

OUR CITY

ELEVEN ESSAYS
AGAINST THE FORCES
OF DISPLACEMENT
IN EUROPEAN CITIES

OUR HOME

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HOME**

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edited by **CHARLIE TIMS**
foreword by **ANDRÉ WILKENS**

Krytyka Polityczna
European Cultural Foundation

2021

OUR HOME

AGAINST

DISPLACEMENT

TIES

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FOREWORD

ANDRÉ WILKENS

It's hard to remember a time when the public sphere felt so challenged and confused. Everything seems available all the time and rarely more than two clicks away. This offers great opportunities, and even greater challenges. Fake news, febrile debates, the blurring of the lines between advertising, reporting and politics. Every time digital media offers us a new way to access information, it finds a new way to confuse us. As our expectations for a functioning and inclusive European public space grow, our disillusionment seems to grow even faster.

Democracies can only function properly if they are underpinned by a public sphere. Europe needs spaces where all of its inhabitants, regardless of their economic, social, cultural or national backgrounds, can connect, share ideas, debate opinions, produce shared culture and find the reliable information that is needed to hold those in power to account.

The sharing of misinformation during the coronavirus pandemic showed that the power to share media can be a matter of life and death. But it also showed that media, which supports truth, justice, empathy and exchange, is a social good that needs active citizen participation.

'Our City, Our Home' has its origins in 'Mediactivism', a collaboration of eight organisations from across Europe: Les Têtes de l'Art from Marseilles, Fanzingo from Botkyrka, zEMOS98 from

Seville, Kurziv from Zagreb, Krytyka Polityczna from Warsaw and a coalition of three organisations from Turin: YEPP Italia, Banda Larga and Visionary Days. Each organisation has a background in media-making, alternative education and an interest in urban issues.

For two years, these organisations have developed a shared approach to activism that addresses right to the city issues through media-making. They found ways of using podcasting, digital mapping, filmmaking and many other techniques to raise and support campaigns dealing with touristification, the privatisation of public space, insecure housing and inclusive urban development.

This resulting collection of essays looks at these issues from a European perspective – the writers here situate what they know in their cities alongside what they know is going on across borders in cities nearby. Too often in Europe, we are caught in national filter bubbles of language, which are reinforced by a media environment that is now designed to profit from such bubbles. Right to the city issues have their origins in cross-border flows of power, money and influence – artists, activists and policy need to see them from a European perspective if they are to address them.

I consider this collection of thoughts part of a growing canon of interlinked public spaces across Europe which is de facto creating a better European public sphere. ■

INTRODUCTION

CHARLIE TIMS

On Saturday, 5 June 2021, the *MSC Orchestra* sailed out of the Venice lagoon. It was the first cruise ship to depart the city since the start of the pandemic. Protestors from No Grandi Navi (No Big Ships) gathered with megaphones, flags, gazebos and red flares at the water's edge and shouted at the sixteen-deck behemoth, which can carry up to 4,000 people. A photo of Jane da Mosto, a well-known local environmentalist, circulated on social media. In the photo, Da Mosto stands statuesque in a flowing blue dress and a rowing boat – David silhouetted against the Goliath cutting through the lagoon above her, metres away.

For more than a decade, activists in Venice and other southern European cities have protested against the cruise ship industry. They complain about atmospheric pollution, the damage to marine life and about the tourists themselves, who make local people feel as if they live in a theme park. Their concerns are shared by protest groups, journalists and filmmakers from Lisbon to Crete.

Anti-cruise ship protestors are one part of a much bigger movement found in almost all cities across Europe: a movement concerned about the enclosure of green space, access to housing and the exclusions of minorities from public space. Taking their cue from French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, these campaigners argue the city is somewhere they *belong*, a place they have a *right* to, rather than a commodity held up to the highest bidder. 'Our City, Our Home.'

They deal with the issues that underpin everyday life in the city: contractual relationships between tenant and landlord, the rules and obligations developers are held to or evade, and systems of planning and land use. They educate tenants about their rights and reveal chains of money and power behind big real estate deals. They reveal the subtle ways in which people from different kinds of minorities are priced and profiled out of their neighbourhoods and they document the slow transformation of parts of the city as residents with more power and wealth replace those with less. It is often hard to bring these issues to light. Thundering cruise ships belching toxic smoke, moving thousands of people at a time to any given spot in Europe, provide a rare moment of drama in what is an epic, but often mundane story.

After city life had been suspended for fifteen months, the day *MSC Orchestra* carved its way through the Venice lagoon felt like a threshold. Would European cities, tentatively reopening after a long pandemic, revert to their former cycles of gentrification, touristification and privatisation? Or would they reshape their relationship with those who think of the city as their home? This is a collection of essays from city-dwellers curious to know.

They are all written with a conviction that people – through a democratic life of imagination, activism and participation – can make cities better, fairer and more meaningful places.

This collection invites us to see the city through the eyes of people who are denied a space in it. In the first essay, **STEFANO MURCIA** – a youth worker and filmmaker working in Turin – tells us about Beniamino, a teenager who rarely steps from the safety of his electric scooter. In the next text, **HYJNESHÉ FRONI**, a recent law graduate writing under a pseudonym, wonders whether the slow drip of street-level racism her friends experience in Paris has the same effect as the state-sanctioned segregation her parents experienced in Kosovo.

We are yet to know how the effort to wean cities off carbon will affect the problem of dwindling urban space. Both require a change in the way we feel about nature within cities. **KRYŚIA JĘDRZEJEWSKA-SZMEK** and **ZUZA DERLACZ**, two artists from Warsaw concerned with wetland habitats, ask us to consider whether animals (or ‘more-than-humans’) might have a right to the city, too.

Several essays examine citizen organising and the ways in which it addresses exclusion and injustice. **EVA TESSZA UDVARHELYI**, founder of the School of Public Life, a Hungarian agency that supports citizen organising, reviews the struggles of cyclists, homeless people and the disabled in Budapest. **MARWA ELMUBARK**, an architecture and design writer in London, documents the rise of a new kind of architect around Europe: one who helps people shape their own urban surroundings. These architects want to break down the mystique of their profession, so that ordinary people in cities feel as able to design, modify and arrange public spaces as they do gardens and allotments. **CHIARA CERTOMÀ**, a geographer from Turin, looks at the rise of different forms of urban gardening around Europe and sees them as ways of contesting models of urban development. **VITALIE SPRINCEANA**, a journalist and activist in Chişinău, looks at how the coronavirus pandemic has reshaped city life and finds hope in the neighbourhood support groups that emerged in spring 2020.

Earlier this year, on Sunday, 26 September, Berliners voted in support of a referendum proposing that the housing portfolios of the city's biggest private landlords should be purchased by the city government. **JONAS BECKER**, the media spokesperson for the campaign, explains what must surely be one of the most dramatic moves a city's residents have made to declare their right to the city.

Activism like this across Europe does not go unnoticed by city governments. In his overview of the phenomenon of touristification, **JOSE MANSILLA**, director of the Observatory of Anthropology of Urban Conflict (OACU), explores how authorities in Berlin, London and Barcelona have introduced policies designed to stop neighbourhoods being turned over to the needs of tourists. **ANTONIJA KOMAZLIĆ**, an activist from the Mozemo (We Can!) green-left coalition writes about how activists were instrumental in shaping the political platform that now controls all tiers of government in the city of Zagreb.

Four years ago, **GEORGIANA ILIE**, a journalist from Bucharest, published a widely read and chilling article about what the next earthquake in Bucharest might do. In her essay here, Georgiana reflects on how that article helped to inspire activists, citizens and politicians to prepare together for the future. Those who oppose right to the city activists tend to say that this is 'just the way cities are', but the story

of a city that can organise against an earthquake stands to remind us that there are no ‘natural events’ in cities.

The photo of Jane da Mosto in Venice found its way into the *New York Times*, *El País*, *Le Monde* and many of the world’s biggest newspapers. Partly under this pressure from activists, UNESCO pushed the Italian government into completely banning cruise ships from the Venice lagoon from August this year. After ten years of calling for it, No Grandi Navi finally got what it wanted.

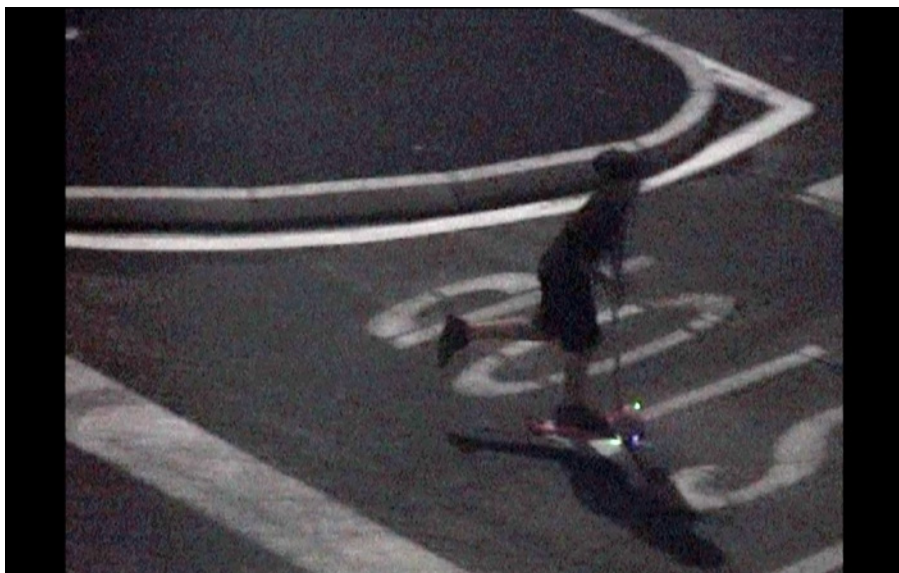
But of course, the msc *Orchestra* sails on elsewhere. As I write this, a shipping tracker tells me it’s currently five hours from Dubrovnik. As capital and wealth flow around the continent, so too do the displacement, enclosure and exclusion they create. There is, simply, no way to imagine a right to only one isolated city. The right to the city shows itself in your building, your park or your neighbourhood, but it connects you to all European cities. Read on. ■

BARRIERA D AT 50 KM/H

STEFANO MURGIA is a film and documentary filmmaker working in Turin. He writes for Comitato Zona Aurora and through his association with Radio Banda Larga has been recently working with young MCS and producers of the Turin suburb Barriera di Milano releasing a series of radio podcasts with a focus on music and rights to the city.



It's ten o'clock on a Sunday evening in June and I am smoking a cigarette with my eyes turned towards the street four floors below. The window of the apartment where I live overlooks Corso Vercelli, a 4.8 kilometre-long avenue that connects the Balòn market to Turin's northern ring road, crossing the Borgo Aurora and Barriera di Milano districts. As the darkness slowly falls, my gaze lazily moves amongst the remains of the Fiat Grandi Motori, once the epicentre of one of the oldest working-class districts in Turin, today an open-air archaeological site in a state of total abandonment. As summer comes, the former factory is invaded by spontaneous vegetation which inexorably advances amongst the concrete rubble and shattered glass. A black cat wanders cautiously. A few metres further along, the silhouette of a man climbs over the wall that separates the area from the road and heads towards one of the few covered areas looking for shelter to spend the night. A passer-by quietly treads the sidewalk that runs alongside the factory, unaware of what goes on behind the high walls covered with graffiti. Then, suddenly, a whistle of tires coming from the south end of the avenue breaks the apparent stillness at the end of the day. Slowly, a multitude of people begins to



converge from the main road, heading towards the origin of the unexpected disturbance. Some gather in small groups; others turn around and change their direction, postponing the return home. The younger ones whiz fast in the middle of the road aboard electric scooters that dart along the sidewalks of the suburb. For my part, I lean out of the window as much as possible, eager to see the place of the accident, but it is hidden by the building that stands out on my left.

Almost unconsciously, I go to look for my video camera. I set the exposure to the maximum and I begin to follow the trajectory of passers-by who are flocking from all directions. The flashing lights of an ambulance and a police patrol car intermittently illuminate the road along with the four orange indicator lights of some cars parked on the side of the road. Suddenly, a swirl of colours reflecting on the grey asphalt appears on the camera display. These are the multicoloured LED wheels of a scooter that whizzes at full speed. Even before zooming out, I know who regulates their rotation: it is Beniamino, a fifteen-year-old boy I met a hundred metres from where I live at one of the popular meeting places for teenagers in the area, known to them as 'Giardini Alimonda'.



Until recently, Beniamino lived in an apartment just around the corner in a council house that his family had occupied in 2020, along with many other homeless people. However, in February 2021, under the threat of an imminent eviction by the ATC and a disparaging media campaign against the occupying Roma families, Beniamino's parents decided to settle their caravan under the canopy of the market in the nearby Piazza Crispi.¹ Some other families still resist eviction inside the building.

I met Beniamino for the first time during a neighbourhood football tournament organised by Comitato Zona Aurora² in Piazza Alimonda in the summer of 2020. The initiative attracted many young inhabitants of the area from the most disparate geographical and cultural backgrounds. On a sunny afternoon, boys and girls of Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisian, Malian, Nigerian, Romanian, Moldovan and Albanian descent confronted each other on a DIV football

¹ The company that oversees the management of public housing in the city of Turin.

² Neighbourhood committee founded by a group of young inhabitants of Borgo Aurora in 2019.



pitch in the heart of the neighbourhood where they live. At the edge of the field, Beniamino watched absorbed by the feats of his peers with one foot resting on the platform of the scooter, ready to ride away at any time as soon as necessity or his whims would require.

