

# Activist Architects Toolbox: Challenging the Austere Policies of Urban Governance in European Periphery

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## Abstract

This paper aims to identify the ways in which socially engaged architectural practices contest the policies of neoliberal urban governance in post-socialist cities, permanently situated at the European periphery due to their economic and political position within global capitalism. The analysis is based on three case studies of practices from the Croatian context, whose work is geographically diverse, demonstrates a variety of approaches to social engagement in architecture, and has been shaped by the conditions of austerity in the aftermath of the post-2008 crisis. Results show a broad range of actions contesting the neoliberal urban governance and a variety of mechanisms through which socially engaged architectural practices problematized the conditions of spatial production and politicized their communities, professional networks, and public spaces. It can be argued that these efforts contributed to changes in the public discourse concerning the relation between social inequalities and spatial conditions, and the importance of articulating public and common interests in the processes of urban governance. As the struggles to protect spatial resources from enclosure and privatisation continue amid the entangled economic, political and climate crises, the slow and relational work of socially engaged architectural practices and its potential political effects continue to grow in importance.

## Keywords

Socially engaged architectural practices, neoliberal urban governance, European periphery

## Introduction

In a city grappling with the aftermath of the 2008 economic crash, socially engaged architectural practices have played an important role in voicing spatial and social urban problems, and in exploring, criticizing, and offering responses to the ensuing crisis. The emergence of urban social movements, which oppose the austerity measures implemented after the Great Recession and advocate for the "Right to the City" (Harvey, 2008), has compelled the architectural profession to reconsider its social agenda (Weiss, 2019). Recent scholarly literature recognizes the potential of socially engaged architecture to contribute to more democratic, egalitarian, and sustainable cities (Karim, 2018; Dodd, 2019).

While architecture is fundamentally inextricable from its social dimension, socially engaged architectural practices are intentionally political; here, the term 'social' should be understood as Schneider (2018) suggests, following Williams: as an "emphatic and

distinguishing term, explicitly contrasted with individual and especially individualist theories of society” (Williams, 1976, quoted in Schneider, 2018). According to Sadler (2018), socially engaged architectural practices utilize architecture to draw people into political life and employ architectural knowledge for the common good. Kaminer (2016) proposes that architecture can precede political economy in identifying new trajectories for society and provide support not only to dominant ideologies and hegemonic politics but also to alternative and oppositional movements. Schneider (2018) seems to agree, arguing that practices of socially engaged architecture should work to unveil the existing, seemingly invincible power structures - “the’ economy or ‘the’ neoliberal city” - as essentially composed of a diverse range of social practices that need to be challenged, along with the dominant mechanisms and means of the production of space. These perspectives converge in recognizing socially engaged architectural practices as progressive social agents deeply connected to their communities, actively addressing pressing global challenges such as economic inequalities and climate change and striving to confront these issues at the local level while, as Schneider (2018) proposes, going beyond their own limits and solidarizing with other social practices in order to propose emancipatory spaces that also address the means of production.

Boie and De Cauter (2023) call this way of practicing architecture “architectural activism.” While illustrating the ways architects navigate the complex terrain of activism and practice, they list several strategies architects use to employ their expertise to confront and address social and urban challenges beyond the traditional confines of their discipline. These strategies include (1) finding hidden opportunities in the assignment: architects using their commissions to subtly alter the initial intentions of a project and interpret the brief to address broader urban issues beyond simply fulfilling the direct requirements of the client; (2) retreating from practice: stepping back from traditional architectural work to engage in conceptual or paper architecture, critical research, or art-related projects; (3) reinventing practice: reshaping architectural practice to address political and social issues directly; and (4) architecture of the commons: using architectural knowledge to encourage and mediate collective action and empowering people to self-manage the city. The examples Boie and De Cauter (2023) enumerate range from practices like muf and Lacaton & Vassal, whose subversive works have been widely acclaimed and awarded, to Archizoom and Superstudio's radical paper architecture from the 1960s, design intelligence of Forensic Architecture and Estudio Teddy Cruz, community-based work of the collectives such as Recetas Urbanas, Assemble, Constructlab and Raumlabor, to cooperative projects fostering ecological resilience, such as Agrocité in Paris and ParkFarm in Brussels.

These and similar practices are becoming more visible thanks to a number of recent publications (see, among many others, Ferdous & Bell, 2020; Feireiss et al., 2020; Lovell et

al., 2020; Donat-Cattin, 2022) and acknowledgments<sup>1</sup> recognizing how engagement with contemporary social problems and their spatial manifestations enriches and expands the discipline of architecture. However, these practices are working against the tide: the architectural profession is deeply embedded in the market-oriented competitive business, and some of the most acclaimed and influential architects in the world would not have it any other way (Gore, 2018; Hadley, 2020). The position that architecture is a discipline concerned with building beautiful edifices for the rich and powerful has been long held and extensively criticized (Jameson, 1986; Bell & Wakeford, 2008; Sorkin, 2017; Gore, 2018, Gough, 2018) also for its implication that the value of architecture is decided primarily in the marketplace, which would diminish architecture created outside of the dominant regime of spatial production, committed to advancing social, environmental, and ethical justice (Awan et al., 2011). Back in 1976, at the heights of discussion on the social role of architecture, Scott Brown proposed that architects should “be encouraged to maintain their skills in translating physical and social requirements into physical form, but to hone these skills to a new edge of social relevance” (1976, p. 112). The complexity of skills developed and roles taken up by the XX-century architects and the ways they navigated the political and economic systems within which they operated has been explored recently, in relation to the welfare state (Swenarton et al, 2014), the socialist world (Pepchinski & Simon, 2017; Stanek, 2020), self-managing socialism of Yugoslavia (Mrduljaš & Kulić, 2012; Kulić et al, 2012; Mrduljaš, 2018), postcolonial geopolitics (De Raedt, 2018), and the non-aligned movement (Sekulić, 2023). Such a collection of contributions demonstrates the growing interest in learning from the architectural practices developed in diverse geographies and under varied socio-political conditions of the previous century. On the other hand, the new edge of the social relevance of architecture has been examined through the lens of the feminist concept of care and in the framework of diverse economies (Fitz et al, 2019), from the perspective of commons (Stavrides, 2016), and in terms of its possible contribution in enacting urban change (Awan et al, 2011; Assmann et al, 2017) through approaching the production of space in a manner diverging from the dominant, neoliberal paradigm (Brenner, 2016; Kaminer, 2016, Bader et al., 2022). The tenacious relationship between architecture and neoliberalism has also been discussed (Jeinić & Wagner, 2013), posing the question of how the concept of architecture as a form of agency has been changing under the influence of the neoliberal ideology, and proposing to study this topic “from a broad range of perspectives, which link different aspects of neoliberalism to different concepts, components, tendencies, and niches of architecture” (ibid., p.9).

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<sup>1</sup> Lacaton & Vassal received the 2019 European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture – Mies van der Rohe Award, and the 2021 Pritzker Architecture Prize, one of the world’s most distinguished architecture awards. Assemble received the 2016 Turner Prize, a prestigious award for the visual arts in Europe. Raumlabor won the Golden Lion of the 2021 Venice Architecture Biennale.

