

Savamala Civic District

Case C5: Failed participation

(by professor of architecture Ivan Kucina)

The program for the bottom up urban transformation of Savamala is based on the conceptual idea of extending the civic life of Belgrade by infusing small scale educational, cultural and artistic practices, crowd sourcing activities, urban manufactories, and self-organized cooperatives. This conglomerate of citizens' initiatives strives to physically transform the Savamala neighborhood and to influence the long-term process of urban transformation that is based on public interest rather than on real estate speculations. In the long run it will change its urban structure by encouraging local community participation, converting abandoned warehouses into socially productive facilities, activating riverfront for the public use, attracting new visitors to the neighborhood, and finally revalorizing and repositioning the Savamala neighborhood within the physical and functional scheme of the whole city of Belgrade. Therefore, the priority goal of the program is to create a sort of civic district as a long-term participatory realm for taking the most of a range of opportunities for non-institutionalized, flexible and dynamic activities through various levels of sharing knowledge and creative practices.

It has been conspicuous that although this creative impulse and the new network of provisional public spaces that made Savamala a very lively environment spread almost unstopably, its urban structure stays the same with its run-down buildings, derelict empty plots and open spaces. Moreover, while the presence of activists in the neighborhood contributes to the transformation of urban space it is at the same time the precondition for gentrification. However, such new context comes as a result of this first phase of the program and craves for the next round of actions that will more actively involve the authorities, official planning institutions, and powerful economic actors in order to link these. The priority goal of the next phase is to create a permanent platform for collaboration among citizens and authorities whereby citizens commit on the basis of cooperative self-organizations and city authorities play the role of catalyst in promoting collaborations.

Collaboration encourages a wide variety of urban actors to join the program and contribute their talents, and to present and incorporate their social and cultural particularities to the platform for social exchange. It is the economy of social exchange that is continually contributing to the improvement of the district.

Exchanges among different urban actors produce a diversity of projects and increase opportunities for a variety of proposals that corresponds to the needs, demands and resources of contemporary urban context. Plot by plot, building by building, and street by street, a series of emergent citizens' interventions facilitated by the city authorities develops a new kind of on-going urban development model. City becomes an interactive system with an unlimited potential to originate diverse opportunities for the new rounds of social exchanges that will produce a new round of urban interventions. The procedure in which the bottom up initiatives meet and question the top down frameworks is imagined as a cycle of step-by-step change through phases of ideation, building, measuring and learning that feeds back into itself to foster continuous improvement. Experiment in Immediate Education School of Urban Practices is a collective that operates as educational platform within the envisioned program for the bottom up urban transformation of Savamala. It has been launched as a working station of the Faculty of Architecture University of Belgrade in order to provide immediate education that redefines architecture profession as a field of transformative activities.

School of Urban Practices draws its projects in the transdisciplinary field in-between academic research and urban activism and uses professional opportunities that are emerging as consequences of ongoing citizens' initiatives. School of Urban Practices is founded upon belief that learning is simultaneously raising new knowledge through permanent knowledge exchange between citizens and architects. This kind of learning process has to be facilitated in the places where their exchange could offer the most of real living experiences. Following 'learning by doing' method of immediate education, students are also helping citizens to seek the ways how to upgrade their deprived environment whether through public policy, mediation, urban planning and architecture design, or any other forms of design that involves citizens from the very beginning of the project. Interaction between students and citizens settles in people's minds as signs of a new life, a life that is injected into the paralyzed urban body, opening the way for the new beginning. Citizens' participation redirects urban projects from its orientation to physical objects toward the negotiation and collaboration with people. Students do not impose their visions, but instead they create a platform for idea exchange in order to carry the process toward the agreement among many different citizens' standpoints.

Participatory process is strengthening relationships among citizens evolved and ensuring awareness to mutual dependence and solidarity that are necessary in upgrading their common environment. Building together is helping citizens to understand the importance of collaboration and sharing for enlarging their capacities to change their city for the good of all. By working on the site and exchanging aspirations with local community entrepreneurs, School of Urban Practices develops its proposals based on critical engagement with contemporary issues of urban commons. In the time of extreme urban deprivation it is important to use any opportunity offered to build common spaces together with citizens who are going to use them. Almost as a side effect, collaboration with citizens reveals an opportunity for architecture design and urban planning to reestablish their social and cultural influence. Contemporary architecture just needs to develop a new sense of commonality in order to become a relevant force in today's society. Architects are the ones who could articulate demands of the citizens and influence authority to put forth the alternative program of urban transformations through bottom-up spatial upgrading that transforms the disintegrating effects of the accepted urban development model into an integrative impetus. It is the economy of social exchange and collaboration that is continually contributing to the integration of the city. Exchanges among different urban actors could initiate a diversity of projects that corresponds to the needs, demands and resources of the real context. Urban transformation process is relied on communication among individuals, citizens' associations, public services and private entrepreneurs as equal participants in the societal realm.

