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Wasted experiments: a commentary on Amsterdam policy for a circular society

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In the last 10 years, Amsterdam has showed to be a city with great energy, active imagination for a better and more sustainable future, and a very engaged and entrepreneurial civic society busy in all kinds of sustainable projects in and for the city. Building on the slowing of real-estate investments after the bubble-bust, many local entrepreneurs, small and medium companies and resourceful citizens have engaged in a urban brainstorming about a possible future made of creative environmental practices, reuse of everything and a growing green economy. The idea of circularity has taken the stage as one of the most evocative and inspiring for this environmental activism. At this point, it is really impossible to ignore the fact that circularity, intended as the reuse of all wasted resources of our individual and collective living, is a powerful idea to trace a vision of an urban future which seriously consider long-lasting adaptation to climate without underestimating the need for a healthy economy.

Looking closely, we see a broad set of experimental initiatives inspired to circularity. From the reuse of wasted clothes, to the production of biogas from wasted garden goods; from the recycling of wasted food into sexy restaurant menus, to the reintegration of waste-water nutrients into the agri-food production chain. These activities are all praised as ‘experiments’ of a green and active economy and society. Environmental studies looks at them as ‘niches’ for future ecological institutions, or as ‘laboratories’ for meaningful socio-economic interactions. And they definitely are! These local experiences are in fact a fertile ground for a more sustainable urban economy and society. They offer a new understanding of the idea of ‘waste’ and redefine the idea of ‘resource’. Yet, how can these wonderful narrative and concrete spatial experiments radically change our cities?

Amsterdam officials and politicians have rapidly picked up these socio-economic practices to trigger a process of institutional, legal, financial and governmental change. The first step was to include local stakeholders in a process of dialogue in order to better sketch the socio-economic and spatial barriers and opportunities for a circular city. In the policy document *Circular Amsterdam*, its successor *Circulair Innovatie Programma*, and in its predecessor *Agenda Duurzaamheid*, the municipality sketches up an action plan to ‘govern’ this socio-economic transition. The conclusions of this document are quite straightforward, and unfortunately not very innovative in comparison with all policy documents produced in the last 10 years (or even already since the 1990s). First, it is recognized that there are two main recurrent barriers to the full realization of a circular economy in the city: the un-adaptive legal frameworks and a culture of linear production based on supply-consume-waste models. Existing laws are accused to increase ‘uncertainty’ for incoming investors, while the established culture (of the people, administrators and companies) is considered an obstacle for rethinking the way of collecting, transferring, managing and reusing waste. The document proposes two equally simplistic solutions to this problem: first, the establishment of some rule-free zones, considered to incentive new circular start-ups in the city; secondly, more investments in technological innovation, considered to give easier access to information and faster communication which in turn reduces the investment ‘risks’ in the reuse of waste. In sum, deregulation and informatization according to the believe that old rules do not work and must be removed, and that old cultures do not work and must be changed through better and more informed communication. In its most recent document *Circulair Innovatie Programma* the municipality is obviously taking the first steps in achieving the second of these aims, by showcasing and linking a set of existing initiatives which can be epitomized under the label of circularity. Another evidence that creativity in the management of resources is certainly not what Amsterdam civic society nor public officials lack today.

However, despite this large variation of niches, the two proposed strategies to promote a transition of a circular-decentered and potentially self-sufficient urban energy system do not offer a truly innovative framework and are likely to not achieve their proposed objective: first, they exclusively address the need to activate experiments rather than seriously discuss their institutionalization at broad levels. Transition studies have frequently revealed that the governmental inbreeding of experiments is a first important step in the enabling of transitions, but it is also self-evident that this is not enough to carry out substantial institutional change. Secondly, the two proposed solutions to circularity tend to over praise the capacity of entrepreneurial actors and new companies to change the urban economy. The municipality of Amsterdam basically affirm the illusion that better communication technologies will institutionalize circularity in the whole city. However, it is also self-evident that more experiments and more communication do not necessary lead to a radical change of the whole urban system of production and consumption.

Amsterdam current policy appears therefore to underestimate the importance of the broad institutional conditions for nurturing and sustaining experiments in circularity. We can distinguish between two specific challenges for governments when tackling the problem of institutionalization of experiments. The first (and the easier to agree with) is the need to offer opportunities for experimentation in the city. Better regulations (not less!) and technology is certainly useful for this purpose. The second (and the most difficult to name explicitly) is to start eroding those economic sectors which are instead linear, that actually depends on the infinite production of un-used waste, and that are the 'main' polluters of our environment. This second point is not yet to be found in the policies enacted by the municipality of Amsterdam, which are, in my opinion, immature for a true circular (r)evolution.

As example, let us look at how the economic added value of circular economy is calculated by the city of Amsterdam. Most of the production chains investigated in the document 'Circular Amsterdam' are limited to Amsterdam and its metropolitan area. Amsterdam is portrait as a close system, where circularity can be (easily?!) implemented and where everybody can gains for it. Yet, there is almost no recognition that 60% of the 10mln tons of material consumed in the city are fossil fuels that come out of the city. It is impossible to ignore the fact that Amsterdam waste is based on an energy and food production chain which goes far beyond the borders of its region. The mass economy of food chain products, of their packaging, and of its logistic is sustained by a network of companies and interests which have indeed (almost) nothing to gain from circularity. The same problem applies to the building industry (another pilot case study of the current Amsterdam policy diagnosis); this sector is dominated by international companies and investors that, at the time of a booming real-estate economy in the city, are primarily looking for large scale and rapid supply rather than reuse of their waste products.

I believe that a policy for circularity that does not consider the rooted problems of the current linear economy but only focuses on experimentation is not mature. Circularity does not need only experimentalism. Actually, Amsterdam entrepreneurial society has demonstrated to be rather well equipped and motivated to experiment with practices of sharing and reuse. A good system of monetary incentives and physical spaces can be already enough for experiments to proliferate. What is needed instead is a system of disincentives for the extensive production of useless waste in a first place, by those players whose economic status depends on unused waste. These are large energy corporation, large food distributors or big packaging producers (and their materials) which in fact base their business model on the very production of waste. These economies of scale are unsuited from the type of close-loop circles of circularity and in fact are frustrating the innovative potential of experiments.

The policy ambitions set by the city of Amsterdam are insufficiently aware of this problem. On the one hand, the municipality is aiming at decreasing by 45% the CO2 emissions by 2025; on the other, it intends to do so by promoting energy efficiency in schools, by setting up a fund of 170 mln, by increasing energy efficiency standard for social housing (which is decreasing in Amsterdam) or increasing electric mobility in the city. Little is said about the need to reuse harbor waste, to manage broad growth agendas, to increase low pollutant activities instead of fossil-extensive industry (such as

aviation of harbor). A circular economy needs a policy that deliberately, convincingly and explicitly argues for decentered energy production systems and for an economy that carefully appreciate the need and social costs of waste.

Circularity is not a creative idea with which creative people are free to play. The way the city is addressing circularity seems to overemphasize the innovative potential of active citizens and their small companies. However, the systemic integration of production chain requires a more consistent and courageous economic, urban and environmental policy. Circularity offer a substantial vision on the political, cultural and economic transition of our society. For this reason it requires an equally serious vision of structural change. If we do not do so, we will have a city full of disconnected experiments which will remain forever experiments. And these are wasted experiments.

Federico Savini is Assistant Professor in Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Amsterdam. He studies urban development from a political and sociological perspective, focusing on urban politics of sustainability and on the financial-legal challenges of land development.