**Chapter 14**

**Mobilizing urban neighbourhoods: Artivism, identity, and cultural sustainability**[1]

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**Introduction: "Small" cities in a "small" country**

The time period of the late 20th and early 21th century has brought significant changes and tough challenges to post-war Yugoslav countries (i.e., Wachtel 1998; Dragićević Šešić and Dragojević 2006; Švob-Đokić 2011; Brkić 2014). Forced and willing migrations, intensified ethnic distances, destroyed industries, and the combined consequences of globalisation, the economic crisis, and the process of European integration have changed not only the ingrained way(s) of life but also the appearance and perception of life in urban environments in former Yugoslav countries.

Within transitional[2] Serbia, numerous city centres and neighbourhoods have lost their identities due to a growing sense of alienation and a diminishing sense of shared place and locality. This has occurred as a result of three main factors: the collapse of urban industrialisation and the idea of shared/common spaces from the socialist period, dissatisfaction with the current urban environment, and a feeling of disengagement from society. Consumerist culture's shopping malls and other popular *non-places* (Augé 1997) have replaced the public spaces traditionally used for communication and gathering (i.e., *kafana, korzo*). Due to this process of *decontextualisation* (Dragićević Šešić 2011b), neighbourhoods are disappearing – now less defined as places, and more as temporary living spaces.

In recent decades, cultural researchers have focused mainly on metropolitan cities (e.g., Bianchini and Parkinson 1993; Johnson 2009; Patel 2013). Furthermore, researchers have tended to overlook and neglect *artivism,* as an increasingly present phenomenon of social activism through the arts. *Artivism* is a neologism, a hybrid notion consisting of two words: art and activism. In his seminal essay, "Artivism," Aldo Milohnić (2005) explains that *artivism* is a kind of *interventionism* which uses "cultural-manifestation techniques in order to become constituted in the field of the political" (18). Furthermore, "the transversality of these practices and their hybrid nature enable quick passages from the predominantly artistic into the predominantly political sphere and back" (24). Writing about the *artivist*, Milohnić says that "an activist is an artist as much as is inevitable, no more and no less; the artisanship is a side effect of a political act" (20).

In light of this, the chapter considers what is left of the *once upon a time* diverse identities of small- and medium-sized cities (SMCs) in Serbia, today converted to similarly shaped and underdeveloped post-industrial cities and their neighbourhoods, and observes the potential impact of artivism initiatives in reinvigorating and contributing to the life and sustainability of these urban units. The paper poses two essential questions: To what extent can artivistic practices in public spaces be mobilising? Can artivism initiate a rethinking of neighbourhood identity and lead to social changes and meaningful urban cultural policies? This research is not about image-making and branding – it is about creating sustainable communities through bottom-up artivism and uses of civic imagination.

**Rebuilding neighbourhood identity**

*Neighbourhood* is one of the most important concepts for understanding a local community, connected through a common space as its base of relations, with proximity as one of the main

characteristics of a neighbour (Bulmer 1986) and the potential for social reproduction (Appadurai 1996). Among the results of the modernization of European societies were changes in the perception and definition of neighbourhoods, where proximity is more of a notion from past times than a constituent characteristic of a neighbour in a contemporary local community, where people do not have enough direct contact with their neighbours nor feel that they are in control of the place (Power 2007). As Eric Hobsbawm has said, "never was the word 'community' used more indiscriminately and emptily than in the decades when communities in the sociological sense became hard to find in real life" (Hobsbawm 1995, 428).

Furthermore, the concept of *neighbourhood* is in direct confrontation with the concept of *consumer society*, since it calls for a strong connection with one place and one group of people, and immobility to a certain degree, which degrades contemporary Western societies' focus on movement and superficial human relations that allow easy physical, social, industrial, and emotional mobility. This tension is even more accentuated in the transition to more consumer-based societies, affected by both processes of globalisation and the current neoliberal politico-economic trends of governance in Serbia.

Inspired by Giuliana Bruno's making of *Atlas of Emotion* (2007) by connecting sight and site, motion and emotion, architecture and film, the case study we use in this chapter aims to connect cultural activist performative projects with urban territories – des *ilots urbains*, spaces with specific character within a city. It is an attempt to sustain a project that presents an interplay of urbanism, architecture, performance studies, culture of memory, and cultural management in order to prove that the real sustainability of particular city neighbourhoods is created or achieved through their cultural practices, which rely on the engagement of multiple

senses and the spirit of the place. This involves a complex intervening of individual and collective action: from *sightseeing* (touristic consumerism) to *site seeing* (exploration of our own city's meanings), the latter defined as a relation "established between places and events that forms and transforms the narrative of a city: the city itself becomes imagined as narrative as sites are transformed by the sequence of movements of its traveller-dwellers" (Bruno 2007, 66).

