

City for Citizens,
Citizens for City





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Case studies on
activism in public spaces
from Albania,
the Czech Republic
and Slovakia

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Introduction

Public spaces in post-communist countries have gone through many changes. Decades of forced limitation or even deprivation of private property ownership have resulted in a very individualistic approach, which is characterized by perceiving public spaces as transitional places between work and leisure. Nobody claims ownership of public spaces, neither municipalities nor inhabitants, and therefore they suffer from long-term neglect. Yet, all of these places have a great potential to become inclusive places where people representing various socio-economic groups like to spend their time and socialize.

This publication aims to demonstrate the above through a series of case studies on activism in public spaces in Albania, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. It brings best practice examples of how any neglected public space could be transformed into an attractive and vibrant place reflecting the needs and preferences of inhabitants and potential visitors. The case studies aim to identify decisive factors, which have led to success of initiatives transforming public spaces and providing others interested in reviving public spaces with valid recommendations helping them to repeat the success.

This publication is also a part of the project City for citizens, citizens for city supported by the Europe for citizens programme. The project endeavors to encourage civic engagement in the formation of public spaces. Through a series of participatory events and discussions it has demonstrated that it is possible to create meaningful relations between citizens, civil society organizations, and municipalities, and together contribute to the improvement of the quality and use of public spaces. Urban interventions in Prievidza and Tirana mentioned in this publication represent project outcomes and practical examples proving the potential of public spaces, which if well used could transform our cities to vibrant, but safe and enjoyable places to live.

The authors



Urban Provoactions - Taking Inside Outside (Albania)

By Aida Ciro, Co-PLAN, Institute for Habitat Development and Elvan Dajko, POLIS University, Tirana (AL)

Summary

For over two decades we have used and misused our public spaces. The space and the natural habitat it belonged to, has been fragmented and broken into pieces so much so as a result of the pressure to develop that, no matter how much we pretend to go out, we continuously remain inside.... inside our homes, inside the coffee bars, inside the car, inside the parking lot ... Without taking a moment to reflect and understand the natural set-up, we are TAKING ALL OF THE OUTSIDE, INSIDE. These leftovers of public space, these unused pieces often in random, unappealing shapes, have been left unclaimed and forgotten...almost surrendered amidst the tall, exhausted apartment blocks. Such spaces are transitory. Nobody claims them. Nobody sees them.

As a result of the demographic movements of the early 1990s, the demand for housing grew beyond what our cities could offer. At first, we built because we needed housing. People dreamt of the city, a better life, a home and of the freedom to do or not to. Then, we built because we could, because we could have a second home somewhere green or on the coast. We could build colourful, funnily shaped towers, but often challenging the balances of nature. Whilst now we have done it for such a long time that we do not know any different. Now ... it's not us doing it, it's the culture doing it. The culture of the selfish "me" prevailing over ' the common good ', where the notion of public space is dead, revived in the form of neighbourhood cafés, improvised parking lots, or greedy additions. This culture that makes us energetic entrepreneurs, most often informally, BUT that makes us expect all common good solutions from the officials.

It has now become obvious how the Albanian society is all the more oriented towards an individualistic approach. Yet, even among this urban growth and incredible transformation distancing us from one another and from nature, there is still hope. This hope is found in the several plots of land that could unite us again: forgotten and unused public spaces in the form of urban pockets, between buildings, created due to informal developments and high urban densification that has transformed Tirana and other cities in recent years. Today, they are often used as unofficial parking lots, improvised tips, or prone to someone's will to build yet another extension... but in fact, it is precisely in these spaces that we can see the potential for the regeneration of our cities and growth of social cohesion.

These spaces can be found almost in every neighbourhood in the city, often varying in size, shape or use. In most cases they are found among tall buildings, but not only. Many of these spaces can be found between large urban areas mainly used for parking. Known as urban pockets, they have become highly desired elements for neighbourhood residents, becoming no more transitional spaces, but places where children, youth, and the elderly, stay, socialize, and feel part of the neighbourhood.

With some good will, and commitment we believe we can transform these spaces into the most popular and frequented places in our neighbourhoods, and why not, in our city. Together with POLIS University and many willing citizens, we have undertaken a series of interventions and urban activisms.

Problem Identification

The journey of Albania's *modern urban transformation (and not only)* is closely related to 1992, like much of its most late 20th century contemporary history. The end of a centralized system marked not only a change of political nature, but the crumbling of a *bottom-up imposed societal structure*. The first taste of democracy for people was that of breaking free of the restrictions imposed upon them, immediately manifested in at least three prevalent ways:

(1) Demographic change – people were free to live in a place of their choice, unlike the times during the communist regime where freedom to move between cities and freedom of choice where to live, was very much

restricted by the centralized planning and policies.

(2) A shift in the value system – the imposed 'us' approach shifted into a sharp 'me' approach manifested boldly in the behaviour of citizens among themselves, and citizens versus the city. This change comes almost as a rebellion against the very structured, centrally run community schemes prior to the 90s:

(3) Tremendous energy poured/invested informally in construction and development mainly for housing and commerce purposes.

In all, democracy was perceived as any given citizen's complete freedom to do or not to do [something]: '*freedom to do*' in the way that the *institutional glue* that held individuals together as part of a centralized system, ceased to exist, and '*freedom not to do*' in that (many) individuals took the freedom to ignore the body of laws and regulations that were in power, straying from regulations and provisions that were in place, neglect responsibilities and role as community members, completely focusing on the welfare of the individual. This gave rise to a chaotic, mainly individually driven imbalanced, often informal development.

The pace of such *physically impactful* changes was hard to match on a mind-set, institutional, and policy level. Both central and local governmental institutions failed to comprehend and keep pace with the socio-economic and political changes at the time. They remained confined to the *inherited traditional modus operandi*, which was not designed to anticipate, or regulate any of the transformation processes. In practical terms this meant that most institutions did not have the resources, adequate institutional and legislative frameworks, instruments and experience to contribute to the establishment and development of a new *integrated societal system* that would embody and promote democratic values. The lack of a *unified societal system* that would replace the vacuum created by the collapse of the centralized system further encouraged the predominance of individual behaviour and the loss of grass root community organization. In tangible *urban reality terms* this meant:

- *Un-integrated, fragmented communities*. In most cases the only thread to hold these communities together in Albanian cities today is 'happening to share a physical space', i.e. a neighbourhood.
- *Death of 'shared public space' notion*. Considering that most development was individual, unguided, and often informal, and it involved transforming and fragmentation of space/territory,

claiming and occupation of public space became a widespread phenomenon. The public space left unclaimed/ or impossible to claim is viewed as nobody's land. This mind-set has resulted in: untended, destroyed remaining public spaces, almost inexistent community gatherings, activities or socializing.

- *Solutions/ improvements come from institutions only.* Problems arising from the imbalanced, uncoordinated development, such as poor infrastructure, and poor, insufficient service provision, pollution, lack of green spaces, property related issues, etc., are all billed to the authorities, as individuals assume an 'expectant role', negating any roles or responsibilities in the processes of city-making (despite their direct involvement in instigating some of these circumstances).
- Wide-spread apathy and loss of trust. Amidst all these parallel occurrences, or lack of, citizens appear to have lost their trust and zest for *positive change/improvement* in their community. Whilst a cumulative effect of all afore-mentioned factors, such apathy has also added to the list further contributing to a general, wide-spread lack of community-based incentives or actions to address issues of 'collective' interest. Most individuals *seem to delegate their role and responsibilities to other citizens*, who in turn do the same, resulting in no community or action taking place.
- *A distorted notion of democracy and citizenship.* The notion of democracy has been confined to narrow personal interests, establishment walls, or election times, leading to a widespread perception that democracy is an institutional task, guaranteed to us, and delivered to us no matter what. The latter has caused for the concept and experience of *citizenship* to change, merely hanging by a thin thread: that of being called a citizen simply because happening to be located in a city.
- *Unaccountable authorities.* For a democracy to work and benefit its people, the governing processes ought to be democratic, that is to say: participatory, inclusive, transparent and accountable. In absence of a *community*, there can be no consistent, effective voicing of issues and demand for increased accountability.

This is not a healthy, sustainable context for a democracy to work. Hence, we believe tangible positive change ought to start at the grass roots, at a community that assumes its roles and responsibilities bestowed upon it by the constitution, and takes a proactive role in driving, shaping or pushing forward the processes of change.

Solutions

At the core of such problems, which vary from a mind-set challenge to a question of public space, among others, lies the need for the community to assume its role and responsibility in city-making processes. As an organization whose work is about people and tangible social transformation and positive change on the ground, the solution would have to be rooted in bottom-up participatory processes. Given the circumstances and our (Albanian community) lack of such inherent, or innate culture of participation and activism, we believe civil society and practical forms of activism can play a great role in setting positive precedents of community initiated change, consequently giving rise to a culture (of participation and activism). In this particular moment of crisis when the youngest generations in particular feel a sense of frustration derived from the impossibility to directly influence the city, Co-PLAN and POLIS University undertook an almost movement like initiative called '*Urban Provo-actions*', which basically used provocations and urban activism as a mean, not only for conveying messages but most importantly, for showing that change can be catalysed and brought about in various ways, including the use of art. The aim of this initiative, which makes for an inseparable part of Co-PLAN and POLIS University regular activities, is to strengthen the role and responsibilities of citizens coming together and interacting as a community; it further aims to instil a culture of participation and co-sharing of responsibilities in the processes of city-making, fundamental for a healthy local democracy. Because of the wide range of issues it addresses, and the people-city dichotomy, depending on the nature of the issue and the specificities, the Urban Provo-cation can develop as a project in its own right, such was the case of 'building a bus shelter using recycled plastic bottles', or can be anchored to big international events such as the 'Tirana Architecture Weeks' and 'Tirana Design Weeks'.

Considering that the city has several prevalent needs particularly *physical*, a good part of the urban provo-actions are in the form of urban interventions on a neighbourhood level. And since no 'two solutions' look exactly the same, what the majority of them share in common is the methodology we use, basically all the steps involved from engaging

with the community groups in the city, to awakening interest among them through means of *urban provo-actions*, mobilizing community input in identifying prevalent concerns and possible matching solutions, developing solutions into technical projects through the assistance of experts and students, and perform the *urban activism* mainly relying on community input. The methodology has been consulted, reviewed, and successfully tested on a number of occasions in areas and contexts. The methodology can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Prior to initiating work in the field, a *mapping process* takes place, in order to identify the most suitable areas in the city, in terms of:
 - (a) Magnitude and type of problem which falls in the range of problems that can be addressed through urban activism;
 - (b) Urgency of problem;
 - (c) Potential to amplify the result;
 - (d) Existing similar practices;
 - (e) Willingness of community to further the initiative; etc.
- (2) Community mobilization and surveying – Problem identification and suggested solutions;
- (3) Street Performance to increase awareness of the community on the need to *address the identified problem as a community*;
- (4) Developing solution into a *feasible technical project of the urban intervention* in a dedicated workshop of professionals, community members and POLIS University Architecture and Art & Design students (*architectural, or artistic, etc.*);
- (5) Community consultation on the site where the urban intervention is to take place. Any necessary changes are reflected in the technical project.
- (6) Performance of the urban intervention together with the community members that are willing to participate in the *activity*.
- (7) Celebratory inaugural event and presentation of the commemorative plaque to the community to mark the successful completion of the urban intervention, and to pass *ownership* of the result to the community itself.

Such a methodology is applicable predominantly in public spaces, which usually manifest problems of: neglect, annexing for individual commercial purposes, lack of greenery, lack of sitting areas, lack of lighting, pollution, limited mobility, lack of socialization, etc. Although the majority of neighbourhoods/areas in the city (an average Albanian city) share in common more than one of the issues listed, the project makes a point of addressing (at least) the most prevalent problems,

which in itself will serve as an exercise for the community as it will be the first step in decision-making as a community. Wherever possible, the solutions suggested by the community (through the surveying process) are translated into projects that affect more than one problem at a time, maximizing the impact of the results and resources used.

The *provo-actions* used to awaken interest and awareness among the communities of the need to act on the particular problem singled out through surveying, are often of an artistic nature and are conceptualized, and performed by POLIS University students. Depending on the specific traits of the context/area, they usually vary from street art, to an artistic performance, to street theatre, etc.

The urban interventions that are usually performed with the active participation of the community members and the support of the municipality vary depending on the nature of the problem. The aim of the intervention is to prove that change is possible when a community acknowledges its responsibility and acts on it. Most importantly, the aim of the intervention is to reverse apathy and show the community that with modest resources and willingness improvements are possible, and they do not have to (always) come from the authorities. Given the modest fund assigned to each intervention – since the focus is on community generated change rather than the magnitude of the investment, the urban activisms are often in the forms of: increasing green space, improvising a sitting area, cleaning and greening an unused space, colourful murals, lighting, rehabilitating a power supply box, etc. Independent of the form, the urban activisms make sure to be for the benefit of the community as a whole, and not as an investment that could be annexed for individual use.

The whole process is documented and filmed in order to provide a very dynamic and practical account of the process in all its constituent steps, challenges, emotions, and achievements and also to further promote the good practices, which are often eclipsed by the echo and the effect of negative practices. Each performance and urban intervention is also documented individually and often disseminated in real time through mainstream media and social media networks.

It is important to note that any such initiative is to be supported and often guided by a visibility / promotion campaign including broadcast, print and social media, in order to amplify the messages and objectives of the initiative.

Results

Urban Provo-actions is a continuous process, and the activities within the initiative happen throughout the year. That considering, producing a conclusive/exhaustive list of results at this stage would not make for a complete representation of the reality. The results achieved through the urban interventions that have been performed so far, and that can be attributed to the initiative are:

1. Providing a model for communities to organize and manage themselves the process of problem identification, planning, and execution, that of participatory planning.

By having a clear methodology, working closely with the community members, and documenting the whole process, it is possible to 'expose' the community involved to the work process, and assist it through all the stages up to the end of the intervention. This almost 'legacy-like' output ensures that the community is in a position to independently replicate the process within neighbourhood as many times as needed.

2. Providing the know-how of the process to interested actors, and disseminating it through various media so other communities can potentially benefit from it and replicate it in their neighbourhoods. In order to be able to share the methodology of the process, and the results that are possible to achieve, all the process stages are documented and packaged in various formats, including multimedia outputs, such as short documentary movies, written guidelines, local/national television coverage of the interventions, etc. By doing so, we make sure that the theoretical part of the process together with the practical/tangible aspects are shared by numerous groups, who can at a later stage initiate such a process themselves.

3. Initiating a discourse on the reclaiming of public space in the neighbourhoods and the city.

The focus of the interventions on the public space comes as no coincidence. The physical neglect of the public space paired with the lack of institutional and media attention has led to the development of a high insensitivity when it comes to public space. By taking action on it, and ensuring that the process and the results are widely shared, it will be possible to contribute to

opening a discussion on the reclaiming of public space through joint community work. We believe the media can play a crucial role in this process, which is why several media channels are employed in covering and disseminating the process and the results.

4. Promoting community values in a context where the individual value system seems to prevail.
5. Strengthening the role of community in driving the neighbourhood development agenda.
6. Promoting local governance issues through the social and online media.