City that is transforming embraces the creative contamination of contradictory relationship among them. It is no longer based on any of their fantasies of order and omnipotence, but it is the staging of their discussions and collaborations. It no longer aims for stable configurations but for the creation of open fields that accommodate processes that are making it. Congestion of diverse initiatives generates instability and dynamism and inspires the creation of new opportunities. Outcomes are not a mix of styles; they are an overlap of uncoordinated activities. They are not a fusion; they are juxtapositions, collisions, and ruptures. Such patterns of behavior are in constant flux, continually disrupted by new and improvised encounters. The capacities to coordinate and synchronize diversity, to incorporate many unpredictable rhythms, to make choices in the multiplicity –to groove and to improvise in real time– these are the learning and new knowledge that are permanently redeveloped through the experiments in immediate education.

Case nr. 5 Ongoing Project C5 by the School of Urban Practices, which has been undertaken as one of the project of the Urban Incubator Belgrade, aims to convert into common space unused basement and courtyard of the residential building in Crnogorska nr. 5 in Savamala. Project has been initiated by

Aleksandar Gezović, the president of the residents' council who has renovated earlier a small part of the basement turning it into his hobby shop. Taking his idea to renovate the rest of a space as a starting point project has been transformed into creation of a space that will serve to each resident equally and raise a new quality into their everyday life. Building new common space is possible only as a collaborative enterprise in which residents learn to respect each other and share responsibilities. Beyond a physical transformation of their private unused cells into a space for all, they have an opportunity to reestablish community that will continually take care about further development. Once this process gets on the run, it may become a role model for many similar cases in which unused and deprived space can be upgraded into commons. Positive contamination may than turn Savamala district into an unstoppable series of bottom up transformations. At the beginning of the participatory process students were questioning residents in order to create their group's profile. Questionnaire was used as survey about the future content of the common space, but as instrument that detects what residents cannot formulate or express: unmet needs, motivations, triggers and symbolic capital. Students' interpretations of the residents' answers were as important as the answers themselves. This method manages to avoid the situation in which residents pass on something that they already saw somewhere as their personal vision.

The profile of the group does not constitute a simple sum of the properties of those questioned, nor their general thoughts, nor their lowest common denominator, but rather a complex value that bears the most vital and often contradictory properties that the interpreter considers important for defining the elements of the project. On the next level, based on group profile, students were making mock-up that suggests the elements of the project, but does not define either their final shapes and size or their final positions. The unfinished mockup serves as a means of discussing the project within group consisting of students and questioned residents participating in a joint workshop. Working together for one week, they reflect and suggest, add and reject, increase and decrease, move and fix the elements of the working model, creating the contours of the project that the students, as more professionally competent, processed and defined after the workshop.

Agreements are always achieved through discussions that are articulated in such way to allow residents to question each other, and in each stage of the process to questions the previous decisions. The very possibility of agreement gives a sufficient reason for project to thrive. The plan was to present the upcoming proposal to all the residents at a public debate and to decide upon the project elements that satisfy them all, to make project documentation of that will be delivered to the authorities in order to get the building permit, and to start fund raising for project realization. Since the participatory process became compromised by the participation of some residents and rejection of others, School of Urban Practices in collaboration with Marijetica Potrč's studio Design for the Living World from Hamburg made a serial of actions In order to attract them to join discussions.

These actions that included personal invitations, cleaning of the courtyard and Sunday morning coffee meetings, failed in their intention. Residents' mistrust and rejection to collaborate with each other were stronger than the good will of students. Moreover, a group of residents managed to organize petition that was delivered to the president of the municipality in which they asked School to leave them alone. Their imitative in which they, paradoxically, managed to self-organize has placed Project C5 on standby until the further notice. What to Do?

Project postponing is rather a consequence of general frustration of the citizens of Belgrade caused by the long lasting political and economic crises, than a disagreement about participatory process. A life shaped by everyday struggles and lost hopes in the surrounding determined by selfish usurpations and overwhelming corruption has implanted deep scarves in peoples' minds. Since they have been treated badly by authorities who were suppose to protect them and robbed by business developers who were

tracing any public source to privatize it, it is understandable that residents believe that everyone who is approaching them has a hidden goal.