We also highlight the importance of the relation between a strong local identity and culture-centred sustainability, which has "positive impacts in creating the preconditions for establishing civic pride, community spirit, and the necessary caring for the urban environment" (Ratna and Piracha 2006, 36). Moreover, as Dominique Moïsi (2009) has foreseen and pointed out, we agree that "the mapping of emotions will become as legitimate and compulsory an exercise as the mapping of geographical realities" (158). Knowing that the predominant emotion in Serbian society (particularly in SMCs) is a *culture of humiliation* (Moïsi 2009), we argue that it can be overcome only through bottom-up civic activism as a precondition for establishing civic pride and civic urbanity (see also Landry, this volume).

**Youth in Serbia: Making something out of nothing**

Young people in Serbia's SMCs share many commonalities with their generation's global struggle with confusion, uncertainty, apathy, lack of interest, information saturation, unemployment, and poor cultural offer (in terms of both quantity and quality) (Azanjac, Bradić, Krivokapić, and Stojić 2012). What they experience in their everyday lives is a phenomenon already described as "emptiness or claustrophobia, rather than neighbourliness" (Miles 2006, 136).

We may define such a *social vacuum* or *void-ness* as the perpetual presence of the absence and the absence of the presence. As Bergson (1983) argued, there is no absolute void in nature because "we can perceive only the *presence* of one thing or of another, never the *absence* of anything. There is absence only for a being capable of remembering and expecting" (281). Paradoxically, there is more, not less, in the idea of non-existent neighbourliness. By leaving *the void of itself*, such absence is full of nostalgia for the better and desired, yet supressed by the current reality.

In this light, our research is based on the case study selected to represent the paradigm of youth *capable of remembering and expecting* – the campaign "Openly about Public Spaces" (hereinafter, the Campaign). Consisting of different culture-led initiatives that encourage self-organizing and mobilisation of culture aimed at urban regeneration, the Campaign has been implemented by the civic association *Civic Initiatives* since 2009, together with youth offices (public structures) in several SMCs throughout Serbia (Kikinda, Kragujevac, Novi Sad, Niš, Kruševac, Smederevo, Užice, etc.).[3]

The Campaign started by launching an official request to all city governments in Serbia, referring to the *Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance* and asking for the list of unused public spaces. Given that young people are lacking space for their own activities and creative expression, they wanted to see how to either obtain or occupy these abandoned spaces and make something out of them. This action is based on civic self-organized mapping and sometimes illegal occupation of unused and often devastated public spaces (*squatting*), usually followed by negotiations with local authorities in order to reconstruct places, revitalise neighbourhoods, and make a long-term contribution to the sustainable development of the local community.

Two distinctively different approaches can be seen in their fight for the right to use abandoned public spaces. The first approach focuses on organizing numerous cultural events, raising awareness, lobbying, and negotiating with local authorities. For example, in Kikinda[4], a group of high school pupils launched an initiative to create the Youth Centre *Pantry* (*Špajz*) – a music room, reading club, and place for different creative activities (workshops, exhibitions, etc.). In 2012, after two years of negotiations and a variety of activities, the administration of the city of Kikinda provided the Youth Centre *Pantry* with a space for the next 20 years. Keeping in mind that this space was a public bathroom initially, with neither water nor electricity, the *Pantry* has to be renovated to meet the needs of the Youth Centre and, therefore, at the moment of writing this article, it is not yet in use. However, young activists continue to fundraise, expanding the network of people supporting them and organizing different cultural events on the streets of Kikinda with the intention of raising awareness of the importance of such initiatives and places.

<FIGURE 14.1 HERE>

Figure 14.1. The exterior/interior of the abandoned military barracks *Dr. Archibald Reiss* in Novi Sad, Serbia. Source: Orfeas Skutelis

Similarly, the *Planet of the Innovative Youngsters* (*Planeta inovativaca*) is an informal group of young people who gathered in 2010 with a desire to create a Youth Centre and contribute to the city they live in, Smederevo[5]. They organized numerous street-based cultural events and performances and, in less than six months, more than 1500 people signed their petition for the opening of a Youth Centre. Although there are many unused spaces in Smederevo, the local government has not shown any interest in supporting this initiative, even though the

adopted *Local Plan of Action for Youth of Smederevo 2010-2014* emphasises the lack of a cultural centre for youth in the city.