In the following months, I met Beniamino aboard his scooter almost every day during my daily trips around the neighbourhood. I often wondered why he always needed to be on the move. Then, one evening this year, I had the opportunity to ask him when I met him by chance, in front of the entrance to the council house where he used to live. His uncles and cousins are still living there and he often ends up spending the afternoon with them. Together with his younger cousin Alfonso, we listened to him illustrating the technical specifications of his new scooter model, with particular emphasis on the top speed of fifty kilometres an hour. That's when Beniamino revealed to me why speed is of such vital importance to him, confirming a hunch that I had during the casual observation of his movements in the neighbourhood. Thanks to the scooter and its speed, he can safely check for the presence of unwanted acquaintances in certain areas. Even more importantly, he can easily get

away from threatening or discriminatory situations which happen every day due to his Roma origin during daily contacts with passers-by or acquaintances regardless of nationality. In addition, on board his electric kick-scooter, Beniamino carries out the duties of a messenger for his family, particularly since his family is split between the market shed and the squatted council estate. Moreover, it is thanks to the autonomy guaranteed by his vehicle that Beniamino travels the length and breadth of the neighbourhood every day, enriches his wealth of knowledge and ‘whizzes at full speed without thinking about anything’ whenever he likes.

Just as he was relaying this, in the blink of an eye, Beniamino jumped on his scooter and darted towards the incredulous look of his younger cousin, who was waiting for us at the entrance to the gardens. Behind him, inside and outside the perimeter of the fences that delimit the garden, several cars of the Carabinieri, three police riot vans and two army vans were guarding the area, preventing access to the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. It was six o’clock in the evening, and the curfew was going to start a few hours later. A few metres from us, the customers of the Lidl supermarket came and went carrying plastic bags. The garden where hundreds of teenagers meet every day to play sports or simply get together outside their homes looked like a war zone. Beniamino loaded his cousin onto the back of the scooter platform and with a sudden flick of the wrist they vanished around the end of the street. I turned on my heels and went home, taking the long road.

I am amazed by Beniamino’s need to be constantly mobile, above all because it underlines his ardent desire for autonomy. At the same time, I feel that his practice is a result of a necessarily defensive attitude towards an urban space that he perceives as hostile. The reasons for such hostilities are likely not clear to him, nor are they clear to the teenagers who live in the Aurora and Barriera di Milano districts, so much so that they could appear to them as consequences of a destiny that has been already written. The reasons for such hostilities are unknown to them not only because they are absorbed in inventing new strategies to live a better life in the neighbourhood, but above all because the economic and political system conceals its role in creating them.

For at least five years, the districts of Aurora and Barriera di Milano have been involved in a regeneration process promoted by all political parties. These areas were neglected by politicians after the FIAT plant closed – the new interventions, which come wrapped in the rhetoric of the ‘decorum’, feel like a recolonisation of the area and its people.³ In practical terms this is happening through a promotional sale of public land to large multinationals. For instance, Italian coffee company Lavazza built its huge headquarters in Aurora – which includes ‘a museum’ and a one-Michelin-star restaurant. Meanwhile, the Dutch company The Student Hotel is starting the construction site for a luxury hostel in a 30,000-square-metre area at the very heart of the neighbourhood. Lastly, the former Maria Adelaide hospital will probably be converted into a hostel for the athletes of the World Student Games in 2025. Because of this, the so-called renewal of the Aurora district has resulted in the eviction of a community centre and the forced closure of one of the few after-school activities for kids and teenagers in the neighbourhood, while the project to reopen a free health centre for the community has been recently denied by the municipality.

I can already see Beniamino whizzing through the streets of the neighbourhood from which he has been kicked out, ostensibly to give space to a new vibrant creative corner of the city of Turin, without any awareness of his rights to the city. ■

3 For more about ‘Decoro (Decorum)’ in Turin, see <http://www.comune.torino.it/arredourbano/presentazione/index.shtml>.

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HYJNESHĒ FRONI is in her twenties and has recently completed a graduate law programme in Paris. She writes under a pseudonym and has changed the names of the people in her article.

Public spaces in cities are the first place where a child sees the world outside the microcosm of their home – a world full of new people, new sights and new experiences. These experiences are crucial to how a person makes sense of this world, and their position in it. This is why othering, racism and segregation in public spaces are far more detrimental than many imagine. Segregation and racism in public spaces can range from direct state-managed segregation to ‘soft’ segregation that filters through to everyday life from structures and policies. Both forms cause affected individuals and communities to feel very exposed and unsafe. It affects their perception of themselves and exacerbates divisions based on racial and ethnic lines, alienating the most marginalised groups even further.

HARD SEGREGATION

My parents’ experience of Kosovo in the 1980s and 1990s illustrates the degree to which a city, despite its sturdy buildings and permanent-looking roads, is an ever-changing entity with the power to profoundly shape people’s lives. My parents were both born in Gjilan in Kosovo, which at the time was part of Yugoslavia. Their social status shielded them from the discrimination other ethnic Albanians had to endure. However, after 1989, a police state was instituted over Kosovo, and the repression at the hands of the Serbian state apparatus grew with each passing day.

Ethnic segregation started as a top-down process, with schools being the first public spaces to be fully divided between the Albanians of Kosovo and the Serbs, and Albanian was no longer allowed to be the language of instruction. My mother, who at the time was in her twenties, remembers how young people would meet on the promenade in the evening and socialise, but observe the divisions enforced at school. ‘There was a clear line for the Albanians, and another for the Serbs’, she says. The other ethnic groups, like people (like my father) who are Turks from Kosovo, felt they had to choose a side, and yet as non-Serbs they also felt exposed and unsafe.

My parents speak of a gradual loss of access to their own city, and a constant feeling of danger in public spaces. Eventually, and yet also quickly, the Albanians stopped frequenting the city centre and many other zones where being Albanian was no longer safe. 'We no longer went to parks, or to the theatre, or most other public spaces, because we knew we were unsafe', says my mother. When I asked her whether there was a specific point when she felt like she no longer had access to the city, she replied: 'When the statue of Tsar Lazar, a Serbian King, was installed in the city centre, it was no longer a question of access. It was a clear sign that we no longer "belonged" in our own city, that, despite it being ours, it was taken from us, and the entire mounting architecture was to make us feel unwelcome in public spaces.' My family and people were being erased from public spaces, which were now openly segregated along ethnic lines by a state apparatus. A Serbian Orthodox church constructed in the University campus of Prishtina was another violent public symbol to remind the Albanians that they were no longer allowed to enjoy what had been their public spaces. They could no longer attend university and now, if they ever passed by the campus, there was a symbol to remind them they did not belong. My aunt, like my mom, did much of her high school and university in what were known as 'parallel structures', not in the official buildings. 'We would learn that the lectures would be held in someone's house or basement, in remote areas so the risk of police finding us, beating us, and jailing us was lower', says my aunt. 'I still don't know what the inside of the high school or the university looks like. I never enjoyed my youth because it was taken from me', she adds. 'Public spaces were a source of fear and anxiety, because that was where we were constantly reminded of our oppression and were physically oppressed and abused by police.'

The traumas and inner turmoil created by a decade of violent segregation remain ingrained in the identity of my family and my people. Even seeing Kosovo police officers and United Nations peacekeepers still makes them uneasy and scared, especially in public spaces. I, on the other hand, was born at the brink of war, and grew up in a post-war setting. My relationship with public spaces

in my city and in Pristina is very different; I feel I belong, I feel safe, and that my presence in these spaces is rather neutral.

This extreme segregation, which at the time was compared to apartheid, is not something that is likely to happen anytime soon in cities like Paris, where I currently live. However, this does not mean that there aren't other, softer, 'more acceptable' forms of segregation, othering and profiling at work.

SOFT SEGREGATION

The theme of feeling unsafe in public spaces is one that kept coming up in discussions with my friends that are from racialised communities. France, across the political spectrum and its institutional cultures insists that it is colour-blind. 'Il y a pas de communauté en France' (There are no communities in France) is a sentence commonly heard from the Left to the Right. There is also some sort of phobia related to the very word 'race' in the country, and many of my French peers, especially the white ones, get very uncomfortable at its mention. *Ethnicité* they insist, is a preferable term. This phenomenon is so embedded here that it is illegal to make racial surveys, as they find it to be contrary to the first article of the constitution, which stipulates that the state owes equality to all its citizens without distinction of origin, race or religion.

Yet, despite this institutional insistence that there are no racial or religious communities in France, my friends, who feel themselves to be part of racialised communities, all complain about feeling overly 'visible' in public spaces and unsafe. These feelings come from being racially profiled in different parts of Paris – feelings denied by Right and Left alike. The Right says that the police have to profile people as crimes are disproportionately committed by 'foreigners'; the Left prefers to say that profiling is based on identifying class background, not race. Both sides fail to adequately understand the experiences of the communities discriminated against in public spaces, and how these discriminations limit their access to the city.

Their reluctance to recognise the role of race and its importance also impedes them from understanding how policies that are not overtly racist can encourage prejudice and enable racism.

Hani, an Arab friend of mine, tells me about being discriminated against in Paris. He is a lawyer who lives in one of the most affluent neighbourhoods of the capital and is amongst the most educated people in the country. Yet, he is often stopped by patrolling policemen in his neighbourhood and asked to show his papers and to tell them what he is doing. The likelihood of being stopped and the invasiveness of the police's questions depends on his physical appearance. 'If I'm wearing a hoodie, or sweatpants, or a sweatshirt I am stopped much more frequently', said Hani during our discussion. 'If I'm wearing a sharp suit, they assume I'm a rich Arab.' The way he is treated is based on his appearance as an Arab man in France. He can use the way he dresses to appear middle class and professional, but it's nevertheless clear that he is viewed primarily through the lens of race. 'I don't feel at home here, probably because of that', he notes. Yet, being aware of his privileges, he tries to take these as learning experiences, which he recognises others don't have the luxury to do. 'Many of my friends feel dirty, weak or unwanted.'

All the people of colour I spoke to complained about feeling overly visible in Paris, especially outside the districts where the presence of other racialised communities is lower. 'When we are in a park as a group, and we are being loud, our behaviour is immediately tied to our race and appearance. But, when we are in a group with mainly our white friends, then the same behaviour is attributed to us being young, and it feels unfair', complains another friend. As someone who is often mistaken for an Arab in France, I also feel more visible here. I've realised I self-censor in public spaces, especially if there are policemen around, so I can avoid uncomfortable run-ins. The police make me uneasy because I feel like I must excuse my presence in these spaces. I also feel I don't belong.

In addition to racial profiling, the women of colour I spoke to complain about feeling overly visible in public spaces. Selma, another French Arab woman, complains that in addition to feeling that she does not have access to parts of the city because of her gender,

she is also subject to racial catcalling. *Beurette*, the French derogatory term to refer to Arab women living in the French *banlieu*,¹ is one she detests as it immediately reminds her that she is in a space where whiteness is the norm, and she is an exotified, fetishized outlier in it.

OUTSIDE THE PUBLIC

Many of my friends who grew up in these neighbourhoods of Paris feel that the more central parts of the city are not made for them. Their presence in these spaces is perceived as a threat and they are perceived to be outsiders, despite the fact that they are French, and were born and raised in Paris. This often makes them question their French identity, and they often self-segregate to avoid these experiences. My white and white-passing friends, on the other hand, said they don't feel particularly visible in public spaces, and unless they are women, they feel they have access to Paris anywhere and at any time. Insisting on not seeing these facts through a racial prism is not helping France avoid division; it is reinforcing it by making entire groups feel like they don't belong and that the state is not tailored to take their experiences into account.

In addition to these experiences, what we are all extremely worried about are the racist effects of gentrification and other urban policies. From London to Stockholm and Paris, the hike in prices caused by more affluent white groups moving into lower-income neighbourhoods populated by people of colour is forcing the latter out of their own neighbourhoods. This often pushes them into even more marginalised parts of the city, and sometimes out of the city completely. In addition to the lack of access they have to some parts of the city, they are losing access to their own neighbourhoods.

¹ A term to refer to low-income neighbourhoods that are in the outskirts of cities like Paris. These neighbourhoods are often where

communities of colour, migrants and other marginalised groups live.

My parents lost access to their city during extreme circumstances because of a police state, and were made to feel like they didn't belong because of policies directed at this outcome. My racialised peers and their communities in Paris are also feeling like they are losing their city, or the parts of it they feel they have access to, even if in less violent ways, because of a myriad of historical factors that have led to their exclusion in predominantly white spaces, and increasing financialisation of public spaces that is materially pushing them out of their homes, streets and neighbourhoods. ■

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PATH TO SPECIES CITY CITY NEEDS TO MORE ACTORS

ZUZA DERLACZ is a member of Spółdzielnia ‘Krzak’ (Krzak Collective), interested in agro-activist movements. She is a co-editor of *Krzak Papier* magazine and is a part of the ZAKOLE group.

KRYŚIA JĘDRZEJEWSKA-SZMEK is a visual artist and biologist. In her artistic practice, she combines her scientific background with art. She is interested in the way people interact with the natural world and more-than-human actors. She is a part of the ZAKOLE group.

A wetland seems like the antithesis of a city. A city should be safe for its inhabitants, allow people's movement and comfort, and provide various services. Meanwhile, a wetland is damp, dense and inaccessible. The forest that grows within mires often has a specific structure of mounds and pits that are seasonally flooded by water – it is very difficult to walk through. The hop vines climb on bushes, forming a thick, green labyrinth. Stink bugs, spiders and ants crawl up the legs of any kind of visitor. The mosquitos are overwhelming. Beavers chew down trees and raise water levels, constantly reshaping and transforming the landscape around them.