After so many years of sustaining self protective attitude they lost the ability to distinguish good intentions from evil ones. They would rather believe to unrealistic theories of conspiracy that may appear in their backyard than to the evidence proven in front of their eyes. All these reasons are providing enough arguments to sign participation as futile endeavour. However, under austerity measures, without capital investments and with bankrupted state, it seems to be the only way left to stop devastation and develop the city. Citizens' initiatives need to be stimulated and nurtured in order to become everyday practice. Beside the crises, citizens' rejection has to do with the larger historical collapse of the socialist ideology and raise of the neoliberal order. During socialism citizens were declared as equal and unified in a collective society that was prospering toward the bright future. In theory citizens' role was celebrated although in practice it was always limited by the rigid administration and reduced life opportunities. In the decision-making procedures and city planning their rights were presented in the form of public hearings at the end of the process when their chances to change the plans were minimal – they would always receive general bureaucratic responses to any comments addressed. Nominally considered as the most important but practically detached from the public resolutions, citizens' interests were increasingly moving to the private realm where they were investing into their own prosperity.

During the couple of decades socialist life standard that was growing gradually offered enough commercial goods and soft loans to meet the dreams for a better life for the majority of the citizens. In the same way, proclaimed socialist society was acquiring features of consumer society with all the accompanying characteristics –diversification, segregation, individualization, and egoism. During this period, political instruments for public engagements were unchanged and even more solidified making resentment to any intention of participation as it could not bring reasonable improvement, but on the other side could make persecutions for the ones too seriously involved. As a consequence citizens found their peace inside their own homes and left the public domain to the city authorities to take care. Authorities were doing that without a ripple, relied on the administrative procedures in order to maintain the comfortable position of the ruler. The more the citizens became wealthy the less trust there was both in the authorities and in any other citizens. In this way societal integrity was destroyed much before the collapse of socialism. At the bottom line, when the founding dream of brotherhood, unity and freedom was dismantled, citizens stayed alone scared by the uncertainty of the aggressive post socialist time stepping ahead. Being isolated they were an easy prey for the new business elite that turned them into eagerly customers.

Without a mutual trust they became incapable to confront the alliance between the authorities and new business elite that finally took their city away and offered commercialized scene instead. Mass of singular commercial developments including office buildings, shopping malls, hotels, warehouses, and gated housing compounds that have been scattered around the city started to dominate over time-worn surroundings. These buildings appear as aliens from the Promised Land and occupy, without defense, the best locations in the city in order to exploit its resources and maximize the profit. Determined by individual developer's initiatives, the city becomes a competitive field of business opportunities instead of being developed as a welfare environment. However, behind illuminated spectacles and supporting media campaigns, old urban neighborhoods where the most of the citizens are living, stayed out of attention, excluded and abandoned.

While facing devastation at home and receiving tempting messages from the media, citizens were trapped in the world of desires, breeding high demands for luxurious life with never enough resources to pay the costs. Being pushed away to the margins, majority of them choose the only shortcut left for them to satisfy unfulfilled desires, citizens started to imitate dominating trend, no matter being

wealthy or poor – to develop their private wealth on the expense of a public. Many of individual appropriations have pushed the city into permanent disintegration which became the signature of post socialist urban development. Turning the process of urban disintegration into integrative force will be the main task for the architects and urban planners in the future and not for them only.

The fact that there is no social exchange among the citizens signifies an important shift in urban development - the ultimate disappearance of community values that were determining human settlements throughout the history. Since the ancient time, city was considered as both the inhabited place and the community that inhabits. Post socialist city is in fact the largest urban structure that is evidently growing without community participation, and instead under constant struggles among individuals to grab profitable resources and satisfy personal ambitions. When there is nobody to take care about public interest, urban development turns into a battle in which everyone fights against everyone. Under the fire, it seems that the only line of defense left is the resistance of those citizens who cannot stand any more violent appropriation of their everyday life. Their power can manifest itself only in relation to the others with whom they are sharing their living space. In order to take back the city citizens have to start working together and by working together they are regenerating a lost sense of community.

Collaboration encourages everyone to join the program and contribute their talents, and to present and incorporate their social and cultural particularities to the platform for social exchange. Architects and authorities should play the role of catalyst in promoting collaboration whereby citizens need their support to commit on the basis of self-organizations. Self-organized citizens are the only ones left to develop a relevant influence that can turn decay into prosperity.



The author

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