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The Urban Laboratory as framework for an alternative approach to urban peripheries within a shrinking city

INTRODUCTION

The paper starts from the research activities developed within the ongoing project entitled "BRĂILA LABORATORY (B-LAB) - Alternative approaches to urban peripheries within a shrinking city", a SEE Grant under the Program PA17 / RO13 - Promoting diversity in culture and art in the European cultural heritage, whose promoter is The Faculty of Urban Planning of The University of Architecture and Urban Planning "Ion Mincu" - Bucharest, in partnership with Bergen Arkitektthogskole (BAS), Norway and with the support of Brăila Municipality.

The research topic is to find new tools to address cities in different situations of urban decline, focusing to the deprived urban areas, vulnerable peripheral areas and marginalized communities. The study starts from a particular case - Brăila city, Romania - and a particular situation, as the General Urban Plan of Brăila is currently in a working phase, trying to accommodate and plan for the next ten years the expected changes and future development.

The paper aims to mirror the actual planning paradigm based on control methodologies, authoritarian decisions, lack of public participation and bureaucratic processes of the planning processes and an alternative method of addressing the city, using a new framework, helpful both for research and planning: the Urban Laboratory and one of its tools -The Urban Markers - especially created to serve the new methods of analyzing the city.

The research emphasizes the observation of a gap between the needs, the immediate resources, the current expectations and problems of the urban life of Brăila, and utopian scope of current urban plans based on extensive growth, major infrastructure investments and the rapid creation of new jobs in services or industry sectors. Also there is the fact that in the "economic boom" years in Romania, urban plans have proved their inefficiency, always remained to follow the real estate pressure and, especially in peripheral urban growth areas, failing to find a balance in the measures and regulations adopted. For this reasons, the trust of the population in the act of urban planning is very low and the expectation for an alternative way of dealing with daily problems, with small interests and domestic issues is very high.

1 METHODOLOGY

The concept developed by this investigation is the Urban Laboratory (UL): it is not new, given that in last years, urban laboratories have proliferated worldwide, either as academic-type, or affiliated to NGOs activities, or even as individual space for developing ideas about how to address the new city's problems. ULs are analyzed within this paper as a phenomenon that generates a movement of attitudes in urban research, an innovative framework, very useful not only as the opposite side of the "official" planning, but for the urban planning itself, which, at this moment, is passing an "identity crisis", looking for new ways to find real solutions for real problems of our cities.

As part of this methodology is the conceptual cutout of urban shrinking and the conditions of urban peripheries. The UL articulates around the differentiation and comparison of these two forms of decline: on one hand, is the shrinking as global decline of the city, shown by demographic and economic data, a decline at macro scale and, on the other hand, the peripheries are seen here as conditions for punctual decline at micro-scale level, occurring both at physical limits of the city (most common), and in other areas, including central zones (Fig.1).

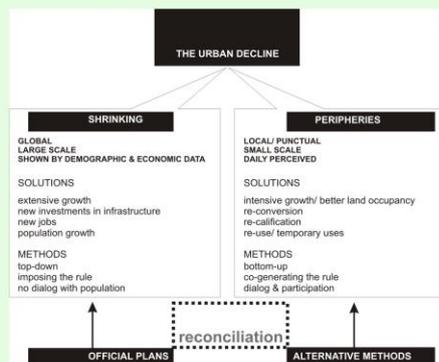


Diagram of differentiation between the two types of urban decline and the ways of approaching it.

2 THE URBAN LABORATORY AS INTERFACE

UL is considered here an interface between the science of the city (naming this urbanism, encompassing its specialized practice and language, norms and rules based on specific data), and the living world of empirical research of cities, consisting of small pieces of urban life and space-situations, relying on co-generated solutions, ad-hoc interventions, using creativity of inhabitants and opportunistic actions. There is already a critical mass of "guerrilla" actions in this direction, but they remain parallel in discourse and efficacy compared to the state urbanism, and this, in the given crisis conditions, are not leading to better cities. The UL as interface is seen as a necessary „device” for understanding the adaptation required within the new relationships between cities and network. The changes of geographical scale, the fast development of technologies, the faster speeds of communication and liberalization of network utilities are creating an evolving context coming with new challenges for small networks, as for big networks. Planning within this networks in a more and more complex urban environment is a matter of scale and balance between different resources, needs, options, politics, etc. All this require an interdisciplinary and open framework in which different approaches to be well gathered. ULs can offer exactly this, as long as they are organized as partnership between public administration, private owners and civic societies, and they work on creating bridges between state mechanisms and societal needs.