This paper focuses on the relationship between socially engaged architecture and urban governance in post-socialist cities at the periphery of the European Union, in the context of Croatia. The main question considers the ways in which socially engaged architectural practices intervene and/or seek to intervene in the process of urban governance, defined by Peters and Pierre (2012) as the process of forming and pursuing collective goals at the local level. In a post-socialist city, this process has been shaped by a transition from state socialism to neoliberal capitalism, which entailed a shift from an industrial to a globalized service economy, rising economic inequality, and market-driven urban planning mechanisms (Hirt, 2013). The rise of neoliberal urban governance, while being a global process – as illustrated by Harvey, a condition in which “the municipal government (is) no longer about benefiting the population, the municipal government (has) to address creating a good business climate” (2007, p.9) – resulted in an especially radical societal change in the post-socialist city (Golubchikov, 2017). In Europe, post-socialist cities are permanently designated to the European periphery and semi-periphery, due not to their geography, but to their economic and political position within global capitalism (Domazet & Jerolimov, 2014). The neoliberalization of urban governance took distinct forms here (Bohle & Greskovits, 2012) and intensified in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis (Mayer, 2016), the effects of which continued to resonate during the next decade (Schweiger & Magone, 2014). The prolonged austerity measures resulted in a decrease in social welfare and provoked a surge in urban social movements and struggles, in which communities fought for the right to housing, strived to preserve natural and communal resources from commodification, contested austerity measures, and offered policy solutions (Leontidou, 2010; Dolenec et al., 2017; Florea et al., 2022; Taylor & Brehmer, 2023).

Croatia presents an interesting case study for exploring activist practices in post-socialist urban environments. These practices developed in response to the economic, social, and political conditions shaped by austerity policies and the all-encompassing processes of neoliberal urban transformation, which resulted in enclosure of the commons and privatization of public space (Stubbs, 2012; Horvat & Štiks, 2015; Dolenec et al., 2017; Dietachmair, 2017). These processes were underway well before the economic crisis of 2008: the shift towards privatization and the emphasis on private ownership began in the 1990s, following the breakup of Yugoslavia, and it defined the new “superprivate” framework within which all space was to be planned, designed, constructed, and utilized (Platform 9.81, 2004). The social and spatial effects of the change were enormous and all-encompassing, turning the matters of architecture and urban planning from common, political practices developed within the Yugoslav self-managing socialism into an exercise of individual rights and interests (Steiner, 2012). This shift fundamentally altered the processes, the means, and the uses of urban planning and architecture. Where architects in Yugoslavia were once agents of socialist modernization, having “the power to outline the contour of a more progressive society”

(Mrduljaš, 2018, p.42), focusing on common good and partaking in complex international networks and projects (Mrduljaš & Kulić, 2012; Kulić et al., 2012; Stierli & Kulić, 2018; Miljački, 2018; Galjer & Lončar, 2019; Sekulić, 2023), the post-1990 era saw them adapting to a new role, dominated by the new market forces. In the context of the post-Yugoslav states' transition to neoliberal capitalism, architects became more akin to service providers, with the scope of work narrowed down from considering the broader social and urban welfare to catering to the ambitions and desires of private investors. The effects of this were neatly summarized by Platform 9.81 (2004, p.23) as “architecture with no surprises” and “urbanism full of surprises,” as the quest to maximize the profit banalized design, circumvented urban planning regulations, and greedily consumed territory in sought-after locations such as urban centers and Adriatic coast. These processes marked the condition of Croatian cities in the lead-up to the 2008 global economic downturn, which then exacerbated the existing problems and contradictions.

Urban activists responded to the spatial and social crisis produced by the shift in socio-political and economic paradigms throughout the long period of the neoliberal transformation (Stubbs, 2012; Dolenec et al., 2017). Architects played a part in the new activist initiatives and spaces; as the economic crisis decimated the market demand for architectural services (see Ćurković, 2010), some in the profession became supporters and educators, and in some cases leaders and instigators of dissent in their communities. The ways in which the architectural scene was shaped by and responded to the Great Recession were captured in the exhibition “Decade 2008-2018” of the 53rd Zagreb Salon, organized by the Croatian Architects' Association (CAA). The exhibition catalogue presents the selection of works of architecture created during this ten-year period, alongside the defining political and economic processes, legislative and normative measures, institutional changes, and theoretical debates (STEALTH.unlimited & Jurcan, 2018). This contextualization made it possible to easily discern the relationship between the architecture and the social reality from which it emerged, but it also made the connections between architects' more politicized actions and the broader social and political circumstances under which they were taken more explicit. It showed how the economic downturn and the collapse of the real estate market led to the adoption of a set of laws and government programs aiming to stimulate the building industry and privatize vast spatial resources, which then provoked numerous local initiatives demanding the space to be treated as a public good, or even a common resource (Pula Group, 2010), and governed in accordance with the needs of the local communities. These protests were either started by activist-minded architects, or explicitly supported by architectural groups and organizations.<sup>2</sup> CAA, the oldest professional association of architects in Croatia with a history dating back to 1878, criticized the government program intended to privatize former military zones on the

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<sup>2</sup> The examples include Civic Initiative for Muzil in Pula, Varšavska Street protests in Zagreb, and the initiative “Srđ is ours” in Dubrovnik (see Pula Group, 2009; Dolenec et al., 2017; Zdunić, 2017).

Adriatic coast and supported the citizens organizing against it. The exhibition also outlined the various forms through which critical discourse accompanying the protest action was produced, including books (Kovačević et al., 2008; Pula Group, 2010; Bodrožić & Šimpraga, 2016), a radio program (Turković, 2014-present), a documentary television program (Ban, 2016-present), and the works selected to represent Croatia at the Venice Biennale of Architecture: “Unmediated Democracy Demands Unmediated Space” by Pula Group in 2012, “Intermundia” by Ana Dana Beroš in 2014, and “We need it – we do it” by Dinko Peračić, Miranda Veljačić, Slaven Tolj, and Emina Višnjić in 2016.

Through this exploration of the tumultuous period of “the decade of crisis” and the critical response it provoked within the architectural scene, the exhibition “Decade 2008-2018” also aimed to raise questions regarding the potential role of architecture beyond complacency with the neoliberal urban growth model; the role in envisioning an alternative economic and political future, which would prioritize a non-exploitative relationship with the environment and recognize the ecological limitations to unrestricted economic expansion. By looking into the recent past and towards the immediate future with questions such as – Can we afford another boom? Could we explore the future of cities beyond speculative economic growth? What could be the role of the Croatian Architects' Association? – authors of the exhibition chart possible lines of inquiry and action, and establish a clear connection between the economic system, political decision-making, and social engagement of architecture, both locally and globally.

These questions lost none of their relevance in the period since 2018, characterized by the prolonged global crises stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and escalations in armed conflicts. They were further compounded at a local level by the consequences of devastating earthquakes that struck Croatia in March 2020 (Slobodna Evropa, 2020). In the spring of 2021, the left-green political platform Zagreb je Naš/Možemo! (Zagreb is Ours! / Yes, we can!), with roots in urban social movements and strong ties with the local activist scene, won the local elections in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. Although the change in the city government could not be expected to result in an immediate transformation of urban governance, the possibility of this change itself was perceived as a sign that other ways of making and governing cities, beyond the old institutional frameworks and capture practices (GONG, 2017), are possible (Stubbs, 2022). This is the setting – the long aftermath of the Great Recession, deepened by the consequences of the more recent, multifaceted global and local crises, sensing a chance for a political change after more than three decades of post-socialist transformation – where this research is situated, seeking to explore the ways in which socially engaged architectural practices in Croatia engage with political processes in the city and challenge the urban governance policies rooted in austere neoliberalism. As it has already been established that socially engaged architectural practices have demonstrated political agency, the goal is to improve the understanding of how these practices intervene in the

processes of urban governance, so that the effects of their engagement can be better understood and evaluated.

