



PARTICIPACIJA U PROJEKTOVANJU: OD RETORIKE DO PRAKSE (I NAZAD?)

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Rezime:

Participacija u urbanom planiranju je inkluzivni, demokratski, javni proces urbanog planiranja i odlučivanja, naročito važan za prostore kod kojih se složene društvene i ekonomske okolnosti mogu pogrešno interpretirati primenom standardne top-down metode. Rad preispituje stvarne doprinose ovog modela implementiranog na izgradnju javnih prostora i kulturne infrastrukture u okviru projekta Novi Sad evropska prestonica kulture 2021 (EPK 2021), koji je zasnovan na demokratiji, decentralizaciji, inkluziji i participaciji građana u kreiranju urbanih prostora. Strategija je pokrenuta sa nekoliko projekata koji se bliže realizaciji. Iz ovog procesa izvedeni su zaključci o mogućnostima realizacije, kao i prednostima i slabostima strategije u odnosu na konkretne projekte, ali i istaknuta potreba o daljem unapređenju urbane prakse i neophodnim izmenama sporih i nepripremljenih mehanizama gradske administracije.

Ključne riječi: urbano planiranje, urbana participacija, bottom -up planiranje, Novi Sad

DESIGN PARTICIPATION: FROM RHETORIC TO PRACTICE (AND BACK?)

Abstract:

Design participation is considered an inclusive, democratic and transparent process of urban planning and decision-making, particularly important for environments where complex social and economic realms could easily be misinterpreted in a common top-down design approach. This paper examines actual contributions of this methodology, implemented in ongoing strategies for designing and building public spaces and cultural infrastructure as part of the project Novi Sad European Capital of Culture 2021, which is based on democracy, decentralisation, inclusion and citizens' participation. Now, these strategies were put into action, with several projects prepared, launched and brought closer to actual realisation. This process revealed conclusions in respect to implementation possibilities, as well as its strengths and weaknesses in actual projects, and emphasized the need to further improve urban practice and undertake change of the slow and unprepared procedures of the City administration.

Keywords: urban design, participative design, bottom-up design methodology, Novi Sad

1. SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY AND PARTICIPATION

For the purpose of discussion of urban sustainability and urban life, if we take a standpoint that social sustainability (the meaning of which is a cause of much debate), is a process and not a final state of society, participation in urban planning may be considered one of the tools in creating urban, i.e. social sustainability of the urban environment.[1] In that sense, social sustainability can be considered as a series of procedures implemented with the aim to raise awareness of the space we as urban inhabitants occupy.

From a sustainability viewpoint, public spaces that have potential to gather a number of social groups are paramount for functioning of a city. Sociologists interpret public space as a spatial prerequisite for spontaneous sociability and social cohesion [2]. According to Bassand, urban function is based on a number of urban processes, but also on actors that participate or influence these processes in any way. Amiability of these actors builds important elements of social cohesion. „Urban functioning represents the agglomeration of very complex interdependent activities which lead to confrontation, which needs to be managed by urban sociology.“[3] The need to identify and understand these interdependences, and avoid confrontation, on the level of public space, leads to the need for public participation in identifying and designing spaces of importance to the community.

Public participation has many facets; this paper considers participation as citizen participation in designing identity of public spaces. Participation is of tremendous importance in urban planning of public spaces and is considered an approach to planning and shaping cities with social sustainability in mind. It's an organized process that initiates interaction between designers of space and its end users, with the aim to produce a final decision as a result of that interaction.

Participation may be implemented on various levels of urban planning: from participating in choice of space, in specifying requirements for the space in question, choosing between different design options... up to taking part in project realization. Participation cannot be merely a series of discussions whose results will be disregarded, because that would stultify the entire process, causing scepticism and, ultimately, resulting in individuals boycotting any public participation efforts to contribute to communities. All engagement requires certain satisfaction in the sense that final conclusions, as the result of a series of compromises between participants, should, to a certain extent, be incorporated in the realized space.

The basic role of participation is to give back the citizens trust in the decision-making system; as such, participation should not be merely a way to meet formal requirements when approaching spatial planning. In addition, the role of participation is informing the decision-makers about the space and the actual needs of those who use it or consider it their own. It should be noted that the public is rarely unanimous in their demands; that requirements are often mutually exclusive; that different social, generational, cultural and other user groups have disparate needs and perspectives on public space. It is the role of public space to consolidate all these different user groups, and it is the role of participation to aid in creating such a public space.

Also, the importance of participation is in education of citizens, primarily in respect to understanding the complexity of interests surrounding an urban space, in respect to

possible means of reaching consent on controversial topics, and in respect to issues and obstacles in planning and realization of urban spaces in question.

