

Constructing Resistance: Socially Engaged Architecture and Civic Activism in Croatia

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Abstract

This article traces the emergence of socially engaged architectural practices in Croatia within wider civic mobilizations against investor-driven urbanism and contested spatial governance. It examines how architects, acting as civic experts, navigated post-socialist urban transformations by combining public critique, knowledge production, and institution-oriented engagement. Situating these practices within broader civil society, the article identifies three phases: early experimentation within the independent cultural scene, politicization of space through public protest and coalition-building, and recent efforts toward institutional reform and participatory governance. Conceptually, it formalizes architecture as civic praxis as a public-oriented configuration of expertise operating through three mechanisms: hybrid roles (pedagogy, organizing), knowledge infrastructures (civic tools deepening public understanding of spatial politics), and institutional repertoires (interventions translating civic claims into procedural change). The Croatian case widens what counts as civil society in CEE by showing how architecture “dirtied by many hands” can help organize communities, circulate usable knowledge, and influence decision-making.

Introduction

Over the past three decades, cities across Central and Eastern Europe have undergone rapid transformations driven by deregulation, privatization, and commodification, visible in uneven development, economic polarization, and political crises. In Croatia, the spatial consequences of these processes—deindustrialization, privatization of public land, urban planning in service of large private investments, and tourism-driven gentrification—have provoked strong contestation from civil society actors. Among the varied responses, a notable and understudied current has emerged from within the field of architecture itself: socially engaged architectural practices that operate at the intersection of professional knowledge, political activism, and civic imagination. Drawing on Awan et al.’s (2011) notion of “spatial agency,” I approach socially engaged architecture as a mode of practice that deploys architectural knowledge to intervene in, rather than reproduce, dominant regimes of spatial production. This intervention does not necessarily take the form of “building” in a narrow sense. Instead, as this research shows, it operates as architecture as civic praxis: a public-facing and organizing-oriented use of architectural expertise to engage communities and movements, which (1) redefines the professional label of “architect” to include the hybrid role of the practitioner as an educator–researcher–organizer; (2) develops knowledge infrastructures (maps, readers, planning critiques, exhibitions) that circulate spatial literacy, build a shared language for spatial politics, and enable meaningful participation; and (3) pursues purposeful institutional engagement (through professional bodies and municipal procedures) to translate collectively articulated demands into proposals, rules, and programs. I refer to the concrete effort of sustaining these capacities—often under conditions of scarcity and political constraint—as architects’ civic labor. Such practice challenges the mainstream understanding of architecture as confined to design and construction and aligned with extractive, growth-oriented development. As Leboš points out, referencing Easterling, “architecture has grown accustomed to convincing itself that it is not called upon to offer opinions on official politics, and that it cannot be held accountable for them” (Easterling 2008, cited in Leboš, 2009, p. 82). Yet, Leboš continues, architecture is well positioned not only to offer opinions on politics, but to expose and critique it: it *materializes* dominant power structures, inscribes them into space, and frequently serves to iconize repressive systems and encode contested values into the urban manuscript (ibid.; emphasis in the original). Conscious of this, socially engaged architectural practices mobilize architectural tools not only to criticize neoliberal regimes of spatial production, but to strengthen existing initiatives, cultivate new forms of community engagement, and build capacities for collective action.

This article offers an empirically grounded overview of how, from the late 1990s, socially engaged architects in Croatia came to act as expert activists within civil society, and how their positions shifted across street, professional, and institutional arenas. Rather than treating

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“architects” as a narrow professional category, the analysis shows that these engaged practices can be understood as a form of epistemic activism: interventions in the ecology of spatial knowledge that produce alternative maps, concepts, and methods capable of disputing state–corporate expertise and reframing urban conflict (Haas, 1992; Vallejos et al., 2023). In this sense, the empirical description itself contributes to civil-society debates in CEE by widening what counts as civic action beyond NGO service delivery and donor-driven advocacy (Fagan & Sircar, 2013; Jacobsson & Saxonberg, 2013). It also aligns with work that questions binary labels such as professionalized/autonomous or co-opted/radical (Jacobsson, 2015; Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2022) and centers “local, contextual, and embedded knowledge” (Bača, 2022) as a resource for “other ways of doing architecture” (Awan et al., 2011).