The research focuses on three case studies: Pula Group / Cooperative Praksa from Pula, ARCHIsquad from Zagreb, and Split Society of Architects from Split. These three practices were selected from a broader pool of potential case studies; although each of them was established before the 2008, some of their key activities correspond with the period of the post-2008 crisis and respond directly to its long-lasting effects, be it to underline the pressing importance of creating alternative forms of urban governance, to support households and communities in improving their living spaces, or to attempt improving the local spatial planning policy through developing new forms of collaboration at the municipal level. Their work shows a variety of approaches to social engagement in architecture, and their practices are centred in different geographical contexts within Croatia. Additionally, all three of the selected case studies have been associated with CAA, whose stated aim is to promote quality in architecture and good spatial practices and foster critical examination of spatial processes. As a national professional organisation of architects, it operates separately and independently from the Croatian Chamber of Architects; whereas the Chamber is a guild safeguarding the professional interests of architects, CCA is concerned with developing a critical apparatus, facilitating social engagement, and protecting the quality of space (Jurcan, in an interview by Bakić, 2018). Studying the cases of local organizing, and how they interact with and feed into these wider efforts, provides an opportunity to explore how different spatial initiatives and struggles intercept within this network and to what effect.

The analysis is based on a combination of qualitative methods, including desk research on socially engaged architectural practices in Croatia and semi-structured interviews, conducted in the spring of 2023, with the founding members of Pula Group / Cooperative Praksa and ARCHIsquad, as well as with the president of Split Society of Architects (SSA). The findings are presented through narratives describing the practices' histories, motivations, and means of engagement with the community, their embeddedness within the wider economic and social processes, the mechanisms used for political engagement, and the problems of local governance their work sought to untangle or draw attention to. They offer a closer look into the contestations of neoliberal urban governance policies in Croatian cities, shaped by the tools of socially engaged architectural practices.

### **Pula Group / Praksa Cooperative**

Pula Group is an informal group of architects from Pula, a coastal city in Croatia. Its work started in 2006 with a workshop in a former military zone Katarina-Monumenti, situated in the city bay. It was a specific moment in the city's history: after almost 150 years of continuous presence the army was leaving this zone, and the vast coastal area around Pula was coming into civilian state ownership – and, potentially, opening for the public use for the first time in

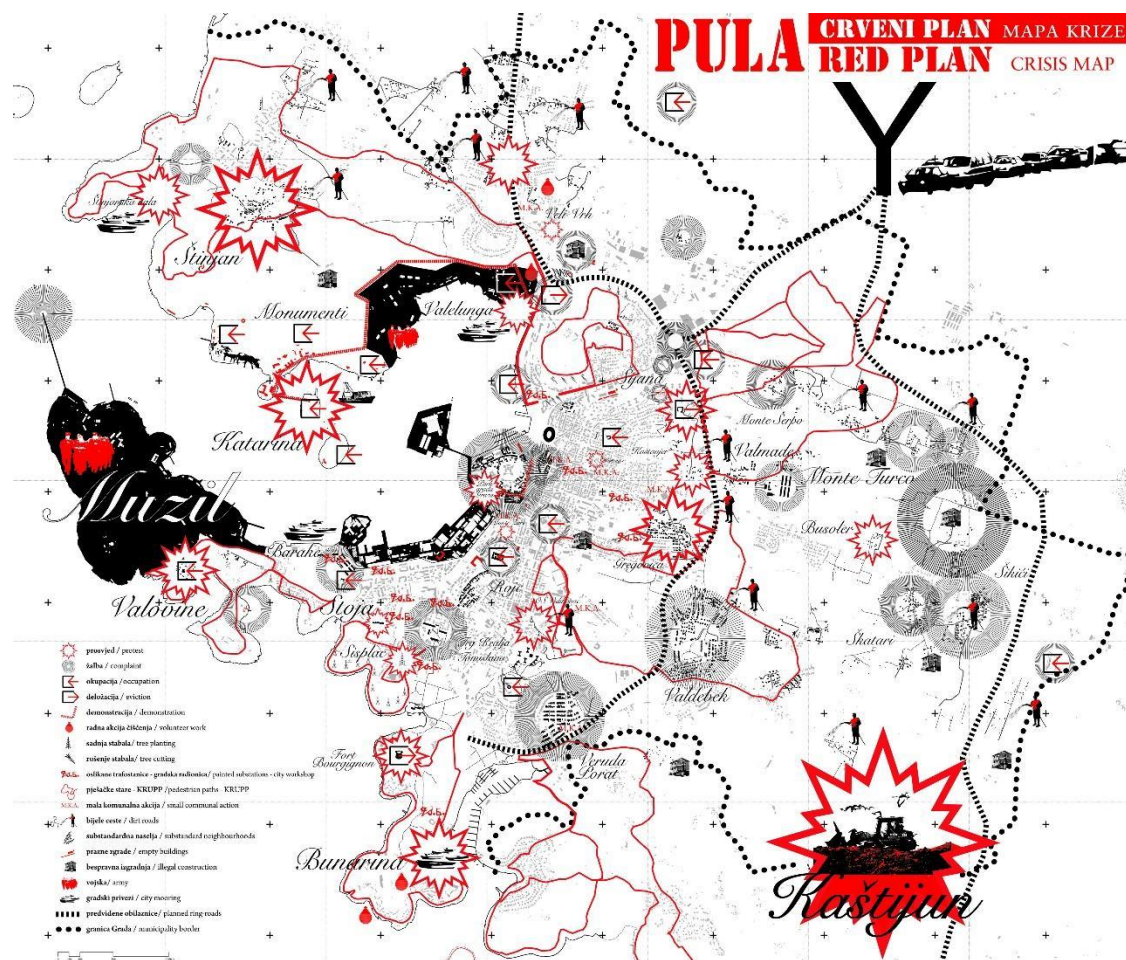
more than a century. However, the official plans drawn up by the Croatian Privatization Fund and the City of Pula prioritized tourism as the only program for the newly demilitarized areas of the city (Komazlić, 2018), intending to develop the Katarina-Monumenti zone into a gated community, through the construction of a tourist resort and an enclosed marina. Concerned by this prospect, four students of architecture from Pula who were at the time studying in Zagreb, Ljubljana, and Venice, organized the workshop with the goal to propose alternative architectural and urban planning vision for the area – the one which would involve the local communities and give them agency in shaping the future of these spaces.<sup>3</sup> The project animated the local scene and yielded inspiring results, presented through a variety of formats: a study, a workshop, two exhibitions, two discussions, three presentations, four lectures, the renovation of one house, and a series of twelve projects (Pula Group, 2006). However, the response from both the architectural community and the authorities was nowhere near enthusiastic: the local association of architects was uninterested in challenging the existing plans, while the government rejected the workshop's proposal outright. As Emil Jurcan, one of the students who organized the workshop and one of the founding members of Pula Group says in the interview, this was the end of the naivete with which they started the project, believing that politicians could be turned by beautiful mock-ups of alternative futures and convinced into considering a different approach. This experience made the nascent Group realize that the existing institutional framework cannot accommodate the ways in which they wanted to continue exploring and publicly discussing the issues of spatial development and that they would have to be prepared for conflicts with the political administration.

