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Amsterdam, 7-9 July 2011

The Development of Civil Society in Urban Issues: a Sociological Account on the Recent Activities of the NGO “The Right to the City” in Zagreb (Croatia)

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Paper presented at the International RC21 conference 2011

Session: nr. RT18.1: Social Justice and the Right to the City: The Costs of Urban Redevelopment
Abstract

The development of civil society in the “transitional” societies has many features. One of them is the activities of urban oriented actions of different NGOs in Croatia concerning urban renewal issues.

In this paper, a current urban transformation issue that is being taking place will be used as a case study to show the activities of two NGOs. The experience of activities of these two NGOs – ‘The Green Action’ and ‘The Right to the City’ represent important examples on how urban issues are mirroring the ‘state of art’ in the development of actual features of civil society in a certain society. The case of urban renewal in the very centre of Zagreb – a specific gentrification process – will be taken as a basis of this paper. Several hypothesis will be developed: (a) the lack of “right positioning” of private developers (corporate actors) in the actual decision making procedures concerning urban issues that makes possible many illegitimate or semi-legal activities in urban redevelopment; (b) the lack or incomplete legal procedures of this positioning is an obstacle; (c) the unclear position of a newly born private entrepreneur in the structure of city’s decision-making; (d) structural and empirical limits of the action power of the mayor of the city should be much more limited; (e) unclear meaning and procedures on what represents “public and common interest” concerning urban issues; (f) potential but (difficult to be proven and documented) “alliances” between corporate actors and city politics in the proliferation of urban redevelopment; (g) the role of protest actions in urban issues due to the construction of one new shopping center with commercial garage and luxury apartments.

The paper will be based on the current theory as well as on the present empirical documentation that already exists concerning the issues. In the concluding part of the paper, major prospect of the development of ‘civil urban democracy’ in urban issues in a transitional society will be elaborated in more details.
1. Introduction
The development of civil society in the post-communist (socialist) or “transitional” societies has many features. In this paper, we’ll concentrate on some important issues that are developing in urban areas. In previous period (“socialism”), every initiative in urban areas – for example, building a new settlement, reconstruction of certain urban areas, etc., was accepted, organized and backed by the state. In a way, decision making was “centralized”, but rather effective.

But, with the change of political and social organization of society that started at the beginning of the 1990s, decision making process and the structure of urban planning radically changed. Many new actors appeared, many new political pressures have been emerged. Also, and very important, a new agent – a private developer that is replacing, so to say, the role of the state from the previous period has appeared. Different NGOs have appeared also – at the moment, there are more then 100.000 different NGOs in Croatia, but only a few are socially and politically “visible” through their activities. In this paper we’ll present some major features of the actions and activities of two NGOs in Croatia that are concerned with urban issues putting their activities within the framework of the plans of redevelopment of a certain part of a city, urban change and re-use of existing urban places.

2. The setting and profile of activities
A current urban transformation issue that is being taking place during the last three years in Zagreb will be used as a case study to show the activities of two NGOs that have been very active in the process of constructing and strengthening of civil society in a transitional society through different actions in an urban milieu. The experience of activities of these two NGOs – ‘The Green Action’ and ‘The Right to the City’ represent important examples on how urban issues are mirroring the ‘state of art’ in the development of actual features of civil society in a certain society. The case of urban renewal in the very centre of Zagreb or in another word – a specific gentrification process – will be taken as a basis of this paper. Several hypotheses could be developed.

(a) The lack of “right positioning” of private developers (corporate actors) in the actual decision making procedures concerning urban issues is more and more an empirical obstacle that makes possible many illegitimate or semi-legal activities in urban redevelopment possible. Private developer, a corporate agent, came into “the game” of urban development unexpectedly, positioning himself within a non-regulated place of decision making on urban issues. In another words, within the praxis of living within “a wild capitalism”, the private entrepreneur – developer puts itself on the top of the procedure of decision making under the umbrella of private-public partnership. In the example we’ll rely on, the corporate agent formed himself the committee to decide about the different versions
of public competition for the redevelopment of one part of Zagreb center and the influence of the "public" was limited only to two member delegated from the City’s assembly.

(b) The other important issue is the present lack or incomplete legal procedures of this positioning which in this sense represents a legal obstacle. In another word, due to the unclear procedures, the space for maneuvering for the private agents is flexible, the rules of the game are set outside the procedural procedures, and the general public is usually excluded from participation in decision making. When the public realized that, there were several protest actions concerning the issues of the redevelopment of the Zagreb central area and Flower Square which resulted – between other things and actions – with the collection of 54.000 signatures against the project that was – in the end – finalized just lately in a form of a shopping centre together with a huge garage right into the pedestrian zone.