In addition, one of the challenges is choice of the topic that would get an appropriate response (size and importance of a specific public space for the community we wish to include in a participative process, relation of citizens to a given space, whether they experience the space in question as a public one). What also proves a challenge is establishing the level of participation for the public in the process of planning and reaching a final decision, identifying adequate stakeholders, raising public awareness about the space at hand and planning issues as well as establishing focus on the goals.

Lorenz Aggens developed a framework according to which representatives of the public interested in participation in the process may be determined using orbits of activity. Each participation level may be observed as an orbit of activity, whereby the level closest to the decision-making process expends most energy and work on behalf of participants. Aggens identifies the public in six levels, orbits: (1) unsurprised apathetics, (2) observers, (3) commenters, (4) technical reviewers, (5) active participants in the process who invest their work and energy and, finally, (6) co-decision makers. [4] Managing participants' enthusiasm levels is yet another challenge, when the process from planning to realizing a space is a lengthy one. [5]

There is a rich experience base for applying various participations models; however, observed in the context of urban sustainability processes, participation should aim towards raising awareness of the social accountability of individuals towards urban spaces.

2. NEW PLACES: NOVI SAD URBAN POCKETS

The initial assumption is that micro urban units are spaces of enormous potential that offer numerous possibilities for multiplication of importance and meaning of urban space, and that successful urban renewal may be accomplished only through complex, multidisciplinary interventions that combine architectural, economic, social, psychological, historical... aspects of space, whereby the role of social participation in these processes must not be disregarded.

We assume that the biggest contribution of social participation is in recognizing and interpreting functions of micro-urban units, that belong to public urban areas but that remain unrecognized by planners as areas of particular interest. Existence of such urban spaces contributes to developing a feeling of community in urban integration of social groups that accept that space as theirs, and social participation promotes urban education and raising awareness of the significance of public urban spaces. It also contributes to sustainability of those newly-formed spaces.

Novi Sad urban planning anticipates public participation mostly only as part of formal public insight sessions and discussions raised when a plan is being adopted. It is on rare occasions that these procedures cause any attention of the public and result in any form of active participation of stakeholder groups.

This is why the strategy for building public spaces and cultural infrastructure, as part of the project Novi Sad European Capital of Culture 2021 (ECC 2021), is based primarily on implementing such a model of public participation in creating and realizing urban policies and practice; the project highlights the exceptional value of participative processes in disseminating democratic, inclusive and citizen participation in creating

urban environments. [6] In particular, this method is featured in development strategies of small public spaces – spaces identified by the citizens as focal points of their local communities and in which they show particular interest.

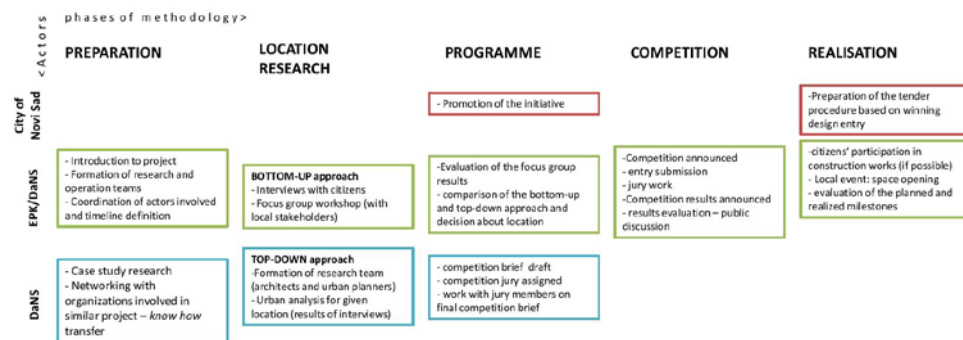
First implementations of these strategies followed immediately after winning the title ECC 2021. Further project development, as presented in the application, encompassed implementation of proposed strategies in physical space. The decision to develop and refurbish urban spaces of all urban and suburban local communities, 46 in total, was immensely stimulating for decentralization processes and citizen education on the topic of value of urban culture. Processes that would lead to realization of these spaces were initially tested during the first half of 2017. They defined the road for a very challenging methodology that was adopted and put to test.