In more practical, tangible terms however, some of the actions that were implemented over the past three years are:

Plastic Bottle Bus Shelter (intervention)

The first bus shelter to be built with plastic bottles in Albania, in the Commune of Kashar, close to the Co-PLAN and U_POLIS premises. The plastic bottle bus shelter in Kashar, aside from a tangible example of successful cooperation with the local authorities, offers a good example of creative design and recycling for a cleaner environment. The construction of the bus shelter employed approximately 10,000 plastic bottles recycled over a period of five months, and was made possible by a team of experts and students in the field of architecture, urban planning, art-design experts, etc.

Green plug-ins

Green plug-ins was conceived as green carpets of grass and plantable trees to be placed in areas of the city that lack green spaces or awareness. During Tirana Architecture Weeks 2012, the area of Selita was chosen, since its notorious reputation for lack or misuse of green public space. The action was committed in order to make a first step for the inhabitants of Selita by bringing all necessary elements to replant green spaces. This action was considered as a first step to provoke the neighbourhood, and check the reactions by planting/ provide greenery so to test if this first step could also become as an activation method. The monitoring of these spaces is in progress, yet the absent care is again taking its toll. On a positive note however, a certain reaction and awareness of the local population is visible. As part of the activity an open dinner was performed

with the inhabitants and casual passers. The discussion sparked during the event was linked to topics on 'active citizen for active neighbourhoods' and their possibilities in protecting local public spaces.

Tirana Urban Bundle

The Urban Bundle is a common space that provides initial condition for people participation in the process of producing and managing their urban environment. It is a political tool of the people who seek to exert influence on the development of relations between private and public life in the city. TUB is a transparent construction without doors and walls, composed as particular modular system combining wooden, metal and other recyclable elements. These elements are designed to be manipulative for transportation and easy for construction.

This structure is also a simple example of how towards a small cost, the urban furniture and scene play a role in animating public life, avoiding the rigidity in the "official" squares, provoking and bring life in transit spaces and stimulating culture and art. TUB is a temporary installation in the public space that encourages transparency and facilitates gatherings of the administrators, citizens, investors and experts in order to maintain their discussions and negotiations on developing Tirana urban conditions. This urban bundle served as an urban catalyst and as a stationary open structure for different events during the Tirana Architecture Week organized by Polis University.

In the hood

"Në Lagje" or "*In the Hood*" is the title of the activity, as a workshop, held in two centrally located, though somewhat isolated neighbourhoods in collaboration with the local inhabitants and inspired by the work and curated by the Dutch artist Rikkert Paaw. Twenty students with the participation of the citizens transformed local scrap material into a temporary installation in public space. Aiming to create negotiated space, the workshop was organised on site in a production of space. This sort of intervention in public space intended to initiate proactive role of citizens by showing large possibilities of self-organisation. Neighbourhood community largely accepted the action with their direct or indirect involvement in the installation production. Large number of locals participated in the activities organised upon finalizing the installation. All of the aforementioned work was implemented in the site of the neighbourhood in order to better understand the problems and characteristics of the area and also to promote the design by process and participation.

Debate on [bus] tour

Reclaiming public space starts with claiming mental space. What better place to do so then while moving through Tirana's neighbourhoods on a special bus tour? The neighbourhood's citizens, students, architects, planners and policymakers would join by introducing their neighbourhood to other participants. Through this series of tour guided interviews and discussions, a diverse mental map of the city emerged. For the participants this meant being introduced to other parts of the city, for professionals hearing another story and for policymakers reaching to 'non-decision making' people thinking.

The lightway (provoaction)

This provo[ac]tion intended to deal with the waterfront of the artificial lake of Tirana. The coastline is only partially part of the Tirana Big Park, neglecting so a big portion of land of immense potentials. The working group needed to show that activities can be organized even in the misused part of the lake coastline so they created a movie projection event followed by a debate and concluded by a party lasting until morning hours. Since the main objective was to attract attention to this area, a 370-meter long, lighted rope was used to physically connect the two sides of the lake and ideally bring together the park and the neglected space. The view of a crowd of people, watching movies and partying at the far end of a lightway floating on the lake was not an everyday scene for many visitors of the park that, provoked by this action, joined the event and temporally reactivated a new space in the city.

Sidewalk Safety (provoaction)

This provo[ac]tion brought to light the missing standards of the sidewalks in Tirana. A very important issue considering that fact because of the not standardized sidewalk, big portions of the city are practically inaccessible, to a big number of categories. During one evening, the missing ramps, the dangerous objects and the narrow passages were brought to light in "Komuna e Parisit" street by painting on the ground a number of signs and icons pointing at the problems. The next day the participants to the provo[ac]tion conducted a sensitization campaign in the same neighbourhood, discussing and interacting with the inhabitants.

Gamescape (provoaction)

This provo[ac]tion turned an abandoned space, inside a housing block, into a "gamescape", an artificial landscape, dedicated to the playing

moment as an important event in the contemporary city. In this case, a participatory project was initialized in which through the contribution of the children from the block a very cheap playground was created.

I am chewing gum (provoaction)

An artistic performance used as a mean to transmit messages concerning the pollution created by the chewing gum.

Glowing tunnel (provocation)

This provo[ac]tion investigated the possibly of creating a space through the input of new activities. A tunnel, going through a housing block, was painted with a paint glowing in the dark. The tunnel so, after dark, turned from a transitory space to a stationary place where the presence of music and drinks managed to gather a big number of people that only needed a good pretext to gather in a public space and share some time with one another.

To conclude, it is important to note that, such participatory, grass-root driven projects/actions are very accessible, suitable and effective means to be used by other actors who are interested in bringing about change in their social contexts. The participatory approach, and non-complex methodology, and modest monetary level of investment required, makes it possible for the initiative to be replicated anywhere a community wishes to initiate a change.

Recommendations

Over the past 18 years and through over 100 projects and numerous precious partnerships, we have learnt our fair share about the community, what makes a city work, and how such collaborative; grass-root interventions can make a difference.

Use cultural activities and art to enhance social cohesion

Festivals, community plays, and other public events have shown how cultural activities can bring people together. In conditions when social cohesion has been slow to catch up with the rapid urbanization, art and cultural events have been regularly used to encourage citizens

to overcome barriers arising from differences. Because art is about meanings, it can enable the dialogue between people and social groups. "Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody."

Make it participatory!

If we want the cities to offer something for everyone, it is important to engage people in the city-making processes. Cities should be designed to accommodate people's needs, and respond to local problems. As Jane Jacobs beautifully puts it: "There is no logic that can be superimposed on the city; people make it, and it is to them, not buildings, that we must fit our plans."

Use art (in public spaces) to explore identities

Art based activities and events have been used by communities of all sorts to explore and affirm their identities, particularly in countries in transition where rapid socio-political changes can have implications in the way a city conveys or reinvents itself.

Use art and culture to improve local image

– art and culture can offer an alternative lens to how we view a city. Through international events, such as Architecture Weeks, held in Tirana, Sofia, Belgrade, and the like, it is possible to promote an image that goes beyond the problems we associate with a particular city, and focuses more on the positive aspects such as values and prospects for growth.

Keep it low-cost and accessible

– so to ensure that such activities are accessible to the community. Keeping them low-cost can encourage participation. One interesting, increasingly used form is that our *urban activism in the form of street art, or small yet impactful interventions in various parts of the city, depending on the theme.*

And last, **try not to reinvent the wheel.** The idea is to keep it simple, and focus on providing a solution that satisfies the local context.



Prague Safer and Barrier-free

(The Czech Republic)

By Jarmila Johnová and Petra Syrová, Prague Mothers (CZ)

Summary

Walking is the healthiest and the most environmentally friendly way of transport. It is the base of all transport – every route begins and ends on foot. However, Prague – the capital of the Czech Republic - is not very friendly to pedestrians. Its streets are clogged with vehicles whose emissions are harmful to health and shorten peoples' lives. Cars represent a serious danger particularly for the most vulnerable road users, including pedestrians and cyclists. The weakest ones (children, older people, people with disabilities, people with temporal impairments, people with small children and prams etc.) are often even prevented from independent motion in the city by dangerous and barrier streets and spaces.

All passengers, but mainly people with reduced mobility, often depend on a car for all their daily trips, due to the barriers they encounter in public spaces and public transport. By improving the accessibility of the public space as a whole (streets, sidewalks, public transport etc.) and making it safer, local and regional authorities should enable all pedestrians, especially the weakest ones, to adopt a less car-dependent lifestyle and use sustainable way (walking, cycling and public transport) of transportation instead. In addition, by improving the accessibility and safety in public spaces, local and regional authorities could also achieve energy savings in transport. Furthermore, it increases the quality of life and the attractiveness of the city or region for inhabitants and visitors and in this way it also supports economic development.

Many European cities have succeeded in solving this issue – they narrow roads, introduce pedestrian, habitual and 30kmph zones, cancel

parking slots, simply cut down on traffic, i.e., create such conditions for pedestrians to make them stay in the city. In Prague, such a perception of the city and proposals do not usually come from the political leadership of the city, but from bottom, especially from non-profit organizations.

This study presents how this issue is solved by the Prague Mothers NGO, so that other cities, associations or individuals could be inspired when dealing with similar problems. We are a non-profit civic association striving to improve the conditions of living environment, traffic safety and accessibility in Prague, particularly for the most vulnerable road users. We support sustainable mobility and try to sparkle the interest of citizens and public authorities for a more responsible approach towards the issue.

> Pedestrians as a low priority

Even though Prague is the capital of the Czech Republic having a population of 1.25 million inhabitants and it is one of the most attractive European touristic destinations (in 2013 it had approx. 5.5 million of foreign visitors), it is not very friendly to the most vulnerable road and city users – the pedestrians. The transport policy of the capital still focuses on car transport and is improving conditions for its “fluency” by building new road infrastructure for higher car intensities, even in the centre of the city. Every year the city invests billions of CZK into the development of car infrastructure from the public budget, while less and less is being invested in the improvement of road safety for pedestrians and improvement of pedestrian paths. The budget for the development of pedestrian infrastructure represents a little more than a thousandth of the total transport budget (few millions of CZK). The adjustments of pedestrian infrastructure are only partial and they are focused solely on removing the most serious problems and deficiencies.

The public administration and politicians make almost no efforts to implement some awareness raising activities towards the support and propagation of walking (and cycling) and its benefits. That is why the general public does not have enough information about the benefits of walking and no motivation for possible change of its transport habits.

Moreover, the municipalities are not used to cooperate and communicate with the public, listen to people's needs and take their demands seriously.

Under the slogan “we are the governance and professionals and therefore, we know how to do it” they often do not solve the real problems of the real road users, which leads to inefficient solutions and measures. And people often having the experience that “nothing works and nobody listens to them”, do not develop too much pressure to fight for their rights as pedestrians and bring about changes.

> Why do we Focus on Pedestrians?

In the framework of this study case we would like to demonstrate how we solve the problems faced by pedestrians on their everyday journeys around Prague.

Why? First of all, pedestrians present the weakest part in the transport chain and always lose in a collision with a car. That is why the protection of pedestrian lives and health should be among the priorities of each city or municipality. In addition, each of us becomes a pedestrian for a while each day, even when using a car or public transport, we need our feet to get into the car or tram and get out of it to reach our final destination. Pedestrian paths take the least space of all types of transport, moreover, pedestrians produce no pollutants or noise, nor endanger anyone. Although walking is the most natural way of transport and has many benefits for both individuals and the city, it does not get the support and protection from the city that it deserves.

> Children

In the group of pedestrians, children are considered to be the most vulnerable part due to their age and height. They experience many difficulties when walking or cycling in public spaces and using public transport. Specifically, children cannot foresee perils such as an approaching car because of their height and low horizon. Some of them are not able to read yet or have difficulties with reading or understanding information. Due to the lack of experience they are still learning how to estimate speed or distances correctly and they may have problems recognizing some kinds of sounds and their source. That is why they deserve high protection on their ways throughout the city. Moreover, walking is beneficial to their health and necessary for their right physical, psychological and social development.

If public space is adapted to the needs of children, it also brings benefits to all others who face barriers and problems when moving around in public spaces and finally it provides better comfort and safety for all road users – what is good for children is good for everyone.

> The main problems in the pedestrian infrastructure

There are numbers of places in Prague that are dangerous and/or difficult for pedestrians. The numbers of accidents involving pedestrians are not decreasing; the death toll is slightly rising, (in fact, car accidents with injured pedestrians have somewhat grown in recent years in the capital), or the number of injured pedestrians have not been reduced as much as with the other road users. As mentioned above, the promotion of walking as a mean of alleviating the environmental impact is not among public administration priorities and the investment is negligible. Adjustments to pedestrian routes are inconsistent, isolated and often not based on pedestrians' real needs, because the authorities do not communicate with the public. The public puts low and fragmented pressure on the authorities to remedy the situation.

The tendency of residents to use cars within the city - even to take children to school daily - still keeps growing. Due to the fact that the roads to schools are not safe, parents are afraid of letting their children go to school on their own and rather drive them by car - see 3.2 about Safe Routes to Schools (SFRS) below.

The most urgent and the most common problems that make it difficult or dangerous for pedestrians to move around the city are as follows:

⬡ Dangerous places and/or situations

- Lack of safe crossing possibilities for pedestrians Wide crossing – eg.
- Drivers do not recognize the priority for pedestrians on the crossing
- Vehicles passing by at high speed
- Cars parking on the crossings or close to them prevent pedestrians from safe crossing (they can't see cars approaching to the crossing and drivers can't see pedestrians standing behind parked cars)
- Cars parking on the pavement

- High traffic intensities
- Traffic jams and chaotic traffic situations around schools in rush hours endanger children who are walking to school
- Areas where people do not feel safe and comfortable as pedestrians (pedestrian underground crossings, underground public transport stations and areas where there are very few people or poor lighting)
- Parallel signal for "go" for both pedestrians and cars turning to the crossing

⬡ Barriers

- Stairs or escalators are the only way of access to the public transport or other destinations and there is no alternative route via ramps or elevators
- Getting on or off a public transport vehicle is difficult, due to a large gap or difference in height between the platform and the vehicle, or when there are steps at the vehicle entrance
- High curbstones at crossings
- Bumpy, uneven, slippery or broken surfaces on sidewalks
- Constricted or too narrow sidewalks and public transport stops
- Wide-meshed pedestrian infrastructure, inadequate marking, lack of "shortcuts" for pedestrians - Pedestrians are forced to make detours or even use underpasses or overpasses

⬡ Other problems

- Incorrectly adjusted traffic lights (long red signal and short green signal)
- Lack of accessible resting places and / or shelters
- Ugly and unattractive places
- Lack of traffic lights at crossings

> How to make pedestrians high priority

} Solutions must be adopted appropriately to bring results

There are several alternative solutions to the problem of barrier or

dangerous streets: disposal of a barrier, reconstruction of a site or public space, regulation of the traffic signalization, prosecuting of unruly drivers, education of children and general public about the benefits of sustainable transport, education of drivers to respect the road code and the most endangered users, the allocation of sufficient funds to support pedestrian traffic and political support of walking (and sustainable transport at all), good communication between public administration and people or media coverage of the topic. In a particular case, it depends very much whether they are chosen adequately, otherwise, they don't work.

Because of lack of money, the effective solutions are not always implemented and they are replaced by other solutions, which only partially solve the problem or solve the wrong problem.

