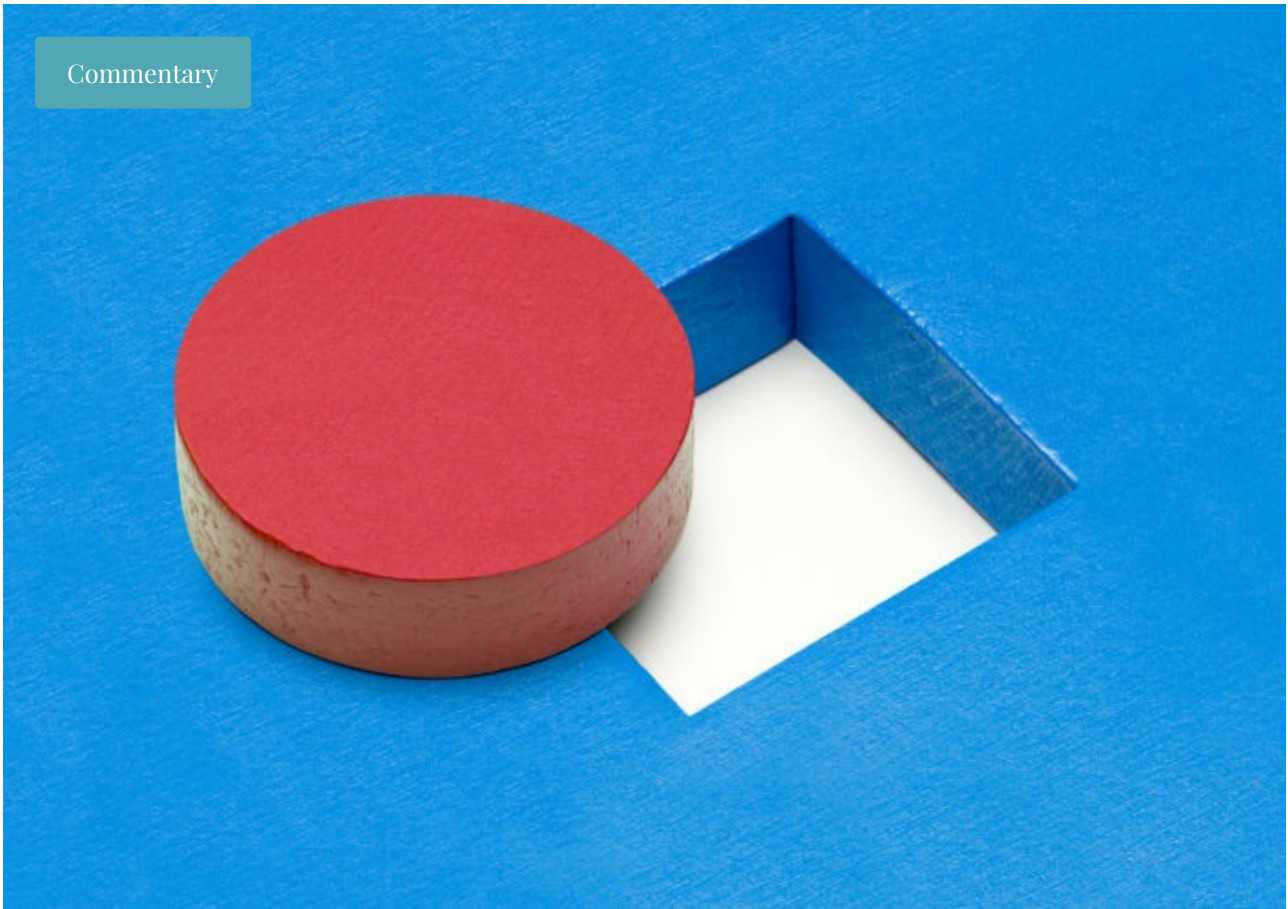


Commentary



Narrating the city through best practices

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Regardless of the urban problem at hand, be it crime, social exclusion or youth unemployment, *best practices* are urban policies considered to be successful in some form of “proven” way. Cities construct and spread best practices through conferences and seminars, and communicate them through web pages, glossy brochures, and various social media outlets. In addition, both national and EU-based urban networks reward best practices and disseminate them throughout Europe. These best practices can be various organisational models, services or solutions that are packaged, disseminated, and transferred in and between cities and urban networks, often in the form of a project or programme. However, for something to become a best practice, and as such deemed superior to other methods or programmes, it has to be tested, standardised and delimited, but also colourfully described and widely spread to a greater audience – the story has to be told. Yet at the same time, best practices also narrate stories of the city.

