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To cite this article: Monika Magdziak 2019 *IOP Conf. Ser.: Mater. Sci. Eng.* **471** 072010

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Social Participation and Experimental Spatial Interventions as Effective Methods of Activating Problematic Urban Areas

Monika Magdziak ¹

¹ Białystok University of Technology, Faculty of Architecture, ul. Oskara Sosnowskiego 11, 15-893 Białystok, Poland

m.magdziak@pb.edu.pl

Abstract. In difficult economic and political times, cities will have less funds for public programs, including revitalization of unused and neglected urban spaces. It will be necessary to involve various, not only formal and public authorities, in order to ensure positive changes in the urban space, provide attractive places for residents and build a positive image of the city. The aim of the work is to show the impact and benefits of bottom-up social initiatives and low-budget spatial interventions as effective methods for urban renewal in a short time and at low cost. In this work the author analyses and classifies examples of social, cultural and pro-ecological activities, consider a number of alternative possibilities of reviving urban spaces that are different to traditional practices of top-down urban development strategies. The author shows the importance of spatial and social relations resulting from the real needs and preferences of user and from current potential of place. The article discusses the issues of activating urban space and integrating residents, as well as the advantage of versatility over aesthetics of place. In addition, attention was focused on the decision-making and design process with the involvement of the local community. Participation of citizens in the design process itself often became more important than the final architectural effect. Moreover, the primary role of the architect and the investor are changed, the new competences of the participants of the design process penetrate each other. In this process, the potential of space users themselves is revealed. They are the initiators, organizers and participants of the process of creating a public space customized to their specific needs.

1. Introduction

Currently, urban agglomerations face the problem of insufficient number of attractive public spaces and greenery, as well as the problem of understanding and satisfying the needs of more and more diverse groups of users. With the development of a free market economy and an increase in the number of private investments, we can notice an intensive process of filling undeveloped urban spaces with new buildings, as well as selling out public places and their privatizations. In the face of such a phenomenon, we can notice the disappearance of the public spaces used for recreation and meetings in the city, for other solutions, such as cafe gardens and fenced private spaces. Places formerly used for integration and recreation become commercial or inaccessible. New top-down public investments often do not meet functional expectations of users or discourage them with too formal character of space. Even the most carefully designed space created in the wrong location or too much defined, it can remain unnoticed, unused or unwanted when it is not a response to the real needs of specific group of users. At the same time, there are places in the public space that have unique potential that often remains unused or even unnoticed. City squares, streets, problematic scraps of space can transform into places where a lot



happens, where we want to be because of the atmosphere, because of the people we meet there, or architectural and spatial values. In the era of rapid growth of urban agglomerations, their intensification and lifestyle changes in the city, the question arises, how to provide access to recreation space in the city and how to use the potential and reactivate problematic urban areas for this purpose. What actions should be taken to meet the real needs and preferences of different groups of residents when shaping urban, local public spaces and neighborhoods.

2. Revitalization of problematic public spaces

The concept of spatial revitalization focused mainly on degraded areas and abandoned places. But today, thinking about the revitalization of public spaces, we often focus on spaces that are not sufficiently attractive to users, and we attempt to make them more attractive, modernized, and alive. It is about building a new image of the place, in order to activate it and attract more users. Commonly, decisions regarding the purpose and use of public spaces are top-down, taken by the local authorities. In particular, large-scale investments often do not focus on the real needs of residents and do not involve them in the decision-making process. They concentrate mostly on the economics and aesthetics of space. Design and appearance of place often wins with the functionality and user-friendly aspects. Nowadays in developing countries, thanks to the support of the European Union, we can observe the phenomenon of very expensive public investments. Apparently they seem to be a very attractive public spaces, but in fact does not accomplish their purpose, because often they are not friendly and do not integrate users. We admire this space by watching it in the pages of magazines and albums, and when we find ourselves in it, we are disappointed by the atmosphere of the place. This feeling does not flow from the form, but from the lack of action. It is a space to admire, not to be in it.

