



Participatory Planning for a Widespread and Resilient Cross-Border Park

Francesca Giglione¹, Sergio Pratali Maffei², Marco Aciri³ and Elisa Polo⁴

¹ Freelance researcher, Gorizia, Italy
francescagiglione9@gmail.com

² University of Trieste, Piazzale Europa 1, Trieste, Italy,
pratali@units.it

³ University of Nova Gorica, Vipavska Cesta 13, Rozna Dolina, Nova Gorica, Slovenia,
marco.aciri@ung.si

⁴ Freelance researcher, Italy
elipolo@libero.it

Abstract. This paper refers to a participatory experience entitled “BEYOND ANY LIMIT. Rethinking borders in the new Europe”, which was meant to imagine a “Widespread and Resilient Cross border Park” between the Italian city of Gorizia and the Slovene city of Nova Gorica; the URBINAT project and its cross-border healthy corridor plan made the experience possible. On this occasion, citizens and researchers were invited to think about a specific border area in the urban continuous agglomerate of Gorizia and Nova Gorica, by investigating four main themes: environment, urban planning, landscape, and infrastructure. The results of this set of public events and the reflections from the week-long training seminar that preceded it are the basis for possible further participatory planning activities with the involvement of citizens from the cross-border area. This will also allow us to achieve more resilient spatial planning also in the perspective of the GoBorderless 2025 European Capital of Culture, the goals and finances of which represent an invaluable opportunity.

Keywords: participatory design, cross-border planning, Nova Gorica and Gorizia

Preface

Between Italy and Slovenia there is a significant urban nucleus extending on both sides of the border. Such nucleus is made by two cities, the Italian Gorizia and the Slovenian Nova Gorica. As the Slovene name tells, Nova Gorica was built by the newly established Yugoslavia in 1948 as a new Gorizia after the arbitrary redefinition of the

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European borders at the end of the Second World War. The city was built to create a new administrative node in the region, which initially hosted all the Slovenians that did have roots connected to Gorizia. Nova Gorica was built thanks to the hard physical work of its new citizens, and thanks to the ‘mladinici’, i.e. youngsters from all over the region. The lives of the two cities have developed differently according to different national administrative frameworks and habits, even though formal and informal communication among the citizens has continued. The removal of the border and the entrance of Slovenia into the EU allowed free movement between the two countries and cities once again, with socio-economic positive as well as negative effects. Even if theoretically the opportunities increased, in practice there was a need to work on the border legacy, which goes far beyond the mere administrative ruling [1]. To overcome the differences of the two administrative models the three cities of the agglomerate (including the small town of Šempeter) established in 2010 a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation, EGTC, to work on integration of basic services for cross-border citizens. Such initiative gave the basis for common strategic thinking in the area, which further led to the selection of Nova Gorica as the European Capital of Culture 2025 (through a joint candidature with the Italian city of Gorizia). However, two decades after the removal of the border, citizens still lament the lack of coordinated actions to give value to the cultural, natural, and human resources in the area, while communicating their willingness to participate.



Fig. 1: The cross-border area of San Gabriele right on the border, standing on the tunnel of the railway



Fig.2: The View on Gorizia from the Kostanjevica terraces in Nova Gorica

1. Cross-border citizens commitment

The focus on participation is not new. The experiences of the 60s' and the theorization of a participatory approach [2] paved the way to an institutionalized concept of Governance through its White paper, which elects citizens at the core. The mid 20th century was also the beginning of a long-lasting period of research on urban regeneration, on account of concerns over the big heritage and historical losses generated by the world conflicts [3] and the scattering of the population in rural areas or migration trends. The understanding of the importance of taking over a holistic and