(d) Structural and empirical limits of the power of the mayor of the city should be much better addressed. The times in transitional societies are frequently also the times of "great and influential personalities", that emerge from nowhere and promise better future. One of them is also a mayor of Zagreb that accumulated great power in his hands and governs the city in the style of the one man band show. So, for further democratization and development of civil society in transitional societies, mayors as well as other politicians must be “controlled” much more and with much more power of the public.

(e) Another very important problem represents present unclear regulations and procedures how to reach a reasonable consensus on what represents “public and common interest” concerning urban issues. Almost everything presently could be classified as public interest, or in another words many individually and privately financed actions in urban redevelopment could be placed under the umbrella of private-public partnership which means that the public interest could be “merged” with no problem with private interests. In the case of Zagreb, right in the very pedestrian part of the center, a new and rather big commercial garage (ca 400 places) was build financed by the private corporate developer to be rather quickly publicly “reclassified” as it was done in the public interest of the citizens of Zagreb. “Let’s take the cars from the pavements”, was a sentence pronounced by the actual mayor which means “let’s build another (commercial) garage” (in an inappropriate place) that is be financed by the city government representing in this way also a public interest.

(f) Due to the fact that transitional societies are also rather still weak in many features of an overall democratization of society, in some cases there are suspicions concerning potential “alliances” that could exist between corporate actors and city politics in the proliferation of urban redevelopment. This also represents a problematic issue due to the fact that these “rumors” can not be proven. Nevertheless, the feeling of that kind is spread out through the public and has a devastating effect on the real democratization of urban politics.
3. Current processes of urban renewal in a transitional society

Let us discuss firstly major frames of references. What is urban renewal, firstly? It is usually a structural and functional deep change of a certain part of the city powered by individual (corporate) or state initiatives (combined). But the question remains - what to regenerate, where and what to invest, whom to invest, why to regenerate? Also, there is a question who are the major agents - individuals (corporate actors), the state, and the city. Apart from these issues, the questions concerning the importance of social elements remains too – if there is a change of physical elements, then there is a change of social settings, of the environments. Regeneration brings the change, introducing the elements of normal life for the existing population of a certain part of the city or gentrifying the area? Many situations represent clearly that the whole system is not prepared to cope with new initiatives and that a new legal framework is needed with precise rules and prescriptions for every agent involved in processes of urban regeneration.

In a transitional society many urban areas are left in degraded conditions, including housing estates as well as old factories, the heritage of industrial architecture, for example. But, still some efforts had been done in the rehabilitation of degraded urban areas. Some of the most important moves have been the following:

- Enlargement of pedestrian zones, especially in the central parts of the cities
- New construction, mostly in the form of interpolations within existing structures
- New housing and especially new business constructions
- “ Beautification” of some, usually central parts of the cities – like, new lightning, new pavement, new urban spaces, new coffee shops and smaller restaurants, etc.
- New green areas and trees, rehabilitation of the old ones, rehabilitation of park areas and some recreational areas
- Traffic restrictions of private cars, especially into central parts of the cities
- Fostering and multiplication of types and sorts of public transportation – higher frequency, introduction of bike lines, etc.

But, the problem still remains with the definition of “urban renewal” – what exactly it means in a transitional society? Is this only “urban reconstruction” or a complex “urban rehabilitation” and “regeneration”? Let us briefly discuss and clarify most used terms and meanings when we mention the term “urban renewal”.

Urban renewal – in most of the cases is understood as a complex process of renewal of degraded physical (and social) structure of a certain part of cities. “Urban renewal” was meant to stop and reverse the processes of urban degradation, “slumization” process as well as to bring “more carrying” new inhabitants into the rehabilitated areas that will have more capabilities to support the renewal. Objective reasons for the abandonment of degraded
areas are the deterioration of environmental conditions, growth of urban violence, insecurity and rising cost of urban living. So, what was typical of the 1960s in Western societies and was named “the fiscal crisis” of the oldest and biggest cities came with a delay of several decades also to be the reality in transitional societies.

Reconstruction – it is usually a part of the of a complex urban renewal, but in most cases urban renewal starts and ends with partial new constructions, without any real „renewal”. Usually it concerns only the new physical construction.

Revitalization – it is much broader concept then a simply reconstruction. It tries to understand the underlying reasons of urban degradation, to see what was going on with the deterioration of physical as well as of social structures and it brings “changes”, brings new life into deteriorated part of the city. In this sense, it includes reconstruction (new construction), but also the change of existing (partial) social structures. Only through the combined intervention of combined private and social sector, the revitalization could be successful.

Regeneration – it is similar to the revitalization and it represents a number of measures that are used to change the degraded part of the city that should be renovated. It is a combination of reconstruction – constructions of new structures, but at the same time also a reconstruction and change of degraded physical as well as social structures of a certain part of the city. In any case, regeneration is especially sensitive towards the existing structures and it takes them as a starting point for the definition of different (new) activities and actions that could be organized to regenerate the existing situation.