2.1. Three different types of Urban Markers

UM are used here at the "molecular" scale of the city, studying the micro-elements of urban space and micro-social relations, highlighting their functions and changes within the urban metabolism. The Urban Markers either extract from the urban reality a certain configuration / situation by putting it into a new context, in order to generate a critical and challenging discourse, either re-create / simulate a specific condition of the city, implementing an "intrusive" elements, in order to stimulate and activate the potential of diffuse urbanity.

There are used three types of Urban Markers:

- 1) "Tumor" Markers - highlighting problems, symptoms due to a specific "illness" already manifest in the city, eg. extensive abandoned areas/ buildings, ghettos areas
- 2) Risk Markers - highlighting the possibility of a risk, at spatial social or environmental level, eg. places under /over used, historical building in risk of forgetting memory
- 3) Opportunity Markers - that highlights the latent potential of certain areas or social conditions, either for further development or immediate uses, eg. unused paths or lands expecting an investment, unused or temporary used objects / buildings, advertisement objects, etc.



Fig.2. Three types of urban markers in one single object (The Garage) and a transforming urban & architectural process from (1) a negative void, to a banal daily function (2), and to a signal/ symbol of former conditions and a claim for re-consideration (3). Final image from the event "This place is pretty good", Braila, 2015 - exhibition curators: arch. Cristian Stefanescu, Catalina Ionita, Andrea Spreafico.

CONCLUSION

The research developed within "B-LAB" has situated itself in the same formula of the emergence of ideas and concepts, coming from different areas of exploration - architectural, urban, sociological and artistic, following the expertise of the project team. Given that the project is still in progress, research has not reached final conclusions, but possible partial openings offered by the ideas already tested and implemented, such as the laboratory, the urban markers, the tie breaker of the decline between macro and micro scale, and revealing the peripheral situations as possible opportunities. Also, given that this project is being conducted in parallel with the urban master plan of Brăila and with the municipality support, it is perhaps a unique case of the conjecture of steps which usually reject, or ignore each other. By opening of the local authority, was built an approach that does not negate development based on master plan, but tries in a joint effort to reach viable sustainable and equitable solutions for the city.

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Many cities and towns across the world, once centres of social, economic and cultural growth, are now finding themselves in a shrinking situation - a widespread pattern of our current times - a decline visible more at the level of demographic and socio-economic processes. This condition has led to new forms of poverty and inequality, to new disparities and loss of identities which occur both at large scale of territory and at small scale of neighbourhoods. In the last decades, in Romania, the most affected territories by these insidious degradation processes are peripheral areas- even it's about the city outskirts or the periphery within the central area, and have led to the expense of urban life quality, with multiple negative effects. These problematically nuanced and plural situations have gone on to render the current traditional top-down planning of city development as ineffective and passive in coping with these newfound realities of crisis-like conditions. In the context of Romanian small and medium size towns, with little to no available economic resources, and choked by a bureaucracy allied with corruption at all levels, emerge the opportunity to consider alternative approaches of the urban decline, engaging more with new and finer tools adapted to local conditions, working with a small-scale, soft- tools and bottom-up view of planning, dealing with immediate resources and with the citizens' participation.

The paper aims to mirror the actual planning paradigm based on control methodologies, authoritarian decisions, lack of public participation and bureaucratic processes of the planning processes and the alternative methods of addressing the city, using a new framework, helpful both for research and planning: the Urban Laboratory and one of its tools -The Urban Markers - especially created to serve the new methods of analyzing the city.

Keywords: growth, shrinking, laboratory, markers

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