapt it to the local circumstances.



UPCOMING EVENTS: the Peer Review Sessions

In the framework of the RE-Block project Peer Review Sessions are one of the three types of forums on urban rehabilitation, which provide the partners with opportunities for transnational exchange and learning.

The general aim of the peer review technique is to enhance standards of quality and improve performance by applying the experience of professionals (peers) within the relevant field to assessing (reviewing) a certain case and assisting in the elaboration of relevant solutions.

Peer Reviews in the RE-Block project aim to contribute to the elaboration of each partner's Local Action Plan for the integrated rehabilitation of the targeted housing estate within the host city. Assistance will be provided by those professionals (Knowledge Ambassadors) who are specialised in the main themes of the project and are nominated by the partners. The expert input will ensure that the practical experience and knowledge will be utilised in elaborating new ways, new answers and solutions for the host city.

Peer Review Sessions can therefore be seen as extended ULSG meetings where the added value of the European level cooperation can be utilised by considering a number of possible new ways raised, and by capitalising on experience sharing among the partners.

The first Peer Review Session is going to be organised by the Municipality of Malaga on the 30th and 31st of May, 2013. Knowledge Ambassadors from 4 different partner cities, project and ULSG coordinators from the remaining 5 partner cities and the Lead Expert will participate at the first session. It will provide the partners the opportunity for exchange and learning in the main themes of the project and will also serve as a test for the Guidelines of the Peer Review Process, which using the experiences of the Malaga meeting can be further developed as well.