People Articulating "the Urban" in Serbia: On-line Platform for the Dialog about Public Spaces, their Availability and Public Usage

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1 ABSTRACT

This paper elaborates on the collaborative on-line platform for spatial resources in Serbia. This is an existing solution for the bottom-up involvement of stakeholders and communities in the revivification of non-functioning public spaces, a hideous legacy of the communist past and transitional present times. This idea of collaboration by means of a virtual resources data base actively uses the technological advances of modern times and enables a passive spectator-urban actor to take an active part in the creation of their environment. This thus provides them with an adequate framework for their spatial and social endeavours with regard to existing built structures in the current urban context.

Generally speaking, any built environment always reflects political and economic processes, especially in turbulent social times such as the disintegration of Yugoslavia's socialist system. These circumstances led to the destabilization of the institutions and the social value system in Serbia, depriving an average citizen of sufficient information about "the urban" and the possibilities and tools for action in their immediate surroundings. In this respect, this sort of on-line, participatory, user-friendly activity constitutes an incessant quest to examine and evaluate urban structures and related practices. It motivates inhabitants to develop an understanding of public spaces, the built environment and a variety of urban settings and trends, which thus become endowed with clear meaning and a positive purpose. This process means that public spaces are therefore eventually adapted to meet human needs.

This collaborative on-line platform launched a website in 2009 as a community-driven initiative to challenge uniform and centralized decision-making processes regarding the availability of special resources. The objective was to gradually and systematically change policies and attitudes within Serbian society, to raise people's awareness of their spatial needs and to enable them to engage in the public life of their cities. In other words, this exposes inhabitants to the reality of urban problems and encourages them to take an active part in the decision-making process of their cities' genesis. Moreover, this campaign ensures direct cooperation among urban stakeholders and informal groups concerning space utilization data, procedures, and practices. Every single case is tackled so as to have a clear and actualized presentation of each urban conflict. The site contains sections for mapping, two-way collaboration and discussion on focal spatial issues. To date, this service contributed to reviving more than 1500m2 of space in Belgrade. Similar initiatives have spread in 20 other towns in Serbia.

In short, this introduction of "the urban" as a tool for action-orientated public critique through modern means of communication such as the Internet, places urban patterns and structures in a positive flux. Citizens are stimulated to react to spatial conflicts. This then galvanizes them into positive action by proposing social practices to invest the space with beneficial social purposes. This activity transforms urban structures which are examined once again and subject to initiative-driven change. The question of space customization becomes a dynamic circle, forming a common meeting ground between actors and space. The rise of urban conflicts in daily life that are beyond the citizens' grasp can thus be prevented.

2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Public Space in terms of the Serbian Transitional Arena

As in other post-socialist, transitional societies in Central and Eastern Europe, the urban transformation of Serbian cities witnessed dramatic social, economic and political deterioration at the end of the 20th century. The abrupt shift from a communist regime to that of a neo-liberal economy hindered urban development in Serbia and led to political instability, convergent socio-economic forces and inconsistent planning systems. Top-down urban planning procedures and strategies, inherited from the communist era, were rendered inefficient in addressing urban conflicts at all spatial levels. If you add to this the failure of successfully replicating more advanced models of western neo-liberal economies, it became clear that a fragmented,

small-scale approach to spatial and social conflict could achieve more long-term consistent and far-reaching results. An informal, problem-solving strategy will thus focus on public space. This is not only an essential prerequisite of social cohesion but also a common denominator of urban issues in a broader context.

Public spaces in Serbia nowadays suffocate under the weight of the neo-liberal dictates of profit as people strive to implement western models, fulfil market economy targets and redefine their national identity. Conversely, in socialist Yugoslavia, public space was defined as a venue for actions and interactions among individuals, yet it was controlled by one actor only: the state, the sole decision maker and executor of spatial strategies and actions. When the dismantlement of the socialist regime in Yugoslavia and Serbia started at the end of the 1980s, and when widespread public space became instrumentalized and reduced to a source of profit; leading to the collision of public and private interests in the 1990s, the most powerful economic actors usurped public space.

Within such a confusing social and political system, citizens are neither well informed about their rights nor conscious of their responsibilities towards the public and social good. Citizens are not aware that they should be the actual builders of the city. Their activities in public spaces could be practical examples of individual expressions of freedom and responsibilities. They would thus rise up beyond the negative influences of transition to build their immediate surroundings and take an active part in the development of their city, impacting on its overall constitution and appearance. Thriving public space allows the formation of social capital, the rooting of participative democracy and the determination of economic development. In other words, public space provides a solid base and an active framework for intensive, durable and mature social interactions in the city.