2.1. Dysfunctional areas - places to fill

Transforming an undefined space into a place that is attractive to users is not an easy task. Often it is not enough that it will be interesting, friendly or functional. In order to change the unused space into a place that will be popular and which will be saved in the minds of users, it should have a character, identity or unique atmosphere. The architecture itself is empty without users or events. Such thinking about space affects the shaping of global trends in the design of places for public use. We observe a tendency to introduce in an uninteresting public space, abstract, multifunctional, flexible, not fully defined structures where users themselves give them meaning, change and fulfill them. An example can be *Ba_Lik*, a small, mobile pavilion in Bratislava, intended for summer exhibitions, concerts, workshops and all other local initiatives. Thanks to its futuristic form, it is a characteristic point that stands out against the background of the historical urban fabric. Very often all you need is a roof to make the place live. The roof protects from the sun or rain and increases the potential of space. If users can sit here comfortably, they will definitely stay here for a while. And if there are already people and the place is not deserted or just passed on the way, it is in some way brought back to life and becomes a defined public space. For example, small, temporary structures, [C] Space DRL10 Pavilion in London, wooden Research Pavilion in Stuttgart, or green Living Pavilion in New York, which in themselves look like structural spatial sculptures and thanks to their otherness become a characteristic point in space.

There are also projects of permanent roofs for large problematic urban areas, as in the case of Open Centre of Civic Activities in Cordoba. Here a forest of colorful umbrella forms was created on the space located near the main railway station. They protect the square from weather conditions and thanks to that it is the place of various cultural events, seasonal marketplaces, meetings of residents, or outdoor yoga lessons. We go under the roofing as in a colorful fairy-tale world, additionally illuminated in the night. Therefore, the form is interesting for both passers-by but also the bird's eye view attracts attention. A simple procedure gave the square a certain frame, leaving the multifunctionality and flexibility of space, so that the place had the potential to organize meetings and events that would integrate the people staying in it. [1]

The way of thinking of private investors also adapts to the needs of the market, therefore, more and more public parks and places are created on private lands to meet the need for integration and access to

open space. This phenomenon applies not only to communities and housing estates, but also to spaces accompanying commercial buildings. Although the most characteristic interventions are initiatives of cultural centers. An example is the *BMW Guggenheim Lab*, an interdisciplinary mobile laboratory, which has visited three cities around the world. There is a meeting center for the local community where the problems of cities around the world are discussed, as well as space dedicated to research, experiments and workshops. The laboratory has an advisory committee consisting of experts from various fields and is supported by a team of people who are responsible for initiating and organizing events. [2]

2.2. *Urban catalyst of events - an object initiating the process of reactivation of space*

The *catalysts of events*, or *space activators*, are rather smaller urban interventions created at generally low costs. It is a tool for reviving space in a friendlier and accessible way, especially in difficult economic and social conditions. In many cases, the space activator is not a predefined structure, but is created within a specific local community. Abandoned industrial, commercial and residential buildings, free city plots, unprotected courtyards and public facilities without financial support, thanks to urban catalysts can be transformed into attractive, functional spaces. Users use simple methods and objects such as industrial pallets, boxes and paints. In the process of improvised design, they create places for sitting, roofing, gardens or playgrounds. In this way, they fill the space with common forces of the local community and adapt it to their needs. Such initiatives with the support of the authorities and larger financial resources may take on a more extensive urban scale. So sometimes even large, very expensive investments appear. They are meant to permanently enter the local landscape, integrate residents and visitors and build the image of an open and friendly city. Such interventions bring a new quality into space and are a catalyst for events. Often these are solutions that provoke us with their unique architectural form. This is justified, because it increases the curiosity of the place and gives it clarity and character. These important features are irreplaceable in the process of building the identity and individuality of the place. An example is *Forest of Hope* in Colombia. It is a spatial structure suspended on irregularly spaced columns, resembling a geometric group of trees shading a sports field. This place acts as a center of sport and community meetings. Cultural and educational events take place here. Thanks to a modern form, a place stands out from the landscape of a poor neighborhood. In addition, the formal reference to the olive tree brings a substitute for nature and is a symbol of hope, in a difficult area completely free from a social infrastructure. The modular architectural structure, according to the designers' assumptions, could grow like a forest in the future.