For example, there are some schools or municipalities which recommend children in order to ensure their safety on their journeys to school to use different safer routes than usual, which are longer or run through unattractive places (major dusty and noisy roads, underpasses etc.). Parents have also their own solution to protect their children – they drive them to school by car. This trend subsequently causes excessive traffic in front of schools and endangers other children who go to school on foot.

Based on our experience, it is also very important to involve pedestrians in the solution of a problem. They, as real road users, can help to identify the “real” problems, to set the right priorities, and to develop a strategy that brings about sustainable improvements of a public space and its accessibility. Involvement of the users is an effective way to avoid aberrations and aspire to sustainable improvements and solutions of a problem. The needs of pedestrians must be taken into account already in the planning phase of all measures. Their involvement in planning, implementing and evaluation is an effective strategy to avoid mistakes and expensive corrective measures. User involvement in all stages of planning, implementing and evaluating helps to save money by avoiding costly mistakes.

Reality, however, is different. The decisions are made without the participation of people who walk in the city and sometimes pedestrians are missing in transport planning processes, which lead to half-hearted and subsequently costly solutions.

On the other hand, some people or civic associations submit their requests to public authorities or publish the issue in media without asking for the reason for their or decisions. This action often doesn't lead to an effective solution of the problem, but even more divides both camps.

} How Prague Mothers address the problem

To improve the conditions for pedestrians in Prague we do many inter-connected activities. We initiate reconstructions of dangerous and barrier places in the city, engage active individuals and initiatives in enhancing the quality of urban public space, bring up the topic of walking to the public, help to improve the communication between the municipalities and the public and try to make changes in the transport policy of the city. A large part of our activities focuses on work with children, in whom we see a strong potential and hope for the future. The responsibility of citizens and parents, above all for the environment has been at the centre of our attention. As most of us are drivers, it is us who must consider when and where car use is really necessary.

To achieve success, we always combine several activities and methods trying to reach consensus among all stakeholders. The power of media is very strong and helpful, but we use it only in cases in which all the negotiating methods have failed, in important cases that deserve immediate publishing or when we want to show some positive example of problem solving.

Below we introduce the most important projects and activities that have been proved to be useful and successful.

a) Involving the general public and cooperation with municipalities

} Safe Routes to School Program

The aim of the program is to increase safety for children on daily routes to school and encourage them to walk to school or cycle or use public transport. The programme also tries to improve children awareness of traffic rules and better inform schools about sustainable methods of transport. The project was inspired by examples from the UK and draws on the experience we have collected in more than thirty Prague schools.

The program is based on the active involvement of schools and pupils in the whole process and on the cooperation of all participants who can influence the form of public around schools. They constitute a “working group” comprised of the representatives of the local government and Transport Department of the relevant district and the Municipal Authority of Prague, the Police, pupils, teachers, parents, our association, project coordinator and traffic planner. The working group meets several times during the school project and tries to find consensus about all important issues.

In the beginning each pupil obtains a map with school surroundings and with the help of his/her parents they mark the routes, which they take to school and the places where they do not feel safe. At the same time, the pupils fill in a questionnaire, explaining why the places are dangerous and what could be done to make them safer. The pupils also describe the method how they get to school and how they would like to get to school. Questions may also be targeted to parents, whose opinion on transport of children can help complete the picture of the whole situation regarding transport habits and preferences in the given locality.

Children put their maps together into class maps and then create a single school map containing the total of all routes to the school and the list of dangerous places, including their description. This output serves as a basis for a planner (road designer) to perform a traffic study proposing solutions for dangerous or problem sections. The study is then presented to the Municipal Authority of the City of Prague and the relevant district as the basis for proposed adjustments to traffic design. In enforcement of these proposals the project coordinator works in cooperation with the school, Police, district and Department of Transport of the City of Prague. The cooperation between children, teachers and parents on one side and the authorities on the other, creates a significant educational effect. The children's participation in the project represents an excellent education in transit issues and increases the sense of responsibility for public issues in general.

The schools engaged in the program are obligated to produce a “Mobility School Plan” – the school's long-term strategy focused on safe and barrier-free routes and the support of environmentally friendly transport to school. This plan is created using the data acquired from the analysis of traffic safety in the area around the school by both children and experts

and the questionnaire regarding the children's transport preferences. In the framework of the program schools also implement measures to promote sustainable mode of transportation to school (shelters for bicycles, scooters and bikes purchase, etc.).

} Pedestrians United

In 2011 we developed and managed a citizens' platform on the website www.chodcisobe.cz. It is a unique connection of citizens inactive so far that uses innovative technologies and social networks, which gives them a unique opportunity to express their concerns, get involved in solving problems and demand a remedy. On the website, citizens can store information (photos, videos, descriptions, locations) about places that are dangerous or difficult for pedestrians, which is then submitted to municipal district authorities, and monitor their remedy. We also encourage Prague citizens to be more actively involved in addressing their local governments using the portal – not only storing their incentives on it, but to play more active role when putting through solutions of their incentives too (e.g. by organizing local happenings, writing to the responsible officials etc.).

} Improving Public Space

We help active local citizens to organize local motivation campaigns and happenings in a public space showing the need, attractiveness and usefulness of accessibility of the city for pedestrians. Through these campaigns (e.g. happening of parents for the placement of benches in front of schools, painting the ugly subway on the way to school, Walk Parade, planting flowers in front of the schools, etc.) and media pressure we enable them to lobby for the solution of specific problems.

b) Disclosure of Pedestrian Traffic Topics and Cases

Cooperation with journalists and media is an integral part of our work. In many cases it is their pressure that eventually reverses an hopeless situation and helps to solve the problem effectively. Thanks to our good relations with journalists we can help active citizens and local initiatives to formulate their demands and to publish them. As we have mentioned, we use media only in certain cases as the power of media can be very positive and constructive, yet, at times it may be also destructive.

c) Education and Raising Public Awareness

Last but not at least, we are trying to attract the attention of the broad public, politicians and media to pedestrian transport issues by explaining advantages, showing good examples from other countries through educational and awareness raising activities. We publish educational materials and organize training workshops for primary and secondary schools and organize local meetings for public administration and citizens or international conferences.

> What Prague Mothers have achieved so far

While many NGOs organize raising awareness campaigns to draw attention to a specific problem or resolve a particular matter (social, political or environmental), we are trying to bring people together in order to reach a complex solution to their common problem of everyday mobility in public space they share. If we really want to feel safe, healthy, and comfortable in the space we share, we have to share our experience and responsibility, as well.

We have developed methodologies for the majority of our projects, repeated them and insisted on the implementation of our proposals. In this, we have achieved results in the form of improved, safer and more comfortable parts of pedestrian infrastructure in Prague – see websites <http://www.prazskematky.cz/projekty/bezpecne-cesty-do-skoly/databaze-realizovanych-projektu/> and <http://www.prazskematky.cz/ukoncene/a-mame-vymalovano/> or www.chodcisobe.cz

Main characteristics of implemented projects:

- They are mostly designed for communities with a strong community participation
- There is a significant cooperation with children - our main target group – in the frame of our projects
- They strongly rely on cooperation of citizens with official authorities and experts combining citizens and professional experience
- They usually go through the whole process of solving community

problems from the original idea to its final realization either

- They mostly combine all the above mentioned areas to reach their intended goals
- They are supposed to be both constructive and positive
- But they do not exclude open criticism
- They try to deepen or introduce communication among citizens and between citizens and their representatives
- They try to increase responsibility of civic society and also official authorities

The main methods of our project work to achieve the planned goals are:

- Communication
- Discussion
- Creativity
- Reaching compromises
- Sharing experience, responsibilities and knowledge

Working methods of our association to fulfil the role of a project coordinator

- Mediation
- Advocacy
- Lobbying
- Consultancy

> Safe Routes to School Program

The Safe Routes to School Program is a typical community project using active participation of citizens, school children, in particular by combining and sharing the experience of road users and various experts or officials. It has already been implemented by more than 30 Prague schools and children's facilities and about 80 measures have been adopted (many of them were reconstructions of intersections or spaces in front, resp. near schools or along the way to schools).

Project stages

1. Looking for participating schools

The specific and very important characteristic of this project is a voluntary, long-term participation of all interested groups of people (respectively their representatives) at all stages of its implementation from the initial analysis to the final change of the public space in question. As school projects within the SFRS program are rather complicated from the organizational point of view – as described above - and need quite a long time to be completely implemented (1 to several years) it is necessary to work only with schools and people who really want to be involved and believe in their success. We know they need sufficient motivation for such a long-term involvement, which is paid insufficiently or not at all. That is why, we mostly start our projects by searching for such schools and personalities through a public call on the internet and at the same time, through letters addressed to head masters and teachers who might be interested in transport or public spaces accessible and comfortable for pedestrians. Schools are supposed to fill in an application form, in which they answer some questions so that we can identify whether they understand the problem that is supposed to be solved together with children and mainly for children – to improve conditions for pedestrians on the way to school. The applications are assessed by a committee as normal applications for grants. The best applications win some small award for teachers and their assistants – consultants and some measures to support sustainable transport to school. Afterwards we speak to winners, discuss and explain goals and methods and answer their questions. In a similar way, we speak to representatives of official structures, which we unfortunately cannot choose (authorities, representatives of Prague districts, police etc.).

2. Project implementation

As described above, the implementation involves an analysis of the traffic situation near schools, of transport habits and preferences of pupils and processing a transport study by a road designer/ planner on the basis of this analysis, which proposes adjustments of public space on the way to or near schools. Children are able not only to identify dangerous or unpleasant localities, monitor the traffic near schools in cooperation with

the road designers resp. police and propose changes, but also publicly discuss and present their views to experts and officials or city district representatives using the internet and various computer applications without any problems. Our experience proves that children may be very creative and good partners for open discussions and teamwork if they feel independent and responsible for what they are doing. We have experienced the same results with adult people: if they feel their efforts are meaningful, they are very creative and powerful.

3. Realization of project proposals

The last stage - reaching the real change of the public space for pedestrians or cyclists is the most difficult and sometimes very frustrating. The problem is not only to convince authorities to adopt proposals and incorporate them into their plans, but to invest money from the public city budget. It sometimes takes several years before the space is changed according to the proposal coming out of the project. It depends not only on the lobbying activities of our association for a higher budget for road safety also on the activities of the given school – letters or visits of children to the district authority or the organization providing technical services to the city may prove quite effective as well as many other factors including individual personalities within public administration. The main problem is the lack of political will to support pedestrians and the lack or inability to communicate within the Prague City Hall, between city districts and the city hall and between citizens and authorities in general. However, our experience shows that if citizens do not lose their patience and do not stop communicating with the city or district officials or representatives, they usually reach their goals. Our aim is to assist them, mediate negotiations, to lobby for higher budget in favour of motor less transportation, etc.

Although we have worked out the methodology for the implementation of SFRS, each school project is quite different. In some schools, there are brilliant students or very creative pupils, in others teachers or parents, sometimes the city district are very supportive. But project results become the best if all participants (representatives) are able to communicate and reach a compromise. Students perform the best if they have motivating teachers who give them space to think and work independently.

All outcomes of SFRS are to be found on: ww.prazskematky.cz/projekty/bezpecne-cesty-do-skoly/database-realizovanych-projektu/cz. For the

best results in work with children see especially projects of ZŠ Slivenec, for the best reconstruction ZŠ Sázavská and for cooperation of a district official with children ZŠ Libuš.

Primary school (ZŠ) Slivenec

The school managed the program very well, especially a teacher who was in charge of the project, worked excellently with children, who have even created their own individual maps with marked dangerous localities, moreover, a group of students made up a school map out of these individual maps. The school also organized a lot of other events: training children their driving skills on the bike, children planted flowers in front of their school under the slogan „We want a park, not parking lots, organized children bike trips etc.

Primary schools (ZŠ) Sázavská

With the support of the City District of Prague 2, the public transport space was significantly improved within the frame of SFRS. For, example, in 2009 the reconstruction of the space in front of (ZŠ) Sázavská won a special award in the competition for the best street design in the CR “The paths through the cities” organized by the Partnership Foundation. For other realizations see the database of schools - ZŠ Londýnská, K.V. Raise on <http://www.prazskematky.cz/projekty/bezpecne-cesty-do-skoly/databaze-realizovanych-projektu/>

Primary school (ZŠ) Libuš

As for the SFRS project in the Libuš primary school (ZŠ Libuš) there was an excellent cooperation of teachers and students, who got enough space to work independently. Besides that, there was a very good relation to the district authority who coordinated the work with students in the student parliament. After finishing their one year project the students still go on activities to support sustainable transport in their district.



Pedestrians United

The project www.chodcisobe.cz, as described above, is perhaps our most successful activity to involve citizens into taking voluntary care of their public space. Our efforts to mediate the communication between citizens and the authorities in both directions have been fulfilled but not finished yet - there are always many things to be improved or developed. Even though it was rather difficult to make some representatives of public administration to participate in the project regularly and in a long-term perspective, the communication is getting better. We emphasize on solving the citizens incentives up to the final stage of changing the public space as in other projects, so the website chodcisobe.cz is not only a list of citizens complaints but it shows a continual process of citizens participation and communication between the public and their representatives or authorities. Many citizens come back to the site repeatedly, update the original information (so do authorities as well), or fill in the form for another incentive. We have made personal contacts with some of them (some of them even support the portal financially) and we are continuously trying to improve the communication with the public administration and speak to them in person. We have met in person and exchanged our experience. As partners of SGI we have organized a joint meeting of citizens and the public administration, Citizens for City. We are working on improving its functions and design within the City for Citizens project.

The current numbers of results on the website chodcisobe.cz (Period February 2012 - May 2014)

921
incentives were sent to the authorities
213
of them have been solved
625
were answered
55
of them stayed without any response
28
of them are being solved or processed

In addition to our long-term projects we have implemented also single actions involving citizens within SFRS programs. For example, parents of pupils from the primary school in Prague 6 - ZŠ N. Svobody, organized an event in front of school to demonstrate missing benches when waiting for children or friends. We invited the Mayor of Prague 6, the media, a road designer and of course, children and other parents to spend the afternoon together. We all placed some furniture in the square – a sofa, tables, chairs, a coffeemaker, an ice-cream machine and parents brought some snacks. We had a talk with the Mayor and explained that parents missed benches. The road designer explained his transport study to the officials and the reason why safe routes for children are good for everybody. Children were playing there, as they were on the playground, everybody was talking, eating, drinking coffee. As a result of this event, new benches were placed there by the public administration of Prague District 6 several months later.

Painting the Underpass

Painting the underpass was perhaps the most positive and joyful project experience for all participants: creative children, cooperating employees of Prague Technical Services, helpful parents and generous and friendly teachers. All of them enjoyed their participation in this activity, which was supposed to make the underpass lighter, safer and nicer in order to prevent children from crossing the busy communication Radlická on the surface on the way to Waldorf school in Prague – Jinonice.

The Anežka Case

The Anežka Case is the saddest and the most cautionary tale in the career of Prague Mothers. In late 2009 a desperate parent, whose 8 years old daughter was killed in a car accident on her way home from school, contacted us and asked for help when enforcing safer ways for children on their routes to and from school in Prague District 3. At first, the public administration denied to cooperate with our organization and citizens at all. Although the situation has been gradually changing - many proposals and several studies have been carried out, many meetings have been held and, several local governments have changed, the Anežka's place (the name of the killed girl) has not been reconstructed, yet. However, we

do not intend to stop our pressure until safer ways identified by children themselves will be improved. The present political representation of Prague City District promises to fix it as there are money in the public city budget to work on the reconstructions.