In this commentary we reflect on the question of *how the city is narrated through best practices*. We argue that cities, through best practices, are narrated as delimited settings of well-defined urban problems where solutions to anything from crime to youth unemployment are perceived as readymade packages, easily extractable from their urban context, movable and insertable in any setting. As such, there is a tendency to perceive best practices as apolitical solutions that can be bought and sold on a marketplace of urban solutions. Taken together, best practices thus narrate a very specific perception of urbanity where differences in time, space and ideology are suppressed.

Our reflections are based on three themes, which correspond to three common characteristics of best practices. These themes are illustrated in the quote below from URBACT, an EU-based platform with the aim of fostering “sustainable integrated urban development in cities across Europe” (urbact.eu, 2021a). Here, good practices are described as:

“...a practice that has been **proven to work** well by ensuring desired results and could be **recommended as a model**. It is a successful experience, which has been **tested and validated**, and deserves to be **shared so that a greater number of cities can adopt it**. All the good practices labelled by URBACT have provided **sufficient evidence** of meeting objectives and indicated the key success criteria for **transfer to another city**” (urbact.eu, 2021b, emphasis added by the authors)

As emphasised in the quote, best practices are: (I) tested and validated solutions to urban problems that have been “proven to work”. They are (standardised and delimited) “models” for others and as such they can be (II) “transferr[ed] to another city”. In addition, or perhaps as a consequence of the first two steps: (III) best practices are assembled in what can be characterised as a market of urban policies, materialised in online platforms and databases of best practices associated with various solutions to local problems, ready for the sellers to promote and the buyers to “download”, adopt and implement. As proclaimed on the URBACT online platform: “come search our wealth of good practices”.

Theme #1: Urban solutions as standardised and evidence-based models

What kind of knowledge should urban decision-making be based on? The role of knowledge in local development and urban planning has varied over time, ranging from rationalistic models (e.g., cost-benefit analysis), through incremental planning, to communicative or dialogue-based forms of decision-making. Today, we are witnessing a development where so-called evidence-based practices or quality standards and assurances are increasing in prevalence. These different forms of standardised knowledge are often formulated as an ambition to replace perceived political fads, arbitrariness and/or personal opinions with science. All best practices are not evidence-based practices in the sense that they are associated with rigorous scientific (often quantitative) inquiries. However, they are, regardless of form, embedded in an evidence-based logic where solutions are considered to be tested, proven to work and thus considered suitable to distribute and diffuse to other contexts. In a wider perspective, this has been conceptualised as an *evidence movement* where summaries of results, existing evaluations and research projects are prescribed to guide decision-making. A key notion here is to assess or test whether-or-not a specific solution is worth the investment, a tendency strengthened through the rapid interest in different forms of urban experiments and living labs.

Best practices are often configured and materialised as projects, pilots or trial initiatives in European cities. These can take the form of a smart city pilot, or projects targeting problems relating to social exclusion or long-term unemployment. As such, best practices enter local government policy as ready-to-be-used models or manuals, thus contributing to a form of standardisation of the welfare apparatus. They are frequently motivated by the desire to break with business-as-usual, and as such avoid what is perceived as the problems of bureaucracy. Yet best practices, just like other projects, create new forms of Weberian iron cages: They often have a strong emphasis on controllability and predictability, and when funded by the EU they are often encumbered with demands on set deliverables and organised in order to enhance comparability and the capacity for benchmarking and evaluation. In this, best practices compartmentalise urban problems in set and delimited ways, thus narrowing down complex problems such as social exclusion into a neat battery of problem formulations and solutions.

Several concerns have been raised regarding such logic. One problem is the risk of delimiting the space of policy options through the assertion that certain forms of knowledge are more worthy or legitimate than others. As noted by Peter Triantafyllou, during the last decade we have witnessed the migration of the “evidence-hierarchy truth regime” into policy fields such as employment and crime prevention (2015:174). This idea of an evidence *hierarchy* entails that the more “proof” that can be produced, the more fit the model is for political decision-making. In this context, randomised control trials are granted more authority than other forms of knowledge, including knowledge based on, for instance, the professional experiences of social workers or urban planners.

Another concern is the tendency to perceive best practices as, in essence, neutral to political goals. With reference to the authority of science and expertise, the aim is often explicitly to go beyond political interest and ideology and opt for “what works”. Through this we also find a transfer of legitimacy in local policy making from democratic decision-

making to expert knowledge – which may also have a depoliticising effect.

Theme #2: The notion of “transferring” solutions between cities.