Human reluctance towards swamps, mires and bogs is connected to their unpredictability and inaccessibility. Even though humans often lived close to swamps and benefited from them, in folk culture they were traditionally associated with magic and danger. For some time now, wetlands have been drained and buried all over the world to get access to peat or land for agriculture, industry, infrastructure and housing. But faced with climate disaster and a great extinction, can we overcome the fear of the wet and impenetrable and trust in wetlands once again to secure our multispecies future? Can we imagine a wet city of the future?

WHERE IS THE CITY?

Horsetail plants, fire-bellied toads and leafy brain fungus are species rarely thought of as city dwellers. When we think of the non-human in the city, we tend to point to animals or plants that live near humans and benefit from our activity – for example, by feeding on leftovers or inhabiting places such as roadsides and gardens. In biology, beings such as sparrows, house martins, foxes or nettles, which adapt to an environment deeply modified by people, are named 'synanthropes'. But imagining a truly multispecies city requires going further and thinking about those who lived there before urbanisation. Those who will not survive on roadsides and rubbish dumps, who need specific conditions, such as wet open areas or inaccessible thickets, provided by wetlands.



Wet habitats have gained much attention from the scientific community because they are key sites for the environment and climate. Wetlands all around the world are hotspots of biodiversity, hosting many endangered species from the Red List; they are also crucial for water retention and absorbing carbon dioxide. At the same time, they are one of the fastest-disappearing ecosystems in our climate zone due to human activity. These changes dramatically sped up in the twentieth century: since 1900 about two-thirds of the world's wetlands diminished, with Europe leading in the statistics of destruction.¹ That is why in 1971 the global Ramsar Convention was established to protect wetland habitats around the world – including those in the cities.

¹ As understood in the Ramsar Convention, 'wetlands are areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or

flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six metres'. See *Ramsar.org*.

In fact, human settlements were always built adjacent to wetlands. Rivers and mires not only provided water, food and transportation, but also a form of defence due to their inaccessibility. For the same reason, wetlands are perfect habitats for wildlife to flourish, even in close proximity to densely populated areas. However, in the course of development and growth of the city, its mires were gradually drained and buried with debris, and rivers were regulated, with smaller ones forced into underground canals. Ever since, the city has made its goal to tame, manage and control water, worsening not only the state of urban microclimates and hydrographic conditions, but also its own biodiversity by destroying the habitats and eventually evicting the water-loving beings from their home.

ZAKOLE WAWERSKIE IN THE MULTISPECIES ENTANGLEMENT

This is also the case for Poland's capital city, which developed around the Vistula River and its marshlands. However, looking at a map of Warsaw's overground watercourses today, it is hard to believe that it used to be crisscrossed by a dense water network. But amongst the blocks of flats, expressways and single-family houses, a secluded wetland has managed to survive the expansion of the city. This place, called Zakole Wawerskie (Wawer Curve), is an ancient meander of the Vistula and the lowest, most wet terrain in the area. This prevented it from being urbanised and secured the survival of many endangered wetland species. The whole site measures 200 hectares and is composed of an older forest growing on a mire, wet meadows, and vast sedge and reed assemblages, surrounded from each side by dense urban development. For several centuries, until the early 1990s, most of this area had been used for agriculture. The



subsequent decrease in human activity, together with the return of beavers, resulted in the rewilding of Zakole Wawerskie. The European beaver has been near extinction in Poland and a big restoration programme had to be carried out for its colonies to rebuild and naturally disperse throughout the country, clogging drainage canals and re-irrigating many wetlands, including Zakole, which became more and more detached from city life.

In some senses, Zakole Wawerskie seems forgotten; it is a place where few people ever enter, and only specialists are aware of its priceless value. Even though this area has been studied for several dozen years, with botanists and ornithologists pointing out the diverse and unique character of this place and its residents, it never gained wider public attention. For many people, Zakole remains synonymous with neglect and danger, which is also why it could evolve at its own pace. Still, although not easily accessible for Warsaw's human residents, the site provides crucial ecosystemic services. Zakole Wawerskie acts like a sponge – it has the capacity to retain huge amounts of rainwater, securing the city from flooding. At the



same time, by keeping water in the landscape, it cools the city in times of heat and drought. Therefore, maintaining such wet ecosystems is necessary to both counteract and adapt our cities to the new reality of the climate catastrophe.

However, the question of developing the Zakole Wawerskie area, consisting of private plots of land, has been the subject of conflict for years. Having its environmental value in mind, the city doesn't allow major investments in the area, but also doesn't buy plots from the various landowners. Meanwhile, due to legal stagnation and loopholes, new buildings arise in the wetland's vicinity. Although part of the wetland is a protected site, and clearly valuable in terms of biodiversity, Zakole Wawerskie is heavily dependent on adjoining wet meadows, reservoirs and watercourses, as well as infiltration and small retention from the surrounding area. The encroachment of urban infrastructure deeper and deeper into this area leads to lowering of the groundwater level and drying of the wetland, and the subsequent eradication of its inhabitants. One of the alarming facts about the future of Zakole Wawerskie is the apparent disappearance

of amphibians from the area in the last couple of years, probably without much chance of restoration without human intervention as the area is separated from other overwater reservoirs. This shows how the process of eviction of non-human city inhabitants can be quick and unnoticed. Warsaw's wetland is also home to over 120 different species of birds – what would happen to them if their habitat was covered in concrete?

WETNESS KEEPERS

Dramatically quick and irreversible processes of the same kind have gained the attention of activists and biologists from Romania connected to the Văcărești Natural Park Association in Bucharest.² This organisation grew from the need to protect an unfinished and neglected retention reservoir that was colonized by various more-than-human inhabitants and became the largest wild and green space in the whole of Bucharest. Their long-term advocacy led to the establishment of a protected area in the centre of the Romanian capital. Today, their activities are focused on the development of a new law allowing for much faster and more efficient establishing of protected areas in other cities. They are also creating a network of urban natural areas and hope to encourage more citizens to speak out in favor of protection. A successful example follows the path of Văcărești, in Cluj-Napoca, where the municipality responded to the public pressure by protecting a wetland. Another example of a man-made retention basin overtaken by nature is a concrete reservoir adjacent to the vast fields of the former Tempelhof Airport in Berlin, saved as a city commons thanks to a grassroots movement. The water basin later became a 'natureculture learning site'³ under the care of the Floating University collective; it now functions as an urban infrastructure in the form of rainwater reservoir, a learning hub and a wet habitat where hundreds of frogs reproduce.

² See the Văcărești Natural Park website, *Parc-naturalvacaresti.ro/en*.

³ See the Floating Berlin project website, *Floating-Berlin.org*.

Our activities as ZAKOLE group grew from the recognition that since there are few people that know of Zakole Wawerskie and its role in the city's ecosystem, there is a need to put this place on the map for Warsaw's residents and advocate for its full protection. We wanted to support the formation of a loose but caring community around it, advocating for the wetland and its inhabitants. With this goal in mind, we conducted intimate workshops, walks and conversations with specialists from different fields as well as the city administration, which helped us to better understand the area and to present it to the wider public on our website.⁴ We want to show how unique and important Zakole Wawerskie is on the scale of European capitals, and that there is no need to build apartment blocks or playing fields to make sense of its existence. The city carries a responsibility towards the wetland and its various residents, and therefore, eventually, it will have to address the issue of legal ownership to secure our common, more-than-human future.

TOWARDS A MULTISPECIES CITY

Ever since the beginning of our work around the wetlands, we have constantly asked ourselves about the possibility of representing more-than-human beings and their needs in decisions regarding the future of cities. As Marie Carmen Shingne points out, 'the right to the city is a political and social concept meant to question the privileging of certain groups over others in the urban space and raise questions about power and decision-making in the production of urban space'.⁵ However, for a long time this idea seemed to be limited to humans,

4 See the ZAKOLE group website, [Zakole.pl/en/](http://zakole.pl/en/).

5 Marie Carmen Shingne, 'The More-than-human Right to the city: A Multispecies Reevaluation', *Journal of Urban Affairs*, (April 2020), DOI: 10.1080/07352166.2020.1734014.

not noticing that city development is, in fact, privileging humans over non-humans. Shinge stresses that it is not about reversing that dynamic – prioritising other species over marginalised groups of people – but thoughtfully acting together against gentrification and aggressive urban development. We need to include other species in right to the city activism, and, consequently, in urban planning, which for a long time has treated cities as separate from ‘nature’.⁶

The ‘urban’ – similarly to ‘culture’ – has long been seen as the domain of humans, where other species are subordinated to people’s needs. But to reimagine the city in the context of climate change and mass extinction is to accept the fact that the urban does not and cannot exclude the non-human and its needs. It is not only about our responsibility towards other species in the face of human-induced climate crisis. Planning for cities with a more caring attitude and the idea of a liveable space for wildlife provides real value for other inhabitants. In the long run, a city gains some crucial services from a wetland, which counteracts major urban problems such as the heat-island effect, pollution, CO₂ emission, both drought and flooding, and – of course – biodiversity loss. Creating alternative, wet visions of urban planning is especially important now, with aggravated weather conditions brutally pointing out the weaknesses and blind spots of our current city model. There is an urgent need to disenchant the damp, wet swamp, and to embrace wetness and sponginess; there is a need to reintroduce wild ecosystems into our surroundings. ■

6 Donna Houston et al., ‘Make Kin, Not Cities! Multispecies Entanglements and “Becoming-world” in Planning Theory’, *Planning Theory* 17, issue 2 (2017): 190–212.

DEMOCRACY
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THE RIGHT BUDAPEST

ÉVA TESSZA UDVARHELYI is an educator and activist working in Budapest. She is the co-founder and board member of The School of Public Life, a community-based training and research centre that supports people living in social exclusion and grassroots organisations that fight for social justice. Since 2019 she has also been working at the municipality of the 8th district of Budapest as the head of the Office of Community Participation.

At the School of Public Life, we believe that, in the words of a training participant, democracy is not a noun, but a verb – it only exists if we do it. In other words, democracy is not only a set of institutions that exist on paper, but a host of practices that people engage in during their everyday lives. Hungary today is portrayed worldwide as a semi-authoritarian country with many of our freedoms curtailed, a highly-centralised media and only semi-independent public institutions. This of course has been an increasingly depressing reality for all of us, but it is also important to keep in mind that there is a different Hungary, too. There are many people who are not giving up our country and continue to fight either individually or collectively for human rights, dignity and social justice.

In the following, I will give a short overview of some of the grass-roots efforts in Budapest that translate this into reality. It would be impossible to cover all the relevant and amazing struggles in our city, including those in the areas of environmental justice, housing, accessibility, migration and the rights of refugees, public space, transportation etc. As a result, I will offer you an admittedly subjective overview of those efforts that I have personally been involved in to illustrate some more general points about the interaction between citizens and the local state.

WHAT IS THE RIGHT TO THE CITY?

At the heart of the right to the city framework are two notions about the city. One is that the ‘urban’ is not a finished product but something continually in the making, a process rather than a product. The other is that control over this process should not lie in the hands of experts such as city planners or real estate developers, as is commonplace in contemporary cities, but in the hands of all of those who inhabit the city.



In his critique of urban life ‘The Urban Revolution’, the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre argued that exercising the right to the city means that urban residents are able to participate in the process of imagining and shaping the city as a shared work whose primary aim is to serve its residents’ needs.¹ The creation of equitable and just cities requires democratic urban planning and policymaking as well as an economy of solidarity that pays particular attention to the needs of marginalised and vulnerable residents. As the geographer David Harvey put it:

the right to the city is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart’s desire. ... [T]he right to remake ourselves by creating a qualitatively different kind of urban sociality is one of the most precious of all human rights. ... The creation of a new urban

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *La révolution urbaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

commons, a public sphere of active democratic participation, requires that we roll back that huge wave of privatization that has been the mantra of a destructive neoliberalism. We must imagine a more inclusive, even if continuously fractious, city based not only upon a different ordering of rights but upon different political-economic practices. If our urban world has been imagined and made then it can be re-imagined and re-made. The inalienable right to the city is worth fighting for.²

THE CITY IS FOR ALL – FIGHTING FOR AFFORDABLE, SAFE AND DIGNIFIED HOUSING

Drawing on the concept and practices of the right to the city, The City Is for All was founded in 2009 with a deep commitment to reclaiming homeless people's civic, political and social citizenship and empowering them to take collective action on their own behalf. The name of the group – A Város Mindenkié – is based on the Hungarian translation of the right to the city.

The City Is for All was founded in 2009 by a group of activists who were previously active in an organisation called Man on the Street, which raised awareness about homelessness and which also encountered Picture the Homeless, an organization in New York founded and run by homeless people. The idea of The City Is for All was to combine our experiences of organising middle-class activists in Man on the Street and the lessons we learned from Picture the Homeless that empowered those most affected by the housing

² David Harvey, 'The Right to the City', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27(4), (2003): pp. 939-41.



crisis. As such, cross-class solidarity and cooperation is at the heart of the work of The City Is for All.

Since 2009, The City Is for All has organised its activities around three main areas: social housing, social services and street homelessness. The group has been running campaigns against the warehousing of vacant apartments and has been involved in direct action to prevent the eviction of social housing residents and shack dwellers. In the area of social services, the group has organised campaigns to challenge the paternalistic logic of the shelter system and has also been engaged in a fight for free and accessible public toilets. Finally, in addition to distributing know-your-rights booklets amongst homeless people and launching a weekly free legal clinic on a public square in Budapest (which later became an independent organisation called Streetlawyer) the group has also been pursuing a long campaign against the criminalisation of homeless people at both the national and local levels.

In addition to stopping or postponing hundreds of evictions and helping potentially thousands of people overcome legal and

administrative barriers, in the first ten years of its operation, the group managed to reframe homelessness from something that has been widely understood as a social deviance to an issue of housing and put the housing crisis at the top of the political agenda for opposition parties. The fruits of this work will take time, but the recent election of opposition mayors in many Budapest municipalities in 2019 may help them along.