Restoring of 79 Cancelled Crossings

In spring 2010, citizens notified us that many pedestrian crossings had been cancelled in Prague during a very short period of time ("zebras" crossings were "erased"). We immediately started negotiations with the Prague City Hall and at the same time, with the Ministry of Transport and the media. Citizens kept us informed on other developments in Prague streets. Luckily, the deleting of pedestrian crossings was stopped right away and approximately a year later a new decree regulating the conditions for introducing crossing over tram rails came into force. There were about 150 crossings over tram rails cancelled in 2010 and most of them have been not only repainted but also reconstructed – see more on <http://www.prazskematky.cz/kauzy/>

Educational materials and Activities

Prague Mothers have also produced various educational materials, for example they prepared together with the help of teachers and environmental and other experts an interactive DVD "Sustainable Transport - Let's learn the consequences", organized workshops for children or international conference "City for People" and "City for Children" – see more in annual reports <http://www.prazskematky.cz/onas/vyrocnizpravy/>, http://www.prazskematky.cz/wp-content/uploads/PM_vyrocka_2010.pdf etc.

Repeatability

Pedestrians United

CMS of the portal Pedestrians United (chodcisobe.cz) can be used in any other city, it can be optionally extended to the whole republic, respectively to Europe. It is possible to add other sites for solving other issues in the area of public affairs, to add functions etc. It helps to encourage civic participation and networking.

Safe Routes to Schools

Similarly the project is applicable to other target groups not only to children such as companies or any other groups of adults. Again, it effectively encourages civic participation and thus civic society.

Recommendations

As mentioned above, we believe that any interventions are effective only if various methods such as participation, cooperation with public administration, happenings, media coverage, lobbying, advocacy, consultation, using expert services, discussions or presentations, workshops, conferences etc. are combined.

The obvious factor of successful intervention is combined with the cooperation between all possible sectors of society,

Despite various and many difficulties that NGOs or other groups face when intervening, they are able to succeed when they do not give up.

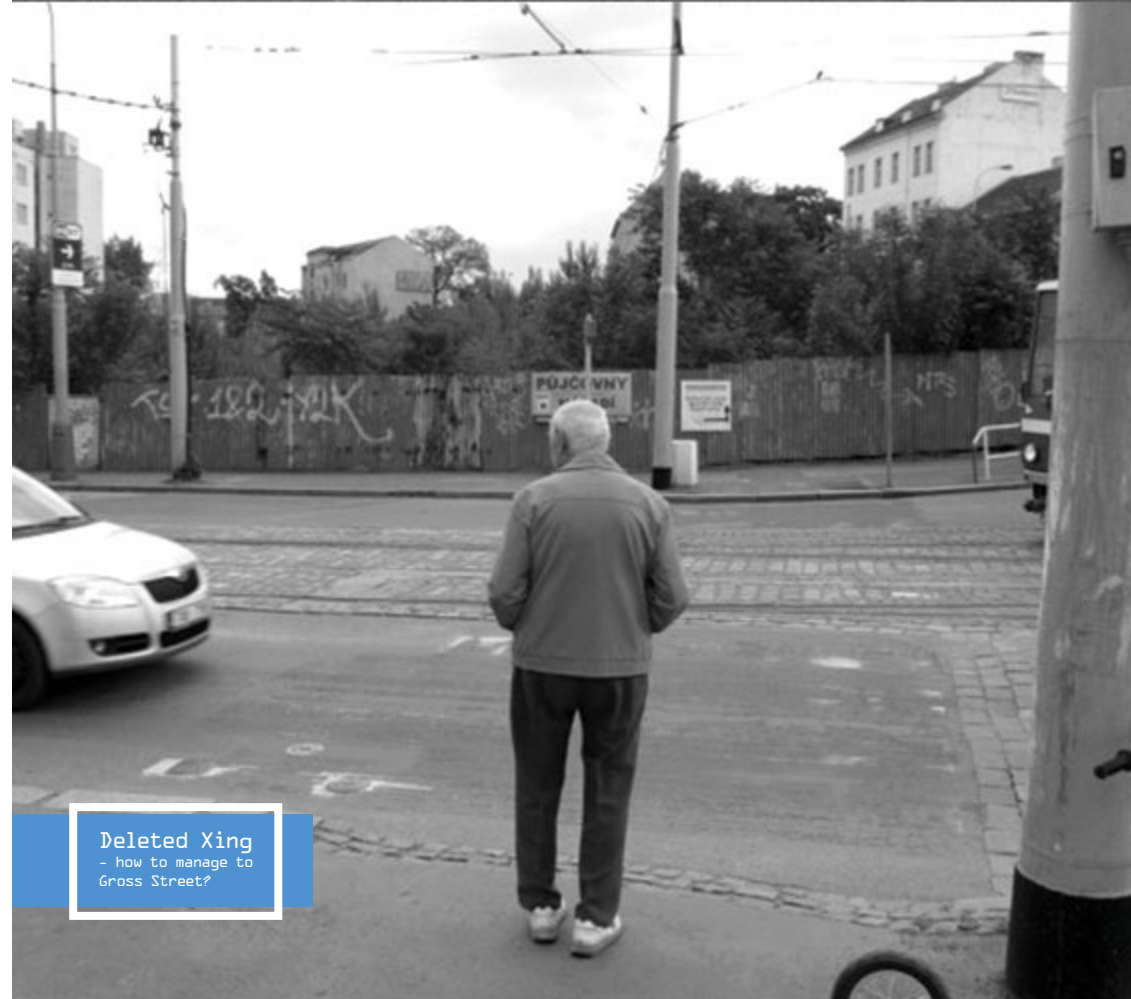
Based on our experience have learnt that positive approach is more successful than the negative one, however, it needs a critical view.

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Playing children
Happening Nam. Svobody



Painting the underpass in Jinonice
"The most beautiful birds
in the world"



Student Bike Ride
2013



Young artist painting the
underpass in Jinonice



PARKOTVOR - Opening the park in people's minds

By Dominika Belanská, Parkotvor (SK)

Summary

PARKOTVOR is an initiative for the improvement of the state of public spaces, green areas and parks. The members of the initiative, professionals and citizen-volunteers, create strategies for renewal that emerge from a dialogue between expertise and the potential of the local community.

Currently, the initiative works on a project of revitalization of park Skotňa in the city of Prievidza, Slovakia. Based on the cooperation between local inhabitants and the municipality, the initiative makes its first interventions and shapes a strategic proposal of an upgrade of the park into a more attractive, vital and well-used space, which would become a heart of the community.

PARKOTVOR considers the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, local youth, leaders of local organizations, political and civic representatives, and other inhabitants of the city to be important stakeholders in the process of the renewal. In September 2013, the initiative invited all stakeholders to a participatory planning event and offered the opportunity to share their insights and knowledge in order to come up with recommendations concerning its future development and use.

This article offers a detailed insight at the motivation, approach, methods and results of the initiative, and attempts to serve as an inspiration for their possible adaptation and refinement in conditions of other cities in Slovakia or abroad.

Challenges of public spaces in Slovakia

In Slovakia and other post-soviet countries, most public spaces are not destinations. They have become transitory places between work, shopping and sleeping. The long-term undermaintenance, dirtiness, non-functional or missing facilities - all of this contributes to their devaluation and to the ongoing self-ostracism of the city dwellers out of the public domain into their private spaces and lives. The city municipalities, overwhelmed with the unbearable extents of public spaces inherited from modernist urbanisation, are not able to sustain their adequate maintenance and programming by themselves.

On the other hand, the financial means available for the revitalisation of public spaces (e. g. from EU resources) are not always invested in a way, which would address the real local needs adequately and creatively. Contracting the projection works and realisation based on the lowest price contribute to the low quality of most projects (Mareš, 2012: 5). The 'revitalised' spaces are often being merely furnished with generic benches and paved with cheapest concrete tiles, instead of being transformed into lively and attractive spaces for interaction.

Not only the physical matter constituting public spaces, but the social connections and interactions happening in it, need reshaping and stimulation¹ (Kratochvíl, 2012: 10). Preserving the current low level of authentic citizen involvement in the creation and renewal of public spaces, would lessen the chance to take into account the real needs of their users and for a radical increase in their popularity, sustainability and building social capacity².

As a consequence of these conditions, a new wave of "urban pioneers" is growing in Slovak cities. These initiatives and organisations are not only striving to address the problematic issues, but also offer solutions, voluntary work and skills of their members and co-workers. They understand that the role of "public" and its relationship with the governing bodies should change and they want to take part in the decision-making mechanisms of the urban development and management³.

1 "The term 'public space' points at two levels: at the physically defined shape, and at the life, which fills it. A square without specific activities, human interactions and relationships is not a public space, it remains just a physical place."

2 The advantages of involvement of public into decision-making are well summarized in the publication Prostory (2013: 86 - 87).

3 The attempts of civic initiatives to change the behaviour of the municipality, but also fails and frustrations from their minimal effect, are described in the blog of the initiative Zelená hliadka. <http://zelenahliadka.blog.sme.sk/c/347703/Kultura-obhajoby-na-bratislavskom-Magistrate.html>



Parkotvor

PARKOTVOR is one of these initiatives, run by enthusiasm and a strive for a change in the way of thinking, that would enable a more productive dialogue between the top-down and the bottom-up management of public domain. We would like to create a platform, which would allow this dialogue. We are trying to provide us and our collaborators with reliable methods and know-how and set a motivating example, which, in the long run, could provoke a systemic change.

How PARKOTVOR was born

Since Jakub Kmeť has become an administrator of the project "Odkazprestarostu.sk" (Message for the Mayor) launched by the Slovak Governance Institute, which collects and mediates the complaints of citizens to municipalities in a number of Slovak cities, he has been facing the problems of the local citizens in his hometown, Prievidza. He approached his friends and acquaintances with applicable experience, to cooperate and approach these problems constructively and creatively. In consequence, PARKOTVOR was established in 2012 as a civic initiative, with the aim to explore public spaces in Prievidza and find ways to transform them via cooperation with local stakeholders.

The team of the initiative now consists of nine members - Jakub Kmeť, Dominika Belanská, Veronika Lahká, Kristína Marošová, Juraj Matiaško, Martin Tragor, Ivana Rybanská, Tomáš Pekár and Alojz Vlčko. All members of the team are in some way connected to the city of Prievidza: some of us live in the city or in the outskirts; others had been raised there, but have left the city to study or work elsewhere, but through this project, they are coming back more often to their hometown - not anymore just to visit their families, but also to use their know-how, skills and "outside" experience.

The members of the team have already had considerable experience in coordination of non-governmental organizations (Ars Preuge, Berkát, Námestie pre ľudí, Poznaj a chráň, Slovenský skauting), and expertise in one or more of the fields of spatial planning, architecture, urbanism, environment protection, participatory planning, community making projects, youth involvement, education, artistic creation, media, PR, coordination of volunteers and more.

Two members of the initiative are also employees of the local municipality. Their insights into the operating mechanisms of the municipality have been very helpful.

Situation and location

Prievidza is located in the central part of Slovakia and has a population of 50,000 inhabitants. This town with a history dating back nine centuries, once known for its high amount of greenery, has been perpetually losing individual trees, isles of greenery and small parks due to new speculative developments.

Park Skotňa, covering an area of five hectares, is the smallest of three major compact parks in the city, but the only park in the city centre. The park was established in 1970's after a demolition of the historically oldest street of the city originally inhabited by the families of local craftsmen. The southern side of the street was re-urbanized, but the plots on the northern side of the street were turned into a public park, after the site was suspected to be geologically too unstable to be built on again. The old gardens and vineyards that belonged to the houses have been transformed into a park that now has an interesting botanical mix of species, with a few traces of the original gardens. The park has a rather natural appearance and atmosphere with no artificial landscaping or sophisticated interventions. The facilities of the park are minimal. They consist of public lighting, a few benches and trash bins, two ping-pong tables, improvised football field and a viewpoint, surrounded by handrail for safety.

The park is situated on a pedestrian connection between the centre and one of the main sights of the city, a monument - catholic church from the 12th century - surrounded by historic fortification and a cemetery, which is located on the east end of the park on a hill. The highest point at the edge of a cliff has been serving as a viewpoint, allowing a nice view to the valley underneath.

The neighbourhood of the park is a mixture of housing, offices, schools, cultural establishment and shopping facilities. Streets with individual housing and a high school border on the north, prefabricated panel mass-housing from 1970s form a small quarter with a kindergarten and shop on the south. On the west side of the park, regional cultural institutions - library, cultural centre and gallery - reside, along with an agency for

environmental affairs. A few meters further eastwards, a small shopping centre and the biggest high school of the city can be found.

} Park needs people, people need park(s)

The benefits of preserving the existing and creating new parks in the fabric of the city go beyond the pleasant visual effect of leafy vegetation. Parks contribute to the well-being of the citizens, regeneration of their physical and mental health and satisfaction, they balance the microclimate and CO2 levels, absorb other emissions and contamination, and provide the irreplaceable recreational and compensatory capacity of open space in the urbanized environment (Prostory, 2013: 124).

Perfect location, interesting history and a rich variety of natural environment and landscape predict a phenomenal potential of Park Skotňa. However, the place has not been widely recognised as a public park - the inhabitants rather understood it as an unidentified piece of greenery. The name of the park itself - "Skotňa" has not been commonly recognized by the citizens. People use the space mostly for a walk (39%), for pedestrian transit (9%), to walk the dog (17%) and for other kinds of occasional recreation (15%). Some have not recognised any use for it at all (15%)⁴.

The lawns in the neighbourhood of the church are used once a year for special church ceremony. Practically no other organized activities happen in the park year-round.

The obvious difference between the potential and the real use of the park drew the attention of the PARKOTVOR initiative towards developing a strategy of transformation of the park into a lively destination for the local communities as well as for the visitors of the city.

> The strategy: Shifting the mindsets

Our intention was to evoke an interest of the inhabitants towards the presence and the potential of the park, to mobilize the local communities, which could become an engine for further valorisation of the locality and ensure perpetuation of its existence and meaningful use. We understood that the participation of the local public and the decision makers in each

4 From a public inquiry via questionnaire performed on site by PARKOTVOR, 13th September 2013.

step of this "rehabilitation" process of the park was crucial, if sustainable and supported solutions were supposed to be proposed⁵ (KUCINA, 2011: 8).

A proper participation of stakeholders in the revitalisation of the park allowed them to "build a personal relationship" with the park, so they would "begin to perceive it as their own." In that way, the interest in its active use would grow "... along with the understanding of its value and the will to participate in its maintenance and further development." (Belanská, 2012: 29).

The name that was chosen for the PARKOTVOR initiative - is a play with words, that in translation into English means 'open-the-park', as well as 'park-creature'. This has become a leitmotif of the communication of the initiative: each participant of the activities in the park could project himself/herself into an imaginary 'parkotvor' - a creature of the park, which perceives the park as its natural environment, a place it can care for, and that also opens to other beings to share it and create it together. However, there was no actual need to open the park as physically, it is accessible to everybody - it is not fenced. The challenge was to open the park in the mind of people.

The initiative assumed, that the way leading to a change of mindset is a sensitive, step-by-step participatory process, in which local stakeholders would be given an active role, and which would also have an enlightening and educational aspect when applicable.