Project New Places (Nova mesta) started its development through two sets of diametrically placed ideas on what participation is, the phase in the process in which its use is justified and in what manner its requirements should be considered and interpreted. The primary standpoint of the ECC Foundation, in charge for project's realization, was in good part formed under the influence of Christian Potiron, an international advisor for citizen participation, whose professional experience in the field of cultural policies, civic initiatives etc. sees participation as the base in all phases of the process of realizing public spaces. Contrary to this, the Association of Novi Sad Architects, in charge for project's realization, places participation as a pre-project methodology that examines the needs that then become the core program proposition of an architectural design competition as the most lively and most public form of professional debate on urban space. Finally, it was concluded that the initial standpoint be realized in a simple and more logical manner in different project, a micro-granting scheme, which completely resides on civic initiative throughout – beginning with the nomination of space, organization of planning and design, with professional assistance, up until project realization; New Places – urban pockets entered realization as a bottom-up approach, beginning with participation in various forms, to then incorporate the conclusions of this phase in a public architecture competition, as well as profiled through careful choice of jury members and citizen participation in further considerations of competition proposals. This seemed justified for several reasons: first, participation of professionals in the process of designing small public spaces is important for establishing best practice in shaping public space, which has been under heavy fire of financially motivated interests, illegal privatization and shady procurement procedures for years; also, citizen participation is highly debatable when there is no awareness, previous experience, or, often, motivation to engage in the process; it could, in certain cases, render the procedure unpredictable and vulnerable; finally, similar work methods implemented in the region imply positive experience and outcomes in respect of establishing this practice, which might lead to other work models in the future.

2.1. Model Testing: Four Urban Pockets of Novi Sad

The first set of spaces that were considered encompassed urban (South Telep, Detelinara) as well as suburban (Kovilj, Sremska Kamenica) local communities in Novi Sad. Image 1 illustrates the established process methodology. It is closely modelled on the one tested in Zagreb, as part of the City Acupuncture Project (2012-2014), whose initiator was the Youth Section of the Zagreb Architects Society; the model resides on micro interventions in urban environment, through interdisciplinary action, participation

of end users and support of authorities [7]. Since this initiative was long-term, they were able to test a top-down method as well – urban research of Zagreb through planning and design methods, which identified spaces and anticipated interventions. Comparison of simulations and actual results that were realized pointed to interesting commonalities and dissimilarities in regard to professionals' standpoint and actual needs of local communities, on the field.



Slika 1. Diagram of the established work process

On the other hand, the Novi Sad model was established in a short period of time. Therefore, it could only partly enable result comparison between the top-down and bottom-up approaches in location selection. It could not, however make new conclusions that would enhance design practices and urban policies. Choice of location relied on surveys of inhabitants of the affected local communities, which established their interests and a general frame of local needs. At the same time, an expert research of subject areas was conducted - identification of locations, their urban, ambient and social values, as well as potential for interventions. Specific locations, usually three, that were the subject of focus groups, were determined by superposing these two analyses. Focus groups were guided conversations with representatives of stakeholder groups, local government, as well as citizens deemed in surveys as active contributors in areas in question, or those trusted by the local inhabitants. Introductory format of focus groups was comprised of a short expert talk on urban pockets and a wide variety of urban spaces that fall under this category, means to articulate them and the range of possible approaches to this problem. The goal of this talk was to familiarize workshop participants with the wide range of potential interventions, prior to actually starting work. Following this, the participants were introduced to the "nominated" spaces and the participants commenced a guided discussion on the topic at hand. In certain cases, spaces identified in surveys were not equally rated by citizen participants of focus groups. Also, spaces identified as potentially valuable during research, were sometimes deemed not a priority in their local community. Focus groups were moderated by an urban sociologist, and they were most productive when they were established as a system of participants equal in significance, who were ready to engage and listen to each other. Dialog was extremely constructive and it often led to election of one space that stood out for its significance and which was then, as such, carefully programmed to meet the needs of different citizen stakeholder groups.

If we analyze the undertaken participation process in project "Nova mesta" using Aggens's definition of orbits of activities, we can distinguish all levels of public involvement. There is certain number of citizens unwilling to participate, or those uninterested for process itself, which are described in orbits 1 and 2. However, since the project is based on small scale intervention affecting local communities, living and working close to those spaces, the number of "unsurprised apathetics" was insignificant, what additionally justified application of participative methodology for this case. The second orbit, the observers, were group of those citizens interested only in taking the information about the project during public survey phase, but not wanting to give any feedback. This orbit also included people who were informed about the programme through media, or other means, what makes their number difficult to define. The next participation orbit - commenter - included people interested in project but not motivated to be actively involved. They were ready to share information, take part in interview and point out the actual problems of the community. Their inclusion was essential for two reasons: firstly, their involvement led towards actual nomination of space to be considered for design intervention, which are reflection of the local community needs; secondly, this was first step in introducing participation practice of this kind to wider community and promotion of its potential to actually change the perception of public space. This orbit is considered for potential resource for further expansion of the modalities citizens' involvement into urban politics and practice.

The most important aspect of the participation process in actual creation of the local public space is at the level of the active participants' orbit. Although our local communities has only vague comprehension of the participation practice, and what might be the benefits, the number of those interested to actively contribute to the process, in all phases, was above the expected. The enthusiasm of the involved citizens was boosted by the fact that spaces at hand were actual choice of the local community, so they could easily recognize their interest and problems, as well as potential of the programmes they proposed to enhance quality of life on local scale. Also, the new format of the guided talk in focus groups, the relatively short period of time in which all the phases of the process were executed was essential for high level of enthusiasm between participants, along with strong promises made about actual realization of the space, in near future.