When created or narrated, best practices are extracted from the messy complexity of everyday practices to produce an easy-to-grasp story of what the problem is and how to solve it. The idea to transfer this best practice also entails an assumption that there is a set of practices, skills, methods and procedures that have universal applicability. But when we say that what works in one city may work in all, something also happens with our understanding of the city – the city is narrated as a generic entity which can be governed by a set of generalised models.

If the literature on implementation has taught us anything, it is that project ideas or policies rarely end up as they initially intended to, meaning that a best practice in one city might be something completely different in another. Not worse, nor better, but different. Barbara Czarniawska and Guje Sevón (2005:8) take this even further, arguing that as a best practice moves from one place to another, it cannot emerge unchanged; “to set something in a new place is to construct it anew”. The spread in time and space of best practices is inevitably in the hands of people and these people may act in many different ways as they move or ‘receive’ a best practice – they might modify it, deflect it, betray it, add to it or appropriate it, as Bruno Latour (1986:267) argues. As these stories materialise in various forms of packaged presentations, they become communicative and as such transferable in time and space, but their movement makes them susceptible to adaptation and translation. Much like a whispering game at a campfire they tend to change as they move from one person to another.

A practice cannot travel, it must be simplified and abstracted into an idea or approximated into words. The reduction of complexity is needed to formulate a coherent and understandable story. (This reduction is also a prerequisite to produce “proof”, as explored above). As a result, best practices are bracketed in space as well as in time – and through this endeavour they become transferable and movable entities presumably applicable to cities everywhere and anytime. So, what best practices lose in complexity they gain in mobility. In this, cities are narrated as compartments containing problems (crime, troubled youth, exclusion...) that can be logically formulated and matched with solutions in a way which enables generalised learning and knowledge. In these processes, cities and municipalities often narrate, share, or push for, their best practices via web pages, or network activities or in presentations at conferences. This will be explored below.

Theme #3: A market of stories

There is an increasing demand on urban policymakers and politicians to show political action in relation to urban challenges, but also to find solutions that “work”, and to launch innovative ways of organizing their work and provision of public services. As such, cities

are on the lookout for solutions crafted by others, but they are also keen on producing best practices of their own as part of branding endeavours. Hence, cities appear to occupy both the supply and demand side of the best practice market – a market not only supported and promoted by powerful economic actors such as the EU and OECD, but also occupied by cities as well as consultants, associations, networks and various kinds of service providers.

Best practices crafted “at home” are spread via conferences and seminars, they are communicated through web pages, brochures as well as via social media outlets such as YouTube, LinkedIn, Facebook or Instagram. In addition to their function as a self-promoting tool, best practices can also be rewarded for a specific initiative by another organisation or association ensuring even wider appraisal of the city’s work and dissemination of their model or practice. Several EU-based urban networks, such as URBACT or Eurocities, reward best practices. The cities that are rewarded benefit from a European-wide communication, a dedicated place on EU web pages and enrolment in EU best practice databases, as well as showcasing at EU conferences/festivals. For cities not (yet) rewarded, these best practices are to function as sources of inspiration and fuel for future action. In this sense, best practices are stories told, narrated and disseminated as commodities between cities through various forms of storytelling.

Very much like in an old square marketplace, a city representative can wander off to meet other city representatives (or consultants and service providers) and find market stalls offering various kinds of best practices. If your city has a problem, you are sure to find a solution at the marketplace. And sometimes it appears to be the other way around – an attractive solution is found in one of the market stalls (at a conference or in a database) to which a city representative may attach one of their problems. A best practice market like this is inhabited by different actors but also different (best practice) supporting products or services, such as evaluation and assessment tools, various kinds of training courses, project models and management techniques. However, there is also a possibility to find funding at this market – a great variety of project funding is available for a great variety of best practices.

Summing up, best practices can be said to indicate a movement towards a marketisation of the city through the commodification of both urban problems and local public service delivery. Through the process of marketing, selling and buying best practices, cities are narrated as consisting of smaller, compartmentalised, problems and solutions where each challenge may be extracted from its context, moved and inserted into another. But is this form of learning and scaling up knowledge bad? Here it is important to emphasise that the problem is not the incidence of learning and knowledge-dissemination between cities, nor is it the usage of “successful solutions”. Instead, the problem is the way that success is understood: On the one hand, best practices are described as apolitical and non-ideological solutions to problems such as crime or social exclusion. On the other hand, the emphasis on “proven results” entails a hierarchy between different forms of knowledge, where certain forms of knowledge production are granted precedence and authority over others. These perceptions of knowledge and democratic decision-making re-configure the urban narrative in potentially depoliticising ways. Taken together, best practices thus

narrate a very specific perception of urbanity where time and space – but also politics – are bracketed.

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