territorial-based cultural approach [4, 5, 6] moved in parallel with an increased attention to the re-naturalization of cities and the recovery of extended brownfields as inherited by vast industrialization from the 19th century. The result today is an interesting attention to motivate citizens and grasp their contributions in urban planning [7], by feeding concrete initiatives on the ground where individuals or NGOs do organize to debate future urban development, as in Amsterdam, Bruges, etc. The participatory models applied in participatory planning also include specific techniques to get ordinary people acquainted with urban design, such as the Design for Real, adopted in URBiNAT [8], or the Future Workshop as imagined by Jungk and Muller [9], even through these methodologies are very demanding in terms of organizational efforts and communication. More and more universities are acting as mediators, in order to match the need to train students the participatory practice, to be confident in guiding citizens to imagine and shape their living space. As an example, for the territorial context of Gorizia, the University of Nova Gorica tried a new methodology in the CLIC project for the city of Rijeka [10] where students/citizens were the core. However, new forms of experimentation in urban planning by training young experts represent a promising frontier, especially in the case of cross-border areas where cultures and perspectives often generate different kinds of conflicts.

The interest of local authorities appears to be diversified. On the Slovenian side there have been several initiatives for the enhancement of the cross-border area, some of which have already been implemented, others in the start-up phase. On the other hand, the Italian institutions appear almost detached, little inclined to overcome those cultural limits that the history of the twentieth century has left in this area. Indeed, beyond the many declarations of principle, there seems to be no clear will to initiate joint planning, both at the territorial and urban planning levels. Consequently, private initiatives have also aligned with these positions: the Slovenian one is extremely active and has seen the creation of new accommodation facilities, even close to the border; the Italian one is passive and no major initiatives have been produced. Institutional actors have been poorly welcomed by the various participatory initiatives that have been promoted in recent years by associations and groups of citizens interested in the future of the area in which they live, work, and study.

2. The Workshop

In this perspective the University of Trieste, Department of Engineering and Architecture, promoted a workshop entitled “*The Role of Participation Tools in the Design of Cross-border Territories. The case of Nova Gorica – Gorizia, future European Capital of Culture*”. The workshop was funded by the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers (within the scheme “University 4 EU – Your future, our Europe”) and aimed at systematically addressing some urgent topics in the cross-border area of Gorizia and Nova Gorica. The focus was on the border area, analyzed

through the perspectives of culture (heritage, culture of solidarity, dialogue, and multiculturalism), environment and sustainability, education and training, and communication. Such an initiative developed into a hybrid set of workshops involving experts and researchers from ,and the academic, professional, or government environments, who worked with students from the faculty of architecture to finally involve citizens who volunteered to participate. This resulted in a final collaborative consultation in an open format, within a public event entitled "Beyond any Limit: rethinking borders in the new Europe".

The workshop lasted 1 full week from Monday to Saturday, divided into two phases. The first phase consisted in 4 days when 26 students from the graduate course in Architecture of Gorizia were informed about local and international initiatives that may have solicited them for their planning and governance exercise. The second phase consisted in 1 day preparation of the meeting with local voluntary citizens, happened on Saturday.

The first phase consisted of frontal lectures made by external experts, supported by the UNITS professors and a professional facilitator. The frontal lecture started a reflection on the border and cross-border cooperation and on how it is presently seen and managed in the area. It also stimulated the analysis of existing participatory tools available nowadays in international practice. Specifically, the lectures were divided into thematic days, as follows:

- afternoon one: the border in the case of Gorizia and Nova Gorica, from a historical and sociological perspective;
- afternoon two: the participatory experiences of the cities with a focus on the prevalence from the Slovenian side (e.g. by mentioning URBINAT and other initiatives by the Municipality of Nova Gorica);
- afternoon three: the redesign of space by the involvement and commitment of citizens, by looking at experiences from the international collaborations even in conflict areas;
- afternoon four: students' preparation and the meeting up with citizens the day after. On this occasion, students were trained to be mediators and facilitators of the scheduled citizen debate scheduled.

In the second part of each afternoon, students divided in groups developed ideas based on the information received that day. the notions received by experts and the collaborative work with them boosted the design and creativity of students, which is also shown by the well-known World Cafe ideas-gathering practice. In such a way students were trained to become mediators in urban design participatory mechanisms,

beyond their academic curriculum development. The students put this new skill into practice on the final day, when they were asked to coordinate the meeting of citizens and to focus on a specific urban area, i.w. the cross-border pass of San Gabriele (along the main axis of connection between the two cities, the old Gorizia and Nova Gorica).