CRITICAL MASS – RECLAIMING PUBLIC SPACE FOR HUMAN- CENTRED TRANSPORTATION

City spaces reflect, organise and embody the categories, priorities and boundaries of urban society. As urbanist Michael Sorkin (1999) put it, ‘the city ... produces citizenship through the repetitive confrontation of citizens with an environment that organizes its prejudices and privileges physically’.³ As a loose global movement that promotes regular bike rides in hundreds of cities worldwide, Critical Mass was born in September 1992 with a mass bicycle ride in San Francisco partly as a celebration of cycling and partly as a protest of the bad conditions urban cyclists had to endure on city streets.⁴

The first ever Critical Mass in Budapest took place in 1998 but was relaunched in 2004 by a collaboration of the Friends of Urban Cycling, other cycling advocacy groups and a group of bike couriers. Earlier that year the mayor of Budapest, Gábor Demszky had

3 Michael Sorkin, *Traffic in democracy*. In J. Copjec and M. Sorkin (Eds.), *Giving ground. The politics of propinquity* (New York: Verso, 1999), pp. 2–15.

4 Jeff Ferrell, *Tearing Down the Streets. Adventures in Urban Anarchy* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 105.



announced that car-free day, which in other major European cities was held on a Wednesday during rush hour, would be staged on a Sunday afternoon when the city streets were already empty. Critical Mass called for a real car-free day. Their demonstration, which took place on 22 September 2004, drew around 4,000 participants, which surprised even the organisers and indicated a need amongst Budapest cyclists for both more political recognition and improved physical infrastructure. Later, Critical Mass was held twice a year with the biggest ride reaching an estimated 80,000 participants in honour of Earth Day in 2008.

The last Critical Mass ride was organised in 2013 with around 100,000 participants. Afterwards, the Hungarian Cyclists' Club and the original organisers of the ride announced the aims of the movement had been reached. More people were cycling than ever and overwhelming pressure on policymakers had been achieved, so the mundane work of advocacy for better and more bicycle infrastructure could be taken over by the Hungarian Cyclists' Club. But two years later, recognising that lobbying with decision-makers



is not enough on its own, the rides started again under the name 'I Bike Budapest'.

The Budapest Critical Mass was arguably the single most potent social movement that emerged in Hungary since the change of regimes and was also the largest of more than 200 Critical Masses organised around the world. The Critical Mass movement was unique not only in the speed with which it gained momentum, but also in its ability to garner and maintain a strong grassroots constituency while exerting significant political pressure. It managed to place cycling amongst the priority issues of Budapest's transportation policy, which has also resulted in infrastructural improvements as well as a recognition of cyclists as a distinct urban user group. Clearly, the political establishment realised the (voting) power of Critical Mass participants. It is also thanks to Critical Mass that Budapest became a biking city: the number of people who use their bikes regularly increased year on year since 2010 and the biking infrastructure is also coming along with it (even if still not at the desired pace).

LIVING INDEPENDENTLY IN A COMMUNITY

The Living Independently – in a Community research team was born out of the cooperation of ten physically disabled people and four allies who worked together from September 2016 to December 2017 as part of a participatory action research team. The team believed that everyone has a right to independent living and the aim of the research was to explore the opportunities that physically disabled people in Hungary have and the obstacles they face when they want to live independently, including challenges in public transportation, employment, housing and support services, which are all crucial for the independent life of disabled people.

In addition to engaging in research, the group was also active in advocacy efforts around the reconstruction of Metro line 3 in Budapest. The reconstruction of the line was a huge opportunity for disability rights organisations to convince the local government of Budapest to make the most heavily used forms of transportation accessible to all residents of the city. In 2016, it became public that the local government of Budapest was not planning to renovate all the stations in an accessible way, but only about half of all twenty stations. Many organisations, including more traditional, established advocacy groups such as the National Alliance of Associations of Disabled People (MEOSZ) and the Budapest Association of Disabled People and many other smaller organisations including the Living Independently – in a Community team and Rehab Critical Mass were involved in pushing the government to change its mind.

The power of this struggle lay in the ways that organisations engaged with decision-makers and the public. The bigger organisations used lobbying and direct negotiations with decision-makers and politicians, while the smaller groups mobilised the public and the media with protests, direct action and community events to put pressure on city leadership. At a certain point, opposition

parties also got involved in the struggle by initiating a local referendum. While this division of tasks was not a conscious strategy, it was very successful: in 2018, the general assembly of Budapest made the decision that eighteen out of the twenty stations will be made accessible to people with disabilities. This marked one of the major victories of the disability rights movement in the past couple of decades and one of the keys to its success was the broad spectrum of actors, allies and supporters who were involved in the struggle.

CONCLUSION: A NEW POLITICAL AGENDA

Struggles for the right to the city can never remain apolitical. Their demands come from those who experience their own exclusion from urban spaces and services. They are born as movements when people realise that their grievances are not individual complaints, but collective needs. Their success builds on a combination of mass mobilization of those affected and more traditional advocacy efforts that engage decision-makers. The involvement of allies and the mobilisation of different organisations is a key element in their long-term impact.

In 2019, residents of Budapest revolted against the authoritarian national government and elected opposition mayors in the majority of local municipalities. Many of these mayors championed participation, social justice and democracy in their campaigns and the mayor of Budapest was elected on a political programme titled Budapest for All, which included many right to the city demands, such as sustainability, housing and direct democracy. From this perspective, Hungarian cities and towns are joining a growing number of municipalities globally that aim to restore social justice and a respect for human rights at the local level, whilst also trying to make an impact nationally.



In the School of Public Life, we have been closely following the work of municipalist platforms all over Europe and the us and have organised many events where Hungarian activists and progressive politicians can learn from the practices, challenges and achievements of cities like Barcelona which keep feminism, sustainability, the right to housing, solidarity with migrants and the belief in strong public institutions high on their political agenda.

In Hungary, the recent political changes present an unprecedented opportunity for grassroots social justice movements in Budapest to turn their agenda into official public policy. However, real social change never comes only from policymakers, experts or politicians: it needs to build on both grassroots pressure from below and political will from above to actually happen. So, today the work of grassroots organisations fighting for the right to the city is needed more than ever to make sure that these gains are not ephemeral by keeping elected representatives in Budapest accountable and true to their original programmes and declarations. ■

PUBLIC MA
ACROSS EUROPE
OF ARCHITECTURE
PEOPLE TO MOD
SPACES

DESIGN A NEW KIND REENABLES IFY PUBLIC

MARWA ELMUBARK is a young Irish Architect and writer working in London with an interest in the role the public plays in architecture and design. She is cofounder of Afterparti, a group exploring ideas of collectivity and civicness in the city through the lens of identity.

Since the advent of modernism in the 1930s and its division between city and nature, a reverence for ‘concept’ and ‘form’ has emerged that has led to design becoming a kind of packaging exercise. Rather than a process of meaningful engagement and discovery, design became concerned with the imposition of preconceived forms into space, often by people not from that place. This, coupled with the deadening effect of standardised, pre-made products and materials has led to formulaic aesthetics, particularly notable across our public realm.

Unlike most buildings, which will only be used by certain segments of the population for work or for habitation, our public spaces are frequented by most people and yet have very generic expressions – completely at odds with the diversity and needs of their users.

ARCHITECTURE AS STAGE SETTING

The opposite of a mass-produced, unresponsive architecture that homogenises space is an architecture of contingency, or what landscape architect James Corner refers to as an ‘art of disposition’. This approach regards design as an act of stage-setting interventions that leaves room for the public’s self-organisation and doesn’t try to pre-empt (often incorrectly) what people might do in a space. This approach allows more room for people to appropriate space and use it in different ways.

The coronavirus pandemic’s limiting effect on movement has shifted life from the centre of cities towards multiple centres as communities turn inwards. This, coupled with the primary response of many to escape to the countryside and nature, has led to a re-examination of our public realm and a reflection on how successful it is as an outdoor amenity, as well as how inclusively it is designed. This return to origins, taking lessons of equity and heterogeneity from landscape and bringing these back into how we design our

urban landscapes is a trend that can be observed across several European cities from Marseille to Rome to Brussels and Madrid, signalling a shift in consciousness post-pandemic that connects with how architecture redefines itself as a social profession.

MOVABLE FURNITURE

The monotonising effect of standardisation on the public realm is probably the most visible problem of public space and has resulted in the output of generic, static outdoor furniture. Often designed to be hard-wearing and featuring metal studs to deter users from lingering for too long, this defensive display of design is becoming more and more offensive as time goes on. These outward displays of hostility beg the question of who owns the public realm, and who can participate in its design, transformation and maintenance.

In 2015, nine architecture students from Brussels formed Collectif Baya, an unusual architectural practice located in the Forest district of the city, who were interested in new ways of putting people in the role of architects and designers. Their practice is mixed with research and sees them collaborating with local groups to design objects and buildings. Boris Papiens, a founding member, recently worked on one of Collectif Baya's research projects which asked the question: 'Can considering the entire life cycle of street furniture and integrating all the players concerned in its production improve the quality of public space?'¹ The resulting report interrogates public-realm design and argues that street furniture is 'the element inhabitants most often invoke to define their uses of public space or the exclusion mechanisms to which they are subjected. It is therefore in a way a translator and an interface through which they come into contact with the public space and the city.'

1 See the online description of Managing Inclusive Furniture – Manif, <http://collectifbaya.com/fr/blog/manif>.

To realise this project, Collectif Baya have been working in collaboration with various user groups and SASHA, a research centre at the Free University of Brussels. Through the testing of objects and their relationships to various users, Collectif Baya found that when you give users the ability to be part of the process, they experience a feeling of ownership and responsibility. The project has resulted in a series of modular objects (currently in development) based on real data from participants and constructed without generic, pre-manufactured parts. The objects can be arranged and moved by visitors to create their own seating and street furniture. ‘People will pay more attention to it and are wary of any act of vandalism or degradation. If you abandon or take away the space and its design from the people, they then don’t really care about it. They start to litter, degrade, break, because “someone” will repair it or clean it’, explains Boris.

The process of producing street furniture becomes more than a generic design process; it becomes a lens through which to explore issues of co-existence and production in the city, and an interrogation of existing systems to produce new methodologies in which everyone’s voice can be heard.

FROM LIMITED TO MULTIPLE USES

In addition to the problem of standardisation, there is also the issue of limitation of use. That is, there is often a disconnection between what city dwellers need and the urban spaces and furniture available to them. Public space is often designed to be static in order to dictate certain types of behaviour and exclude anything outside of that.

Orizzontale Collective are a Rome-based collective who share Collectif Baya’s interest in participation and DIY architecture. In their 2014 project ‘Twins’ they challenged the idea of a static public realm by designing a temporary seating area at the entrance to a

new public garden.² The project is part of an extensive programme proposed for the Giardino Ammirato by the Rome-based collective. The superposition of light, architectural elements was the result of a collaborative process with the local community – signalling a starting point for neighbours to engage with their new space and programme of activities in the public garden.

‘The project since its earliest stages of conception and design was shared by neighbours, citizens’ associations, interested persons to maintain and care for green areas, and greater use of public spaces’, explains Nasrin Mohiti Asli, a co-founder of Orizzontale.

By simulating the buttresses of the historic walls through the use of a modular, timber-frame structure, the construction countered the static nature of many public space pieces and could be adapted by its users.

‘The proposed architectural intervention is a temporary, mobile and lightweight structure, a mechanism for the reception of different proposals and at the same time a mobile site for apprenticeship, an open-air school and a platform for meeting’, continues Nasrin.

The design mediates between the pragmatic and the poetic. The existing concrete benches form a prospective entrance to the new garden, while others at the edge of the square set up a rhythm which users can add to in order to accommodate future events and transformations. It is the embodiment of public realm as theatre, the opposite of something static to be viewed and not used.

DYNAMIC PUBLIC SPACE

Marseille-based practice Collectif Etc have also responded to the problem of the static public realm of limited inclusivity by proposing a dynamic public space in Marseille’s central square – a collaborative endeavour which has been ongoing since 2016 in the Belle-de-Mai district around the Turfu Embassy in Marseille.

² See the online description of Twins, https://www.orizzontale.org/en/portfolio_page/twins/.

With a brief that asked the question ‘How can we make public space desirable and accessible?’ Collectif Etc have been exploring ways to empower citizens to shape their environment through simple methods of construction. This has been happening in a series of workshops which aim to teach participants the basics of timber and metal frame construction. Participants were taught basic welding, cutting and carving techniques, with the help of trained technicians and guidance from the architects. Applying their skills, they then built a series of sliding tables and chairs, removable platforms and an open-air performance space, which were all a product of simple construction tools and processes.

By distributing knowledge and skills in this way, Collective Etc challenges ideas of the architect as sole author of a project and promotes a more equitable approach to building in which everyone plays a contributing role.

As Collectif etc explain; ‘Public space is what we share with others, for better or for worse, in an improvised choreography where our bodies cross without stopping there, from the boulevard to the square, from the public garden to the shopping centre, from home to work.’

BUILDING PROCESSES, WITHOUT THE BUILDINGS

The problems of public space are manifold. However, what the work of these practices shows is that erecting a new building is not always a good way to ensure people are engaged and feel part of their communities. The answer almost always comes from process, and in particular processes that are tailored to the specificity of site and the community they operate in; processes which challenge the traditional role of architectural practice and dissemination of design and construction knowledge to the many rather than the individual.