In contrast, the second, completely different approach to raising awareness and obtaining unused spaces can be observed in civil disobedience and subversive practices defined as *squatting*. These examples of unauthorised occupation of abandoned public spaces appeared as a reaction to the nonexistence of a space for citizens to engage in independent, educational, and cultural activities important for the community, even though there are empty and abandoned public facilities, military buildings, and industrial complexes.

<FIGURE 14.2 HERE>

Figure 14.2. The activist occupation of the abandoned military barracks *Dr. Archibald Reiss* in Novi Sad, Serbia. Source: Danijel Šivinjski

After three months of preparation, sending requests to relevant but indifferent authorities and representatives of the Army as well as transparently announcing plans and activities on their website, the artivists of the initiative for the *Independent Social Centre* in Novi Sad[6] entered the abandoned military barracks *Dr. Archibald Reiss* on Army Day 2011. During the three weeks of the Centre's existence in the barracks, the facilities were cleaned and numerous programmes were organized (all free of charge and open to the public), including: 18 educational, creative, and humanitarian workshops; 12 music programmes; nine panel discussions; six film and video programmes; three exhibitions; five literary programmes; and five performances. However, representatives of the army and police then evicted the activists from the military barracks and prohibited further access to the abandoned space. To this day, the space remains empty and the Centre is temporarily situated at another location.

Furthermore, negotiations with City authorities are at a standstill following political changes in the city administration of Novi Sad.

<FIGURE 14.3 HERE>

Figure 14.3. The joint military and police action of evicting the activists from the abandoned military barracks *Dr. Archibald Reiss* in Novi Sad, Serbia. Source: Danijel Šivinjski

Similarly, without its own premises and through various actions and street art events, the independent art production organization *Undercity* (*Undergrad*)[7] in Užice[8] emphasised the importance of using abandoned public spaces on many occasions. In 2008, they occupied a former rifle range in the centre of the city (abandoned for more than 15 years) by painting the empty walls with *post-graffiti*[9] (Reinecke 2007) and placing a mini skate ramp inside the building. Although the police cleared the space after only ten days, the *Undercity* activists continue to negotiate with local authorities with the aim of obtaining their own space, as well as drawing people's attention to the large number of abandoned and unused public spaces in their city.

As acts of social engagement and protest against the public reality and civic lethargy, these and many other examples throughout Serbia have shown the increased youth demand for neighbourliness. The Campaign appears to embody the generation's dissatisfaction with the social environment and articulates an awakening plea for everyone (else) to participate and get involved – to confront social issues and deficiencies through artivistic projects and, moreover, to find, *conquer*, *unlock,* and use abandoned public facilities for their cultural expression. In other words, the Campaign's artivism "reappeared out of necessity to fight

pressures of the market, governmental directive policies, and indolence and incapacities of the public institutional system in culture" (Dragićević Šešić 2011a, 83).

Nevertheless, a lot of initiatives in Serbian cities depend on local elections, political changes, and affiliation to political parties. Local authorities are largely unapproachable and very slow to make decisions. With few exceptions, they tend to remain deaf to such initiatives. Incapable of seeing the numerous benefits in opening public spaces to young people and delegating certain rights to civic organizations, they prefer to keep the abandoned public spaces empty (Dimitrijević Mišković 2012).

**Public art in public space as a public good**

Although traditionally public space is defined as a place accessible to everyone at all times (such as town squares, streets, parks, etc.), the military buildings mentioned above and similar facilities inaccessible to the public can be perceived as *quasi-public spaces* due to entry restrictions (Knox and Worpole 2007, 9). Needless to say, a city is not just a set of buildings – public or private spaces. As discussed by Lefebvre (1991), "(social) space is a (social) product" (26), a complex social construction. Therefore, every society produces its own unique space(s). Cities, neighbourhoods, and public spaces are not given *per* se – they are socially and culturally constructed because people make places (Mean and Tims 2005, 24).

Rooted also in Lefebvre's *right to the city* concept, the Campaign promotes the importance of neighbourhood place-making, which might be conceived as a *right to the neighbourhood* concept. The Campaign belongs to the public art subgroup of *new genre public art* – artistic expressions are not only situated outside conventional art spaces (galleries, theatres, etc.) but

specifically committed to activate citizens' engagement with the environment and participation in the public sphere (Tornaghi 2008, 4). Based on civic engagement, active citizenship, and conflict as creative tools, these initiatives are an attempt to restore the city's significance to its inhabitants. However, the essence is not to debate what public space or public art is, but rather what makes a (public) space *public* and how does the public art in public space influence the *public*?

Through artivistic initiatives in Kikinda, Smederevo, Novi Sad, and Užice, in settings that have lost their urban narratives during the transition period, inhabitants are trying to (re)claim control over the process of the production of (public) spaces and their joint use. By attributing particular, new meanings to abandoned spaces and breathing life into them, these youth initiatives attempt to convert *non-places* into *places*.