The paper asks: What motivated and enabled socially engaged architects in Croatia over the last three decades? How was architectural knowledge deployed—as critique, pedagogy, organizing repertoire, and institutional tool? What civic labor sustained these efforts and with what limits, as actors moved between independent cultural venues, protest coalitions, professional organizations, and municipal arenas? To answer, the article traces three phases: (1) late-1990s to mid-2000s experiments in the independent cultural scene; (2) late-2000s to mid-2010s commons-oriented mobilizations that politicized spatial planning; and (3) mid-2010s to 2020s efforts toward institutional reform and participatory governance.

This work makes a threefold contribution to civil-society and social-movement debates in CEE by clarifying mechanisms through which expertise becomes civic capacity in semi-peripheral urban contexts. First, it specifies socially engaged architects as expert activists whose intentionally political practice mobilizes professional knowledge as civic labor, organizing with communities and movements and sustaining collective capacities over time across protest, professional, and institutional arenas. Second, it demonstrates that the production of situated knowledge (maps, readers, planning critiques, counterproposals, exhibitions) functions as infrastructure: it makes planning legible, supports public engagement, and enables coordination between actors and across cycles of contention. Third, it traces purposeful institutional engagement as a distinct repertoire, showing how civic claims are made through professional bodies, municipal routines, and participatory mechanisms. The account remains empirically led and regionally situated: a Croatian case traced from the late 1990s, clarifying how experts-as-citizens broaden what counts as civil society in CEE.

Theoretical framework

Whether through direct action, public debate, institutional reform, or long-term collaborations with citizens and movements, socially engaged architects in Croatia have participated, often prominently, in defending the right to the city (Domaradzka, 2018; Harvey, 2008) and in shaping ideas of just and collaborative urban futures that may still be possible at the peripheries of global capitalism. Building on scholarship that documents architects’ alignment with urban struggles and public-interest agendas—spanning advocacy and public-interest lineages (Bell & Wakeford, 2008; Davidoff, 1965), collaborative and insurgent approaches (Healey, 1997; Miraftab, 2009), “spatial agency” (Awan et al., 2011), and recent syntheses of architectural activism (Boie & De Cauter, 2023; Petrescu & Trogal, 2017; Sadler, 2018)—this article situates Croatian cases within civil-society debates in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe. In taking up architecture as civic praxis, the Croatian materials show

how a subset of actors from the architectural field positioned themselves as expert activists within civil society, using professional credibility to shift relations among expertise, urban mobilizations, and institutions. In practice, this has meant extending architectural work into public critique and organizing repertoires: producing handbooks and exhibitions as shared reference points, convening forums and assemblies as spaces for deliberation, developing pedagogical programs and workshops that grow spatial knowledge, and crafting institution-oriented critiques and proposals that translate civic demands into procedural and programmatic interventions. Framed as civic labor, these efforts support collective action over time and help convert moments of contention into more durable practices and, at times, policy.