Slika 2. Citizen survey and focus group work

2.2. Participation and competition practice

The most sensitive part of the entire process was transfer/generalization of results to form an actual project specification. This was the step that differentiated the two approaches to the project from the very beginning. This is why competition participants were presented with some basic space selection parameters as part of preparation activities through emphasizing potential; final functional interpretation was to be left to proposal authors as a unique creative contribution to understanding the focus group dialog, which was made available to applicants in the form of workshop proceedings. This approach created an 'interpretative' field and reduced the risk of hinting applicants to a specific 'desired' design solution. This was later visible in the proposals themselves, which significantly ranged in approach. Also, the four spaces that the competition was announced for, offered urban environment proposals of radically different qualities – ranging from natural embankments, to hi-frequency urban residential areas.

Another valuable asset in this process, defined by Aggens as "technical reviewer", was in this case active partner during the participation process (Architectural Association of Novi Sad), and included even competition jury, who were engaged in preparation of the Call, establishing evaluation criteria, and avoiding potential obstacles of the rather new competition practice based on this methodology. The competition jury was a response to its regional character; it did, also, gather relevant experts from a range of architectural practice domains – initiators of such processes in the region that offered the know-how, representatives of competition backers, local government responsible for realization, urban sociologists and architects prolific in similar design practices.

Competition proposals and winning projects illustrated a distinct diversity in approach and proposed solution, which enabled establishing a practice that fosters a contemporary approaches and essentially establishes modern values in local communities, from the very beginning of the project. Public debate surrounding winning competition proposals gave positive feedback on selected projects and a clear confirmation that architectural solutions are outside of the range that could have been anticipated by inhabitants of the affected communities. This in turn gave validation to the notion of active expert involvement, and the education benefits that these realizations will have on the inhabitants.

3. CONCLUSION REMARKS: CHALLENGES OF PARTICIPATION PRACTICE IMPLEMENTATION

Space is not merely a physical dimension. It is comprised of a series of intangible values, content and events that facilitate a range of relationships between its users. [8] Public spaces are symbolic and integrative in character, and it is there that inhabitants of a community build their collective identity. They must be determined: spatially, structurally and programmatically – functionally organized in such a manner so as to guide, attract and retain potential users. Translated into a spatial framework of the micro units in question, such organization would mean meeting the needs of existing users and appending content that could attract users from other social groups. Herein lies the basis for user participation when identifying and designing public space.



Slika 3. Winning proposals: upper left - "Linear bench + eaves" for the Zmaj Jova Square plateau in Sremska Kamenica, upper right - Drive-through marketplace (park and marketplace space in Kovilj), bottom-Pavillion/pontoon (south Dunavac riverbank)

Finding a solution throughout all aspects of the process of designing a space (from functional to visual): within financial and physical constraints, designer aspirations and requirements of numerous stakeholder groups is the main challenge of urban planning. Participative processes initiated by the Novi Sad ECC 2021 project anticipate new practices in urban planning, which are, sadly, used rather selectively. In contrast to the New Places project, other projects focusing on infrastructural projects do not meet even the basic requirements of sound architectural practice – finding the best solution through open architectural competition call. The participation process itself is, in some cases, formally conducted before, and in other, after the design procurement procedures have already been concluded, with the basis of project specification not reflecting the actual needs of the locality affected.

The initial set of spaces that have followed this entire methodology are currently, according to city officials, on the "brink of realization" (which is also to be procured and built at lowest price), but actually even left out from the new planning and regulation documents, which are being developed and ratified in the meantime. The high intensity of the process, in preparation phase, high level of citizens' awareness and activism, is

coming close to become yet another argument for the ignorant, but sadly common, attitude towards citizens' initiatives. The main reason for this situation lays in slow and unprepared mechanism of city administration, and strict and rigorous follow of the same by city officials. So far, we have situation where almost surprising level of citizens' motivation to get involved, in spite of having modest or no knowledge about its possibilities, almost certainly no practice or experience with same, is taken for granted, and not stimulating for making structural changes in already established procedures. The fact that no actual space is still under construction stands as a reminder of numerous discrepancies existing within the system. Even when the first of the local public spaces starts its makeover, it will be just the beginning of a very uncertain process, which does not define: the role of a designer in the process of realization, production of project execution plans and their contractor, restrictions that public procurement procedures impose on choice of material and urban equipment. All this points to the need for further work on adjusting specific procedures, administrative mechanisms, as well as education of all participants in the process about the need for such changes.

LITERATURE

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