While the idea of *public* (public good, public interest, etc.) may be shrinking in contemporary society (Cruz 2012, 58), it is increasingly necessary to reformulate and reinterpret its present-day meaning by recognising *civic imagination* in itself as a public good. It is in the public interest to support active citizenship and to stimulate direct cultural participation, which is the cornerstone of the Culture 3.0 paradigm we are experiencing today, "a situation in which individuals do not limit themselves to absorb passively the cultural stimuli, but are motivated to put their skills at work: creating their own programmes and projects, not only responding to Government policies and practices" (Sacco 2011, 5). Thus, we believe that civic imagination is crucial for practicing the *right to the neighbourhood* concept.

Keeping in mind the relationship between public art and the broader social and political environment, the Campaign can be observed in accordance with Kester's (2005) definition of

*dialogical* aesthetic, which reflects the notions of *community specific* (cf. Miles), *relational* (cf. Bourriaud) and *conversational* (cf. Bhabha) art practices. Since they are based on dialogue, process, participation, communication, and exchange, we may argue that such aesthetic experiences and artivistic practices can generate remarkably influential changes in the consciousness of their participants who "share insights, and forge a provisional sense of collectivity" (Kester 2005, 84).

Thus, what artivistic initiatives as part of the Campaign might bring (back) to the community is a sense of belonging to a place and connectedness in relation to both other inhabitants and the shared physical environment – that is, neighbourliness. Through processes of coming together with other people as well as the unique spatial and temporal synthesising of self, others, space, and time (*hic et nunc*), the initiatives contribute to long-awaited process of place-making and meaning-making of abandoned public spaces and silenced neighbourhoods. By stimulating and mobilising citizens to actively participate in urban regeneration and development, as well as encouraging communication, social interaction, and negotiations with local authorities, the Campaign is a potential platform for re-thinking and re-creating neighbourhood identities. Therefore, the initiative may have a vital role in the social life of local communities and, moreover, their sustainable development.

**A bottom-up approach towards sustainable cultural development**

In times of crisis of democracy or, more precisely, of democratic capitalism (Streeck 2011), when power is concentrated in small circles of various nomenclatures, the idea of going back to the *bottom*, where the *real people* are, as presented through the examples from the Campaign, seems like a feasible option, but often like a naive one too. It can even seem like an attempt to go back to mythical beginnings, from where everything starts, where all people

and events are more *true*. However, localism is more than a meaningful principle and form of social organization, and today it can mean much more. We can even say that "there is no cosmopolitanism without localism" (Blackshaw 2010, 86), while making a distinction between the cosmopolitanism of the elites and the localism of people (Castells 2004). In the same way that we perceive a large city completely differently when we explore it by foot and by underground public transport, local community can be perceived, or perceive itself, as a physically close and contingent group through space/time, but also as a neo-tribe (Maffesoli 1996) perceiving the space/time as pointillist, non-contingent, and experiencing life in episodes (Bauman 2007).

Knowing that cities are a unique form of natural, built, and cultural environment (Haughton and Hunter 2003, 9), we may argue that culture, broadly defined as the way people live together (UNESCO 1998), has always played an important role in bringing them *joie de vivre*. From the model of *the managed city* (after the Second World War), to the *postmodern or post-industrial city* (in the 1970s and 1980s), to the *entrepreneurial city*, we can trace the so-called *cultural turn* (Mercer 2006) in 1990s and 2000s. Since the publication of *Our Common Future* (*The Brundtland Report*) (WCED 1987), while the concepts of the *creative city* (Landry and Bianchini 1995) and the *eventful city* (Richards and Palmer 2010) emerged and became widely popularized, they are being increasingly replaced with the sole idea of the *sustainable city*.

Although no single definition of sustainable development has been universally accepted, an increasing number of researchers worldwide have tried to bring together the two key concepts of culture and sustainability in public discourses, policy, and planning – to incorporate the notion of culture as *the fourth pillar of sustainable development*.[10]

As Landry and Bianchini (1995) argue, we cannot create sustainable environments by taking into account only environmental, economic, and social dimensions: "we need to assess how 'feel', ambience, atmosphere and 'soft' infrastructures are created, something which requires different skills from those of planners brought up to think in terms of physical solutions" (13). In this vein, local experiences of sustainable cultural development through artivism have to address people, to understand how they mix and connect, and must engage and inspire them to participate in this process of more meaningful neighbourhood-making.