Before any direct interventions would be made, the initiative wanted to examine how the park was perceived and used by the local dwellers and identify the problems and potentials of the space. The initiative wanted to shape new possible roles and functions of the park with the users, based on a belief, that a successful involvement of users in the co-creation of spaces has a number of positive effects: "through emotional attachment to one's own work as a community matter, the users become more affiliated to their environment, they appreciate it and treasure it, and feel like being a part of it. The devoted time, work and experience that go along with its making and its creative use boost its significance" (BELANSKÁ, 2012: 10).

5 From the citizen viewpoint, participation can enable individuals to influence institutional decisions. From the institutional viewpoint, participation can build public support for planned activities.

} Researching the plot, finding the partners

The initial step of mapping and understanding the location was very closely bound with the intent to identify local stakeholder groups and find the right partners for the process: The cliff on the east side of the park made us think of local mountain climbers' club, that might find the rock as their potential territory. The presence of the catholic church led us to think how the church community uses the location and we have identified their leader – the priest as an important opinion maker. The cultural centre and library on the other side of the park were perceived as a great potential of introducing cultural program into the future programming of the park. The historical references of the park inspired us to contact the local club of history fans. Moreover, own memories of members of our team (such as sledging the hilly lawns of the park in winter as they were kids), have pervaded and enriched our research and projections of the next possible steps.

The physical landscape and environment of the park was rich in inputs and associations and vice versa - the institutions, offices and social capital surrounding of the park was perceived as a true potential for possible partners in the process and future users of the park.

This perception came hand in hand with the proposed open-minded strategy of the involvement of stakeholders - while looking at the map, we did not see only a piece of land with grass and trees, surrounded by houses and crossed by pathways, but a dense field of associations, contacts and suggestions. These are always subject to emerge, if we manage to switch from thinking firstly about “what is wrong with the place and how should we change it?” (project-based approach) into “who should be invited to contribute to the discussion and cooperation?” (place and community-based approach)⁶.

Focusing on the place, people and connections, we have succeeded to contact and involve a wide group of partners into our project. Schools, local scout organisation, local experts in the field of environment protection, devotees of history of the location, librarians, members of local municipal council, and also the local municipality leaders, were all invited to contribute. To accumulate as much knowledge as possible, we

⁶ Adapted from the online resources of organisation PPS / Project for Public Spaces - www.pps.org

interviewed people who have a long-term experience with the locality, and the conception of the park itself, such as the landscape architect of the park. We also talked to the chief architect of the city. The intentions of the initiative were presented at a meeting with the members of the local board of municipal council, who expressed their support.

During the initial phase of sharing our intentions and making contacts, we have also succeeded to get valuable recommendations, demanded by a foundation in a grant call, from the deputy mayor and the member of the municipal council Ľuboš Maxina, who stated, that he welcomes the idea to “think conceptually about the use of this public space” (referring to the park). He expressed hope, that “possible ways of revitalisation and the future use of the park would be found with the inhabitants,” and that, referring to our initiative, he fully supports the “activities of the enthusiasts” and that he is also willing to come in person to our planned participatory event⁷.

The intentions of the initiative were presented at a meeting with the members of the board of the municipal council representing the district, where the park is located, and they also expressed their support and offered personal help e.g. with technical aspects of the event.

Financial support for the realisation of our project was granted from the program ‘Europe for Citizens’, awarded by the European Commission via the Slovak Governance Institute (SGI) and from the project ‘Oživujeme verejný priestor’ (Revitalising the public space) by Intenda. The technical and material support was provided by the City of Prievidza, KASS (local cultural centre), RKC (regional cultural centre), company PrievidzaNET and individual contributions.

> Participatory planning event

The launch of the process of involving stakeholders and the actual first steps towards gaining suggestions for the future revitalisation of the park was the participatory event “Parkotvor”, organized on-site by the initiative and its partners on 13 September, 2013.

Its aims were to bring people into the park, to spend time there and explore it in an interesting manner, meet the local inhabitants and other

⁷ Recommendation cited from the application for funding from O2 Think Big grant scheme, April 2013. Project name: PARKOTVOR

stakeholders and collect their valuable insights about the park, as well as suggestions and wishes for its future function and appearance.

The event was planned to be full of activities and interaction. A variety of methods of participatory planning and educational tools were chosen and adapted to meet the goals. The approaches and methods were based on the experience of members of the initiative, such as participatory planning of Kamenné square in Bratislava by the initiative Námestie pre ľudí (Square for people) (Belanská, 2012); or tested by other experts in citizen involvement in Slovakia and internationally, e. g. Tomáš Hanáček's version of 'urban walk'⁸ (Droppová et al., 2013), and Zora Pauliniová and Karolína Miková, who conducted participatory planning processes in the program PrieStory.

The mix of methods for collecting impressions and suggestions was adjusted so that a wide spectrum of participants would be included - from children to senior citizens, from passers-by to those, who would spend a few hours in the park. Some of them took a chance to add their impressions and experiences on the big emotion map, joined the discussion to present their opinions and insights, or the walk to explore the park, others preferred to fill in a written questionnaire.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire remains the basic and standard way of getting into people's attitudes and experience with the researched space in a short period of time. For Parkotvor's needs, a survey was performed at the event, using a simple and short questionnaire, which demanded answers to these basic questions:

What do you like and what do you dislike in Park Skotňa?

How do you use the park and how often?

What kind of changes would you welcome in the park?

What kind of activities would you welcome in the park?

Participants were also asked to add information about their age, sex and occupation.

We have posed the question so that they would not contain misleading

⁸ Hanáček used his version of method 'urban walk' first in project "Trenčín si ty!" (video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVII1Y5yhtQ), later in Kamenné square, Bratislava (www.namestiepreludi.sk/ako-dalej-kamenne, p. 18-23) and Karloveská zátoka, Bratislava (DROPOVÁ et. al., 2013)

suggestions. The obtained data was evaluated not only statistically, but also provided qualitative interpretations.

Planning walk

Planning walk is a method of participatory planning, in which a walk is being transformed into a resourceful mean of engaging participants in discussion about a variety of issues and collect suggestions right on the spot. In the case of the participatory planning event in Park Skotňa, the walk through the park had five different "hotspots", strategically located according to the topics and with good overview. At each point, a special information board was placed temporarily, which contained historical reference, suggestion for the future of the park in the form of visualisation/ collage and a space for placing suggestions and reactions written on post-it cards by the participants of the walk.

The standing points, commentaries, discussion focus, and intent of the information panels were chosen in a way that the walk comprised the whole area of the park and touched various aspects and topics. Local host speakers at each standpoint introduced and explained historical aspects of the location, as well as intentions in the planning of the park, or the diverse fauna and flora. After introductory notes, a micro-discussion was evoked by the walk guide (facilitator), with the help of images on boards with visualisations of what might be possible in the future. After that, people were asked to make comments on post-it cards and leave them on the board.

This method has enabled us to inform the participants about interesting facts about the park and some of the possibilities of its use and appearance so, that in the next stage it could have been reflected and discussed. Inspirational ideas have been preserved on the post-it cards, ready for further analysis and evaluation.

Workshops with students from local schools

Local schools were asked to send their students to spend some time at the event in the park with us and participate in educational and creative workshops. Together, almost 100 children and young people aged 13 to 18 from three local schools participated.

The students were working in groups divided by classes, each guided

by at least two lecturers. The students were given a short introduction on the goals of the event, reasons and benefits of participatory approach in planning and decision-making, and also on the history of the park. It was important that they would understand their role in the planning and that their work can be useful.

After that, divided into smaller groups, they went for an “expedition-walk”, each group in their assigned part of the park, with a task to explore it in detail and collect specific materials they would find. Consequently, they posed them on a big printed map accordingly, and thereby created a material map of the park, where various kinds of leaves, grass, fruit, stones, branches, but also rubbish, gave an insight on the qualities and character of the environment.

Based on the individual observations and spatial experience from the walk, a discussion was provoked about the findings and impressions of each group, critical attitudes were called for and problems were identified and localised.

After the summarizing analysis, a new creative task was given to the groups - to make a proposal concerning the future of their given segment of the park, according to their ideas, wishes and based on the previous research. The proposals were drawn into maps and individual sketches and at the end of the workshop presented to classmates.

Moreover, the observations, proposals and designs made by students represent a rich source of interesting ideas for the possible functions and facilities, that Park Skotňa should offer in order to be more attractive to the young generation of users, such as an open-air cinema or bike pitstop.

} Emotion map

Coloured post-it cards with emoticon imprints were used for the emotion map, which was located in the park during the whole day and providing passers-by with the opportunity to mark places, which they associate with certain feelings, ranging from positive to negative.

Unlike the way the method was used in the participatory planning in Kamenné square, Bratislava by the initiative Bratislava hrá na city (2012), in the emotion map prepared by Parkotvor people could also write on the cards what exactly caused their emotions. Therefore, the initiative got not only a quantitative map of positive versus negative spots, but a much more complex and precise image of what are the causes for pleasure,

despair or anger of the park users.

The importance of this method lies in discovering the most favourite as well as the most detested places or situations that people may encounter in this location. The indirect effect of the method was, that people were inspired to explore their emotions towards the space, thus could realize, that they might have a certain relationship with the location. They could also realize, whether their attitudes are based on their personal experience, knowledge or prejudice.

} Public discussion

In the evening, after the planning activities, a mapping public discussion was held indoors, in a conference hall of the Regional Cultural Centre, which is located at the edge of the park. It was important, that representatives of all stakeholder groups from public and from local government were present in the audience - the mayor, Katarína Macháčková, the deputy mayor and other representatives of the municipality and its council, the director of Regional Cultural Centre, which hosted the discussion, was also participating, the representatives of local communities were present, such as the priest from the local catholic church, and other local inhabitants came, too. Altogether, approximately 50 people were present, and among them were many of those, who actively participated also in other parts of the event throughout the day. (This could have been a sign, that they enjoyed the interaction and wanted it to continue, or that they were curious about further steps or needed to stress their attitudes.)

At the beginning of the meeting, the aims of the initiative and the actions of the whole day of the participatory event were summarized by the members of the initiative. Topics which seemed sensitive or knotty, and needed further discussion, were pinpointed. After that, the facilitator led the process, allowing everybody who wanted to express his/her views on the point, to have a chance to speak. The mayor also got the word, but was not privileged with more time or opportunities for contribution compared to the other guests present. The major role of the mayor in this discussion was to listen to the inhabitants and present the point of view of the municipality.

To save all contributions for further utilization, the discussion was video-recorded and a record was also being written down live and projected on screen during the discussion, to allow the participants to control what was being recorded.

With the indispensable professional work of the independent facilitator, Zora Pauliniová (PDCS), the discussion was held and kept in a friendly, non-conflict atmosphere. The facilitator was not only giving space to discussants, but also summarized crucial ideas and showed overlaps in presented proposals (PROSTORY, 2013: 87).

People who gathered for the discussion were perceived as equal individuals with the same rights to express their attitudes. This kind of setting worked as a premise for constructive and valuable exchange of ideas. Unlike many other public discussions about governing issues in Slovak cities, people could leave with a satisfaction of being heard and having contributed to the discourse about their neighbourhood.

Results of participatory planning and their implementation

After the public discussion, the program continued with informal conversations and concerts of local musicians and a young band from the region. The visitors were offered free buffet with traditional goulash, prepared and served on site by municipality council members. Although the discussions throughout the day had brought up repeatedly concerns about the possible negative impact of loud music on the neighbourhood, we did not get any complaints regarding this evening concert.

We were satisfied with the quality of the contribution of the local inhabitants and the diversity of the participants who showed interest. We were left with an impression that the park matters to the inhabitants. The event was an opportunity for them to see the park from a new perspective and to spend time together and exchange ideas. The peaceful flow of the event and public discussion suggests, that it was a successful first step towards the cooperation among the stakeholders in the process of revitalisation of the park.

Almost all participants of the planning event agreed on the point, that the park must be preserved and no part of this area should be cut away or overbuilt. They wanted the vegetation to be preserved and better cared for. The matters, which were discussed the most were: safety (which according to the participants has decreased due to unsatisfactory night lighting and presence of the homeless), cleanliness (insufficient amount

of trash bins and low maintenance), missing outdoor facilities (such as benches, playgrounds etc.) and programming of the park, and absent accentuation of historical references. In general, the park should offer a bigger variety of occasions for spending time, such as cultural events, but these should not endanger the quiet atmosphere of the park and its recreational use. There were also interesting proposals of a more complex nature, e.g. establishing a bike route connecting the three major parks in Prievidza or night illumination of the church, so that it would become a dominant in the night skyline of the city.

All the opinions and suggestions that were collected during the planning event are being summarized and implemented by the initiative into the recommendations for the future of the park, which will be presented to the municipality representatives and published online on our website. These recommendations will be at hand for the municipality or other decision-makers, who would approach the locality, and will be drafted in two levels: as a strategic, complex manual - for example in case of a bigger investment into the revitalisation of park and as a leading thread for small interventions, improvements and necessary maintenance of the park.



The next steps of PARKOTVOR

PARKOTVOR wants to continue in facilitating and keeping alive the discussion about the park and its future and also to take actions to foster its potential.

After having covered an overview of the whole area of park in general, smaller areas and partial themes were tactically chosen, to enable a hands-on approach on a smaller scale that corresponded to the means and capacity of the initiative.

As the first focus point, the area on the hill with the viewpoint was chosen, for reasons explained in the next chapter.

Based on the results of the participatory planning, an action-plan of the next viable steps of the initiative was also proposed, with the aim of dealing with issues which have been identified as the most urgent or important, and to sustain the continuity of involvement of local communities into the life of the park. Perpetual engagement of the local public into the activities was considered as crucial, because it would provide them with the opportunity to become co-producers of the tangible changes that would be made, build up their mental attachment to the locality and

increase the feeling of responsibility for its well-being.

For the next summer and autumn season (2014), a series of participatory events for wide public was proposed. The events should have a form of creative workshops embedded in topics like importance of parks, proper maintenance of the park, invasive plants, barriers of pedestrian motion in park and their dissolving, life and culture in the park and local traditions. Each event is supposed to be conducted by local or guest lecturer, a specialist in the field, who should introduce the subject and guide the participants in realisation of related interventions in the park. Local partners, established or new, will be asked to contribute to the conception and organization of the events.

The initiative will attempt to succeed in the realization of the proposed actions, providing that it will have enough personal resources and financial support from grants and partners.

First footprints of PARKOTVOR

Especially critically perceived by the inhabitants was the location of the viewpoint on the hill, in the neighbourhood of the historical church and cemetery. According to the citizens, the viewpoint was under-maintained and even dangerous, the view itself was obstructed by overgrown vegetation and there was no reference to the important history of the place, nor any specification for the visitors about what natural or urban elements can be actually seen from the viewpoint.

The participants openly expressed a wish to transform this area. Proposals to use this part of the park for sports, barbecues or other kinds of divertissement was, however, by some of the participants understood as clashing with the historical and religious character of the space.

The initiative recognised that the viewpoint and the neighbouring area need an active intervention. Following the suggestions of inhabitants and consultations with the local environment protection experts, we proposed a project for the revitalisation of the viewpoint divided into series of workshops and based on quick and affordable means and voluntary work of our team and partners.