The terms *urban catalysts*, *space activators* can be replaced by synonyms, such as an initiator or a motivator. Active means the same as the forward-looking. [3] The main task of the activator is to initiate beneficial changes in a given location. This term slowly enters the architectural dictionary, due to the names of architectural and social projects. An example can be: *Urban Activator* in Rotterdam - a rectangular, adaptable pavilion, which was created on a deserted square between the Gothic cathedral and the canal [4], or a pro-social initiative of *Urban Catalyst* - an organization that implements numerous projects regarding temporary spatial interventions in degraded areas of Berlin [5].

The concept of *space activators* stands in opposition to the idea of durability in urban planning. Such a slightly experimental operation with a looser planning framework, gives us the chance to unlock problematic places in the city today and not only in the next decades. However, this requires a top-down acceptance of the authorities that decide on the destination of wastelands or places that are badly used, and which can allocate public areas for spatial adaptations. In this context, it is worth appreciating the importance of simple and temporary spatial concepts. It is an excellent location test and verification of real users' needs, and in dysfunctional areas an efficient and quick way of introducing changes. This is especially important in times of political and economic uncertainty. In addition, as Bishop and Williams claim, the growing popularity of work at home, the tendency to re-use space and change its functions, the development of new technologies and the more cosmopolitan lifestyle of younger generations, are conducive to greater acceptance for all kinds of changes. These tendencies bring with it the need to change the way of thinking about urban space as an inviolable permanent structure built over a hundred

years. At the moment, the ability to change, adapt or introduce additional features should be taken into account at the design stage. [6]

3. Social participation - shaping public spaces in the context of real needs of users

New global trends that should be noted and used in the process of revitalization of problematic urban areas flow from the users of urban space. Residents of large metropolises, crammed into small apartments, are looking for public places that will compensate for a small private space. They also look for places that will provide entertainment and create an opportunity for social contacts. The informal atmosphere and the small scale of the space is conducive to such expectations. Consequently, bottom-up initiatives of local communities are created in cities. Residents want to integrate and spend time together in external spaces. They create gardens, rest areas, playgrounds or simply multi-functional spaces. However, bottom-up social initiatives, collective spaces, informal and temporary organization of urban spaces, in a long term requires legalization and support of local authorities.

3.1. Municipal Participatory Budget - support from local authorities for experimental bottom-up social initiatives

Real needs and involvement of residents contributed to the fact that for several years, in many Polish cities, the *Civic Budget* or the *Participating Budget* is approved. As part of this initiative, citizens can directly decide on the allocation of part of the City's Budget to, in their opinion, beneficial investments for residents. There are meetings and discussions on local needs, then the initiators submit projects, and the residents of the city give their votes to them. Projects that receive the most support are implemented in the next budget year, it means in a fairly short time. That's why they cannot be too complicated and expensive projects.

In addition, to meet the expectations of residents, it happens that officials can appreciate ideas that have not been selected and include them into the City Budget. [7] An example of this is the *Traffic Road Town* project on the *Sunny Slope* housing estate in Białystok. This idea has not gathered enough votes, but the city authorities have recognized that this initiative has not only the social and educational dimension, but also fits perfectly in its development strategy and building the image of cycling city. Despite the fact that it is a local project, this place attracts cycling enthusiasts from all over the city.