There remains a need to understand how these practices unfold within specific regional and historical contexts, particularly in post-socialist societies, where established research advises a wider view of collective actors and their strategies, beyond the accounts of both NGO-ization and classical contentious politics (Jacobsson & Saxonberg, 2013). In Croatia, the legacies of Yugoslav socialism, the 1990s war, and post-2008 austerity policies have shaped trajectories of civic engagement, contributing to tensions between professionalization, activism, and institutionalization (Dolenec et al., 2017; Heideman, 2018; Stubbs, 2012). Across the region, post-socialist urban transformation was accompanied by privatization and deregulation that eroded democratic control over public assets (Harloe, 1996; Rakita, 2013) and intensified the privatization of public space (Hirt, 2012). In this setting, critically inclined architects, urbanists, and allied practitioners developed a regional knowledge base for diagnosing investor-driven urbanism and civic organizing, drawing on a spatial history shared across the former Yugoslav republics and a common stock of socialist architectural and planning references. Within academic and planning institutions, few but important voices contributed: in Serbia, Vujošević, Petovar, and Lazarević Bajec analyzed most comprehensively how the idea of public interest—the normative foundation of Yugoslav planning—was contested and hollowed out in post-socialist urbanism (Lazarević Bajec, 2009; Petovar & Vujošević, 2008; Vujošević & Petovar, 2006), while a similar critique emerged in Croatian urban sociology (Čaldarović, 2012), often in shared venues (see Svirčić Gotovac & Zlatar, 2012). This knowledge was also formed through para-academic reading circles, publishing, curating, and organizing under conditions of scarcity (Tucakov, 2024). Throughout, it remained in dialogue with the achievements of socialist-era spatial production and its “breathtaking boldness” (Miljački, 2018): the generous public and green spaces, the innovative mass housing developments, the coordinated regional planning of the Adriatic coast—all treating the city as a collective project and public space as a non-negotiable good (see Gulin Zrnić, 2012; Kulić et al., 2012; Mrduljaš & Kulić, 2012; Stierli & Kulić, 2018). The circumstances of socialist Yugoslavia, Čeferin (2012) argues, were “far more in favor of the practice of architecture as a thinking practice” than what came after, and post-socialist engaged practitioners sought to reactivate this lineage.

Practices such as STEALTH.unlimited’s collaborations (e.g., “Lost Highway Expedition”), Platform 9.81’s “Invisible Zagreb” and “Superprivate,” and the Peti park (Fifth Park) reading group in Belgrade built communities by translating theory into accessible formats, convening cross-disciplinary coalitions, and generating tools—maps, readers, exhibitions—that made planning legible and civic participation more possible (Blažević, 2008; Blažević et al., 2011; Carl & Jovanović Weiss, 2007; Platform 9.81, 2005). Subsequent collectives extended this repertoire: in Serbia,

analysis by Ministarstvo prostora (Ministry of Space) demystified planning, linked struggles to the commons, and scrutinized state-enabled, private-investor-driven megaprojects such as “Belgrade Waterfront” (Čukić, 2013, 2017, 2018; Čukić et al., 2015, 2019; Grubbauer & Čamprag, 2018; Vilenica, 2014), and Nova planska praksa (New Planning Practice) examined how planning professionals relate to public interest in this context (Milovanović Rodić et al., 2022). Housing policy critiques and mappings connected everyday dispossession to policy regimes (Krstić, 2016; Sekulić, 2012; Vilenica, 2017), while Croatian actors such as Platform 9.81, Right to the City, and Pula Group articulated explicitly political critiques and situated alternatives, from “Post-Capitalist City” to the 53rd Zagreb Salon’s “Decade Reader” (Jurcan, 2010; Pula Group, 2010a; STEALTH.unlimited & Jurcan, 2018). Together, these practices show knowledge production functioning as civic infrastructure: bringing practitioners into durable networks, equipping communities and movements with legible critiques of spatial production, and letting claims and repertoires travel across sites and years.

Seen from this trajectory—where knowledge-making, public critique, coalition work, and institution-facing interventions develop together—the theoretical task is to specify how architectural actors convert professional expertise into civic capacity, while remaining attentive to the Croatian post-socialist context from which these mechanisms are derived.