The first event took place in February 2014. We named it 'Ples v Skotni' (Ball Dancing in Skotňa), inspired by the ballroom season running at the time. The event was in gloves, indeed, but fellow volunteers and we

'danced' with litterbags, and collected rubbish from the illegal dump in the forest which borders the viewpoint. Forty-two litterbags were filled and disposed.

Consequently, at the end of March 2014, we organized another intervention, called 'Návrat výhledu na vyhlídku' (Comeback of the View). The overgrown bushes, which were obstructing the view from the viewpoint were sawed and cut short. The voluntary help of members of local tourist club was vital. The reason why the viewpoint was actually there - to allow visitors to see through into the valley and further into distance - was restored.

Both these interventions advanced the viewpoint closer to a more adequate and attractive appearance and were the first physical 'footprints' of the PARKOTVOR initiative in the park. The next levels in the process of the renewal of the viewpoint - installing benches and trash bins, repainting the handrail, installing information panels and arborist treatment of two old lime trees - will be attempted to be realized step-by-step, if the required personal and financial resources are found.

The lessons learned

The research, participatory planning and interaction with local stakeholders have brought up a great deal of inspiration and impulses for the work of the initiative. The park, its name, identity and future was made a discussed topic.

Citizen feedback

It was rather difficult to map the feedback of the local community on our actions and deliver an objective assumption of reactions, due to the low accessibility of the focus groups by social media and online tools, which are most accessible and affordable for the initiative. However, the reactions of local inhabitants that we could monitor (e.g. from personal meetings during the planning event and other actions in the park or from online social networks) were mostly positive.

But there were also many people, who expressed fear and suspected us of intending to initiate building development on the site. It was crucial to explain accurately what the objectives of the initiative were. We also

met with scepticism and resignation of people, who, probably because of their previous experience and observations of governing of the city or the state, did not believe that the proposed changes will ever be realised. We also got a lot of positive response, support and encouragement from the locals, but generally, we lacked the kind of pro-active, 'let's-do-it-together' attitude. The partnerships with local initiatives, clubs or individuals were mostly initiated from the side of the initiative, not the other way round.

Learning from these observations, the initiative will attempt to be more inviting and open towards possible contributors and will try to explain more accurately the possibilities of collaboration and contribution to the actions, not only to their realisation, but also to planning and organising, thus becoming more imbedded in the core of the initiative. We hope that it can be a way of making the initiative and its actions more rooted in the local community and also more vivid and sustainable.

Reflection in the media

The printed media played an important role in hitting our target groups of local inhabitants, because the online social media proved to be inefficient. The contact with local media has been good. On occasions, we provided them with press releases and also arranged PR articles. Invitations to our actions and reports were published in the local and regional press and television and we were asked for statements to our actions repeatedly and cited mostly correctly. An optimistic 'buzz' was created about our actions.

In the context of our actions of cleaning the park from rubbish and the restoration of the viewpoint, the members of the team were referred to as "indispensable enthusiasts"⁹. This perception is rather flattering, and states an interesting alternative to the tag 'activists', which has been used by the Slovak media in the past years to portray active citizens as those, who protest against any kind of development or change and has rather negative connotations.

The level of featuring the global issues that the initiative is trying to address, such as the importance of collaboration between public and municipality or the crucial role of participatory planning, has been slowly rising, and we consider this to be an effect of a smooth communication

9 www.prievidza.sme.sk/c/7164601/nenahraditelni-nadsenci-cistia-a-upratuju-zadarmo.html

between the journalists and initiative representatives, who are often asked to give statements in written form.

A big challenge lies in an attempt to shift the perception of the active citizenship not only as a remarkable voluntary aid, but also as an important and constructive attitude, that enriches and improves the standards of the decision-making process about public issues. To perform this shift, the quality of reflection of active citizenship provided by the media is very important. Reading an article with a paraphrase, that rings the bell, like "The main interest of Parkotvor is not the cleaning of public spaces but primarily the transformation of the park into a space, where municipality, inhabitants or cultural institutions would meet and create the surroundings together"¹⁰, make the attempts worthwhile.

Municipality as a partner

Unexpectedly, in Spring 2014, the initiative was awarded 'for the realization of non-traditional cultural activities in the year 2013' in a regional culture awards ceremony. At the ceremony, special thanks to contributors to the local culture and society, including PARKOTVOR, was expressed by the mayor.

In a discussion during the international conference Mesto pre ľudí, ľudia pre mesto (City for the People, People for the City), organized by the Slovak Governance Institute as a part of the Europe for Citizens Programme, the municipality spokesman Michal Ďureje acclaimed the importance of the initiative and expressed that the municipality values our actions¹¹.

The municipality was an important partner throughout the whole process. The local representatives welcomed and supported our actions, helped out if possible and took an active part in the planning event, either by participating in the public discussion (mayor, deputy mayor), or by providing technical assistance and self-made catering (members of municipal council). Technical assistance was provided by the city maintenance service, too, in the form of the transport and disposal of the trash, collected by the volunteers during the cleaning of the park, and

10 www.prievidza.sme.sk/c/7164601/nenahraditelni-nadsenci-cistia-a-upratuju-zadarmo.html

11 www.youtube.com/watch?v=fP8BouLsCWA (1:48 - 1:50)

also of the branches of bushes displaced during the 'Comeback of the view'.

After the planning event, a summary of results of the planning event, plans for the next steps and basic recommendations for the first interventions, which could be co-financed by the municipality (such as extension of public lighting and reconstruction of pavements), were presented to the local board of members of the municipal council. The reactions of the council members were positive and they decided to set aside some finances from the city budget for co-funding our next actions, such as reconstructing the pavement leading to the viewpoint and thus provided co-financing for our current foreground intent, which is the renewal of the viewpoint.

The cooperation with the municipality was for the most part trouble-free and bilaterally beneficial. It is also to mention that having members of the team that are employed by the municipality was extremely timesaving. The communication with the municipalities is usually much more complicated and slower, without knowing exactly where to go for advice or which officer to approach with a specific question or demand.

There were, however, situations, where even this fact could not help and the coordination and communication failed. In Spring 2014, we applied for a grant from the Pontis foundation, the program 'Obce bližšie k vám' (Municipalities Closer to You), with the agreement from the municipality to co-finance the proposed project by 20 percent. Unfortunately, the municipality also send their own project into the same grant program, which was against the rules and led to our disqualification from the grant scheme and losing the potential funding of 6,500 Euro, which could enable us to organize five complex participatory workshops connected with interventions in park during the summer season of 2014. No matter what caused this misunderstanding - whether it was inconsistency of the grant setup or passing over the details of terms and conditions - it was an experience that advised us to scrutinize similar situations in the future to prevent frustrations and wasting of energy and time.

Reserves and limits

Junge-Reyer¹² states that some of the 'urban pioneers' who provoke

change in the cities, can grow into being stable partners in the development of the city: "there are projects, that, although originally intended to be of limited duration, put down roots in one location, grow, develop and become professional. They thus contribute to a location's long-term, sustainable development" (Junge-Reyer, 2007:18). Whether PARKOTVOR will turn into such an established partner or will at least work as an inspiration for other movements that will follow, is hard to predict at the moment. But after more than a year of its existence we have already seen that there are limitations of its functioning that will probably have to be confronted soon.

Although the team of the PARKOTVOR initiative is quite large (consists of nine people), and the distribution of roles and tasks has been usually smooth and successful, the fact, that only five of us live in the city and the other four commute to the meetings and events from other cities, seems to be limiting. All of the members work on the projects of PARKOTVOR only in their free time on a voluntary basis, alongside their day-to-day jobs and other projects.

The members mostly perceive the activities as a purposeful contribution of their free time to the upgrading of their environment and an enjoyable way to spend time with friends, and most of them do not have the ambition to professionalize their role in the initiative.

Resultant lack of continuously dedicated personal resources reflects upon the irregularity of the actions of the initiative and unintentionally complicates the ambition for a closer and more profound interaction with the local stakeholders.

None of the members of the team has been put into the position of a stable team leader or community leader, yet. What could have been done sooner and still is a viable option, is further opening the team of the initiative to new people, who could take over the drive and then redistribute tasks and responsibility. Maybe, among the local inhabitants, a resourceful person could be found, that would adopt the position of a motor of the community engagement and made the revitalisation of the park his/her dedication and free time fulfilment.

Some members of the team also keep in mind the possibility to promote a change in thinking on the level of governance and to affect the structural decision-making processes. But to push these ambitions through, much

¹² Junge-Reyer is Berlin's ex-mayor and ex-senator for city development.

more time and energy would have to be invested than is available at the moment. The position of the initiative in the city's stakeholder map is still only crystallizing. We believe that by producing visible results of the step-by-step, hands-on approach, which can serve as a positive example and inspiration for others, a lot can be accomplished, too.

A considerable option for the future management of the park would be, that the city municipality would create a paid position for a person who would act as an active connector between the municipality and the local stakeholders and be able to manage the essential programming of the place.

This scenario would work only if the city prioritized the need for a sustained participatory process and community involvement in the revitalisation of the park, and that this person would specialize only on a few selected, maximum three prioritized locations throughout the city.

An alternative scenario is that the local cultural institutions, such as KASS (Cultural and Social Centre Prievidza) or RKC (Regional Cultural Centre) would employ a worker with similar responsibilities, or a community worker, and thus the location could benefit also from the resources of local culture.

An interesting way of dealing with the need of community involvement and creative participation is the project SPOTs in Košice. Unused heat transformation stations in selected neighbourhoods were turned into community centres. These 'spots' employ cultural workers who communicate with the local community on a daily basis, and guest lecturers and artists, who help organize variety of cultural and educational events¹³.

Recommendations

Create an interdisciplinary team

The actions of PARKOTVOR were preceded by many meetings of the team, where concepts and methods were shaped. The interdisciplinary nature of the team was very beneficial and contributed to the development of a multi-faceted strategy.

If you seem to lack a specialist in some field, do not hesitate to invite a new member into the team, ideally based on previous good experience or a recommendation from a trustworthy person. Sometimes, an open call for a position also works out. Make sure everybody in the team contributes to the shaping of the overall directions and strategies and has an equal chance to give and receive feedback. Distribute roles and tasks sensitively and according to experience. This way, your team has a chance to stay motivated.

Invite external facilitators and consultants

The fact that the locality was familiar to the members of the initiative has been a strong aspect and proved to be our strong point. But having also someone to think outside the box, who is independent, but not personally involved, helps a lot. Based on our own experience, we would recommend inviting skilful external facilitators and consultants, especially in a situation when objectivity is at risk. An external consultant can bring up concepts that might seem inapplicable for the people from the internal environment, but can be found enlightening when given a try.

An expert with experience in participatory planning can help with the choice, adaptation and performance of the right methods for your project and anticipate the best possible outcomes.

Invite everybody

You never know, who will come with the best idea, tell a crucial matter or save the day with an important discovery. In the long-run, the best results are usually reached, if all parties feel free to join the discussion. Keep mailing lists and contact lists, or create newsletters, so that all the people who have showed interest are continuously dragged "into the game".

Be specific about why and how people should contribute to the project or take part in the initiative.

Concentrate on the process

Focusing on the process (rather than on solutions, surpass your projected designs), makes the projects that involve public an extraordinary experience. Keeping your mind open for new impulses and alterations

of the project throughout the whole process, allows for a much bigger flexibility in dealing with the unexpected, which has the likelihood of appearing, when diverse stakeholder groups are engaged.

Do not overshoot or miss the target

Ask yourself and your team regularly if what you are actually doing corresponds to goals and aims you have set at the beginning. If not, try to analyse, whether the inadequacy is found in the aims or in the methods, chosen on the way to reach these aims.

Make sure you do not promise the participants something that you cannot fulfil. Rules should be clear and your aims should correspond to your competency and means.

Make friends with journalists

Media can be helpful in spreading ideas and building audience. Create a buzz by contacting all related media, writing a press release, or writing your own blog, so that more people would get the chance to get inspired by your pro-active attitude.

Do not rely solely on one channel. Use all the means available to get to your audience - sometimes a conversation with the neighbours is the right way, sometimes flyers have to be spread. And in some situations, press conference should be organised.

Check twice

When communicating with bigger institutions within the hierarchic structure, such as municipalities or big corporations, check if your message really got to the competent person(s) or department(s) and whether it is going to be responded or resolved accordingly.

When fundraising for a project, check twice the terms and conditions and make sure everybody who works on it does the same.

Be transparent

Avoid speculation about your motifs by publishing content lucidly, e.g. via website. Do not expect, that if you say something once, everybody will remember it.

Share your methods, results, success, but also difficulties. The open

source approach enriches the whole community of urban actors and innovators and provides important references. Ideas, just like plants, need some 'soil' to sprout from.

PARKOTVOR is an open source

The strategies and methods of participatory planning, including those, that have been used by PARKOTVOR, are unfortunately still only scarcely used by the municipalities in Slovak cities, although necessary issues and procedures of participation are also prescribed by the European legislation¹⁴. The understanding of why the participation of citizens is important, is still very low. In the past few years, there were only a few trials to undergo the process in its complex nature in Slovakia.

Participatory approach in urban planning and decision-making has a very open and flexible nature, and is applicable practically in all situations, where more stakeholders are expected to lobby for their rights, such as the creation and revitalisation of public and semi-public spaces, squares, streets, and parks, or their parts, but also in dealing with bigger areas of city quarters or whole cities.

The way to reveal the advantages and full potential of participatory planning can be also stimulated by examples of good practices and their results. We hope that the actions of PARKOTVOR have the potential of encouraging the citizens and initiatives to communicate about the possibilities and advantages of participatory approach in their local municipalities, and inspire other actions that will draw from our experience and results.

More about PARKOTVOR is available at www.parkotvor.prievidza.net and www.facebook.com/parkotvor.

¹⁴ The Aarhus convention establishes a number of rights of the public, including the right to participate in environmental decision-making. www.ec.europa.eu/environment/aarhus

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Activism transforming public space (Slovakia)

By Maria Bulkova, Slovak Governance Institute (SK)

Summary

The quality of public spaces strongly influences the life quality of people living in close proximity. Despite this fact their state and appearance is often regretful. On one hand, there are municipalities, which do not devote public spaces sufficient attention, neither maintain them accordingly nor develop them. On the other hand, public does not identify itself with public spaces, not only because is generally uninterested but also because it does not know to what extent it could intervene, and therefore acts very rarely. As a result of weak identification with public spaces, and unclear competences public spaces often remain neglected as no man's land.

However, as dissatisfaction with the current state and appearance of public space is rising, the number of civic initiatives aiming for improving and reviving it is increasing, as well. In order to enhance common good these initiatives often choose from several different approaches. This case study will discuss two of them providing concrete examples from Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia.

There are initiatives that seek to improve public space through formal cooperation either transforming public institutions, mostly municipalities. But also initiatives that leave out any bureaucratic structures and processes and with "do it yourself spirit" revive or improve public spaces.

This case study does not have an ambition to come up with the assessment which approach is better and more effective. First, there is no ultimate answer. Second, it would not be appropriate to compare these two approaches without specifying further what problem of the public space is being addressed by the chosen approach and what goal is followed. This case study will address through concrete examples two problems,

particularly the neglected state and weak maintenance of public space and the lack of incentives to spend time there, which are closely related.

Ills of public spaces in Bratislava

First, it is important to define what public space is. Architects and urban planners agree that public space is "a vacant space, open and accessible to all regardless of their sex, race, ethnicity, religious views, age or socio-economic group they belong to (Mikova et al., 2011: 9). For instance, roads, sidewalks, squares, parks, waterfronts, gardens, markets, playgrounds, and many other places serving public for common good are considered as a public space.