Over the next few years their activities intensified and the Pula Group – never officially registered as a non-governmental, or any other type of organization – continued to grow, establishing itself as a politically engaged collective of young architects, relying on the tools of urban planning and architecture in their explicitly political work. The Group's influence gradually grew, attracting mostly younger architects, so much so that by 2011 its members had taken over the leadership of the Association of Istrian Architects, a regional chapter of the CAA. From that point on, Pula Group's efforts to "reform and politicize the profession", as Jurcan says, were carried out through the Association of Istrian Architects, which continued to employ the Group's socially engaged approach. Around the same time, in 2011, in response to the effects of the economic crisis which made architectural work scarce and precarious, members of the Group founded Praksa (the name meaning "practice"), an engineering cooperative and a socio-economic association collective, first of its kind in Croatia (Praksa, n.d). Through the format of a cooperative, they were able to organize their individual design practices at a lower cost, while preserving the collectivist spirit, the horizontal decision-making structure and the political stance fostered through the work of the Pula Group. The Group was never officially dissolved, but the most active period of its work culminated in 2012

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<sup>3</sup> The four students were Emil Jurcan, Edna Strenja, Marko Perčić and Jerolim Mladinov.

when it represented Croatia at the Venice Biennale of Architecture with the project “Unmediated Democracy Demands Unmediated Space” (see Pula Group, 2012).



*Figure 1 – Red Plan of Pula: crisis map, showing the acts of protest and independent civic initiatives that revolt against the official urban planning policy, but also point to new ways of understanding the city and acting together. Source: Pula Group, 2008*

From its beginnings, the work started by the Pula Group and continued through the Praksa Cooperative was focused on the community. In the conclusion to the book “Katarina 06 – Opening Pula's Shore”, which came out of the Pula Group's first workshop, young architects define their publication as “an appeal to all people (architects as well as others) for solidarity in the community's struggle for the right to choose its own future” (Pula Group, 2006, p.230). The workshop aimed to show how newly available spaces in Pula Bay can be developed through community projects, implemented in close cooperation with the existing users of the location. However, soon it became clear the government was outright hostile to this approach, while the existing institutional mechanisms for public participation were ineffective in fostering actual participation in decision-making and affecting public policies.

The Group turned to experimenting with other, extra-institutional forms of organising and continued their work within and with the community. Activities ranged from giving

lectures and workshops, which deepened and furthered the Group's research work, to protesting the decisions concerning local urban development and planning, which rested on the privatisation of space and exclusion of local communities from both the political and the economic aspect of spatial transformation. In 2008, the Group created the "Red Plan of Pula: crisis map" (Figure 1), documenting how urban revolts shape the city in the age of late capitalism and making a case for the development of a new theoretical model for city planning, based on new forms of transparent community organizing (Pula Group, 2008).

As the economic crisis of 2008 worsened, initiatives like Pula Group sprung up across Europe. The need to develop international connections became clear: to work with other communities, urban movements and architectural practices who recognized the political nature of urbanization processes and the necessity to develop new forms of urban governance. In the summer of 2009, the Pula Group organized a "Post-capitalist City" congress, which brought together 14 practices from across Europe, including STEALTH.ultd, Raumlabor and Exyzt. The congress produced a book of the same title, which concluded with "The Declaration on Commons" created by Hackitectura.net, Observatorio Metropolitano and Pula Group.<sup>4</sup> Here, the "commons" was defined as a shared space, overcoming the existing forms of urban exploitation based on ownership and the real estate market, and emphasizing the values of accessibility, use, action, and care (Pula Group, 2010).

One of the motivations for the international congress was the Group's engagement in Civic Initiative for Muzil, a community effort started in 2009 against the official plans to convert the former military zone on the Muzil Peninsula into a golf resort. Over the next few years, the initiative conducted numerous and varied activities, including discussions, workshops, protest walks, publishing a newspaper (Praksa, 2012), holding citizens' assemblies (Praksa, 2013), and collecting petitions against the plan (Matić, 2014). As the work of the Pula Group expanded and seeped into the Association of Istrian Architects and the Praksa Cooperative, the methods of working with the local community further evolved. The Association of Istrian Architects, established as a non-governmental organization (NGO), started forming alliances with other local organizations devoted to environmental protection, with the goal of creating a broader critically inclined environment, which would problematize and actively oppose problematic spatial plans and projects implemented in a top-down manner. For an association of architects this was a new approach, and, as Jurcan says, it was completely incomprehensible to the architects of the older generation – they saw the profession primarily as a job, as a means of making a living rather than a political arena.<sup>5</sup> Jurcan eventually became the president of the

<sup>4</sup> A couple of months later, in October 2009, Elinor Ostrom received the Nobel Prize in economic sciences for her analysis of the commons (Ostrom, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note the difference in understanding what an architect's job is and how it changes over time, depending on the political and economic conditions. It could be argued that during the era of Yugoslav self-management social engagement was the job, primarily in the sense of creating a spatial framework for the development of egalitarian, emancipated society. Under the conditions of neoliberal spatial production, the job is decided by the individual interests and means – therefore, community organizing is largely understood as

Association of Istrian Architects in 2015 and went on to become the president of the CAA in 2017 for the duration of a two-year term. This period was marked by the efforts to solve the financial problems of the CAA, decentralize it, and strengthen and support its local and regional chapters, which have engaged in struggles to preserve spatial resources in cities like Šibenik, Zadar, Split, and Zagreb, particularly in response to the pressures of capital on the coastal areas (see Džokić et al., 2018).

The community engagement methods employed by the Praksa Cooperative were varied and built upon the experience of the Pula Group, but they also relied to a large extent on the physical space the cooperative fostered from 2013 to 2017. An old, centrally located building they rented to use as office space became a social and community centre, and a venue for independent political, artistic, and social engagement. Since the space was not reliant on any sort of government support or funding, it could afford to be critically oriented in its programming. The building served as a performance venue for concerts, exhibitions, and various other programs, but also as a gathering place for neighbourhood meetings, youth cooperatives, and political initiatives. Many non-architects became involved in the cooperative's work, drawn to its openness and possibilities to engage in artistic self-publishing, jam sessions, and other forms of artistic expression. This lasted until 2017 when the building changed ownership and was demolished to make space for a new construction project. The cooperative moved to a more conventional office space, but the loss of the original premises resulted in the loss of this vibrant social component of the cooperative's presence in the city. Jurcan believes the local community in Pula still identifies Praksa Cooperative more with the free political space constructed within the walls and the courtyard of this old building and with the socially engaged activities it nurtured, than with any of the new buildings the cooperative's members designed.

The critical examination of plans and policies regulating and projecting the future urban development of Pula was the main preoccupation of the Pula Group from the onset and remained an important segment of the work of the Praksa Cooperative. The critical approach that instigated the 2006 workshop in the Katarina-Monumenti zone continued developing through an almost decade-long struggle against the plans for effectively privatizing Muzil Peninsula by turning it into a tourist resort and a golf course. In this struggle, several frameworks for action have been used: Muzil Initiative was co-founded together with other local organizations, while the wider, national-level support was sought through cooperation with initiatives such as "The Right to the City" (see Dolenec et al., 2017) and "Srđ is Ours" (see Zdunić, 2017) and through the engagement with the National Forum for Space, a network of

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being firmly outside its purview. However, architectural practice changes in response to its social conditions in order to become more effective: as Čeferin (2012) writes, "It is true that the circumstances of socialist Yugoslavia were far more in favour of the practice of architecture as a thinking practice, but the Yugoslav architectural production also shows that the circumstances for such a practice are never given but always have to be created, enforced in each given situation."

civic initiatives devoted to politicizing spatial issues. The wider architectural community was involved through CAA and in cooperation with faculties of architecture, whose students participated in the workshops organized in Muzil, with technical expertise provided by the Praksa Cooperative (Pula Group, 2009). “It’s a spectrum of about a dozen people in the city of Pula, who wove these networks of support that we all needed in this fight we were fighting - everything was overlapping and adding up”, Jurcan says.