The processes adopted by these practices operate in a way that challenges the singular idea of 'concept' in favour of the multiplicity of narrative, weaving together different ideas into a cohesive whole. They range from the pragmatic, research-based interventions to explorations of the poetic potential of public space as theatre, challenging what architecture is and providing an alternative to the mass-produced commodification of public space. ■

POLITICAL

THE RISE OF URBAN GARDENING IS A FORM OF CONTESTING

PLANTING URBAN WAY SPACE

CHIARA CERTOMÀ is an assistant professor of political-economic geography at the University of Turin. Her research focuses on innovative forms of urban governance and planning in the context of pressing environmental challenges and the digital revolution.

“The reason why you’re doing this ... is not just to make one patch of the neighbourhoods more pleasant to look at, but because you believe the entire city is worth the effort. And because you decided that, rather than wait for the world you want ... to just appear, it was better to start making it yourself.”¹

DAVID TRACEY, *Guerrilla Gardening: A Manual* festo

Urban gardening is a global, diverse and informal movement encompassing a wide range of initiatives through which people collectively design, organise, realise and take care of public green space in their own cities by transforming urban voids and neglected spaces into pleasant and vibrant places.² Today, urban gardening is a developed (often institutionalised) phenomenon worldwide and European cities stand out as some of the most prolific contexts, thanks to the significant support received in the last twenty years from both macro-regional and local institutions.³

Between 2012 and 2016, I was part of an international research initiative documenting urban gardening and gathered a Europe-wide network of over 200 academic and independent researchers, social activists, entrepreneurs, and public administrators.⁴ Together, we investigated the policy, design and planning of urban gardening as well as its social and ecological benefits. We made useful factsheets for prospective gardeners and resources for scholars.⁵

Despite being largely context-dependent and diverse, the definition of urban gardening encompasses three main categories of initiatives: allotments, community gardens and guerrilla gardening actions.

- 1 David Tracey, *Guerrilla Gardening: A Manual-festo* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, BC, 2007), p. 29.
- 2 Kristin Reynolds, 'Disparity Despite Diversity: Social Injustice in New York City's Urban Agriculture Aystem', *Antipode* 47, issue 1 (2015): 240–59; and Jeffrey Hou (ed.), *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities* (London: Routledge, 2010).
- 3 See, for instance, the EU-funded projects Ru:urban, URBAN GARDENING, RECOMS, CITISPYCE; or the locally promoted projects such as in Shared Gardens in Paris, <https://www.paris.fr/pages/les-jardins-partages-203>, or support for urban farms in Vienna, <https://www.wien.gv.at/stadtentwicklung/projekte/landschaft-freiraum/landschaft/landwirtschaft/urban-farming.html>.
- 4 See the COST Action initiative info on *Urbanallotments.eu*.
- 5 For details, see <https://www.urbanallotments.eu/fact-sheets.html> and <https://www.urbanallotments.eu/output.html>.



ALLOTMENTS

The most common and historically documented form of urban gardens are allotments; small parcels of land cultivated by individual citizens to grow vegetables for their consumption (→ FIG. 1). Contemporary allotments are rooted in the nineteenth-century tradition of allocating parcels of public land to socially disadvantaged groups (for instance, the traditional *Schrebergarten* in Dresden, recently

refashioned into modern allotments⁶). Even today, allotments are often provided, designed and regulated by the local authorities.⁷

Nevertheless, the pervasiveness of urban gardening signals that it is neither the desperate search for green space in the crowded city nor the desire for fresh and local food that motivates urban gardeners. Instead, the garden is often an opportunity for advancing projects in common with other people. Sometimes this is a way to bring life and activity to derelict areas (such as the abandoned train tracks in central Stockholm now turned into the Trädgård på Spåret⁸); at others, it is a way for people to play a role in the community (or even to feel that a community actually exists) or to find the metaphorical and physical space for social cohesion and emancipation initiatives (clearly exemplified by Azadi, a Kurdish garden in Rome⁹).

COMMUNITY AND COLLECTIVE GARDENS

So in this way, over time, allotments morphed as they engaged with experimental social projects. During the 1990s, collective (or community) gardens and guerrilla gardening grew in European cities creating a new category of urban garden, distinct from allotments. These gardens fulfilled multiple purposes, such as taking care of residual or mismanaged green areas, to provide the city with more accessible and more interactive public spaces for education, leisure and socialisation (as in the case of the Prinzessinnengarten in Berlin¹⁰);

6 See the project's website, <https://www.dresden.de/de/stadtraum/umwelt/umwelt/hochwasser/kleingarten-hochwasser.php>.

7 For more on this, see Simon Bell et al. (eds.), *Urban Allotment Gardens in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2016).

8 See project's website, <https://www.tradgardssverige.org/tradgardar/tradgard-pa-sparet/>.

9 See the project's website, <https://comune-info.net/il-giardino-di-azadi/>.

10 See the project's website, <https://prinzessinnengarten.net/de/home/>.

to involve marginalised, disadvantaged or minority social groups; and to advance sustainable alternatives in urban life (see for instance the Pla BUITS project in Barcelona¹¹).

Collective gardens consist of portions of (usually abandoned or neglected) public urban space, around which formal or informal associations gather to look after and to create areas for horticulture, sporting, eating or art events.¹² Although local administrations support collective gardens, they can also emerge in the absence of any agreement or even as a reaction to institutional plans, leading to occupation initiatives, as happened at Landhuis in Gent.¹³

Guerrilla gardening spots present an even more radical character as these envisage the performance of spontaneous and illicit flash-gardening action in, for instance, flower beds, brownfields or even grey streets in need of care (→ FIG. 2) to attract citizens' and the administration's attention. The F Troop actions in the Midlands in the United Kingdom are a good example of this kind of activity.¹⁴

POLITICAL GARDENING

Collective gardens and guerrilla gardening are forms of 'political gardening' and emerged as consequences of shrinking public space in the neoliberal city.¹⁵ However, while public space underwent privatisation, walling, mall development, commodification, sanitisation

11 See the project's website, <https://una.city/nbs/barcelona/social-urban-gardens-pla-buits-vacant-lots-plan>.

12 George McKay, *Radical Gardening: Politics, Idealism and Rebellion in the Garden* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2011).

13 See the project's website, <https://tlandhuis.wordpress.com/>.

14 See Michael Hardman, 'Look Out Behind the Bus Stop, Here Come Guerrilla

Gardeners Digging Up an Urban Revolution', *TheConversation.com*, 16 July 2014, <https://theconversation.com/look-out-behind-the-bus-stop-here-come-guerrilla-gardeners-digging-up-an-urban-revolution-29225>.

15 Chiara Tornaghi and Chiara Certomà, 'Political Gardening, Equity and Justice: A Research Agenda', in Chiara Tornaghi and Chiara Certomà (eds.), *Urban Gardening as Politics* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 209–15.



and surveillance processes, the urban gardening movement in Europe, sitting within the broader domain of urban social movements, brought neglected issues about land ownership, distribution and use to public attention. Meanwhile, building upon an understanding of urban planning as a tool of oppression, social researchers interpreted urban gardening as a counter-planning practice inspired by the right to the city ideal, which claims that people are entitled to decide the fate of the urban space. It is thus pretty common to see urban gardening associated with multiple forms of ‘everyday urbanism’, ‘insurgent or counter planning’ or actually existing commons

initiatives.¹⁶ In analysing the development of the urban gardening movement, engaged scholars signalled, however, that internal contradictions and ambivalences may emerge.¹⁷ For instance, when urban gardens are administered by a public body or landlord they can quickly become monopolised by middle-class groups taking them away from the less-advantaged groups they were often created for; or fuel neoliberal gentrification processes. The case of the eviction of the Manor Gardens allotment site in London to make room for the Olympics in 2012, which reopened eight years later in a sanitised form wedged next to a railway line, is a sad story of urban gardening's institutionalisation.¹⁸

Nevertheless, our research found that most of the existing projects in European cities proved to be authentically grassroots-driven attempts at addressing social vulnerability and inequalities by adopting alternative public space planning.¹⁹

INFORMAL PLANNING

Notably, urban gardens exemplify informal planning practices (→ FIG. 3). This differentiates them from pre-existing forms of self-made urbanism, which generally involves appropriating public space for answering personal needs (such as housing, food provision or creating space for small businesses) rather than general purposes. In contrast to those projects, informal planning envisages the re-invention of public spaces through planning, thanks to the mobilisation of diverse material and symbolic practices intentionally put

16 Efrat Eizenberg, 'Actually Existing Commons: Three Moments of Space of Community Gardens in New York City', *Antipode* 44, issue 3 (2012): 764–82.

17 Laura Calvet-Mir and Hug March, 'Crisis and Post-crisis Urban Gardening Initiatives from a Southern European Perspective: The Case of Barcelona', *European Urban and Regional Studies* 26, issue 1 (2019): 97–112.

18 'Last Stand on Olympic Allotments', *BBC.co.uk*, 24 September 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/london/7009063.stm.

19 There is a list of cases on the COST Action website: <https://www.urbanallotments.eu/case-studies.html>. See also John Crossan et al., 'Contesting Neoliberal Urbanism in Glasgow's Community Gardens: The Practice of DIY Citizenship', *Antipode* 48, issue 4 (2016): 937–55.



forward by local dwellers to structure and organise the city space in the absence of a legal definition, guidance and funds provided by the public or private sector.²⁰ Urban gardening can be regarded as an example of informal planning because it is a generative, community-led spatial initiative intended as a socio-political gesture whose realisation requires practical intervention into the materiality of public space.

The rise and evolution of urban gardening practices was a feature of the last decade of city planning in European cities. Firstly, the quest for vacant spaces where civil society actors can organise

²⁰ See: Chiara Certomà, Lorenzo Chelleri and Bruno Notteboom, ‘The “Fluid Governance” of Urban Public Spaces: Insights from Informal Planning Practices in Rome’, *Urban Studies* 57, issue 5 (2020): 976–95.

gardening, educational and recreation activities emerged as a sort of performative politics. Urban gardeners, in fact, have been changing the form and functioning of (part of) the city by directly making these changes happen.²¹ This politicisation of gardening passed through a reading of urban space as something to which citizens can claim a right to stand against social injustices.²² Secondly, the increasing popularity of gardening initiatives proved to be a powerful means for making planning more receptive to the public's participation. By upgrading the spontaneous spatial configuration emerging from everyday life practices, informal urban planning, exemplified by urban gardening, is characterised by the intentionality of collective and grassroots initiatives, which advance socio-ecological alternatives to the prevailing logic of urban development embedded within the re-production processes of global capitalism.²³ ■

21 Chiara Certomà, 'A Practice-based Approach to Political Gardening: Materiality, Performativity and Post-environmentalism', in Chiara Tornaghi and Chiara Certomà (eds.), *Urban Gardening as Politics* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 35–45.

22 Karen Schmelzkopf, 'Incommensurability, Land Use, and the Right to Space: Community Gardens in New York City', *Urban Geography* 23, issue 4 (2002): 323–43.

23 Alberto Corsín Jiménez, 'The Right to Infrastructure: A Prototype for Open-source Urbanism', *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space* 32 (2014): 342–62.

THE RIGHT
POST-COVID
THE PANDEMIC
REORGANISED C
AND THEIR POLIT

TO THE D CITY

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HAS ITIES TICS

When the coronavirus pandemic began and state authorities ordered inhabitants of their cities to stay home and closed restaurants, libraries, schools and public transportation, people were perplexed. How could this even be possible?

Then, when pictures of empty cities from all continents started to emerge, perplexity changed to awe and fear: What if this means the end of the city as we know it? After all, during the pandemic, most of the qualities that made cities attractive – bustle, proximity, density, intensity of social contacts, agglomeration – acted as major vulnerabilities that helped the virus to spread.

During the first months of the pandemic, there was a constant and intense stream of articles, photographs, movies and artworks that showed empty streets, boulevards and urban spaces, which were lamenting that the virus has uncovered the ‘dark side of urbanisation’ and were praising the virtues of village life and de-urbanisation.

Then, cities started to come to life in new ways. In Chişinău, where I live, a group of activists – called Together against Covid – established a hotline where people in need of help could get info about the pandemic and find volunteers willing to do their shopping. Other activists – from The Blue Hut – started to distribute food, clothes, first-aid kits and thermometers to homeless people. Elsewhere in Europe, local authorities in Paris, Budapest and many other cities started to transform vast urban spaces (streets, highways) into pedestrian and bike places in order to create enough space for physical distance between citizens.

Although the pandemic is ongoing, it is also clear that most cities have survived (yet again) despite the laments of detractors of the urban. It is also true that cities, or at least some of them, are emerging transformed out of this struggle against the coronavirus pandemic.

THE RETURN OF THE LOCAL

As global supply chains fell apart, leaving customers worldwide short of food, medicine and goods, the policymakers, activists, scholars and public started to put an emphasis on the *local* and its significance

for the city. In the words of the British architect Amanda Levete: ‘We need to ... understand the importance of local. Covid may attack our bodies, but distance and remoteness are threatening the very cultural foundation of our lives. More than ever we need to create better connectedness in our communities to improve the quality of life for everyone.’¹

What does this ‘new *local*’ mean? On the one hand, it means that power has shifted from the national authorities to subnational (local/city/regional) authorities charged with dealing with the most urgent tasks: organising hospitals and beds, providing masks, helping vulnerable groups etc. Also, because global supply chains were absent, cities had to rediscover how to produce some basic items in order to cope with the pandemic: food, masks and sanitizer.

On the other hand, even within the cities themselves, urbanists and mayors started to understand that the spatial segregation that separated the center of the city (where all amenities and services are concentrated) and residential areas (with limited amenities) is an anachronism that should be changed.