Public places have played an important role in our history. They witnessed revolutions, political meetings, demonstrations, protests, and happenings. Our immanent right for public spaces is declared in the constitution by the right to assemble peacefully without restrictions (the Slovak Constitution, 1992: Article 28).

When discussing the functions of public spaces, as mentioned above they are public because they should serve the public, inhabitants and visitors. Often, public space is perceived as a living room of the neighbourhood or city. If well designed it is expected to catalyse social interactions, create, and attract public life. To fulfil its functions public space needs to meet some criteria. Besides basic criteria in terms of cleanness, safety, health, and sustainability, it also needs to be designed to attract people. As Jan Gehl, renowned Danish architect and urban designer, states people attract more people. Public life in public spaces is a self-reinforcing process. If public space is once inviting and welcoming, and offering a wide range of activities so that inhabitants and visitors are motivated to stop by, and spend their time there, more of them will come. Nonetheless, how to create such a public space?

Gehl starts with the first basic prerequisite, which is that the city has to be walkable: "When you reinforce the life on foot a multitude of valuable social and recreational opportunities naturally emerge" (Gehl, 2010: 19).

When we decide to apply this basic criterion to Slovak cities, we observe several problems that refer to the state and use of public space as

these are naturally intertwined. First, it is important to mention that cars represent the dominant mean of transport at the expense of walking and quality of public spaces. Their use is excessive at least in Bratislava as the report requested by the City Council proves. Every seventh car only has more than one passenger (City Council Website, 2014). Therefore, the public space, sidewalks particularly, but also courtyards are shrinking and giving up its space and original functions to accommodate the demands of drivers. Many places that were originally intended to serve pedestrians are impossible to walk now. Not only an increase in car ownership and car use is responsible for diminishing public spaces. Other factors, such as suburbanisation and security, which led to the creation of few gated communities¹⁵, and privatisation, which could be perceived as a demonstration of New Public Management¹⁶ practices (Drechsler, 2005) also play its role.

Besides the negative trend of shedding public spaces it is also important to explore the quality of the remaining public spaces. Often it is difficult to talk about quality as many public spaces are affected by long-term ignorance. Lawns in parks are not maintained regularly, benches are missing, public bins are not being emptied, cars are parked on sidewalks, and these do certainly not finish the list of problems of public space.

15 Gated communities (GC) are a form of residential community or housing estate where entrances for pedestrians, bicycles, and automobiles are strictly controlled. Access of foreigners to a gate community is very limited, and often possible only after proving your ID. GCs are often surrounded by walls and fences and have closed perimeter. They usually consist of small residential streets and include various shared amenities. Inhabitants tend to choose them for security reasons although GCs were not proved to have lower crime rate. In some countries living in a gated community might also suggest a declaration of higher social status. Despite this concept is not generally known in Slovakia and is not the topic of public discourse, in fact it is spread and few gated communities could be found also in Bratislava, such as Trinasta Street in Kamzik or Septimiova Street in Rusovce.

16 New public management (NPM) is the transfer of business and market principles and management techniques from the private into the public sector, symbiotic with and based on a neo-liberal understanding of state and economy. The goal, therefore, is a slim, reduced, minimal state in which any public activity is decreased and, if at all, exercised according to business principles of efficiency. NPM is based on the understanding that all human behaviour is always motivated by self-interest and, specifically, profit maximization.

On one hand, municipalities are responsible for the state, appearance and utility of public spaces, and often fulfil their duties poorly. However, on the other hand, inhabitants and visitors do not identify themselves with public spaces either and therefore, contribute to their disregard, as well. Public spaces suffer from the commonly known phenomenon “the tragedy of the commons”¹⁷. This concept, which reasons that an uncoordinated use of common resources, for this purposes the public space leads to its exhaustion, is valid and actual also nowadays. This phenomenon reveals that whereas a person using excessively or polluting a public space believes that the consequences of his/her actions are negligible and will be borne and distributed equally between other people using the public space. Since everyone is thinking and acting the same way, the public space will be depleted at some point in time. This is one possible interpretation of reasons behind the low quality of public spaces. Though suffering from “the tragedy of the commons” is certainly not the only reason. An absencing sense of responsibility, unawareness of competencies that pertain to the municipalities and to inhabitants, unclear or poorly enforced regulations and laws, these are all factors that contribute to the current regretful state and appearance of some public spaces.

Since this study would also like to discuss the use of public spaces, it is important to mention that if public space is neglected, it cannot fulfil its functions. As Gehl states a quality public space is a place where people,

¹⁷ The tragedy of the commons is a concept first introduced by Garrett Hardin, professor of biology at the University of California in Santa Barbara in 1968 in the Science Magazine. This concept warns that if people use a resource without a coordinated plan and without taking responsibility, a resource will be depleted. This concept can be demonstrated on an example of a courtyard enclosed by neighbouring blocks of flats easily. There are few of these courtyards in Bratislava, particularly in the districts of Old Town and New Town. Once they used to be quiet and green places widely used by neighbours whose children used to play there. However, with the urbanization process, and increased car ownership, a demand for near parking lots raised. If one neighbour decided to park a car in the courtyard believing that his one car is not going to degrade the quality of public space, we would be able to observe a courtyard turned into a car park very soon. As other neighbours would be thinking the same way, trying to maximize their own utility believing that the consequences will be insignificant. However, since everyone would be thinking the same way maximizing his/her own utility, the courtyard as a public space would become overused, and would completely lose its initial function.

whether inhabitants or visitors are given different interesting stimulus, and reasons to stop by and remain there for a while. However, if a public space is neglected, dirty, and full of barriers it will hardly attract attention. Thus, such a place remains deserted and empty. Once it is deserted and empty, it will stay like that. Gehl explains it very simply, but concisely in his famous book Cities for people, “nothing happens because nothing happens” (Gehl, 2010: 65). People attract other people. If there is life, activity, and stimulus in a public space, there are also many new social connections and ties created. If a public space is empty, it will stay empty unless someone, either a municipality, civic initiative or an individual intervenes.

Putting public space in its place - who and how can achieve it

As suggested earlier, the problems of public space related to its state and appearance are very closely intertwined with its further use. To put it simply, if public space is neglected and empty, nobody is going to use it.

There are several approaches how locals could contribute to the improvement of public spaces. After 1989 civil society started to be created in rather formalized way – new civil society organizations (CSOs) - NGOs, civic associations, foundations emerged, and they chose cooperation and dialog with public institutions as a strategy since their goal was also to influence public policy and transform these institutions. CSOs also aimed for adopting new democratic regulations and laws, and oversee their enforcement. However, mainly in the past five years more informal initiatives appeared, and they are significantly different than the traditional CSOs.

“Do it yourself activism” addressing the problem of public space quality

If something is typical and common for all these new informal initiatives it is the preference to omit all bureaucratic structures and processes, and act on their own when and where they consider it important and necessary. They do not reject cooperation with public institutions a priori, quite the reverse, they welcome it. However, they perceive a risk of slowing down the action and results delivery when the municipality or

other public institution is included.

Moreover, their activity is often motivated by a strong sense of individual responsibility for the commons, and an urge to distinguish themselves from passive inhabitants who complain, but wait until public institutions or someone else solve the problem that bothers them. They also would like to strengthen the relations between neighbours and encourage them to be more active.

The DIY activist approach is not only typical of initiatives as groups of people (at least two people) but also for individuals who get tired of some problems related to public space and decide to take responsibility and act. One of the most notable examples is Milan Capák, an activist from Rožňava, teacher and musician by profession, who lost patience with potholes on the sidewalks of Rožňava, and started to fix them on his own at his own costs, later continuing with the potholes on the roads. Paradoxically, the municipality did not appreciate his efforts and sent him an official letter challenging him to stop his activities under the threat of a fine, which demonstrates that also approaches of municipalities vary significantly as will be described later in the study. It also confirms that the expectations of some initiatives that a municipality might slowdown or even jeopardize their activities could be reasoned.

} Modern heroes fixing up the city in their leisure time

Though there are also cases of individuals who have taken responsibility for the commons and have improved them, still more common than individual interventions is an effort coordinated by a group of two people at least. For instance, an interesting initiative that tries to address the problem of shedding public space, and mainly its poor quality is Zelená hliadka (translated as Green Watch), which was established in 2011 shortly before the Ice Hockey World Championship in Bratislava as a response to mess in the streets of the city by two young brothers. Matúš Čupka, the co-founder of this initiative started to collect garbage in his close neighbourhood, which was at the same time, in near vicinity of the stadium where the matches were held. Later on, he moved on to different city districts. He defines his motivations as follows: "It was very important for us to define against people who discuss the problems, complain, but never do something to change it. With Zelená hliadka we wanted to

demonstrate that we could do something on our own without the help of the municipality." When other initiatives are further discussed it is possible to observe the common trend that most of them prefer independence. Their relation to the municipality is not inherently negative, they are open to cooperation, but do not want to establish it officially, and be dependent on their assistance or approval.

Besides collecting garbage, Zelená hliadka fights against the barriers in the city and visual smog. They have concreted ramps to the sidewalks so that they are easily accessible for the handicapped, parents with prams, and little children. They also created an original sidewalk sign showing how much space a driver should leave for pedestrians when parking his/her car on the sidewalk. It is important to mention these, since while collecting garbage is rather an action with temporary results (in a perception that if you remove garbage you can still put it back), concreting ramps to the sidewalks or painting sidewalk signs is rather an action with permanent or long-term results (in a perception that it would require significant effort to reverse these actions). The majority of actions realized by Zelená hliadka both with permanent or temporary results carried out in public spaces owned by the municipality or another public institution.

The initiative cooperates with the municipalities to the extent that these provide Zelená hliadka with disposal of collected garbage.

} "Do it yourself activism" addressing the problem of public space use

Neighbours reviving the courtyard

While Milan Capák and Zelená hliadka address the problem of public space quality primarily, help to make it barrier-free, clean and visually appealing, some of these "DIY initiatives" that have emerged are trying to address the problem of public space use and revive it.

One of them is an initiative called Susedia na dvore (translated as Neighbours in the Courtyard), which was founded in 2010 in the courtyard in the Old Town District in Bratislava. It is located within 10 to 15 minutes walking distance to the city centre between the streets Záhrebská, Bjorsonova and Povraznícka. The courtyard is a public space owned by

the municipality; it is publicly accessible for everyone.

Dušan Martinčok, lawyer linguist by profession, and a resident of one of the houses enclosing the courtyard has decided to revive it as he was disappointed by the anonymity and coldness in neighbour relations and wanted to change it.

“Before we had a chance to meet the neighbours at the owners meetings only, and I realized we did not know each other. We share space with them, sometimes even a wall, but we did not know each other. Then when discussing problems we have it is very easy to slip into negativity and criticism,” he said about his motivations. He wanted to create another opportunity for the neighbours to meet, talk, and get engaged.

He started with a neighbour party, and since 2010 the initiative has organized several events: parties, discussions with CSOs, author readings, outdoor film screenings, concerts, courtyard sales, gardening, book clubs, etc. It is well known beyond the neighbourhood and people come to their events from different town districts. Its team has also widened from one (the founder) to five people. The initiative does not cooperate with the municipality unless they need some permission, for instance for fitting the mobile library in the ground. However, once the initiative started to be well known the municipality showed interest in their activities and visited them.

Growing vegetables and relations in the mobile community garden

The most frequent case is that a municipality is the owner of public space, and therefore it might get difficult to intervene in it without a prior consultation and approval. As was demonstrated on the case of Milan Capák, the municipality might not agree with this kind of activism and if the intervention is permanent it could even fine the activist. Most often it does not prevent the activists from realizing their interventions. As mentioned above, Matúš Čupka from Zelená Hliadka also does not consult with the municipalities when he decides to concrete the ramps to sidewalks or paint the sidewalk signs.

When it comes to improving public space use, often the ownership is not a question and cooperation with the municipality is not required since most of the outcomes of the initiatives' interventions are temporary, such

as events of Susedia na dvore. However, some initiatives would like to revive space by significantly changing its function.

Such case is represented by the initiative Vnútroblok (translated as Courtyard), which has decided to establish a mobile community garden in the centre of Bratislava in 2013. If this activity was realized in public space, most probably a prior approval process by the municipality and other relevant public institutions would be required. Vnútroblok did not want to go this way. “We did not want to end up discussing and criticizing how the things do not work and networking, but in fact not doing much. This is why we decided to omit the bureaucratic processes and partnerships with the municipalities because we were afraid it would slow us down. Therefore, our first premise was not to choose public space. Moreover, it was not the vital aim of our project to revive public space. We wanted to work with neglected vacant spaces that are not accessible and make them available to public,” Sandra Štasselová, one of the founders explained. By finding suitable private land and convincing the owner to provide it for these purposes Vnútroblok has created privately owned public space, which serves as a mobile community garden. When discussing the problem of shedding public spaces in the beginning of this study, this approach could serve as one of the answers to the problem, and is more and more applied in many other Slovak cities. If public space is not available, private land with a willing and open-minded owner could be turned into privately owned public space. For instance, the initiative Bunka pre súčasnú kultúru in Nitra (translated as the Cell) also used private land for placing their shipping container and made it publicly accessible for the cultural events and workshops. This approach definitely broadens the scope of public space where inhabitants and visitors could meet, talk, and do something together, create community, and also become more engaged in public life.

The mobile community garden of the Vnútroblok initiative started in March 2013 and gained its first supporters shortly after that. Sandra Štasselová attributes the success to the fact that the garden was very vibrant. She or someone else from the team was always there cleaning and preparing the land, which only confirms the statement of Gehl that presence of people attracts other people. Sandra said that they did not devote special attention to PR and communication; they preferred to be there. “We wanted to do something. That was our priority. Prior to the first event when we cleaned the land of garbage, we did not have almost any

financial resources. We printed 50 to 100 black and white leaflets and put it to the letterboxes of neighbouring houses. Then we spent time in the garden regularly. People started to stop by, ask us about the garden, and help us.” Again this only confirms that these new initiatives prefer prompt and efficient interventions, sometimes arising even from guerrilla activism to networking and official partnerships.

The mobile community garden successfully finished one season and started a new one. It has regular gardeners who bought their own planting box for a symbolic fee. However, it also attracts many other visitors beyond the neighbourhood who attend regular grill parties and pick-nicks.

All these initiatives demonstrate that there is a wide range of different approaches and responses to choose from when addressing the problem of public space and quality depending on what goal we would like to achieve.

Making municipalities resolve the problems related to public space

Though more initiatives with “hands-on approach” tackle the problem directly with immediate results, it is still important to devote attention to initiatives, which also aim for improving public space but do it in a formal way through cooperation with public institutions, mostly municipalities.

The rise of the Internet and other Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has made everyday communication between inhabitants and public institutions much easier, prompt, and at almost no cost. It definitely widens the possibilities to get engaged in public life and let the public institutions know about the problems related to public spaces with a minimal effort. It is no surprise that these new trends in communication have influenced activism, as well.