Restoration. This segment of a complex urban renewal is also a part of regeneration of degraded urban tissue. It consists of the renovation of traditional milieus, buildings, open spaces, squares, streets, and other contents that used to exist in the past. Many methods are combined to reach the successful restauration including faximile method and different types of “retraditionalization”. Sometimes replica buildings are erected again.

Gentrification – it is rather newly emerging process of urban renewal that is developing in many countries in recent decades in the more developed societies of Europe as well as in the States. Simply explained, this process comprise the change of social structure of inhabitants of usually degraded part of a city in the following sense – from the “less carrying” to the “more carrying” population, from the poor to the rich population that will start to live in the regenerated and gentrified areas. It is expected that “new style of living, new lifestyles” will emerge and starts to spread out also in the neighbouring parts of the city which can result in the bettering of larger parts of cities – in the longer run. It usually concerns the change of “structure of contents”- from the „old and simple”, to more exclusive, the rents usually also rise, and former public space usually transforms into privatized areas that are not anymore accessible to regular citizens, now controlled by corporate agents,
companies and other “external powers”. Usually, gentrification includes a process of “beautification”, mostly through new construction of housing and business buildings but also the separation of urban population – to paraphrase M. Castells – into the “connected” and “disconnected”, rich and poorer inhabitants who, in the longer run, could result into the transformation of the city into the form and substance of “a dual city”. “Gentrification” in a sense could be understood as an “exchange” for a complex urban renewal and it is mostly powered by private initiative but usually is backed by city government and merged corporate agents.

4. Urban renewal and the emergence of new NGO actors

NGOs and private corporate agents emerged for the first time as new players in a complex game of urban planning and urban life in the transitional cities. Corporate actors suddenly emerged as main players of the game to replace the state, citizens and “centralized” urban planning. Corporate actor emerged as a main organizer not only of the urban reconstruction process, but also as a main organizer of the whole decision making process who puts himself into the position to be in charge of everything concerning urban renewal projects - development of the project, selection of proposals and selection of the final solution of urban reconstruction. This represents the illustration of a completely new situation in which the position of private investor, new agent in urban renewal is not clearly defined that opens a space for many ways how revitalization of cities could be understood in many different and many times confronted ways. It is clear that for the future involvement of private corporate agents more precise and clear legal procedures must be elaborated and accepted as new rules of urban planning and revitalization in transitional cities.

What are the consequences of a current situation? The most important ones are the following:

a. Personalized changes of urban tissues and structures of contents. Revitalization of a certain part of the city becomes a “free terrain” for private investor to build almost anything he or she wants. The influence of citizens, ideas of complex urban planning and revitalization are minimized.

b. Introduction of inadequate settings into the core of the city, like garages and parking facilities that are placed usually in the very centre of pedestrian zones.

c. The revolt of the public and of the NGOs. The avoidance of democratic procedure in the concrete case of Zagreb brought to the activism of two major NGOs – The Green Action and The Right to the City which collected 54.000 signatures against the proposed project of gentrification. But, that left no trace. Apart from the signatures, these two NGOs organized many protest actions, including passive resistance, camping on the site, writing
articles, putting banners etc., but with almost no results. In the end, new shopping centre and a big garage are built, but the battle for future reconstruction ideas is not lost!

d. The position of City Government. This example showed that either the City government do not understand the principles of democratic urban planning and decision making or it neglected these principles on purpose, to give to the private developer the possibility to invest his or her money.

e. The decision of the City’s government department for historical preservation to “take out” or exclude two classic old buildings from then protection measures to make space for new, gentrified shopping centre, also showed that even professionals could, under the pressure change their views about the values of historical inheritance. Due to the fact that the whole Downtown area of Zagreb is protected, it is not clear what criteria had been used to exclude two buildings from the protection principles.

6. Conclusion - the meaning of public interest and how to detect it and implement in a current praxis of urban renewal in a transitional society?

It is clear from this example of urban reconstruction that clear democratic procedure is still missing in urban planning in a transitional cities, that the newly emerging agents, especially developers are coming into the game backed usually by the city’s politicians and local urban governments and that the NGOs are still without real power to intervene with their arguments into urban rehabilitation. But, this is mostly the consequence of the slow and painful development of the overall democratization of the societies that used to be centralized and for the last two decades “under stress” of a strong institutional, political and social change of the overall social system, including urban planning and urban reconstruction.

It may be that the most important issue is the lack on the comprehensive understanding of the meaning of a public interest in urban issues and how to define it. Also, the role of the NGOs are not yet recognized as a legitimate part of a civil society that should have much more important role in decision making.