Architecture as civic praxis: A three-part framework

I use the term *architecture as civic praxis* to refer to a public-oriented form of architectural work in which professional expertise is mobilized as civic capacity—producing public critique, supporting collective claims-making, and engaging in coalition work and procedural change. In this article, the concept is developed from Croatian cases shaped by post-socialist restructuring and private investor-driven urbanism, but it is proposed as an analytical lens whose mechanisms can be examined in other contexts where expert knowledge becomes a resource for civic action. The framework specifies how architectural actors participate in civic activism not simply as designers or technical consultants, but as citizen-experts who organize communities, build usable knowledge, and intervene in governing procedures. It does so by identifying three interrelated mechanisms:

- (1) *Hybrid roles (educator–researcher–organizer)*: architecture as civic praxis begins with a role-shift, in which practitioners use disciplinary authority to publicly question dominant processes of spatial production, examine their social and ecological effects, and contest decisions that privilege private interests over public good. This critical stance can take many forms—from public statements, research briefs, and curated debates, to plan readings, formal objections, and procedural critiques—producing counter-expertise that makes spatial conflict legible and contestable. From there, architectural work extends into public pedagogy and organizing: facilitating assemblies and workshops, translating technical language for wider audiences, and helping build alliances around shared spatial claims. An important indicator is not “participation” as a method in architectural practice, but the public performance of expertise in relation to organized communities as co-creators of political agency.
- (2) *Knowledge infrastructures (civic tools)*: planning critiques, readers, maps, exhibitions, counter-briefs, and accessible

publications function as knowledge infrastructures—civic tools for understanding spatial politics. They translate complex processes of spatial production into matters of collective decision, making clearer what is proposed, planned, and built, for whom, through which procedures, and with what social and ecological consequences. By building a shared language and presenting analysis in accessible formats, these tools help communities and movements articulate claims, contest official narratives with counter-expertise, and coordinate action. They can also support continuity by preserving analyses, methods, and reference points that can be carried forward across cycles of contention.

- (3) *Institutional repertoires (purposeful engagement)*: in architecture as civic praxis, socially engaged architects intervene in and through institutions—professional associations, public hearings and reviews, participatory mechanisms, and municipal administrations (including advisory and departmental roles)—to reshape how spatial decisions are made. Their work translates public-interest critiques coming from the civic struggle (e.g., commons, spatial justice, democratic control of public assets) into points of intervention: expert opinions and objections, agenda-setting within professional associations, design briefs, public participation criteria, and other policy instruments. What distinguishes this repertoire from depoliticized technocratic work is the public-interest and democratizing orientation of the intervention: it seeks to alter procedures and priorities in ways that widen public scrutiny and expand what becomes institutionally feasible and legitimate. In practice, such engagement is often targeted and uneven—constrained by capacity, legal frameworks, and political opportunity—yet it can contribute to creating pathways for cumulative change, from incremental procedural reforms to, in rare moments, broader shifts in governance.

This framework clarifies what distinguishes architecture as civic praxis from policy-elite “epistemic communities”: it is oriented to publics and organized communities as well as officials, and it operates across cultural venues, streets, and institutional arenas. In the sections that follow, I use these mechanisms to read three phases of Croatian cases, tracing how the balance between hybrid roles, knowledge infrastructures, and institutional repertoires shifts over time. Read through architecture as civic praxis, expert activism is not a technocratic elite project oriented only to policymakers, but a form of public-facing expertise that participates in civic organizing and supports urban movements’ quest for change, in line with regional syntheses that treat urban mobilizations as laboratories of democratic practice (Bilić & Stubbs, 2015; Jacobsson, 2015; Jacobsson & Korolczuk, 2019).

This framework also speaks back to architectural discourse. Against Schumacher’s claim that architecture can only translate already hegemonic political programs—treating contested agendas as external “irritations,” attributing political meaning of architectural work to its empowered clients, and warning that “critical” debate overburdens the discipline (Schumacher, 2012)—the Croatian cases show slow political work embedded in knowledge infrastructures and institutional repertoires: formal objections, assemblies, public writings, and professional statements that contest procedures, delay or rescale projects, and broaden public literacy and participation around planning. Here, “political” extends beyond formal decision-making moments such as elections or votes: it includes problematizing dominant agendas and doing institutional work on governing procedures, planning among them—rights claims, coalition-

building, counter-expertise. At the same time, critiques of participatory tokenism and post-political drift remain relevant (Hoskyns, 2014). Consistent with Sadler's (2018) caution that architectural social engagement is most realistic as an instrument of larger politics, the practices analyzed here do not substitute for political organizing; they build organizing capacity, usable knowledge, and procedural interventions that broader coalitions, including municipalist platforms, can take up when opportunities arise.