The Muzil Initiative sought to open the potential of this 180-hectare space, to make it accessible to the public for diverse uses and developments in the years and decades to come, and to involve the community in imagining such a future. This goal is yet to be achieved, as the plans for enclosing this space to build private tourism projects persist. For Jurcan, the effects of the engaged work of the Pula Group, Praksa Cooperative, and their communities and networks of support can be perceived through the change in the official narrative and discourse of party politics. During local elections, the topic of space and its protection, exploitation, and accessibility became important in several cities, including Pula, Zagreb, Split, and Dubrovnik. However, even when the local government changes, the policies governing spatial development stay the same, because they are too deeply embedded into the functioning of the local and international tourist economy and capital circulation. Jurcan also notes that the architectural profession has become more aware of its political position over the last ten years, acknowledging that it is not neutral, objective, or separated from political actions and processes. Students of architecture are adopting the view of “architecture as a means of struggle”, as he says; therefore, to an extent, the legacy of Pula Group is part of the next generation’s education. Newly established post-graduate educational programs that study cities through interdisciplinary lenses are also an encouraging development. On the other hand, the political and economic contexts are changing for the worse: the post-2008 economic crisis did not lead to a critical understanding of its structural causes and to the paradigm shift, and capitalism became even more entrenched and exacerbated in its aftermath. At the same time, urban communities are dissolving, as the economic crisis has resulted in impoverishment and depopulation of urban centres throughout Croatia. The closure of the shipyard, which was a major employer, along with the rise of platforms like Airbnb and Booking.com, had a profound impact on the city of Pula, resulting in depopulation and touristification. If the social basis that made possible the advances in the political, social, and cultural context of the city in the 2010s is not there anymore, the potential for further critical reflection and change can hardly be sustained.

## **ARCHIsquad**

ARCHIsquad – Division for Architecture with Conscience was established in 2006 by a group of students of the Faculty of Architecture in Zagreb.<sup>6</sup> Their early experiences of student

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<sup>6</sup> The members of this group were Ana Dana Beroš, Vedran Jukić, Ana Boljar and Mirna Horvat.

exchange and participation in architectural projects in countries like Brazil, Central Asia, and Tanzania contributed to their interest in working with and for marginalized groups, and outside of the centres of global capitalism. Ana Dana Beroš, the co-founder of ARCHIsquad, recalls in the interview how during the prosperous years of the early 2000s, before the economic crisis, there was not much interest in such work at the local architectural scene. Work opportunities for architects in Croatia abounded, at least in part due to numerous design competitions for public buildings. According to Beroš, exploring the conditions for architectural work in the context of scarcity was simply out of focus at the time. Hence, the students gathered around ARCHIsquad decided to devise their own alternative education initiatives, by inviting lecturers with experience in architecture and urban planning in Africa, Asia, and beyond. Notable invitees who came to Zagreb at the end of the 2000s included Jean-Philippe Vassal (of Lacaton & Vassal) and Diébédo Francis Kéré, both of whom were granted the most prestigious international architecture awards more than a decade later.<sup>7</sup> Their lectures, which were open to the public, emphasized the importance of generosity in architecture, the potential of alternative materials, and the imperative of constructing bright, generous spaces even when resources are limited (Beroš & Horvat, 2007). ARCHIsquad strived to apply the lessons learned in their design work, which was at the time focused on a project for a small clinic in Tanzania, near the Ngorongoro National Park. The project was never completed, but the experience of designing it, examining the possible solutions suitable for such a context and constructing a variety of spaces with simple natural materials was formative. In the years to come the group grew, reaching around twenty architects who were involved in the ARCHIsquad projects based in Zagreb and elsewhere in Croatia.

ARCHIsquad was registered as an NGO and operated as an association from 2006 until around 2014. Once its members started transitioning from their college years to professional work, ARCHIsquad became an additional commitment, alongside their architectural office jobs, representing a third shift in their lives. As Beroš says in the interview, the formal registration of the NGO was discontinued due to the group's shifting priorities and lack of capacity to manage administrative tasks, but the strong bonds among the members remained. During its years of operation, the association funded its work through donations from supportive architectural organizations and sponsorships from a few studios that wanted to encourage the group's efforts. However, ARCHIsquad did not prioritize fundraising and preferred to focus on informal education, activism, and collaborations with cultural actors and institutions receptive to their ideas and approaches.

The work of ARCHIsquad sought to engage the community from early on. As Beroš explains, their activities aimed to share the knowledge they felt privileged to be exposed to. The lectures they organized as students used the premises of the Faculty of Architecture in Zagreb, but substantial institutional support was lacking. The presentations and conferences

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<sup>7</sup> See footnote 1. Diébédo Francis Kéré was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2022.

were open to the public and charged no admission fee, to ensure economic accessibility for everyone. When presenting their work to the wider architectural scene, primarily through publishing in specialized magazines such as “Čovjek i Prostor”<sup>8</sup> and “Oris”,<sup>9</sup> members of ARCHIsquad emphasized the importance of achieving social sustainability and involving the community in the design and construction processes. “In a way, we have been talking of architecture in some other contexts and by some other means, for years”, says Beroš, noting how these topics have gradually started taking up more space in the national architectural periodicals.

One of the key projects through which ARCHIsquad sought to practice socially responsible architecture together with the local community was UrgentArchitecture: a free-of-charge architectural consultancy offering advice on improving individual and collective living spaces, which started in 2011. It was a pilot project ARCHIsquad initiated upon an invitation from a public gallery in a deindustrialized neighbourhood of Peščenica in Zagreb.<sup>10</sup> The initial idea was for the group to contribute to the gallery program by designing a thematic workshop for the local community. At the time, the economic recession was at its height, and there was almost no work for young architects. Many of the ARCHIsquad members were working for half of their pre-crisis pay, or for no pay at all.<sup>11</sup> The invitation to get engaged with the community in Peščenica prompted them to think of offering their services for free. “We were unable to make a living as architects anyway, so we decided to work for free and to investigate the impact of the recession on households and their living conditions”, Beroš explains. The idea was to offer architectural counsel to people seeking ways to improve the living situation in their apartments, houses, and neighbourhoods, and to expand the conversation on the quality of dwelling from individual to collective spaces – playgrounds, playrooms, laundry rooms – which the community still vividly remembered from the socialist era and could imagine and establish anew.

Over the next few years, the project visited various neighbourhoods and cities around Croatia, from Novi Zagreb to Sisak and Rijeka. ARCHIsquad developed it in collaboration with local cultural institutions, usually museums and galleries, interested in fostering community engagement (Figure 2). The consultations often took place as one-day workshops, which were promoted in the local media and by the members of ARCHIsquad themselves, standing in the street and inviting potential participants with the questions like “Do you lack an extra room?” “We advertised ourselves as a group of craftsmen fixing clogged drains to attract attention. People called us “house doctors””, Beroš remembers. Their tactics resulted in a wide and varied

<sup>8</sup> Archive of the magazine “Čovjek i Prostor” (“Man and Space”) is available online: <https://arhitekti.eindigo.net/?pc=i&id=10027>

<sup>9</sup> Website: <http://oris.hr/en/oris-magazine/>

<sup>10</sup> For spatial and social consequences of deindustrialisation in Peščenica, see Marčetić (2012).

