

09 Apr 2015



Spaghetti and Marshmallows...What could possibly go wrong?

Ever tried balancing a marshmallow on the end of a stick of spaghetti? Neither had I until last week. Let me tell you that it's harder than it looks – particularly when the spaghetti (spaghetto?) is balanced on top of a structure made up of other...spaghetti.

Article first appeared

<http://www.blog.urbact.eu/2015/04/can-marshmallows-save-our-cities/>

By now you're probably asking yourself whether I don't have anything better to do with my time. Well, I can tell you that my spag marshmallow experience was part of an URBACT final conference, organised in York by Genius Open which looks to transfer the city's open innovation experience to three other EU cities – Siracusa, San Sebastian and Tallinn.

Steven Perez from Future Capetown used the spaghetti marshmallow exercise during a workshop on design thinking. It involves groups of four people trying to assemble the highest freestanding structure possible in 18 minutes, using twenty spaghetti sticks, a metre of tape, a metre of string and a marshmallow. Sounds easy until you try it...

I'd like to say that our team won the contest, but that would be lying – and others who read this blog would be quick to point it out! But we did manage to have a structure that stayed up, marshmallow proudly on top, unlike most other teams who went for great height, only to be disappointed.

So, Who Are the Marshmallow Champs?

Unpacking the experience was fascinating. Steven explained that in this widely undertaken exercise, a few interesting patterns recur. Reassuringly, teams with architects and engineers do better than average. But, most interestingly, young children tend to perform better than senior executives and business school graduates.

Why is this? Well, groups of young children are less hung up on status than adults. Under time pressure (the 18 minutes matters here) hierarchy can get in the way of adults who don't know one another. Do you jump in and take charge? Do you facilitate the others? Do you wait and see who speaks first? All of this is in the mix for grown ups – but not for kids.

The other thing is that children tend to test a few things out. Critically, they often stick the marshmallow on first and play with the options. Adults on the other hand will tend to discuss the options, get building, then stick the marshmallow on top – and find that the whole thing falls down (as it did with three of our five groups). Tom Wujec's great TED talk explains all of this and gives an insight into the exercise.

What Does the Marshmallow Test Teach Us?

What does this little exercise tell us? Well first of all it says that flat trumps hierarchy when it comes to group problem solving. Status can get in the way of creativity and coproduction, and if you create spaces where all participants engage equally you already have a head start. Smart organisations have known this for a while – but there's no harm in reinforcing it! And that's why the URBACT Local Group method – engaging all relevant stakeholders to actively tackle a challenge – sets great store on empowerment and ironing out power imbalances.

For me the spaghetti exercise also says something about the importance of not overthinking things and the power of play and prototyping. Many of us super well-educated literate people love to pore over a problem in theory, making sure we have covered every angle before implementing actions. The test reminds us of the importance of playing, testing at scale and prototyping before embarking on the grand plan and putting the metaphorical marshmallow on top. The organizational theorist Karl Weick said it much more powerfully when he observed that " We are much more likely to act our way into a new way of thinking than we are to think our way into a new way of acting."

Given the title of Steven's workshop, there is also an obvious but important point about design thinking. If you're in the business of cities, you'll have noticed the increased focus on design in relation to urban issues. Here, we're not just talking about architecture and planning – which have always been central to city development- but about the importance of having designers involved in all aspects of city work. The insights and revelations designers bring is important and distinctive, but also, their way of working is hugely valuable, particularly when applied to urban problems.

Where we look to introduce innovative approaches, the culture of design – analysing the problem, researching the options, creating and testing prototypes before scaling up- is hugely important. There is a growing acceptance that these principles can help us to tackle the wicked problems that cities face – often with diminishing resources – in order to get better results and improved value for money. That is what Future Capetown is trying to do, and it also runs through the model that York is attempting to transfer via Genius Open. It is also a key message emerging from our latest workstream on Social Innovation, which pays particular attention to the link between urban regeneration and design.

What Has This Got to Do with URBACT?

So, what does this all mean for URBACT, with its focus on cities, as we enter a new programming period? There are three important messages for me. The first is our ability to highlight the value and potential of design-led approaches. Across Europe, cities are hungry for new ideas and creative solutions to chronic problems. Although design is not a universal panacea, urban approaches which embrace it can help shift mindsets, spark creativity and encourage coproduction between stakeholders.

Linked to this, the second thing that URBACT can do is to continue to provide a green light for innovation and a shared space to experiment. The marshmallow test carries an important message about the importance of play, experimentation and prototyping. Faced with diminishing resources, spaces to do this are increasingly a luxury. Yet, without them, cities can struggle to achieve the breakthrough solutions that these anxious times demand.

Finally, a related element of URBACT's repertoire is the programme's capacity building activities. Repeatedly, our feedback picks out the value of 'peer-to-peer' learning and the 'learning by doing' approach championed by URBACT. This forms part of the city network experience, but is also at the heart of events like the Summer University and the forthcoming URBACT Cities Festival in Riga. The space to network, learn by doing and have fun with peers is a powerful combination, particularly when they stimulate new approaches which get results.