3 PEOPLE ARTICULATING "THE URBAN" IN SERBIA

Started as a small-scale joint action between social activities and virtual networking and collaboration, the "Openly about Public Spaces" campaign and on-line platform for dialog about public spaces aimed primarily to increase the citizens' awareness of public spaces, to give them the tools and information to address each case and officially claim their right to use these spatial resources. Tending to gradually impact the distribution of power and influence with regard to public space in a confusing transitional period aggravated by the ugly sequels of a 40-year period of socialism and totalitarianism, this carefully coordinated action not only increases the consciousness and democratic potential of Serbian society, but also brings it closer to modern trends by its use of low-budget, popular technological means and gimmicks (such as the Internet).

The idea was to create a virtual register of all public spaces in public ownership so as to map their distribution, identify the interest of urban actors or civic groups in using them, and define legal procedures to obtain them. This collaborative approach is particularly important as a community-driven initiative to allow informal groups to obtain access to spatial resources obstructed by blurred procedures, conditions, institutional responsibilities and lack of information. Citizens can therefore increase their awareness of public space in general, local initiatives to access this space can be strengthened, and information can be spread to all interested parties, enabling them to form a common front to pressurize institutions into addressing the largest number of focal points.

3.1 The Campaign: Dialog about Public Spaces, Their Availability and Public Usage

After the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance was enforced in 2004, and the Law on Public Ownership was proposed in 2009, the Civic Initiatives Youth Programme launched an official appeal to all municipalities and cities in Serbia, asking about the assets they had and how young people could access them. This campaign aims to ensure:

- Direct cooperation with NGOs and local communities to raise awareness of the issue of space utilization

- Dialog and cooperation with institutions concerning the collection of data, procedures and practices

- Public discussion on every single case in order to acquire a clear and updated presentation of every urban and spatial conflict.

The official record of municipal assets was the first hurdle to be overcome. It turned out that all property was owned by the government authorities, and that municipalities and cities were the sole administrators of said

property. On the other hand, before the adoption of the Law on Public Ownership (September 2011), a great many assets and public spaces were 'lost' and became privatized.

The Civic Initiatives Youth Programme first had to focus on areas where different groups and organizations (youth in particular) had already started an initiative to obtain space. By constant connection, dissemination of information, workshops, official and unofficial meetings, presentations of regional experiences, they tried to inaugurate another campaign pillar and bolster all formal and informal groups, organisations and individuals, who had started space acquisition initiatives.

Thanks to consulting, directing, helping in strategy making, negotiating with local authorities, and conducting actions for the revival of public spaces, the positive results of good practices started to emerge. Once a group has identified the public space which they want to 'conquer', they start to negotiate with the local authorities or they appropriate the space immediately (by arranging it, gathering in it, conducting various artistic activities in that space). It is most important not to give up in case of defeat, failed negotiations or disapproval, because it requires continuous action, ideas and persistence to unlock public space and obtain it for public usage.

3.2 The "Openly about Public Spaces" On-line Platform

The initiatives described above revealed that the local authorities (municipalities) do not have an official register of the public property in their ownership. "Openly about Public Spaces" supports the idea of giving abandoned or non-used public spaces to citizens, artists, youth organizations and NGOs. To classify the information obtained and better manage the development of the project, it was agreed that the abundance of information on different public spaces be gathered in a register. This would include mapping the spatial distribution of „public spaces", and collecting relevant data about public spaces, the legal framework to obtain them, their physical state and social interest in their revival.

Current trends of virtualizing social life via the World Wide Web and Web 2.0 bring into perspective the production of an on-line platform to enable average urban actors to discuss these issues., Two key elements/factors have modernized and simplified the participation of citizens in matters of spatial resources in Serbian cities: the fact that this information can be accessed through Internet, and that users can instantly communicate regarding eventual focal points.

While preparing the on-line platform, it was important to achieve maximum impact and to develop an effective map with a minimum of expended funds. The technical platform itself is set up with free software (Ushahidi) and free editable Google Maps. Ushahidi is an open-source platform designed for different types of mapping and data collection. Due to the needs of the local community, the software has been translated into the Serbian language and implemented in a very simple and clean graphical interface.

The platform is very simple, to allow the average user to better understand its content. It consists of informative and communicative parts. The informative section contains a virtual map of Serbia, where all identified public spaces are located and marked according to the category to which they belong, and a data base of textual, graphical and legal information about each space. Communication within the platform is enabled through a message-contact option, news feed and blog.
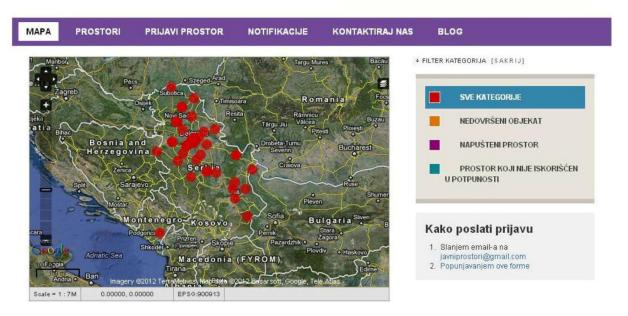
New public spaces are added to the map as soon as the information about them is validated and they are classified. To date, the platform has identified public spaces in more than 30 cities and towns in Serbia. According to physical and functional characteristics, these public spaces are divided into 3 categories:

(1) Unfinished urban structures

(2) Abandoned buildings and places

(3) Public spaces which have been partly used with non-used facilities

These categories were defined to clarify and streamline the actions to obtain the public spaces thus defined, which are themselves subcategorized in the same manner depending on their physical state: good, bad or very bad physical condition. The latter helps potential users of the space to plan their actions and the specific usage of the selected space.