<sup>11</sup> According to the 2010 analysis by the Croatian Chamber of Architects, 61% of architects who took part in the research reported working less than before, or only half-time, 74% of them earned less than before, and 50% reported an income decrease of more than 20% (Ćurković, 2010).

base of users of their services, from truck drivers who happened to pass by their stand in the Port of Rijeka, to aspiring architecture students seeking career advice. The workshops often led to home visits and on-site consultations and finished with proposed solutions and adaptations achievable with small investments, or through changes in how the space is organized and used. ARCHIsquad usually created several variations of a potential solution, enabling users to consider different options. Some cases required consultations with legal advisors and other experts. For a time, ARCHIsquad also offered UrgentArchitecture assistance via weekly newspaper, through a sort of “Architectural advice” column. Beroš estimates that up to a hundred people used the UrgentArchitecture services over the course of its run. Despite the project's growing visibility, it remained ARCHIsquad's occasional, voluntary initiative. The experience inspired the group and their collaborators to consider if it would be possible to institutionalize such a program by establishing small regional centres offering architectural expertise and consultations, but the idea was never realised.

According to Beroš, the guiding principle in the ARCHIsquad projects, regardless of their scale, was to prioritize the social responsibility of architecture. She traces the origins of this imperative at least partly to the fact that the group was predominantly composed of female architects and architecture students, who went through a fundamentally misogynistic education system. This experience might have compelled them to adopt a perspective that focused on the experiences of others, leading to a strong interest in social justice. Their work often focused on marginalized groups, from adapting housing for people with reduced mobility to participating in competitions for construction projects aimed at improving living conditions for disadvantaged communities, including the centres for migrants whose rights were jeopardised amid the international refugee and migration crisis. More recently, during the time that coincided with the pandemic and the post-earthquake period, ARCHIsquad collaborated with the BLOK Collective on a project for the Trešnjevka Neighbourhood Museum, conducting spatial-speculative studies on establishing this community-based institution in a neighbourhood with rich working-class history (BLOK, 2020). Even though ARCHIsquad is not a formal organization anymore, the work and the collaborations within the framework it established continue.



Figure 2 – Poster for the UrgentArchitecture counselling session in Rijeka, organised by the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art as part of a series of art interventions in public space, 2014. Source: ARCHIsquad

Through the fieldwork undertaken within the UrgentArchitecture project, ARCHIsquad got a comprehensive look into the substandard living conditions and housing issues prevalent in Zagreb and other areas of the country. The group considered their activities as supportive and complementary of the efforts of those advocating for better public space and housing policies, such as the "Rights to the City" movement, but they did not directly engage in public advocacy. UrgentArchitecture highlighted the connection between dwelling in the home – that is, trying to repair and improve private spaces, and dwelling in the city – debating and solving communal problems; therefore, it articulated another way to connect architecture and the processes of urban governance. Beroš cites the socially engaged work of Platform 9.81 – Institute for Research in Architecture (see Platform 9.81, 2004; Mrduljaš, 2006; Blažević, 2008) and Pula Group as having a significant influence on ARCHIsquad, which acted as a smaller architectural “unit” with a quieter, more subversive approach to questioning the status quo in architectural and spatial production. It aligned with the extra-curricular learning programs they had developed from the onset. As Pohl writes in her review of the ARCHIsquad practice, “the richness and impact of both projects lie in their pedagogical approach, which

focused on architecture as a tool to empower the local communities through engaged collaboration” (2017, p. 161). Beroš sees the knowledge developed and the connections constructed through the work of ARCHIsquad as its most impactful legacy, tying together a generation of architects aware of the importance of a socially engaged approach in architecture and of the effort it requires. This legacy has also been embedded into wider professional networks, especially CAA, where Beroš acted as a vice president for a two-year mandate, between 2017 and 2019.

### **Split Society of Architects (SSA)**

Split Society of Architects (SSA) is a professional association of architects based in the coastal city of Split. It has, in various organizational formats, existed since 1908. Today it is registered as an NGO with around one hundred members. It is a chapter of the CAA, architectural organisation which, as previously discussed, has become increasingly politicized in the aftermath of the Great Recession and has taken up a prominent public role in contesting the trajectories of local urban development in recent years, especially in the coastal regions of Croatia. SSA has been notably vocal in their criticism of local spatial planning procedures and regulations, and active in the attempts to improve local spatial planning policy so that it serves the local community, rather than particular and privatized business interests. Their main tools are educational programs and participatory initiatives, based on the critical analysis of spatial plans and regulations which SSA presents to the public and to the policymakers, aiming to inform citizens and influence political decision-making.

SSA functions as a voluntary organization, with members usually contributing their work for free. The leadership of the organisation, the board, consists of seven members, two of whom are the vice president and the president, who most often represents the SSA in public. The regular activities (e.g., reviewing changes in spatial plans, proposing alternatives, presenting proposals to the city councils, writing opinion pieces for the local newspaper, etc.) are usually done collaboratively, with the participation of the members with relevant expertise often facilitated by online tools for long-distance collaboration. In the interview, the current president of SSA, Daša Gazde, says that “The goal is to be effective”, adding that nobody in the organization is obliged to do this work; rather, there is a sense of duty, which motivates members of SSA to step forward and offer their time and knowledge. The organisation’s activities include educational work, often delivered in a workshop format. Members working on educational programs are compensated, with funding coming partly from membership fees and mostly from the sums SSA receives for organizing architectural competitions in the city of Split.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> According to its Statute, one of the economic activities SSA carries out is organizing architectural and urban planning competitions (Split Society of Architects, 2017).

Gazde acknowledges the importance of the architects' socially engaged approach to shaping urban spaces, as well as the challenges they face in an often-hostile political landscape. "They don't know why we do it," she says about the local political elite's lack of understanding of their activist approach. She ascribes architects' motivation for engaging in the work of SSA to the desire to change the processes directing the city's future for the better: "We must get involved because we want to live here. If there is no better system, we will create it. And the only way to create a system is for us to get involved, to get it started". Gazde's assessment is that the local administration lacks capacities for designing and implementing spatial policies. The critical, analytical, and advisory work done by SSA compensates for this deficiency and increases the impact they might have, to a certain extent; as Gazde says: "We learned a lot about the local government works and we gained some influence, accompanied by a considerable amount of new responsibility."

The spatial development policy that SSA seeks to promote would have to include the programs that have been lacking in the predominantly tourism-oriented economy of the city of Split, such as good quality public space, public infrastructure, affordable housing, and housing cooperatives (Kuzmanić, 2020). The organization understands that to accomplish this, the general understanding of urban space needs to change in ways that recognize the value of non-commodified spaces and elements of the urban environment. Likewise, SSA considers the improvements in the planning process as going far beyond technological aspects (e.g., beyond the mere digitalization of planning documents) and focuses on promoting the idea of spatial plans as tools to improve the urban environment, rather than simply facilitate the new construction. As Gazde says, "Planning should guide people towards considerations that they might not otherwise have. (...) We must teach a man it's in his best interest not to build the biggest house possible and to have a tree in the garden."

SSA orients its activities towards the community in several different, but related ways. One of them is the effort to build an increased local presence across Split-Dalmatia County by creating a local "cell" in each town of the region. Architects who live and work in these small towns know the local problems, plans, and circumstances; when a local spatial problem arises, they can offer analysis and criticism rooted in local expertise while benefiting from the support of the entire SSA community. SSA and its official representatives can then continue the advocacy work by bringing the discussion to the wider public and to the decision-makers so that the activist architect living in a small community is shielded from any potential pressure or backlash.