In this sense, the article complements recent syntheses of architectural activism (e.g., Boie & De Cauter, 2023) and related work that understands socially engaged architecture as an array of strategies—from reinterpreting briefs and pausing practice for research and curation to reinventing practice around commons-oriented projects (Dodd, 2019; Fitz et al., 2019; Kaminer, 2016; Karim, 2018; Stavrides, 2016; Dragović, 2024). The contribution is to specify, in a post-socialist setting, how such strategies operate as civil-society mechanisms: performing hybrid roles in public critique and organizing, producing knowledge infrastructures as civic tools, and engaging institutions purposefully. Traced across three phases in Croatia, the analysis shows how architecture, as an embedded civic praxis, becomes politically consequential through sustained civic labor—thereby extending CEE debates on civil society and social movements and linking them to broader discussions of architecture's public role.

Methods

This research employs qualitative methods, drawing on a combination of semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and interpretive engagement with both academic literature and grey sources, including publications, media coverage, exhibition catalogues, and activist materials, which are analyzed as integral to the knowledge practices and public presence of the scene under study. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive overview of socially engaged architectural actors in Croatia, but rather to examine some of the practices, processes, and moments that have shaped—and been shaped by—the evolving civic scene since the late 1990s. Relatedly, the paper does not set out to map the full field of professional contestation of investor-led spatial development, including challenges from within the planning profession and adjacent fields that operate outside the engaged scene examined here. That wider landscape deserves (and, hopefully, will receive) a dedicated study.

To specify mechanisms of architecture as civic praxis, the empirical sections use selective description of events, artifacts, and institutional encounters as process evidence, showing how hybrid roles are performed, how civic tools and knowledge infrastructures circulate and are taken up, and how institutional repertoires are attempted, contested, and revised. Details are included if they help trace how civic capacities are built and sustained, not to chronicle the scene. Focusing on participants, the networks they wove, and the forms of knowledge production that emerged, the study situates socially engaged architecture within the field of civil society and in relation to neoliberal spatial politics and its effects.

The core empirical material consists of a series of in-depth interviews conducted between 2023 and 2025 with eight architects who have been members of engaged practices—Platforma 9.81 (Platform 9.81), Pulska grupa (Pula Group), Zadruga Praksa (Practice Cooperative), ARCHIsquad, Pravo na grad (Right to the City), and Društvo arhitekata Splita (Split Society of Architects), as well as younger practitioners affiliated with more recent initiatives. The interviewees were selected through purposive sampling, based

on their involvement in socially engaged architectural work and their ability to represent different generations, regions, and institutional positions. The selection aimed to capture continuity and transformation in the field, from early experiments and protest mobilizations to current forms of engagement with public institutions, participatory governance, and discursive platforms. Interview material is cited throughout by participant code (INT-1 to INT-8); the coding is applied to interview excerpts, while published and otherwise public contributions are attributed by name. Interviews were conducted in Croatian and translated by the author. Several important episodes discussed here (e.g., Right to the City, Fifth Park, National Forum for Space) unfolded with architects working alongside activists from other backgrounds; in these, the study follows how spatial research, critique, and public pedagogy enter civic repertoires and support civic capacity. Analytically, the materials are read through the lens of architecture as civic praxis, tracing how hybrid roles, knowledge infrastructures as civic tools, and institutional repertoires emerge and shift across episodes and phases—focusing on how architectural actors co-produce political knowledge, engage matters of public interest, and negotiate the structural limits of their work. Throughout, the aim is to show how socially engaged architecture evolved with and within the field of civic action in Croatia, contributing to collective learning and decision-making and supporting struggles for public space and just urban development.