Since the start of the pandemic much attention has been lavished on the ‘fifteen-minute city’, an idea promoted by Carlos Moreno, a professor of complex systems at the University of Paris. Moreno argues that people should be able to access all life’s essentials – work, shopping, health, or culture – within a fifteen-minute walk or bike ride from their own doorstep. For policymakers the idea presents a way both to plan cities for a low-carbon future and to create services designed around the patterns of movement necessitated by the pandemic. City governments in Amsterdam, Helsinki and Paris have integrated the idea into their planning processes and UN Habitat recently named ‘the fifteen-minute city’ as one of ‘twelve key principles for making an effective response to Covid-19’.

This new local also means an emphasis on the development of local civil society, i.e. civic actors (organisations, initiatives,

¹ BBC WorkLife, ‘Coronavirus: Will Our Day-to-day Ever Be the Same?’, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20201109-coronavirus-how-cities-travel-and-family-life-will-change>

community centres) that work and act in *proximity*. The massive civic mobilisation against Covid-19 proved the significance of actors that were organised and acted locally. Food distribution, along with helping the elderly and other vulnerable groups was handled better by civic organisations that were based locally than by the state apparatus (which, itself, was partially paralyzed by Covid-19 and lockdowns). As new, local solidarities emerge, there is a growing understanding that these forms could constitute the basis of a renewed civic society and should be supported².

SEEING INEQUALITIES WITHIN THE CITY

As the pandemic unfolded, it became clear that it has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable groups: the elderly, the poor, the homeless, women, people with disabilities, migrants, blue-collar workers, etc. Even before the pandemic these groups were suffering from lack of adequate housing, discrimination in the labor market, and lack of access to adequate healthcare and education. The pandemic just made things worse. The homeless, for example, who couldn't follow the 'Stay Home!' order given by the state because they lacked one, were left on their own in the streets of Chisinau.

Another pandemic was developing in parallel with Covid-19 – the gender violence pandemic. 'Misogyny is the other epidemic!' is a slogan used by a Romanian feminist activist group and captures the situation very well.³ Women bore the heaviest part of the pandemic and paid the biggest share of its cost. Gender violence exploded: after all, the government ordered women to stay at home and this

² 'Politique de la ville et Covid-19: quels enseignements pour l'avenir?', *Les Cahiers du Développement Social Urbain*, no. 72 (2020/2): 43–46.

³ Adina Marincea, 'Misogynie, cealaltă pandemie!', *Baricada.org*, 8 March 2021, <https://ro.baricada.org/misoginie-cealalta-pandemie/>.

often meant to stay confined with their abusers. But the state and local authorities were not there to help these women. Fears of contagion saw many women working in care and domestic work sectors have their time-off cut in places such as Paris, Milan and Madrid.

Some cities – Barcelona and London, for example – have implemented vigorous policies to alleviate some of the worst consequences of the pandemic: to move vulnerable families into tourist apartments or hotels,⁴ to open shelters for women who are experiencing gender violence, to freeze energy bills for households, to give housing renovation grants to people affected by the pandemic, to vaccinate the homeless, but also to give money to associations that were fighting the pandemic in the neighbourhoods.⁵

The pandemic was a universal event, but it showed how unequally equipped we were to deal with it. It is clear now that an equitable post-pandemic city should promote, as a key priority, inclusion in all its forms.

A RENEWED FOCUS ON DEMOCRACY AND COMMONS IN THE CITY

During the pandemic, a new understanding emerged that any efficient response in the face of a disaster like the Covid-19 pandemic should include multilevel governance, with both state and non-state actors.⁶

- 4 For the city of London's Covid-19 response for people sleeping rough, see <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/housing-and-land/homelessness/covid-19-response-people-sleeping-rough>.
- 5 For the city of Barcelona's social support services during Covid-19, see <https://www.barcelona.cat/covid19/en/social-support>.

- 6 UN Habitat, 'Cities and Pandemics: Towards a More Just, Green and Healthy Future (2021)', https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2021/03/cities_and_pandemics-towards_a_more_just_green_and_healthy_future_un-habitat_2021.pdf.

In other words, the urban governance process should be democratised. It should also be made more transparent. Cooperation of citizens in the vaccination process, and their willingness to accept restrictions and limitations depend, crucially, on the level of trust they have in their local administrations. In some cities, like Warsaw and Madrid, the existing mechanisms for citizen participation and engagement helped create a good environment for the local government to distribute information about the pandemic, to reach at risk groups such as children and persons with disabilities, to help small local businesses and so on.⁷

The pandemic has contributed, at least in some parts of the world, to the new understanding that societies need to be defended, including by possibly reversing some previous attitudes that seemed common sense before. This is also the case for the logic of privatisation of everything. Thus, we could hear the French president Emmanuel Macron arguing that ‘there are goods and services that have to be outside the laws of market’, meaning of course, health-care, medicine and food. It was a rare instance where heads of state would agree with UN experts and activists that privatising everything can be harmful.⁸

This new situation has brought renewed attention to the topic of the urban commons. Access to water, public space, green areas, adequate infrastructure for pedestrians, housing, air – all proved to be crucial for the survival of the city.

7 Roberto Falanga, ‘Citizen Publication During the Covid-19 Pandemic – Insights from Local Practices in European Cities’ (December 2020), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/lissabon/17148.pdf>.

8 Leilani Farha et al., ‘Covid-19 Has Exposed the Catastrophic Impact of Privatising Vital Services’, *TheGuardian.com*, 19 October 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/oct/19/covid-19-exposed-catastrophic-impact-privatising-vital-services>.

ACTIVISM AT A DIFFERENT SCALE

The experience of the pandemic has simultaneously reshaped how we physically experience the city and how we think about the cities we live in. This disruptive moment will reshape cities for years to come because it will open the door to forces that predated the pandemic: the pressure from city planners to create more low-carbon cities, the desire of many employees to work from home more, the ongoing concentration of people in urban areas. All these point to a city-life organised locally around a new kind of neighbourhood.

The experience of the pandemic – of self-help groups, of reaffirming the importance of essential workers, public spaces and so on – could be a long-hoped for ‘communitarian moment’ when people, local governments, and civil societies start to cooperate and support each other.

But the fifteen-minute city could also be a bleak model where basic service provisions are unequally provided in ghettos arranged across a city. The difference between the two visions will be the energy, commitment and willingness to campaign for a better city and the rights of its residents to live, grow and shape it. ■

THE YELLOW
PURPLE RED
A HUGE CAMPAIGN
TO EXPROPRIATE
PRIVATE LANDLO
UNDERWAY

WAND REBELLION BEGAN IN BERLIN AS THE BIGGEST WORDS IS

JONAS BECKER is a student and spokesperson for Deutsche Wohnen & Co. Enteignen. After this piece was written, a referendum was held on 26 September 2021 with the result in 59.1% in favour of expropriation.

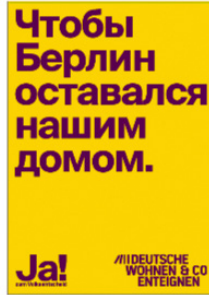
Being an Erasmus student, one of the hardest tasks is to find accommodation in an unfamiliar environment. I have spent a semester abroad in Paris, France, and Lund, Sweden, respectively. Even though the cities are very different, I was facing the same problem each time upon arrival: it was incredibly difficult for me to find affordable housing (options). After graduating from university, I decided to move to Berlin, but the problem remained the same. I just could not find an affordable place to live. For me, it is evident that the malfunctioning housing market is one of the biggest societal problems of our time and that it affects almost every major city throughout Europe. However, Berlin can be seen as a special case.

THE PROBLEM

The development in the housing market over the past fifteen years has changed this city enormously, and in most cases not for the better. Between 2008 and 2018 rents in Berlin doubled, which led to a stark disparity between wages and rents.¹ Not only did this development have an impact on foreign students, who were seeking short-term renting options, but it also – and mostly – affected low and medium-income households. Eighty-six percent of Berliners are tenants, and thus immediately affected by rising rents. Threatened by displacement and poverty, some tenants formed small groups to get organised against rising rents and initiate actions such as demonstrations against gentrification. While the rents were unstoppabley skyrocketing, the grassroot movement became larger and stronger. Simultaneously, the Berlin housing market became more and more attractive for speculators and corporate landlords. From early on, many activists identified the profit driven real estate corporations as one of the key actors in the housing crisis.

¹ See the statistics website, <https://go.empirica-regio.de/go-live/>.





THE SOLUTION

The idea arose to launch a campaign to expropriate large corporate landlords,² who are in possession of more than 3,000 apartments in Berlin, and to socialise their real estate property in order to get the rental housing market under democratic control and keep the rents affordable. That is how our campaign “Deutsche Wohnen & Co. Enteignen”³ emerged. Our goal is affordable housing for all because we think that housing is too essential to be treated as a commodity. The main problem from our perspective is the large corporations’ profit-orientation, which puts their shareholders’ interests above

- ² It is important to note that our campaign’s aim is to expropriate corporate landlords only. We will not expropriate cooperatives, since we view them as a role model for orientation towards the common good.
- ³ Deutsche Wohnen is one of Germany’s largest real estate corporations and the one with the most apartments in Berlin.

their tenants' interests. In order to ensure democratic participation, we do not simply want to expropriate large real estate corporations and nationalise their property; rather, we want to socialise it. This means that the properties will not be under state-owned corporative administration, but instead administered by a newly formed public-law institution (AÖR),⁴ which ensures the democratic participation of tenants and civil-society actors. This idea relies on Article 15 of the German Constitution, which explicitly states that:

'Land, natural resources and means of production may, for the purpose of socialisation, be transferred to public ownership or other forms of public enterprise by a law that determines the nature and extent of compensation.'

Since the article has never been triggered in the history of the German Federal Republic, there is no legal precedent about the extent of compensation. However, most legal opinions conclude that the compensation amount could be set significantly lower than the properties' market value, because the article's purpose is to make socialisation possible to enhance the public good. In addition, one major argument for compensating below market value is the rapid increase in the properties' value, which cannot be attributed to any productive effort on part of the real estate corporations, but rather simply to the market's development. After all, the actual amount would be a political decision made by the Berlin Senate and subject to the condition that 'an equitable balance between the public interest and the interests of those affected'⁵ must be established. As a campaign, we expect the compensation to be somewhere around €10 billion and propose that the amount could be refinanced by the newly formed public-law institution (AÖR) out of the rental income over the next forty years. From our point of view, this would be an 'equitable balance', because the rents could be immediately lowered while the expropriated corporations would be granted just compensation.

4 Abbreviation for 'Anstalt des öffentlichen Rechts'.

5 See the English-language version of the Constitution, https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.html#p0087.

THE APPROACH

Our campaign's aim was to achieve a Berlin-wide, citizen-initiated referendum about whether to socialise large corporate landlords' properties or not, but approaches for direct democracy in Germany come with many obstacles. The legal and political barriers to initiate a referendum are very high due to historical reasons.

Therefore, the campaign had to complete two phases of direct democracy. First, we had to collect 20,000 signatures to initiate a petition for a referendum. After we collected over 75,000 signatures in 2019, the Berlin Senate's approval to initiate the petition should just have been a formality. However, the Senate's largest party, the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany), who led the responsible Senate Administration for Interior Affairs and is strictly opposed to the initiative, took over one year to approve the petition's legality. This charade even has a historically ironic element, since it was the SPD who fought very hard for the inclusion of Article 15 when the German Constitution was written in 1949.

Finally, in February 2021, the second phase began, and we started collecting signatures for the petition for a referendum. The necessary quorum we had to collect was 175,000 valid signatures. With a lot of effort put in by more than a thousand activists collecting signatures all around Berlin, we managed to reach over 350,000 signatures by the end of June 2021. This was the largest number of signatures ever collected in the history of direct democracy in Berlin. As a result, we are now heading to the third phase, which is a referendum that will be held on September 26th 2021.

According to the state election office, 32.7% of the signatures collected were invalid, most of them (almost 60%) because the signing person did not have German citizenship and was thus not eligible to sign the petition or to vote in the referendum. It was a political decision by our campaign to nevertheless collect all signatures because we find it scandalous and discriminatory that many people who have been living in Berlin for a long time or were even born here, do not have a say simply because they do not have German



citizenship. From our point of view everyone who lives here should have the right to participate in direct democracy about such essential local matters as housing politics. Even the signatures of many activists, who are helping this campaign thrive, were not counted as valid and they will not be allowed to vote in the referendum. Therefore, we are not only fighting for affordable rents, but also for a right to the city for all.

THE POTENTIAL

The success of our campaign stems from the huge mobilisation potential from all ages, nationalities and social groups. We are a very heterogeneous group for a political movement from the Left spectrum, yet we can all unite behind a common objective: solving



the housing crisis. This mobilisation potential exists in other European cities as well, even though Berlin has a particularly strong and active political culture. Many examples from other cities show that tenants' enormous frustration at housing crises all around Europe can form the basis of a movement.

Social media proved to be very helpful for our purposes. From early on, we have focused on public relations and especially social media to spread our message. At first, this helped us to connect different social groups, political movements and civil-society actors within the city of Berlin, but being one of the largest social movements in recent history brought us a whole new level of attention, both on a national and international level.

One of the cornerstones of our campaign's success is our 'corporate design': in a political context, we exclusively use the purple and yellow colour combination. Our approach was to connect the colour combination to our referendum. As a grassroots movement we did

not have much money that we could spend to make our colours and message popular, so we used guerrilla marketing techniques, such as posters (in different languages), stickers, T-shirts and banners to spread our message, and collaborated with companies that showed their solidarity with our movement (such as a local brewery that printed our message on their bottles). At demonstrations we tried to encourage people to wear our vests and we sewed our own flags (as you can see in the pictures). The crucial part was that we stuck with the colour combination throughout. Since purple and yellow is such a unique and rather strange combination, our strategy paid off and we caught and still catch a lot of attention.