3.2. Filling spatial wasteland with events - bottom-up, socio-cultural initiatives

Interesting is the fact, that creative and artistic communities are the most open to using and occupying marginal or empty spaces and buildings. Artists can see their potential and uniqueness. Therefore, all cultural initiatives and activities are very often the first step on the way to regaining and reviving a problematic location. Often informal initiatives of creative and open minded people contribute to building the image of a place that becomes recognizable, not necessarily due to architecture but to the accompanying events and atmosphere. Such popularity means that socially restored places have a chance to gain the attention and support of local authorities in the future. An example of such a bottom-up initiative may be cultural activities in post-military areas at Wegłowa street in Białystok, in the north-east of Poland. In this location for many years there were a number of cultural events organized informally by the residents. Currently it is so-called *Cross-border Cultural Center - a place of creative activities, open to all*. The organization and management of the events was taken up by the *Creative Podlasie Association*, which aims to integrate the inhabitants of the region, around innovative and original social initiatives. Association organizes events in the sphere of education, culture, sport and civic activity. The project for the revitalization of large areas located at the post-warehouse buildings included recreational and sports areas. It was submitted by the mentioned association to the *Citizens' Budget of Białystok City for 2014*, under the name *Wegłowa - place to third power, social concept of spatial development*. The project is the result of the first civic participation process in Podlasie region. The spatial concept was developed as part of two cycles of participation workshops, in which over 80 people participated. In addition, over 1000 residents' opinions were collected on an online questionnaire.

The project was implemented with the help of the *Batory Foundation*, which supports the development of democracy and civil society. Currently, there is already a recreational public space that is very popular among the city's residents. In addition to the *Cross-Border Cultural Center*, in the existing buildings is located private *Museum of Technology and Automotive Industry*, skate park, and about 35 institutions and organizations. There are still many informal actions and probably it attracts young people the most. For example, *Decentrum - Illegal Patronage of Culture* works here. In the future, the *Bialystok Science and Technology Park*, *Center for Eastern Martial Arts* and the *Sybir Memorial Museum* are going to be built there. [8]

Due to the climate of neglected architecture and alternative activity, this place is popular and controversial at the same time. Thanks to municipal investments this place slowly gains more friendly character for whole families not only for rebellious youth. Above all, this place does not wait for the future but has been living its life for over 10 years and is constantly developing, bringing together people of culture, media, science and attracting residents. An example of changes taking place in these areas is proof that independent culture can be a powerful lobbying force in political discourse and in various spatial changes in the urban landscape. In addition, the activities on Weglowa street perfectly illustrate the advantage of participatory activities, beyond any more formalized methods of recognition of public opinion. Participation gives the possibility of engaging in the decision-making process of people who could not formally express their opinions like children, young people and foreigner. This is an important issue in the context that this region of the country, due to the proximity of the borders and neighbouring countries, can be proud of its vibrant multiculturalism.

3.3. *Defining a place - urban agriculture as a method of integration and activation of residents*

Another way of integrating the inhabitants and at the same time introducing an element of adaptability to the common space is to intentionally leave undeveloped fragments of space to be freely completed by the users themselves, now or in the future. Most often this applies to residential areas. In this case, it is not the end result itself that is the most important but the process of participating in the project and its implementation. As a result of working together for the benefit of the whole community, strong social bonds, a sense of identity and responsibility for the place created are born. Typically, residents create different types of recreation spaces for all ages. What connects all people is the need for contact with nature, greenery and space. Therefore, housing communities plant greenery to improve the aesthetics of the place, and set up vegetable gardens in the spirit of eco-consciousness. However, the concept of growing edible plants in urban areas is not new. Allotment city gardens, greenhouses and small backyard vegetable gardens have been known for centuries. However, recently these activities have taken on a more advanced form, larger scale and involve more participants.

When ecology became a rapidly developing field of science, entering the sphere of everyday life, a debate about urban agriculture began. In highly urbanized areas, in empty or degraded places there arise collective communities of people who want to live in harmony with nature. These are environments that bring together people with higher ecological awareness. Their actions are not limited to food production. They create self-sufficient ecosystems, build wastewater treatment plants, and introduce renewable energy systems. They try to live in accordance to the considerations of the French philosopher, theoretician of humanistic political ecology, André Gorz, who claimed that humanity in order to survive should produce what consumes and consume what it produces [9].