By making an effort to safeguard abandoned public spaces from further deterioration and take them into consideration in light of the public's cultural memory as well as for the benefit of future generations, the Campaign signifies the power of civic imagination and self-organization, a model of alternative and progressive cultural practices that recognises the importance of culture for local development towards an attractive and sustainable living environment. Whereas numerous post-industrial cities are in decline, mostly due to a *culture of humiliation* (Moïsi 2009) because they lost their geopolitical importance and meaning, both the research literature and this case study have shown that people participating in community activities have stronger ties to it, especially if those activities are of an *alternative*, subversive nature. Furthermore, if attached to it, people are more willing to stay in their neighbourhood and contribute to its sustained development (Bramley et al. 2010). In this context, we also have to emphasise the importance of relationships among generations in the context of social changes – an issue raised more than six decades ago by Mannheim (1952) in his theory of generations, which is still relevant and applicable to our case study today.

Despite the fact that the long-term goals in the cities of Kikinda, Smederevo, Novi Sad, and Užice are not (yet) achieved, and the fact that citizens are stubbornly being excluded from the policy-making process at the local level, we may note that these initiatives are of great importance for local growth and planning. They raised awareness, introduced critical thinking, made the new paradigms more *real*, created meeting places, rethought neighbourhood identities, and, consequently, initiated negotiations with local authorities. These types of innovative bottom-up initiatives that allow citizens to participate in the planning, social transformation, and revitalisation of abandoned areas are perceived as being the only suitable approach towards sustainable cultural development for the reason that they are not imposed from above. On the other hand, such an approach requires a more sustained agenda for long-term impact. Recalling the processual character of artivistic place-making and meaning-making, we may argue that sustainable cultural development is a demanding and long-lasting process rather than one-time occurrence – as Franco Bianchini has put it, it is a *difficult art* (Bianchini 1993, 19).

In the context of the global economic crisis, which has proven to be beyond the economy, culture and art(s) seem to lose their focus (Bonet and Donato 2011). Given that most art is political nowadays (Vander Gucht 2006), both culture and artistic engagement are potential catalysts for social sustainability (Colantonio 2011). One of the possible answers to the problems arising from identity-based conflicts in Europe is setting the frame for their resolution in the centres of the local communities (urban and rural, large and small), developing programmes which have a positive effect on the level of intercultural dialogue among different cultures, mainly through initiatives of the civil sector, initiated directly by the communities. The field of culture should be placed in the centre of this frame, with its actors using this space to advance the development of more progressive, holistic, and

sustainable communities. Thus, a *culture of humiliation* could be replaced by a *culture of hope*, which, at the present moment, can be developed only within the communities using their own civic imagination and activism. This needs to be done, moreover, not only through much more efficient and necessary self-organization and social engagement, but also through support from local authorities, which is essential for long-term sustainability, as shown by the relative lack of success in the presented case study in Serbia.

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[1] This research was partially developed within project no. 178012 of the Ministry of

Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia, and the

Research Fund of LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore.

[2] The word *transition* is used to mark the shift from a society with more social equality and

multicultural demographic structure (attempted by a communist/socialist Yugoslavia) to

societies with radical social inequalities and more or less mono-ethnic countries (resulting

from an attempt to quickly appropriate the values of a liberal capitalist society, such as

private property, competitiveness, and entrepreneurialism), in a region that tried out most of

the modern political systems at some point – "from empire to revolutionary republic, from

multi-national federation to nation state to protectorate" (Močnik 2003, no page).

[3] For more information see Veselinović i Stevanović (2012) and Dimitrijević Mišković

(2012).

[4] Situated in the autonomous province of Vojvodina, the town of Kikinda has 38,065

inhabitants, while the municipality has 59,453 inhabitants (*National Census* 2011).

[5] As the administrative centre of the Podunavlje District, the city of Smederevo has a

population of 108,209 (*National Census* 2011).

[6] As the second largest city in Serbia, Novi Sad is the administrative seat of Vojvodina, with a population of 231,798 (the administrative area of the city has a population of 341,625) (*National Census* 2011).

[7] *Undergrad* is an NGO developed within the programme *Open-highway E-761*. For more information on this programme, see http://www.scp-srb.net/files/OpenHighway.pdf [Accessed 28 February 2014].

[8] Situated in western Serbia, Užice has a total population of 78,040 (*National Census* 2011).

[9] We use the term *post-graffiti* in order to make a distinction from the traditional *graffiti*, usually perceived as vandalism.

[10] Some of the most important contributions are: Hawkes (2001), Nadarajah and Yamamoto (2007), Papageorgiou (2007), SALAR (2008), UCLG (2010), and Duxbury and Jeannotte (2010, 2011).