Reflecting these trends Slovak Governance Institute (SGI), a civic association focused on improvement of public policies in different fields, established the online project Odkazprestarostu.sk (translated as Message for Mayor) in Bratislava in February 2010. This online project enables citizens to submit their complaints related to public spaces directly to the municipality competent for solving them through a brief form on

the website (www.odkazprestarostu.sk) or using the mobile applications available on all platforms (iOS, Android, and Windows) following few simple conditions. Users have to briefly describe the problem related to public space they would like to report, attach a relevant photo, and locate the problem on a map. If these three conditions are met, the complaint is reviewed and confirmed by the local administrator, and sent to a municipal official responsible for resolving it.

All content is publicly accessible, both the complaint and response of the municipality. This ensures transparency and openness, and encourages the municipality to act promptly and provide with appropriate and polite response. Municipalities have ten days to respond the complaints. If they do not respond within ten days, the complaint is labelled as unsettled automatically. If a municipality responds ambiguously, and a solution is unclear, citizens then have an opportunity to vote online whether the response was satisfactorily or unsatisfactorily resolved.

“We wanted to contribute to the improvement of public spaces, but also to make a municipality more accessible to inhabitants or visitors, and cultivate their relations,” explains Ctibor Košťál, one of the founders of Odkazprestarostu.sk.

After four years of its existence it has proved to be a helpful tool for achieving greater responsiveness from municipalities. Since the complaints are publicly visible, an inadequate response, no response, or having a complaint labelled “unsettled” is perceived as a negative PR for the municipality. Therefore, municipalities make a stronger effort to respond and to resolve complaints to the greatest extent possible, certainly more than if they were submitted by individual e-mails. Currently, the websites serves to 1.3 million of inhabitants and is available in 47 municipalities in Slovakia¹⁸.

Statistics demonstrate that since the existence of Odkazprestarostu.sk, 3,400 complaints of inhabitants or visitors were settled, which represents almost 50% of all complaints.

This approach addressing the problem of public space quality is very

¹⁸ The ambition of the online project Odkazprestarostu.sk is to be available in as many municipalities as possible. The project team is trying to engage new municipalities continuously. Therefore, it is important to mention that the number of municipalities participating in the project might not be up-to-date at the moment of reading this study. The above data corresponds with May 2014.

important since it mediates and cultivates the relations between municipalities and inhabitants although it might not bring prompt results and changes. It helps to clarify inhabitants the competencies of the municipalities and therefore enables them to be more aware of their duties and rights in relation to public space.

Positive impact sprawls and affects different actors

If anything is common for all these initiatives whether these are informal or formal, related to public space quality or its use, their positive impact has spilled over far beyond the neighbourhoods where it all started.

Tangible changes to public space

First, it is important to mention that all discussed initiatives of shorter or longer existence achieved great goals in terms of changes to public space. Milan Capák repaired tens of potholes in Rožňava. In years 2012 and 2013 Zelená hliadka built 54 ramps to the sidewalks, helped with their signs many drivers to park their cars on the sidewalks properly, and most importantly, collected more than 7,536 bin bags, which represented more than 300 tons of garbage.¹⁹ These numbers and all activities of Zelená hliadka represent enormous savings for the municipalities. Matúš Čupka states that it was one their goals as well: "I believe that when people take care about their neighbourhood and keep it clean, the municipalities are able to save financial resources on maintenance and cleaning, and use it rather for building new roads, creating bike paths, or improving public spaces."

As mentioned above, the online project Odkazprestarostu.sk drew attention of municipalities to more than 7,000 public spaces related complaints, out of which almost the half has been resolved. To illustrate what tangible changes have been achieved through the project, most of

¹⁹ Information is available on the website of Zelená hliadka. Information stated in this study reflects years 2012 and 2013.

complaints deal with the quality of roads and sidewalks, potholes and barriers in particular, garbage, car wrecks, neglected greenery and its utilities, highlight car dominance and improper parking, illegal buildings, and many other problems.

A significant change to location could also be observed in the case of the initiatives Susedia na dvore and Vnútroblok. Though Susedia na dvore mostly organizes events and therefore, improves rather the courtyard use than its appearance, some of the events contained gardening and collecting garbage and dog waste, which certainly also improved the appearance of the courtyard. Moreover, it is important to mention that once a public space is cleaned, inhabitants and visitors treat it differently, and make a bigger effort to keep it clean. So in these terms, it is possible to observe a positive shift in terms of appearance.

Vnútroblok achieved a substantial tangible change to location. The private land where it is located was neglected for long-term. "Drug-abusers used to visit the place. We found really terrible things there when cleaning it. It also smelled. In this regard we could call ourselves lucky, now the neighbours will not complain that we parked here old caravan because it had been much worse before we came. Even if there is someone who is not happy about our garden when s/he sees little kids watering plants with little spout, s/he leaves it," said Sandra. Thanks to the mobile community garden the neighbourhood became cleaner and more attractive. Nowadays, it does not have a significant impact on the value of properties in the neighbourhood; however, it will probably have in future. A study of New York City community gardens indicated that property values increase an average of 2.3 percentages within one year of a community garden being established on a neighbouring property. After five years of existence of the garden, this percentage more than doubles (Voicu and Been, 2008). This trend could be expected in Slovakia once community gardens became more popularized. Today an increase in property values could be observed in the proximity of big shopping malls mostly.

Undoubtedly, all discussed initiatives brought significant and tangible results to the places where they realized their activities.

Adopted public space = improved public space quality

Second, people who are engaged in activities of discussed initiatives tend to "adopt" the public space where they are active and prefer these places to other places in the city. This phenomenon is called the "IKEA effect"²⁰ in modern behavioural psychology, and suggests that people incline to overvalue anything they contributed to with their own labour and completed it.

This concept fits very well to activities realized by the discussed initiatives. For instance, localities cleaned by volunteers of Zelená hliadka lose their anonymity and strangeness for them. These localities will become "their" places. "I would say they adopt the places. As they are able to compare how Čierny les, Chorvátske rameno or floodplain forests changed thanks to them, they create a relation with these places," Matúš Čupka confirmed in an interview.

Ties to the place of intervention were also expressed in interviews with neighbours participating in the initiative Susedia na dvore. When they talk about the courtyard they not only express how they feel in the place now, but also plan how to improve it in future. Peter, 40, software developer, said he would like to install a small swimming pool for children there.

Also, users of the online project Odkazprestarostu.sk who have submitted a complaint and the municipality has resolved it, expressed a belief that they have an important part of credit in improving the public space related to the complaint. From the website and commentaries under the complaint it is also possible to observe that users who submitted a complaint examine the further state of public space related to the complaint regularly. Though they do not contribute to the improvement of public space by their own physical work, making an effort to submit a complaint is being already considered as an adequate contribution to assume their right to this public space.

All in all, any effort made to improve a specific public space creates a bond to the space, which leads to its further maintenance and care.

²⁰ The term IKEA effect was coined by professors Michael I. Norton of Harvard Business School, Daniel Mochon of Yale University, and Dan Ariely of Duke University in 2011 and suggests an increase in valuation of self-made products. The research demonstrated that people tend to perceive their creations however amateurish they are as similar in value to the creations of experts, and expected others to share their opinions. It was named IKEA effect since IKEA products usually come with assembly required.

Changes in attitudes

Last but not least, an important outcome of the activities realized by the initiatives is a shift in attitudes. This change does not relate only to people who are participating actively or passively in activities, but also to people who live in the neighbourhood, moreover, the activities may inspire even people who live in different cities.

Currently, there is an increasing trend that people have a need to become a member of some community. They would like to participate in their free time in activities for the common good (Mikova et al., 2011). Founders of the initiatives confirm it. Dušan Martinčok, the founder of Susedia na dvore said that he noticed a need to do some volunteering activity in his surroundings: "It is a strong urge to do something besides what they do for living, something for the common good."

Later this civic engagement has positive internal and external spill over effects. Within their communities active individuals increase social capital by learning self-respect, enhancing group identity, and developing public interaction skills (Stolle, Morjé Howard, 2008). It has been proven that even outside of their communities, in everyday life, active individuals tend to promote values such as mutual cooperation, trust, and openness, and demand governments to affirm these values more than people who are not engaged.

With regard to attitudes, several changes could be observed, particularly in activities, which rather address the problem of public space use and bring neighbours new possibilities of spending time.

For instance, both Susedia na dvore and Vnútroblok encourages communication. Sandra Štasselová from the mobile community garden confirmed that their presence has brought new opportunities for locals to meet and communicate; it helped to create new friendships: "You walk the street and you greet people, they are not anonymous to you. I like it a lot. It is something rural in the city. I grew up in the suburbs of Žilina where people knew each other, and it was very pleasant." Also foreign case studies, which examined mobile gardens and their impact, demonstrated that they are places to connect across different socio-economic and cultural groups²¹, to connect with family and neighbours, and a place for

²¹ This is not the case of mobile community garden of Vnútroblok since it is located in the centre of Bratislava where property owners rank to the higher socio-economic group.

social activism. They were also described by respondents as a location where not only vegetables grow, but friendships, as well (Teig et al., 2009). Dušan Martinčok from Susedia na dvore also claimed that relations have improved: “The circle of my acquaintances has expanded greatly, and I have also gained some new friends. It was actually the main aim of our initiative to encourage new friendships and ties. Our motto is Meet your neighbours. It is an essential sense of our existence. I lost many barriers in relation to my neighbours. If I need help I am not afraid to ask for it.” Also neighbours in interviews stated that communication with others using the courtyard has improved. “The relations are much better here than in the place I used to live,” said Monika, a 28-year-old pharmacist. Jana, a 33-year-old architect mentioned that thanks to knowing almost everyone from the courtyard she feels safe here.

Respondents who are participating in activities of the initiatives also mentioned growing reciprocity between neighbours. Sandra Štasselová from Vnútroblok gives holidays as an example: “Even if gardeners do not meet in the garden regularly when somebody leaves on holidays, s/he does not hesitate to call someone to ask to water his/her plants during absence. There is a humanity in relations.” Dušan Martinčok also noticed a positive change in this regard and neighbours participating in the activities confirm it. Peter who has lived in the neighbourhood for the past year and a half said that he often exchanges things with his neighbours, such as tiles, eggs or many other things: „We are also willing to help each other when needed.“ Also foreign studies examining neighbours' initiatives confirms that people who participate in these like to share, particularly in community gardens, where they share tips on growing specific plants and food recipes (Teig et al., 2009). Sharing and reciprocity is also demonstrated by bringing their own things to the events – baking cakes for pick-nick, bringing stuff for sale on the courtyard sale to support the initiative, etc.

Yet, another change in attitudes was an increased mutual trust. Dušan Martinčok provides with a great example: „Before the initiative nobody would hang their laundry in the yard. Now, it can be noticed quite often.“ Even other respondents from the courtyard said that since they have know the people living there better, they have been feeling safer and they appreciate more that the yard is publicly accessible and open.

Many people who participate in activities also stated that it helped them

to create new identities. Mostly newcomers who haven't lived there for long mentioned this. “I used to live in Ružinov²² for a long time. There was a great network of services at one place. Here it is more difficult; however, I started to like it here very quickly. Every place here has its story, it breathes history here. Moreover, it is not so anonymous here also thanks to this initiative,” said Peter.

The most important thing is that people, who are participating in activities of any of these initiatives, become more motivated to get engaged in other areas as well. Scholars examining activism in public spaces found out that the benefits of it spill over to other areas of life (Coplen, 2012). Active participation in the community garden or neighbours's initiative encourages leading more engaged lives generally (Teig et al., 2009). For instance, Zelená hliadka began as a group of volunteers collecting garbage and after a year of existence it started to be a solid proponent of effective use of public resources in waste management and policy. Users of Odkazprestarostu.sk often do not abandon the problem if they do not get the appropriate answer from the municipality; on the contrary, they diligently search for other ways to achieve problem resolution. Peter, neighbour active in Susedia na dvore does not help only with the organization of their events, but also attend other events, for instance organized by municipalities, such as cleaning parks, planting flowers etc. Jana participating in activities of Susedia na dvore also mentioned that she feels that she has a chance to decide about something in her neighbourhood, she can create it on her own and feels included. This responsible and engaged civic approach has also a positive impact on the municipality that is met with higher demand for quality public spaces from inhabitants who are at the same time willing to help creating these spaces.

Repeatability

Under certain circumstances most of the discussed initiatives are applicable in different places. It is important to mention, that all of them in fact, got inspiration from abroad to some extent.

Its British equivalent Fixmystreet.co.uk influenced the start of the online



Susedia na dvore



project Odkazprestarostu.sk. An inspiration of Vnútroblok to build a mobile community garden has roots in their founders' study stay in Amsterdam. Dušan Martinčok from Susedia na dvore wanted to achieve friendly and functional relations between neighbours, which is a rather widespread desire. As a matter of fact, all discussed initiatives are based on universal ideas that could be applied almost anywhere within close social and cultural context. Emergence of similar initiatives in other cities only confirms it.

For instance, a version of Odkazprestarostu.sk is now available in Prague as Chodcisobe.cz and in Budapest as Jarokelo.hu, and many other activists from different countries approach SGI regularly with the request for assistance in establishing the portal in their city or country. Zelená hliadka started in Bratislava. Encouraged by its success activists established equivalent initiatives in other Slovak cities, particularly in Topoľčany and Pezinok, and certainly in many others cities, just did not inform Matúš Čupka, the founder about it. Sandra is also often approached by people from different cities with a question how they could start their own community mobile garden. "We want to help them but it is difficult. First, the processes are not so systematized to offer a step-by step manual. Second, we do not have capacities to help everyone. However, we are always willing to provide with our know-how, we can advice how much it costs to build a garden, how to communicate results, we already know what we did wrong and how to improve it. This is value added we can be helpful to those who are interested in creating their own mobile garden. However, the biggest problem is always to find an appropriate piece of land, and owner willing to provide it for this purpose for free or for a symbolic fee", said Sandra.

However, though the beginning might be difficult, and there are many factors influencing the outcomes, all discussed initiatives have a chance to be successfully repeated in different neighbourhoods and cities. Below the study suggests some recommendations how to achieve it.

Recommendations

(For new prospective initiatives)

Be persistent

All the discussed initiatives are successful because people behind them were persistent. It takes time for people to notice what you are doing, and to convince them to participate in your activities. The mobile community garden of Vnútroblok did not have tens of gardeners at once. First, they were mainly friends of the founders of Susedia na dvore who attended their events. Its popularity increased among neighbours and inhabitants of different town districts only after certain time. Matúš Čupka from Zelená hliadka was collecting garbage with his brother for weeks before other people joined in. Also, the online project Odkazprestarostu.sk had only hundreds of complaints for more than a year before it managed to break through. Therefore, it is important not to give up, and continue despite the initial low interest.

Inform about what you are doing

First, people will not come to your events if they do not know about them. Second, if information about your activities is limited, you will have difficulties to find new supporters and partners. It is great if your family members or friends support you, but if you would like your initiative to grow, you need to be able to attract people outside your network. Third, it is important to develop long-term relations with journalists; you will be able to get more of your content into media and get the audience accustomed to your initiative and await further stories.

Include people outside your target group

When designing and realizing your activities research the needs and preferences of your target group, but also people outside of it. Accommodate these as much as possible. You want your initiative to be inclusive.

Incorporate feedback you get into your strategy

Ask for the feedback from your colleagues, your target group, partners and people who are affected in any way by the realization of your activities and take their remarks and suggestions into consideration and incorporate them into your strategy. If people see that you have included their ideas in your activities, they will identify themselves with the initiative easier and consider it as their own.

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