For a long time in Scandinavia, we have been observing the phenomenon of formation in suburban areas, collective housing communities called cohousing. This model has many social, practical, economic and environmental benefits, as it very often takes the form of eco-farms [10]. It is not easy to transfer such an initiative to the area of a large agglomeration. It requires not only the cooperation of the local community, but also land and space, but in the cities there is either a lack of land, or available areas are very expensive. Therefore, we can observe such methods of introducing agriculture into the city as vegetable gardens on balconies, green roofs and vertical gardens. These ecological projects and innovative green solutions have now become the object of interest and public discussion, but also social fashion. According to this trend, Paris authorities have developed a *Permis de Végétaliser Program* and

adopted a law allowing residents to fill with plants all corners of the city, especially empty unused areas. To avoid chaos, a new function of the urban gardener has been created. It can be any inhabitant of the city. You just need to get permission to set up a garden. It can be carried on the roof, on the wall or even on the sidewalk. The city authorities are very keen on introducing greenery to the public space, but also about better integration of district residents. By 2020, the city wants to create 100 ha of vertical and roof gardens, of which at least one third is to be vegetable gardens. [11]

Currently, more and more foundations and support groups for social initiatives are being established. An example is *R-urban*, an association that deals with supporting and developing strategies for creating local networks of closed ecological cycles in European cities. It creates technical prototypes to transfer ecological solutions from rural areas to urban locations and gives them more urbanized or movable forms. These activities are expected to contribute to the self-sufficiency and ecological security of cities in the era of climate, social, financial and economic threats. An example of this is the eco-passage project *Le56-Eco-Interstice* in Paris, implemented with the support of *R-urban*. This is the urban agriculture in an unused space between two residential buildings located in a densely populated part of Paris. The project was developed as a demonstration example of inter-sectoral cooperation between residents, local organizations, experts in spatial planning and city authorities. The activities were conducted on the basis of public consultations, participatory activities and temporary installations. An informal space was created to integrate and activate the residents, in the form of a meeting place and a green garden with a closed ecological cycle. A space with a rich identity, content and vitality was created with relatively low budget and high social involvement. [12]

4. Results and discussions

Public space is first and foremost a place of social, cultural and ideological interactions. It is not architecture, it is contact with other people and the exchange of thoughts or cooperation that define and give the main meaning to the existence of public space. A creative and participatory approach is necessary both in the planning, creation and subsequent use of space. It creates identity, belonging and responsibility towards the place and people.

It can therefore be said that this is a way to create urban space in terms of sustainable development, because such a place created and functioning establishes a direct relationship with its users. Social activities are characterized by the fact that spaces often have low economic value, but have a much greater social value due to the participation and involvement of users. By providing citizens with the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process or to plan urban interventions, we ensure that we create a place for people and their real needs and preferences.

Examples of experimental activities presented in the work, defined as architectural interventions, *catalysts of events*, *space activators*, participatory activities and bottom-up social initiatives, reveal many differences in the process of shaping and revitalizing of urban space compared to traditional practices and strategies for urban development. Both bottom-up and top-down initiatives bring desirable quality to the process of social participation and contribute to shaping an attractive and user-friendly urban space. These dependencies are illustrated below using a summary scheme (figure 1).

Bottom-up initiatives bring advantages such as: simplicity of actions, low-cost solutions, short implementation time, integration and activation of residents. As a result of such initiatives, the improvised and experimental space is often created. However, spontaneous activity of the residents is often characterized by a lack of plan, funds and legalization as well as low aesthetic quality of space. These factors can be ensured through cross-sector cooperation between users, designers, sponsors and officials in the participation process.

An important issue is also the new role of architect and urban planner who in the process of participation take the role of mediators or managers of the spatial intervention process. The new role of residents is equally important because they had to change from passive observers to active contributors. At the same time, the design process itself became more important than the final effect. This approach release creator from searching for the perfect solution and allow them to replace the unreal ideal project with multi-functionality, flexibility and adaptability of space.