In addition to mapping, the communication part of the platform is concentrated around a dialog box in which site visitors can type in locations and receive information should anyone else enter data on the map related to that particular location (comments and discussions). The overall idea is to carefully examine, tackle and

eventually solve each case. * in the text under the map: ... platform customised for the "openly...../welcome/home page

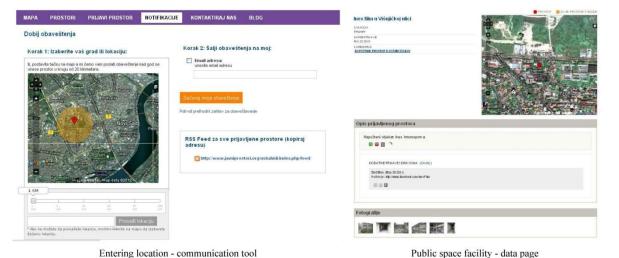Ushahidi open-source platform accustomed to "Openly about Public Spaces" project - welcoming page

Entering location - communication tool   Public space facility - data page

Figure 1: On-line environment of the "Openly about Public Spaces" platform

3.3 Activities in Concrete Space: Solved cases

The platform's on-line activity resulted in practical commitment through the Civic Initiatives Youth Programme's "Openly about Public Spaces" campaign. Armed with collected, classified data and willing to collaborate with institutions and diverse stakeholders, this programme gained significant success in its first 2 years of existence.

One of the first cases was the 100 m2 public space in the "Studentski Grad" local community in New Belgrade. This was successfully allocated to the "Context" and "ApsArt" associations and the "Carina" informal scene, which belong to "Cultural Network of New Belgrade" Association (NBKM), for their artistic activities from September 2011 until February 2012. What is more, they are released from having to pay all the costs related to the space. The associations decided to furnish the Municipality of New Belgrade and NBKM with quality artistic programs and advanced cultural activities. The broader social purpose was to create new cultural value at the local and municipal levels through an independent cultural scene.

The other project was the "Bezistan" Street Gallery, launched by the "MicroArt" organization, which highlighted the problem of abandoned space and its untapped potential. It was an abandoned and devastated street passage in the city center of Belgrade - and "MicroArt" proposed its reconstruction as a venue for cultural and artistic productions. "Bezistan" Street Gallery is a unique project in the way in which it refers to

the physical disposition of the elements in space as well as in its program of gallery activities, which consists of engaged art that addresses vital social issues. The cooperation of city authorities, municipality and citizens' associations established a new model of dealing with neglected public spaces in order to set up the innovative and unique principle of the displacement of the Arts in public spaces for cultural purposes.

All of these actions were launched by individuals, informal groups and associations ,through coordinated action with the Civil Initiatives Youth Programme using the "Openly about Public Spaces" campaign and on-line platform. These actions respond to the lack of public space for individuals and groups involved in community, educational, cultural, artistic, recreational and social activities, and to the lack of venues for interaction among these individuals and groups.

4 CONCLUSION

Encouraging the average urban actor to take an active part in social affairs can be but positive, for it reduces their passive roles as mere consumers of a growing, global mass culture, and endows their urban existence with an active purpose: the design of their urban environment and the control of their urban experiences. Therefore, the idea of collaboration on public space issues strengthens the social impact of these organizations and individuals, thus extending the influence of all urban actors, and calls for the legal responsibility of all institutions and stakeholders involved in the process.

To sum up, the objectives reached by this campaign may be identified as follows:

- Demystification of public space issues

- Relocation of issues about public space from the spheres of business, politics and potential corruption, to the spheres of public interest and the common good

- Enabling public accessibility to information and data about public space, real estate ownership, state property and their status and the possibility of leasing

- Increasing the availability of public space for citizens and associations, with an emphasis on youth organizations, groups and initiatives

- Increased transparency regarding the work of institutions and public authorities in relation to public spaces

- Increasing awareness by citizens of their opportunities, rights and responsibilities with regard to public space in general

Finally, this virtual participation tool represents a new interpretation of cities, their design, social and spatial development. The importance and expressive power of culture and the arts have been revealed in the hitherto undertaken actions of the "Openly about Public Space" project on spatial resources, their revival and design. Art in public spaces has always had the power of transmitting the message of the community, promoting social and cultural values, and embodying the ideas of a collective consciousness. In other words, this project proves that a set of prepared, organized cultural and artistic activities, supplied with the very resources for their implementation, is also a tool for political promotion and communication between the authorities and the public in order to establish a new and improved social order.

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