*Figure 3 – SSA workshop on urban problems in the neighbourhood of Srinjine, June 2021. Source: SSA*

Part of the Society's activities involving a broader scope of participants are workshops, designed to promote the understanding of how urban space can be produced in a way that offers better living conditions and to emphasize the importance of involving the public in the processes of spatial planning. The programs are often focused on the marginalized parts of the city beyond the touristic zone, such as the eastern quarter of Mejaši (see Kuzmanić et al., 2022). The work with this community began with two SSA members organizing a workshop within their own project, DegrowthCity, which started in 2018 (see DegrowthCity, 2020). The workshop was supported by SSA and continued in other peripheral urban zones (Figure 3), involving members of the local community and students of architecture, encouraging them to discuss the local problems and ideas for improvements (Split Society of Architects, 2021a). The SSA architects collaborate with various stakeholders, including faculty members and mentors, to create these workshops and facilitate broad participation. They prioritize addressing community needs: an example is the lack of swimming facilities in the city. According to Gazde, even though Split is situated on the Adriatic coast, up to half of all the children do not know how to swim, which is a consequence of the lack of public infrastructure. In this case, the results of the workshop translated into a search for suitable locations for the construction of new public swimming pools, in cooperation with the local government. It is

illustrative of how SSA works, leveraging the local knowledge and expertise of its team to get the decision-makers to collaborate on projects of local importance.

One of the main goals SSA strives to achieve in the future is to change the General Urban Plan, which is currently outdated (adopted in 2007) and, in their view, lacks the strategic outlook necessary for addressing the spatial, social, and economic issues the city is facing. To accomplish this, SSA relies on the established mechanisms of cooperation with the local government and on public participation methods. The former refers to a cooperation agreement that SSA signed with the local government of Split in 2021, which stipulates that they, as the local professional association of architects, will provide the city with expert support in amending the General Urban Plan and other spatial planning documentation (Split Society of Architects, 2021b). Such contracts have been made in other Croatian cities, aiming to formalize the advisory role that local chapters of the CAA have carved out through their activities in recent years.<sup>13</sup> The expert assistance is provided without financial compensation and is considered integral to the organization's regular voluntary activities. This new framework contributes to establishing trust between architects and politicians, allowing architects to share their knowledge with the policymakers and to (at least) be heard in the decision-making processes related to urban development and spatial planning. Their advice is not always taken, but Gazde sees the fact that the local government seeks the association's professional opinion as a positive development. She believes this kind of cooperation has also contributed to the recognition of the architects' expertise and the importance of their perspective amongst the public, resulting in an increased volume of requests for advice on various spatial issues coming directly from citizens. The weight of responsibility to always provide prompt and accurate analysis, maintain integrity, and preserve credibility has been increasing, in proportion to the rise of the organisation's public profile.

To ensure the changes in planning documentation will accommodate broad public participation, and that the people of Split will understand the far-reaching effects of this process and be motivated to take part in it, SSA is preparing Reader on Planning, which will be published online and as a sub-sheet of a local newspaper. "Our profession uses a complicated meta language, and although complexities of urban planning cannot be entirely simplified, we need to make the language more accessible", Gazde explains. While working to educate and inform the public, SSA promotes the benefits of early participation in spatial planning to the local government, and lobbies to integrate the community workshops into the official planning process. Another effect of the formalized cooperation with the local authorities is the possibility to involve their representatives in the community activities organized by SSA, to demonstrate their methods and results and show how they can be used

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<sup>13</sup> In Dubrovnik, a similar contract was signed in 2020 (Dubrovnik Net, 2020). It provides a framework for a closer cooperation with local authorities, but it is not entirely new: due to the results of their socially engaged work, Platform 9.81 was invited to participate in certain planning activities of the City of Zagreb as far back as 2005 (Blažević, 2008).

in the broader governance processes. This entire arrangement is far from frictionless, but it promises room for improvement. As Gazde says, “We don't always agree with the local authorities. Before, if we disagreed with them, we would write a response and publish it in the newspaper. Now we discuss it face to face.”

Another important mechanism through which SSA exercises influence in matters of spatial production is their license to conduct architectural competitions, granted to all the regional Societies of Architects by the Croatian Chamber of Architects. SSA executes the administrative procedure, analyses the competition programs to ensure the local authorities have communicated the competition requirements clearly, and encourages the participation of young architects for whom competitions are an especially important way of finding expression and establishing a practice. SSA also mediates between different actors in the competition process – public authorities, private investors, local communities, and architects – to help them communicate their needs clearly and reach an agreement. Gazde considered the role of a mediator as the one in which SSA has been most effective.

Apart from acting at the local level, SSA is involved in the regional committee of the Croatian Chamber of Architects working on the national planning legislation. This work is related mostly to analysing the proposed laws related to spatial development and offering improvements. Gazde considers that both the influence of SSA in this sphere and their dedication to this line of work would be greater if they were closer to Zagreb, as the decision-making processes concerning legislation are still rather centralized and require the amount of labour which is considerable, especially for a local voluntary organization with limited capacities.

## Discussion

The three cases from the Croatian context presented here offer an insight into how socially engaged architectural practices responded to the urban condition of austerity following the post-2008 economic crisis. Although enclosure, privatisation and commodification of space were features of the post-socialist transition, the post-crisis period gave rise to the public policies through which these processes intensified, leading to the rise of urban social movements and to a growing politization of the architectural profession. As the financial crisis was global, these developments were as well. However, neoliberalization of urban governance in the European periphery intensified in the aftermath of the crisis (Mayer, 2016; Schweiger & Magone, 2014), rendering the activist responses to its prescriptions ever more urgent, while at the same time severely limiting their efficacy through new waves of public divestment, privatization and continuous absence of public policies addressing the growing social and spatial disparities. The goal of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of how socially engaged architectural practices intervene in the governance processes under these conditions, in the cities of the European periphery, based on the cases from the Croatian context. The

main findings are summarised in *Table 1*. They provide a broad overview of urban governance policies challenged by socially engaged architectural practices, types of actions undertaken by these practices, mechanisms through which the actions were implemented, and the effects to which the actions have contributed. Hopefully, these findings can also contribute to constructing comparisons with other cities and regions, which would lead to interesting insights about architecture's engagement with local organizing, politics, and policy.

The urban governance policies challenged by the analysed socially engaged architectural practices are grouped into several categories: enclosure of public land through spatial planning, the commodification of public space, favouring private over the public interest in spatial planning, and inadequate policy response to the housing crisis. As has been outlined in the narratives describing the three cases, socially engaged architectural practices reacted to these policies by taking various forms of action, which can be grouped as theoretical criticism, policy propositions, spatial interventions, public protests, and the development of participatory tools for effective involvement of local communities in decision-making processes. These actions have been realised through a series of mechanisms, including participatory research, informal education, collective and cooperative local organising, alternative economic models, building new and politicizing the existing professional networks, practising co-design, taking on a role of a mediator, and finding new forms of cooperation with local authorities. The effects that can be, at least to a certain extent, attributed to these actions and mechanisms, include increased public awareness of how spatial conditions relate to social inequalities, development of non-institutional programs serving disadvantaged communities, development of new knowledge (within local communities, in the expanding sphere of architectural profession, and within public and professional institutions), enhanced collaborations and partnerships within both the existing and the new networks, and a shift in the official discourse of party politics at the local level, evolving to include the notions of protection, exploitation, and accessibility of public space.