Fig. 3: One of the interactive, productive sessions among students divided into groups and expert moderators

The workshop with citizens was the crucial moment of the initiative, since it condensed the scientific and academic effort of the entire week. On the last final day 46 citizens from the cross-border area, both Slovenians and Italians, came to contribute to the rethinking of space and policies. The citizens were 29 females and 17 males; 24 of which were under 25 years old, 12 between 25 and 50 years old and 10 over 50 years old. Citizens were divided into groups of 8 people on average and each group worked on a different table, as per the methodology of the World Cafe. Each table was coordinated and facilitated by a pair of "hosts" who traced a circular thread, to gather as many opinions as possible. The workshop consisted in five sessions of debate, lasting each 20 minutes. The topics discussed in each table were chosen based on the students' workshops of the week, and were the following:

- How to give continuity to the participatory planning process?
- What role can culture play in border areas?
- How to enhance the natural areas along the border?

- How to improve the integration between the two border areas?
- How to improve border connections and infrastructure?

On the final day of the workshop, held at the University building in Gorizia, citizens were invited to actively participate and were informed via flyers and word of mouth. Some inhabitants reported that they shared information via their Facebook neighborhood group; other inhabitants of the Slovenian minority living in Gorizia communicated with friends and contacts in Nova Gorica. Lastly, during the workshop week, a small group of architecture students went to the field to talk to the inhabitants of the area. Some inhabitants opened the doors of their houses to inform about themselves and their Slovenian neighbors (the group of students was Italian, so they only talked to the Italian population). Communication between the citizens of the two cities has been very partial and limited, except on the occasion of joint initiatives, essentially of a political nature. These, however, have involved only the most committed and sensitive part. Moreover, communication appears to be sporadic and unstructured, being limited to some specific aspects, especially environmental or mobility-related. Therefore, it would be desirable for local authorities to introduce shared practices in decision-making processes, to enable a cross-border community, with similar needs but different routines and rules.

2.1 How to give continuity to the participatory planning process?

This table discussion focused on the future, a critique of the present aimed at drawing a line between multiple generations, environments, sectors, and social and economic aspects. Participatory planning, to be considered as such, must put in place real investigative processes. These processes should involve both public institutions and individual citizens to generate tangible feedback, whether it be planning and therefore implementation, or simply opinions gathering. Information and its communication in these border areas is particularly important to facilitate the integration of people living in the area. To achieve this goal, citizens insisted on the need for integration and interaction between different cultures, starting with non-institutional dialogues and popular communication paths. There is a need to make up for the lack of accessible and continuous dialogue between administrations and citizens, since participatory planning processes often remain at a purely administrative level, while there is no active open involvement. There is a need for proposals on engagement that start from the bottom (bottom-up), thus arising from those who actually live in the territory. Such proposals are the only ones through which real connections can be established between different people, associations, and interest groups.



Fig. 4: How the table was organized to gather ideas, namely letting them be openly shares in a common paper and offering maps to locate them in space.



Fig. 5: The results for the plenary session coming from the table on the need of participation.

2.2 What role can culture play in border areas?

While it is intuitive to speak of tangible elements and infrastructures on a map, in this topic many aspects of social and relational nature were discussed.

First of all, it emerged that diversity is an added value and not a concept to be overcome. Indeed, its preservation and respect can be an attraction for both territories of Gorizia and Nova Gorica: it is from the acceptance of diversity that comes mutual respect. The issue of respect was addressed both in the social sphere (towards others) and in personal terms (self-respect). This, from a cultural point of view, inevitably leads to the cultural acquisition of civic awareness. From an emotional standpoint, an intriguing insight into the "culture of falling in love" was also proposed: culture also means having the audacity to fall in love, and falling in love may occur with other persons or with work. The major cultural issue nowadays is that one does not always manage to fall in love with a place, but rather benefits from it out of self-interest. The term "union" has always connoted a relationship. A good plan could be achieved as the concrete realization of a system that highlights and enhances the mentioned places by bringing together the various services between these two cities.

Speaking of culture, one must address the issue of education, related to the bilingual and cultural situation in both cities. The common hope is that in the future there will be a greater dedication to the teaching of both languages, Italian and Slovenian, to guarantee a better cultural mixture than the current one to the new generations.