We happily engage in skill sharing with many movements from across Europe who are interested in our work.

I would like to say that for me, our campaign shows that a grass-root movement can get overwhelmingly dynamic and successful if it convinces many people of an idea, encourages us to get active and start organising. We are fighting (all on a voluntary basis) against the largest real estate corporations in Europe and against powerful conservative and liberal parties in Germany, and we could win this fight. ■

TOURISTIFIED
OR A COVER
URBAN ECO
ACROSS EUROPE
TOURISM RAISES
OF WHO THE CITY

ED CITIES RNE NOMY E, URBAN S THE QUESTION Y IS FOR

JOSÉ MANSILLA

is a member of
the Observatori
d'Antropologia
del conflicte Urbà
(OACU) in Barcelona.

Tourism is here to stay. Although factors that are impossible to predict, such as the global spread of Covid-19, may affect the popularity of destinations, tourism is already an integral part of the DNA of European cities in the twenty-first century. How could it be otherwise, when the European and other populations continue to be concentrated in cities? This phenomenon – which began with the Industrial Revolution and means that, today, we live on a truly *urban planet* – accelerated with the emergence of neoliberalism and globalisation.¹ These processes fuelled the transfer of industrial production to other regions, mainly in Southeast Asia, in search of greater surplus value. Thus, with heavy industry and manufacturing moving elsewhere, tourism has logically presented itself to policy makers in Europe as an alternative source of jobs and economic activity.

But the fact that contemporary European cities are inevitably cities where tourism has a presence need not mean they become *touristified cities*. A city, a neighbourhood, a street or any other urban space is touristified when this activity becomes what the French sociologist Marcel Mauss called a *total social fact*. This means that tourism is so prevalent in the city's social dynamics that any alteration in the amount or type of tourism has an immediate effect on those dynamics. For the Belgian geographer Daniel Hiernaux, tourists,

by operating in spaces inhabited by permanent residents – sometimes with an intense urban life – and fulfilling desires and interests that differ from the socio-spatial practices of these residents in their daily lives, ... they disrupt this active life in the daily life of their tourist practices. At the same time, they radically modify some aspects of urban mechanics such as the real estate market, which favours an increase in rentals, the tendency to sell properties for tourist purposes, and the modification of uses, for example for short-term rentals in direct deals between the owner and the tourist through computer platforms with a high degree of illegality (irregularity).²

1 Mike Davis, *Planeta de ciudades miserias* (Madrid: Akal, 2005).

2 Daniel Hiernaux, 'Turismo y centros históricos: un dossier candente', *Estudios Críticos del Desarrollo* VIII, 14 (2018): 7–22. 3

Governing tourism is precisely about managing that potential disruption. But mayors and policy makers – who in recent decades have tended to view urban development through a neoliberal lens – have been reluctant to do it. Letting the market and private agents lead the urban economic transformation, through the pursuit of their own material satisfaction, has not resulted in the collective welfare promised to us by the popes of neoclassical economics. Instead, our societies and cities have become less equal.³

EUROPEAN CITIES UNDER TOURISTIFICATION

There are numerous examples of the dynamics unleashed by these types of policies; policies that, moreover, were always presented as technical, natural and positive, reminiscent of the well-known affirmation of the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre when he stated, in relation to urban planning and development, that ‘under a positive, humanist, technological appearance, they hide the capitalist strategy: the domination of space’.⁴

In the case of Barcelona, for example, neoliberal policies played a leading role in preparing the city to host the 1992 Olympic Games. Although these policies were never abandoned, it is also true that, in relation to tourism, they were accentuated when *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), a conservative, nationalist and business-friendly party, came to power in 2011. Thus, during the electoral campaign that prepared the arrival of its local leader, Xavier Trias, for the mayoralty, one of its political leaders stated that,

3 David Hope and Julian Limberg, ‘The Economic Consequences of Major Tax Cuts for the Rich’, *London School of Economics, Working Paper* 55 (2020), http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/107919/1/Hope_economic_consequences_of_major_tax_cuts_published.pdf.

4 Henri Lefebvre, *La revoluciónurbana* (Barcelona: Ed. Península, 1972).

We want tourism to continue to be the city's economic engine. You, many of you who are here ..., the tourism sector is a very imaginative sector, there is little more we can ask of you [referring to the businessmen present], because, really, your capacity to innovate, your capacity for ideas is very high. We want a safe, civic and clean city.

The city's commitment, and its explicit recognition of the role of tourism entrepreneurs, thus became evident. The consequences did not take long to reveal themselves: in 2013 and 2014 alone, licenses for the concession of terraces (permissions for occupying the street with tables and chairs) increased by 15%, and in 2017 there were 20% more than at the beginning of the mandate.⁵ Thus, the privatisation of urban space took a determined leap forward. But this was only one of the consequences; others were overcrowding of iconic spaces, such as Plaça Reial or Parc Güell; the strengthening of gentrification processes in some neighbourhoods, such as Barceloneta or the Gòtic; or the homogenisation of the commercial landscape and the monoculture of tourist services.

Barcelona, in this sense, shares the limelight with other European cities, such as Berlin. There, tourism has been used as an important strategy for urban promotion and the fostering of internal competitiveness. Thus, since the fall of the Wall in 1989, the city has become a reference point for urban tourism. Just a few figures suffice to illustrate the touristic character of the German capital. Whereas in 2013, around 26.9 million tourists visited the city, by 2016 this figure had reached over 31 million, an increase of 15.5% in just three years.⁶ By way of comparison, in the same year, Barcelona reached 34 million, London 50 million, and Paris 36 million. To a large extent, the Berlin visitor has tended to avoid hackneyed experiences and the classic *tourist bubble*, opting for alternative public

5 José Mansilla, J. and Claudio Milano, 'Introducción a la ciudad de vacaciones.: Apuntes sobre turismo y malestar social en Barcelona', in idem., *Ciudad de Vacaciones: Conflictosurbano en espaciosturísticos* (Barcelona: Pol-len Edicions, 2019), 19–79.

6 Barcelona Turisme., *Estadístiques de turisme, Barcelona: ciutatientorn* (Barcelona: Consorci Barcelona Turisme, 2016).

spaces or urban areas considered creative and turning their gaze towards the everyday practices of the residents of the city's neighbourhoods. This transformation of the ordinary into the authentic has ended up transforming some of the city's areas into tourist destinations, generating a notable process of tourist gentrification in specific locations like Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg. Thus, the *disruption* signalled by Hiernaux, which can be different in every city, has become a reality amongst us.

WHAT TO DO?

After Covid-19, everything has changed, and tourism has been a primary sector affected by the pandemic. However, let's not be naïve; tourism is embedded in the DNA of cities, so what can be done to mitigate its future impact? We now know at least two things that we did not know before: firstly, that governments are not going to do anything unless they are subject to the protests and pressure of social movements, critics, collectives, writers, filmmakers and other figures from the world of the culture, etc. who for years have been raising awareness of this issue. And secondly that, after several years of debate and newly implemented regulations, followed by the Covid-19 crisis, we have amassed the experience and a different social hegemony necessary to change the situation. This is because observation of the tourism management policies put in place by different European cities can provide an interesting manual for the prevention and/or management of the dynamics of tourism. This may not be perfect, but it is at least something to consider in the continued fight against this kind of process.

In the case of Barcelona, the arrival of a left-wing government to municipal power in 2015 led to a whole series of actions that, although incomplete and limited, allowed for a certain degree of control and administration of tourism-related processes. Amongst these are the design and application of the 2020 Strategic Plan for Tourism, with the aim of managing the tourist city and making it compatible with the other needs of the Catalan capital's residents;

the approval of the Special Urban Plan for Tourist Accommodation (SUPTA, or PEUAT in Spanish), to organise the network of tourist facilities and installations in the city; the approval of a new, more restrictive regulation on terraces for outdoor eating; and a series of specific regulations to avoid the commercial specialisation of certain areas for tourism.

In the case of Berlin, policy makers concerned about tourist gentrification and the increase in rental prices have introduced a regulatory clampdown on tourist flats and laws have been passed to increase the volume of public housing.

Similar measures have been taken in Amsterdam, where the City Council has reached agreements with some short-term rental platforms so that they commit to encouraging and promoting the sharing of rooms or beds only, and not of flats or entire dwellings. They have also totally banned the latter in the centre and restricted them in the rest of the city. London has taken similar action, allowing people to rent out their own homes as tourist flats, but with a maximum limit of ninety days a year; and Paris has opted to promote the exit of empty homes from the long-term rental market through a tax that ranges from 20 to 60% higher than that already paid from second homes.

In short, we have seen a whole panoply of measures and regulations that hinge on a single axis: the fight against the touristification of neighbourhoods and cities, a touristification that does not respond to the interests of residents, or even the tourists themselves, but to those powerful actors in a service-driven urban economy in search of profits, and which must be governed. ■

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PROTEST RIGHT MOVEMENT POWER

ANTONIJA KOMAZLIĆ is a member of Zagreb je NAŠ! and Možemo! She is a local councilor in the District Council of Peščenica – Žitnjak and was an organiser during the local election campaign. At city level she participated in the development of the programme of spatial and housing policies and the programme for gender equality.

With the Green-Left Coalition – led by Možemo! and Zagreb is OURS! – winning the Zagreb local elections in May this year, Croatia found itself on the map of a growing number of European countries whose cities are run by green-left political alliances. The margin of victory was considerable. Mayor Tomislav Tomašević won 45% of the vote in the first round, and in the second he defeated the far-right opponent with 64% of the vote. In the election for the City Assembly the coalition gathered about 41% of the vote, twenty-three out of forty-seven seats, and at the level of local self-government they ranked best in sixteen out of seventeen city districts and in 101 out of 218 local committees. The Green-Left Coalition – which alongside Možemo! and Zagreb is OURS! is made up of New Left, For the City and Sustainable Development of Croatia (ORAH) – has the majority in the City Assembly with the Social Democratic Party (SDP), a traditional centre-left party which won five seats.

SUCCESS FROM YEARS OF POLITICAL STRUGGLE AND WORKING TOGETHER

The green-left political platform Zagreb is OURS! was founded two months prior to the 2017 local elections by activists for labour and migrant rights, public education, the right to the city and protection of public goods, together with cultural workers, social entrepreneurs, trade unionists and others. Through various social movements, many of them have battled for years against business structures that dominate Croatian politics. The idea of the Green-Left Coalition led by Zagreb is ours! was to bring together minor left-wing and progressive political parties aiming to build a new policy based on the principles of broad political participation, inclusiveness, openness, sustainability and gender equality.



Zagreb is ours! is conceived as a municipal platform, whose democratic principles rest on experiences from earlier local struggles while drawing inspiration from similar political platforms in Europe. Those in Spain, for example, that came to power in several cities in the 2015 local elections: Barcelona en Comú (Barcelona), Ahora Madrid (Madrid), Marea Altántica (La Coruña) and Guanyem Valencia (Valencia). Like those organisations, the agenda of Zagreb is ours! is based on promoting participatory democracy through citizen involvement in the decision-making, democratisation of public institutions, improving public services and preventing their privatisation, and with the idea of Zagreb developing as a socially just, green and multicultural city that supports those less privileged and vulnerable amongst us.

Since 2017, when it entered the City Assembly with only four representatives (with seventy-two councillors at the level of local self-government), the Green-Left Coalition has been the symbolic leader of the opposition, constantly challenging the corrupt and business-oriented government of then-long-time mayor Milan



Bandić. The next step took place in 2019, when some Zagreb is ours! activists founded Možemo! and the new party entered the Croatian Parliament after winning 6.99% of the vote in the 2020 elections, with seven seats out of 151.

The key formative battles for this new Croatian left were those for public education and the right to the city movement – particularly the citizens’ occupation of Varšavska Street in central Zagreb in 2010, which opposed proposals for a shopping centre on public space. As current mayor Tomislav Tomašević, one of the leaders of the right to the city, and political scientist Danijela Dolenc, one of the founders of Zagreb is ours! and Možemo! and current deputy mayor, stated later in an interview in 2017, this legal battle and one of the largest citizen protest movements in the country’s recent history ‘was not a one-time confrontation but a decade-long civic and political phenomenon’. They went on to say that ‘reflected and mobilized widespread public concern over pervasive corruption, liaisons between political and economic elites, failures to regulate spatial planning and enforce control and protection at the level of

ministry, and the phenomena of the conflict of interest and lack of public participation in urban planning'.¹

In the context of their recent political success, this experience of struggle, organising and encouraging citizens' engagement and political participation, with the emphasis on well-being for the majority which they bring to the political sphere, has proved to be very important.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GREEN-LEFT COALITION AND ITS POLITICAL PROGRAMME

The political platform *Možemo!* arose from the need to connect with activists in other Croatian cities, through building a national platform that brings together several different municipal platforms (in Split, Rijeka, Osijek, Pula, Karlovac, Dubrovnik, Korčula and Pazin). What connects these with Zagreb is *OURS!* is the trust and partnership built through earlier joint struggles. In Dubrovnik, for example, there is a municipal platform *Srđ is the City* which was founded by activists from the *Srđ is Ours* initiative, who in cooperation with their Zagreb colleagues (subsequent founders of *Zagreb is OURS!*) some ten years ago managed to halt a harmful project to build a resort on *Srđ*, a hill that overlooks the city and is its valuable spatial resource. This year's local elections saw councillors of *Možemo!* enter all eight of Dubrovnik's city councils, while the town of Pazin also elected a mayor from the ranks of *Možemo!*

In addition to their long-standing joint struggle, circumstantial factors worked in the Green-Left Coalition's favour. The major

1 Danijela Dolenc, Karin Doolan and Tomislav Tomašević, 'Contesting Neoliberal Urbanism on the European Semi-periphery: The Right

to the City Movement in Croatia', *Europe-Asia Studies* 69 issue 9 (2017): 1401-1429.

earthquake and later the flood that hit Zagreb during 2020, along with the Covid-19 crisis all highlighted the problem of deteriorating public infrastructure and the corruption-ridden local government. The previous administration, which ran the city in a centralised and neoliberal way, had created institutions ill-prepared to tackle these problems and was unable to rise to the challenges.