The analysed cases demonstrate what Awan et al. (2011) define as the key political responsibility of the architect, which is “not in the refinement of the building as static visual commodity, but as a contributor to the creation of empowering spatial, and hence social, relationships in the name of others” (p. 38). Acting in the name of others can be motivated by various factors, and Awan et al. relate those factors to politics, profession, pedagogy, humanitarian crisis, and ecology. In the cases analysed here, motivations for socially engaged architects can be understood as driven by a clear political position, antithetical to the political status quo, and by concerns for social justice, where those who act first make the relations between social inequalities and spatial conditions legible, and then try “to alleviate these injustices through some form of action or intervention” (ibid, p. 41).

| <b>Urban governance policies, challenged by socially engaged architectural practices</b>                                                                                                                              | <b>Types of actions undertaken by socially engaged architectural practices</b>                                                                                                                              | <b>Mechanisms through which the actions were implemented</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <b>Effects to which the actions have contributed</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>enclosure of public land through spatial planning</p> <p>commodification of public space</p> <p>favouring private over public interest in spatial planning</p> <p>inadequate policy response to housing crisis</p> | <p>theoretical critique</p> <p>policy proposal</p> <p>spatial intervention</p> <p>public protest</p> <p>development of participatory tools for involving local communities in decision-making processes</p> | <p>participatory research (workshops, consultations, field visits)</p> <p>mapping</p> <p>critical analysis of spatial plans</p> <p>knowledge production</p> <p>knowledge sharing (lectures, workshops, conferences)</p> <p>introducing new forms of organizing to the local context (collective, cooperative, horizontal)</p> <p>prioritizing economic accessibility of the programs and services offered to the community</p> <p>fostering physical spaces of encounter and exchange</p> <p>building new networks (local and international)</p> <p>politicizing the existing networks</p> <p>co-designing spaces, participatory methods, and policy proposals</p> <p>mediating between the public authorities and the public</p> <p>formalizing cooperation with local authorities</p> | <p>increased public awareness of how spatial conditions relate to social inequalities</p> <p>development of non-institutional programs serving disadvantaged communities</p> <p>development of new knowledge: communal, professional, institutional</p> <p>enhanced collaborations and partnerships within both the existing and the new networks</p> <p>shift in the official discourse of party politics, evolving to include the notions of protection, exploitation, and accessibility of public space</p> |

*Table 1 - Socially engaged architectural practice challenging policies of neoliberal urban governance: Actions, mechanisms, and effects of contestation.*

In the context of a city in a post-socialist transition facing a new, post-2008 economic crisis and the rising precarity and inequality, actions taken to counter the new conditions of austerity were also a way to reclaim political subjectivity – to, as Medak (in Dietachmair, 2017, pp. 218-219) describes it, “(...) feel that you are not just on the defensive, but that you can interrupt something and maybe shift the political ground (...) that you can do something to change how things operate.” Whether or not the actions of socially engaged architectural practices have been successful in provoking or achieving the change, and to what degree, largely depends on the definition and the scale of change. The analysis of the work of the practices presented here shows that they have been impactful in developing locally based knowledge and non-institutional programs serving disadvantaged communities, as well as in changing the discourse on spatial production and its embeddedness within the capitalist economic system. On the other hand, the system itself remains largely resistant to the challenges through these bottom-up approaches, as it relies on the far more powerful centre-periphery feedback loop, where the peripheral cities of southern Europe are relegated to the role of vacation destinations and left with not much choice in terms of strategies of urban development. As the case of Pula shows, these strategies mostly boil down to deindustrialisation, privatisation and touristification. What, then, can be achieved through the instruments of architecture and urban planning, if what is needed is a systemic change in the functioning of the economic and political system? It is the same question posed by Markus Bader of Raumlabor, experimental architectural practice from Berlin, widely recognised for their socially engaged work:

To what extent can we, inside the capitalist reproductive system, offer any kind of countersystem? Of course it is about gradients. Our position at the moment is to allow for this counter architecture, to create situations of making otherwise and invite people in.” (in Donat-Cattin, 2022, p.32)

By creating possibilities and spaces for learning, exchange and cooperation, small and localized initiatives can lead to scaling up; as Langguth explains:

(...) scaling up in the sense of building a stronger network, allied against the challenges we may face in the future. As part of this process it is crucial to bind in as many actors as possible from different spheres aiming for change at policy level. This means setting the firm goal of social change and leaving behind the idea that we exist within a fragmented society where everyone is isolated from one another in their individual practices.” (In Assmann et al, 2017, p. 133)

The research results show that socially engaged architectural practices in Croatia have been pursuing this kind of alliance- and network-building throughout the last decade, working with local communities and institutions, strengthening the national networks of cooperation (like the Croatian Architects' Association and its local and regional chapters) in the process, and enhancing their capacities to challenge the prevalent policies of urban governance and directly

participate in policy-making. This has been unfolding within the wider context of urban struggles which, as Sassen notes (2017, p.6), are highly localized, but represent a form of global engagement: “their globality is a horizontal, multi-sited recurrence of similar struggles in hundreds of cities worldwide.” As part of the global political struggle for spatial and social justice, the actions of socially engaged architectural practices do challenge the prevailing order, but, in the grand scheme of things, the effects of their actions can be difficult to perceive and measure. When architecture is concerned, Yaneva writes, doing politics is no longer “a procedural attempt to reach a good decision or to achieve the perfect ‘consensus’ that will be further embedded (...) in urban form”, but rather “a substantive move to (...) reshape the connections and redistribute the agency in a slow and relationally efficient way” (2017, p. 32). The slowness of building and sharing knowledge, deepening relationships, establishing trust, and developing a political practice means its processes and outcomes take time to evolve and produce effects. However, this meticulous work of locating, redistributing and amplifying the agency of the peripheral places and communities might be of crucial importance in constructing just urban futures.

## Conclusion

This paper demonstrates some of the ways in which socially engaged architectural practices have contested the policies of neoliberal urban governance at the European periphery, in the context of Croatia. These contestations took the form of a range of actions, through which socially engaged architectural practices problematized the conditions of spatial production and politicized their communities, professional networks, and public spaces. The gradual change in public understanding of how social inequalities relate to spatial conditions can be traced back to these actions, as can the change in public discourse, evolving to include notions of protection, exploitation, and accessibility of public space.

Actions of socially engaged architectural practices were implemented through a series of mechanisms, which rested on critical interrogation of the dominant narratives and models of neoliberal urban development, and on close collaborations with local communities. Although various participatory planning tools have been developed and some new forms of collaboration between the public authorities and socially engaged architectural practices have been established, a major change at the policy level was not achieved in any of the analysed cases.

The continuing struggles to protect spatial resources from enclosure and privatisation and the emergence of left-green political options rooted in urban social movements in Croatia highlight the importance of changing spatial governance so that it serves local communities, rather than capital accumulation. In questioning and countering the policies of neoliberal urban governance, socially engaged architectural practices move away from (only) providing expertise and into broader fields of advocacy and facilitation on behalf of others (Awan et al., 2011), asserting their own agency in the process: seeking ways to build a city differently, so

that different ways of city making can become possible. Under the circumstances of deepening global crises of climate, economy, and politics, this endeavour is vastly important. It will require another set of communal relationships, formed at the intersection of socially engaged architecture, politics, urban governance, and urban social movements. To better understand how these relationships are and can be cultivated, further research is needed, particularly on the conditions in which socially engaged architectural practices work and reproduce themselves, on the frameworks necessary to sustain dedicated architectural work outside of the confines of the neoliberal marketplace over longer periods of time, and on the existing and potential institutional settings that would make the change of the dominant regime of spatial production possible.

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