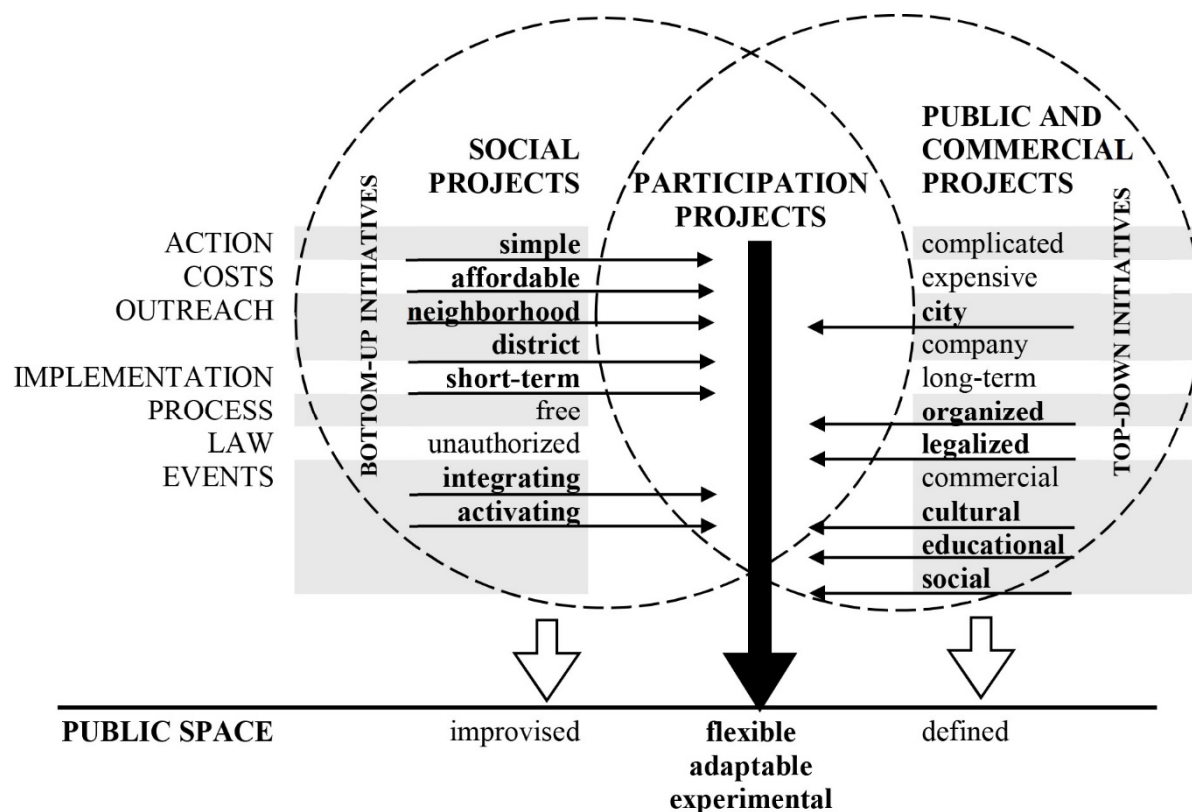


Figure 1. Participatory project as an optimal tool for shaping attractive urban spaces that combines positive aspects of both bottom-up and top-down spatial initiatives.

5. Conclusions

After presented analysis, we can formulate the basic conclusions and proposals for the activation of problematic urban areas:

- Bottom-up initiatives and social participation contribute to meeting the real needs of users, building a civil society and integration between various sectors.
- Participation and involvement of the local community in the process of revitalization, strengthening social bonds and a sense of identity and responsibility for the place.
- The process of creating a place may be more important than the final project, in the context of user integration.
- Even a minimum spatial intervention can define a specific location and create conditions conducive to the activation of the place and integration of users.
- Small and low-budget interventions are a quick and financial-free way to change the problematic location.
- Urban agriculture brings social and ecological benefits to degraded areas.
- Experimental, low-budget and temporary activities are a search process to provide long-term solutions to specific social and spatial problems.
- Desirable features of attractive urban spaces that build social bonds and the identity of the place are: small scale, informal character, adaptability, multi-functionality, flexibility and unlimited access for all groups of users.

Acknowledgment

The research was carried out within the framework of work No. S/WA/2/16 funded by the polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

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