However, what may have been decisive for the Green-Left Coalition's results in this election was its successful political organising at the level of city districts and local committees, which, of course, required a lot of energy and field work. Central to this was a simple online survey, organised using Google Forms, and extensively promoted across social media, which enabled informing people throughout Zagreb about the political programme of *Zagreb je NAŠ!*. The survey asked open-ended questions like 'Do you think things are going in the right or wrong direction in your neighborhood?' and 'what would you single out as the biggest problem in your neighborhood and do you have a proposal for an appropriate solution?' The answers to the survey were used to develop priorities for the neighbourhood and the city as a whole. Anyone who completed the survey was offered the chance to join a local *Zagreb je NAŠ* district group. The survey gathered more than 10,000 responses and was vital to developing both the policy agenda and the movement as a whole.

This organic growth of membership which has been going on for four years reflects what Danijela Dolenec stated in 2017: 'we are going slow because we are going far'. Or, as political organiser Mark Rudd put it in a similar fashion: 'organising is another word for slow'.²

MUNICIPALISM

This principle of political organising is common to other municipalist platforms in Europe that share the same problems. It is a

² Astra Taylor, 'Against Activism', *The Baffler* (March 2016).

response to the social and political crisis marked by increasing climate change, social inequalities, the growing need for affordable housing, the fight against gentrification and increasing divisions in society, all accompanied with the crisis of political representation, lack of trust in politics and the rise of far-right movements and Euroscepticism.

Municipalism approaches this from the immediate environment, at the level of the neighbourhood, through open channels of participation and collaboration of ordinary citizens, social movements and NGOs, where local issues are at the centre of political action. This new form of political organising is designed according to feminist principles and respect for diversity, with the central issue of enhancing and protecting basic public and social services, reinforcing citizen participation and ecological transition.

For example, many municipal platforms in Europe have become leaders in implementing the European Green Deal. While the coronavirus pandemic has often left aside the implementation of a climate agenda on the national level, cities run by left-wing municipal platforms do address these challenges, seeing them as an opportunity to build local environmental resilience.

In recent years there has been a rise of municipal and civic initiatives springing up across many European cities. As already mentioned, in Spain's 2015 local elections, several municipal platforms won majorities in large cities. The Barcelona en Comú platform, which has had the governing majority in Barcelona with the Social Democrats for the second term, organised the first Fearless Cities Conference in 2017. It brought together similar initiatives from around the world and has grown into the Fearless Cities network in recent years. In France's 2019 local elections, about a hundred civic platforms took to the polls, winning in Grenoble, Poitiers, Toulouse, Montpellier and other cities. Municipal platforms are also on the rise in Italy, in Bologna, Naples and in Trieste, which is nearest to us, where the Addresso Trieste platform is running in this autumn's elections. In Budapest, Párbeszéd [Dialogue] has been in power since 2019; it is a green political party whose mayor, Gergely Karácsony, won back the city from Orban's Fidesz. The closest regional counterparts of Zagreb is Ours! and Možemo! are Ne da(vi)mo

Beograd – ZA BOLJI GRAD [Don't Let Belgrade D(r)OWN – FOR A BETTER CITY], a municipal political movement that grew out of years of civic resistance to the self-important real estate project 'Belgrade on the Water'.

GREEN-LEFT PERSPECTIVES: EXPANDING THE HORIZON OF THE POSSIBLE

One of the most important goals of Zagreb's Green-Left Coalition in its first term is to return local self-government to the service of citizens and democratise the distribution of resources and communal activities.

More specifically, councillors in local committees are directly connected with the district councils, which in turn are connected to the City Assembly. The intention is to use this infrastructure in such a way that it is truly in the service of citizens; that their voice is heard and that at the level of local self-government funds are allocated transparently, which has not been the case so far. This is important because a change in the way that we make decisions about our immediate surroundings can increase citizens' political activism and engagement. Additionally, it is essential to put city resources in the service of the public good; for example, buildings belonging to the city for the purpose of increasing public housing. At the same time, our institutions must be reformed to provide social security for all citizens and not only to the very poorest, as was the case with the previous city administration which kept narrowing the scope of its responsibilities. This would mean building a truly social city.

As Ada Colau, mayor of Barcelona from Barcelona en Comú, pointed out in her opening speech at this year's Fearless Cities Conference, we must 'conquer' cities for the people – as humane,



living, communal spaces where citizens meet and get to know each other; spaces that are healthy and environment friendly. To achieve this, it is necessary to design ‘new institutions in the environment of climate change’.

According to her, this is a period of transformation. Old structures no longer function and threaten life on this planet. Once we emerge from the pandemic, ‘we will not just need recovery, we will need transformation’, and to get to those just, feminist, sustainable cities we want, our policies must be innovative, imaginative, creative – because now is the time to innovate, create and expand horizons of the possible.

At the end of her speech, Colau quoted Antonio Machado, an early twentieth-century Spanish poet: ‘El camino se hace andando’ (The path is created along the way), which recalls what Danijela Dolenc from Zagreb is ours! said: ‘We are going slow because we are going far.’ ■

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GEORGIANA ILIE is journalist and senior editor at DOR, an independent news platform based in Bucharest. In 2017, she published an award-winning article about what the next major earthquake would do to the city, which pushed earthquake resilience onto the local political agenda.

RISK EUROPEAN QUAKE RESILI- LE BECAUSE ORS AND ORK TOGETHER

‘Earthquakes don’t kill people; buildings kill people.’

I heard a civil engineer say these words in 2017, at a conference dedicated to earthquakes in Romania, right as my county was marking the forty-year commemoration of the most devastating local seismic event we experienced.

It blew my mind. I was two months into the process of reporting for an article about earthquake preparedness in Bucharest and, while learning about seismic waves, national reserves and building classifications, I had never heard this fact explained so clearly.¹ Yes, in a country with virtually almost no tsunami risk, it is buildings that kill people in the aftermath of a major earthquake. And not just the buildings we inhabit or work in, not just the public buildings, but also roads, water dams and industrial buildings, electrical poles, advertisement billboards and decrepit concrete fences.

Everything humans build is flawed.

So how can we prepare for an earthquake if the things we build to protect us and make our lives easier are the things that betray us first?



I live in the only European capital that is close (150 kilometres) to a mid-depth seismic area. There are other seismic regions in Europe – Italy, Greece, Albania, Croatia, Turkey, to name a few – but they are all surface areas, five to fifteen kilometres deep. That means that the earthquakes they produce, while sometimes devastating, affect only a small area above the ground. Vrancea earthquakes come from 120 to 200 kilometres deep and travel far: sometimes to St. Petersburg, sometimes to Rome. An iteration from 1986 killed more people in the Republic of Moldova than in Romania. A major (above 7.2Mw) earthquake hits the capital on average three times

¹ See the author’s ‘Earthquake in the Vulnerable City’, trans. Craig Turp, *DOR*, no, 9 August 2017, <https://www.dor.ro/earthquake-in-the-vulnerable-city/>.

a century. In 1977, one killed more than 1,500 people and damaged tens of thousands of buildings.

So, this is what's under the ground. Above the ground, Bucharest is a crumbling city, despite its bubbly social and cultural scene, incessant development and a regional GDP that is higher than Bulgaria's.² At least 2,250 historical buildings are at risk of complete collapse following a major earthquake. Most schools and public buildings haven't even been evaluated recently for seismic risk. The roads and sidewalks are overcrowded with illegally parked cars and the most congested traffic in the world.³ The emergency services are understaffed, there is almost no public education on earthquake preparedness (other than sporadic, terrible TV spots⁴), and the earthquake shelters are few and basically just holes in the ground, with no water or food reserves.

This paints a terrible picture (and I didn't even go into the air quality problems), but there is a silver lining, and it's coming from both local and national authorities and local activists who have been working together for the past four years.



In the local authorities, we now have a mayor of Bucharest (Nicușor Dan, who won the election in the of 2020) who is a former activist for the city's old buildings. During previous administrations, he advocated for safer buildings and for saving the historical ones from demolition. Now, as mayor, he has started working on turning that

2 See Alison Mutler, 'Romanian Capital and Suburbs Richer than Some EU Countries, World Bank Report Says: Bucharest Lacking Development Strategy', *Universul.net*, 19 April 2021, <https://universul.net/romanian-capital-and-suburbs-richer-than-some-eu-countries-world-bank-report-says-bucharest-lacking-development-strategy/>.

3 See Andrei Chirileasa, 'INRIX 2020 Traffic Scorecard Shows Bucharest

Is Most Congested City in the World by Hours Lost in Traffic', *Romania-Insider.com*, 10 March 2021, <https://www.romania-insider.com/inrix-scorecard-bucharest-march-2021>.

4 See 'Recomandări Generale în caz de cutremur', YouTube video, 0:29 sec, uploaded by ISU Cluj, 26 February 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgQ8SfqoshQ>.

into reality. While his administration is still new and at times controversial (there are many critics who say he hasn't done enough in the past ten months), he did manage to upend the urban development plans that had allowed the previous mayor to approve erratic building projects and the destruction of parks.⁵ For the following year, no new building permits will be issued, not until Bucharest has a proper urban development strategy.

He also brought into city hall an earthquake-resilience activist, who is now in charge of the retrofitting of old buildings to make them earthquake safe. Here, however, Bucharest city hall just follows in the steps of the previous administrations and retrofits at-risk private buildings with public funds (owners are to pay it back in instalments over several decades). With many buildings in need of repairs, the high cost of such an endeavour (recently, the city council approved the budget for fixing a large apartment building downtown: it cost 14 million Euro, as the building was deemed of historical value), and the lengthy process (one renovation can take between two and six years), this is not a quick fix and it doesn't solve the immediate problem these buildings pose.

At the level of the national authorities, there has been some progress in the past years. More than half a billion euros (in EU funds) have been invested in better equipment for firefighters (from trucks to training), fire and police stations have been retrofitted to be earthquake safe (via World Bank funds) and several earthquake simulations took place to help adjust the national response plan.

The most exciting things happen in the civil sector, however. Following the publication of my story, 'Earthquake in the Vulnerable City', in June 2017, several things started simultaneously:

- The Bucharest Community Foundation made earthquake resilience a priority of the organisation. What that meant was that in the past four years they managed to bring together several companies to pool into a fund called Prepared Bucharest that is used to fund grassroots initiatives that increase resilience.⁶

5 See the author's 'Zamfi versus Primăria Bucureștiului', *DOR.ro*, 13 May 2021, <https://www.dor.ro/zamfi-versus-primaria-bucuresti/>.

6 See <https://bucurestiulpregatit.ro/>.

- The World Bank created a working group with all the NGOs and public institutions involved in EQ resilience, funded their initiatives and gave them access to the organisation's extensive international knowledge of disaster risk management.
- Some of the NGOs and institutions featured in the article started working together on various local projects. Some of them became partners of the Department for Emergency Situations, the national authority in charge of the seismic response.

The funds and collaboration allowed for increased grassroots response, even if there is so much more to be done. The Red Cross trained kindergarten and primary school teachers to make earthquake response plans which protect children better. Search-and-rescue dogs were trained to find people in the debris (two of them, with their trainers, joined the Romanian delegation to Albania in 2019 to assist with finding the missing earthquake victims there). Radio amateurs built an infrastructure that will allow them to help authorities communicate when all other systems are down. A national heavy-machinery index has been created by an NGO for the state, to help have fast access to the necessary trucks, bulldozers and other vital equipment in the aftermath of an earthquake. Code for Romania, a national volunteer coder organisation, created various apps to help the first responders, the citizens and the volunteers communicate both before and after an event.

There is even a community-building project: The Antiseismic District. Community organisers knocked on doors in a vulnerable downtown neighbourhood, populated mostly by elderly people, and helped them get to know each other, become aware of each other's needs and limitations, and establish roles for a post-seismic intervention.

What was amazing, for me, was that all this was possible because activists, authorities and donors worked together. These were not disparate initiatives, each trying to find funds, competing. They were all part of a movement, like pieces of a puzzle fitting together to form a bigger image. There are still holes in it, but enough has been done to know now what works and who can do what.



Truth is, this is the best we can do as a country. There is no real solution to fixing the old buildings, the ones that will actually kill people. We can't tear them down and build new ones because there is no strategy for that and no housing available for the people who inhabit them. Fixing all of them would take several lifetimes. Private-public partnerships that would allow private developers to fix them faster and without blocking public funds don't have a good history in this city, marred by city hall corruption. And, as more time passes, more buildings – over 10,000 communist apartment buildings – become more vulnerable.

What can be done, according to the disaster risk management and public infrastructure experts, is invest more (from the national budget) in good city streets that we keep clear, safe roads that allow us to leave the city in the aftermath, and sturdy and well-equipped hospitals that would be able to treat the wounded. For that, I haven't seen any vision at the government level.

What I hope, though, is that the same energy and cooperation that made all the grassroots changes possible can translate at a bigger level someday, that earthquake resilience won't be just a thing the Department of Emergency Situations has to think about, but a priority for the central government, so that all national development plans are informed by it.

Buildings kill people; infrastructure can save them. ■

OUR CITY, OUR HOME

ELEVEN ESSAYS AGAINST THE FORCES OF DISPLACEMENT IN EUROPEAN CITIES

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