Lastly, concrete proposals were made to encourage cultural events that are common and univocal, but which maintain the identities of both Slovenian and Italian cultures, both to protect and enhance diversity and to stimulate greater participatory interest on both fronts. Through an intergenerational comparison during the discussion at that table, the group realized that there are countless cultural (and other) activities in the territory, but that, for various reasons, only a small part of the two communities participate. The objectives to be pursued are both greater involvement on the part of the and greater participation and interest on the part of citizens. The hope is to expand the activities that already exist while verifying the need to create new ones.

2.3 How to enhance the natural areas along the border?

It is important to consider that during the intensive workshop week, the students were able to focus on the area around the Erjavčeva ulica/via San Gabriele crossing. Various design tools and activities were used, starting with a meeting with some experts who have been working on the concept of "Border" and "Limits" for years. A more detailed design was then carried out with them to identify the features of the identified area. The students worked through the use of orthophotos, sketches, dialogues, comparisons, and the use of Lego to construct the concept of "border". Last but not least, they explored the area of interest with one of the stakeholders as a guide.

Several highlights emerged at the discussion table on the subject of natural areas along the border, especially the need to improve the use and accessibility of natural areas and the lack of activities to promote and enhance locations that are already defined in their uses (routes, existing paths). Several people sat around the table, i.e. women and men of different ages who all inhabit the cross-border area. During the discussion, they highlighted the importance of considering the relation between the value of natural areas and the history of the territory and its socio-cultural aspects. Therefore, natural areas are to be experienced and protected as open-air museums. In addition to aspects related to the implementation of tools and services that improve connectivity and slow tourism, a relevant part of the discussion concerned the theme of biodiversity to overcome the exclusive economic valorization of natural areas. The preservation of species diversity, the safeguarding of ecosystems and their integrity, together with the protection of flora and fauna, are also fundamental aspects for citizens to consider. The need for bilingualism of signposting and signs between Italy and Slovenia, also for natural areas, was also a recurrent topic. Last but not least, the desire to build ecological corridors emerged, also to enhance the area's environmental heritage and agricultural potential.

2.4 How can the integration between the two border areas be improved?

Regarding infrastructure and tangible connections, the question of integration becomes

more delicate and trickier here. Because of the world wars, political divisions, and events during and after the conflicts, this area has experienced communities' resentment and separations that still hinder cross-border confrontation. The linguistic difference between the two neighboring cities is seen by all as the greatest impediment to the integration of the two cultures. To improve the interaction between the populations, it is considered essential to start with education, by involving the community from a very young age through the teaching of both languages and the proposal of town-twinning between the municipalities bordering the Italian-Slovenian border. To stimulate dialogue, public events (sports, cultural, theatrical, etc.) involving the inhabitants of both towns are necessary.

There is a strong need to valorize green spaces so that they become an opportunity for meeting and sharing, upgrading the existing urban heritage. The events, even if present, are not always properly advertised. Nowadays there are several technological communication tools, through which invitations to participate can be disseminated. At the same time, individuals must show an interest in keeping up to date.

2.5 How to improve border connections and infrastructure?

The importance of cycle-pedestrian routes and connections between Gorica and Nova Gorica was pointed out many times. They stressed that while the Slovenian side has a structured and extensive cycle network, in Gorizia this is limited and almost non-existent. The proposal was to create a network of bicycle lanes in and around the cities, thus creating a single network that would make use of the bike-sharing system between Gorizia and Nova Gorica (e.g. the possibility of taking a bicycle in Gorizia and leaving it in Nova Gorica). Another node to be improved according to the participants is the use of cross-border city buses, with a single ticket for city bus routes to favor the use of public transport over private transport. During the collective presentation of the discussions at the tables, the need for a traffic plan in Gorizia, also emerged (Gorizia currently lacks one), which would encourage planning on pedestrian traffic, since Gorizia is a potentially only car-friendly city nowadays. There are several considerations concerning the San Gabriele/Erjavčeva street crossing since it is both the main entrance between the cities and the only place where there is a level crossing. Even in preparation for GO! 2025, this constitutes a connection problem between the two cities for many of the participants. As a possible solution, the construction of bridges, both physical and symbolic (i.e. symbolic ideas of connection), was identified as a gateway between the two cities.

Table 1: Table resumming all the contents presented at the tables and points of discussion for future co-design activities

How to give continuity to the participatory planning process?	What role can culture play in border areas?	How to enhance the natural areas along the border?	How can the integration between the two border areas be improved?	How to improve border connections and infrastructures?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible communication (improving all channels); • Absence of dialogue among the administrations and citizens; • Bottom-up processes are missing; • Other priorities suggested by citizens as improving the knowledge of the region, passive bilingualism, role of institutions as GECT, favouring cross border design and planning, strengthening participatory planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preservation of the diversities along/across the border; • Respect and trust between/among cultures; • Care of spaces and places; • Merging the services across the border; • Improving cultural education, with special focus on bilingualism; • Joint cultural events for improved participation; • Lack of participation in cultural events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge, information, and promotion (signs and bilingualism); • Better common management; • Environmental and cultural values acknowledgment; • Public green facilities; • Slow mobility; • Biodiversity enhancement beyond financial vision of environmental resources, by protecting the diversity of flora and fauna, by establishing corridors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overcoming the traditional historic prejudices; • Overpassing the linguistic diversity; • Promotion of schools' activities; • Involvement and commitment of adults; • Increasing and improving the common spaces; • Improvement of the green areas and spots; • Common radio and bilingual journalism; • Valuing individuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating better bike-pedestrian paths. More friendly intermobility; • Intensifications of trains to the cities for go2025; • Promoting public transport instead of private; • Night connection between the two city stations; • No traffic plan at the moment in Gorizia, where cars are overwhelming; • Common bike sharing; • Free-shuttles between; • Improving safety mobility, especially in Gorizia; • Rethinking Gorizia car network (Focus on via Corsica and Rafut); • Redesign of valico San Gabriele; with a bridge? • Casa Rossa redesign; • Common industrial plan with buildings relocation

3. Conclusions

A green, active city where integration turns into beauty and where events and live shows become instruments of cultural policies. This is the vision of Gorizia and Nova Gorica that emerged from the working tables in this one-day event entitled "BEYOND ANY LIMIT: rethinking borders in the new Europe". The event was a moment of confrontation between citizens and university students, aimed to highlight the validity and effectiveness of participatory methodologies in a cross-border context that recalls the strength and power of a place where everything merges, and everything is transformed. Cultures, languages, and landscapes become one thus creating an opportunity for Europe through the candidacy of cities as European Capital of Culture as well. Hence the need to treat participatory planning not simply as a matter of procedures, but as an approach to "better governing the public thing, i.e. the commons", and to address the need to improve the tools at our disposal. The involvement of the various actors is not the goal, but a tool: it is the urgency of developing a new administrative and civic culture of participation what loudly emerged within the working tables. In this context of experimentation, with the tools and techniques made available, a need to train citizens and administrators emerged, by deepening the approaches to participation, as well as operational indications on why, when, who, how to involve, and how to manage the various phases of a structured participation process. A cross-border strategy aimed at implementing a shared system of cultural production, i.e. economic development, enhancement of sustainable agriculture, agricultural-cultural heritage and social innovation. This type of strategy has been put in place through the URBiNAT project, with a major stress on the Slovenian side, showing how topics such as renaturing cities and creating better healthy environments through nature could be a viable channel of horizontal and vertical governance collaboration. A Truly innovative cultural ecosystem, capable of giving citizens a voice through participatory tools and cross-border institutional bodies. In this discussion, it was suggested that the European Group of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC GO) could cover the role of management structure of the participatory processes desired by the participants. The latter also firmly recalled the potential opportunities offered by a territorial entity, which can act as an intermediary and support policies that implement bilingualism. Finally, the workshop that preceded the public initiative gave the students the opportunity to engage with the various speakers, who also worked together with them, both by discussing the theme of the border/limit and by analyzing the potential and criticality of the cross-border area destined to be the future European Capital of Culture.

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