The rest of the article is organized into three sections that trace the development of activist approaches in the field of architecture across three chronological phases, which are not rigid categorizations, but a framework for understanding evolving motivations, strategies, and forms of engagement, from early experiments within the independent cultural scene of the late 1990s to contemporary efforts at institutional intervention. The conclusion consolidates the mechanisms identified, specifies the article's contribution to civil-society and social-movement debates in CEE, and reflects on what the Croatian case reveals about the potential of architecture as civic praxis.

Emergent spaces of critique: Architecture and the independent cultural scene (late 1990s–mid-2000s)

A new generation of socially engaged architectural practices in Croatia emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s, confronting the discipline's marginalization amid post-war transition and accelerated neoliberal reforms. As the new state consolidated a nationalist political consensus and privatization restructured everyday life, the architectural profession—historically aligned with the modernist project of socialist Yugoslavia—found itself increasingly detached from meaningful public engagement and unprepared for the political-economic forces reshaping the built environment. Against this backdrop, architects, artists, and cultural workers began to reevaluate architecture's role in public life and its potential as a tool for civic engagement and political critique.

Across Zagreb and other urban centers, a dynamic independent cultural scene formed, catalyzed by frustration with conservative cultural policy and a desire to experiment with non-institutional modes of organizing and knowledge production. Collectives such as BLOK, WHW, MaMa, Attack!, and Drugo more (The Other Sea)—encompassing curatorial platforms, media-culture centers, and autonomous social spaces—advanced a politicized, self-organized agenda focused on urban space, post-socialist transition, memory, and social justice. In conditions of underfunded public institutions

and limited support for independent initiatives, public space became both a site of cultural production and a terrain of struggle to exist in—and to co-constitute—the city. As Golub (2004) and Bekić (2020) note, these organizations built new infrastructures of critique, collaboration, and spatial experimentation. Within this milieu, some of the “new protagonists” in Croatian architecture (Mrduljaš, 2006) sought to work beyond strict disciplinary confines and align architectural research with civic action.

Platform 9.81, formed in 1999 by a group of architecture students at the Faculty of Architecture in Zagreb, was one of these actors. Early members recall a widening gap between architectural education and the social–political transformations around them—and seeking out the collective to close it. One of them, who had come to architecture from a war-displaced background, describes a curriculum that could not speak to their reality and looking for “outlets to complete my own education” (INT-7). Another remembers a formative provocation from a mentor: “Why should architecture be learned only from architects?” (INT-4), pointing to the interdisciplinary, public-facing, collective work the official curriculum offered little of: bringing artists into architectural spaces, turning installations into pedagogical tools, and debating architecture’s relationship to society. Platform 9.81’s published self-understanding was explicitly public-oriented: educational and experimental, committed to engaging wider audiences and producing “spatial infrastructure to be used by all producers of culture” (Platform 9.81, 2005). In this sense, it prefigured architecture as civic praxis as accessible, participatory, and publicly relevant, or, as one founding member later described, “dirtied by many hands”—a form of architecture where architects collaborate with citizens invested in both process and outcomes (Vizkultura, 2015).

From the outset, Platform 9.81 adopted a project-based, collaborative model that convened architects, urbanists, cultural producers, and community actors around shared spatial concerns. Public lectures, ephemeral interventions, exhibitions, mappings, and design research functioned as tools to reintroduce critical discourse into planning and architecture (for early work, see Jaklenec et al., 2012). “Architecture Live” (2001–2002) created an informal forum for public reflection within the discipline, while “Invisible Zagreb – The Cabinet of Wonders” (2003–2006) mapped underused and abandoned spaces, reframing them as zones of civic and cultural activation (Blažević, 2008; Platform 9.81, 2005). These formats generated knowledge infrastructure: they gathered community, produced shared reference points, made urban change legible, and tested collaborative methods. They also surfaced practical challenges, requiring constant collective reflection on authorship, ownership, means, and methods, which further distinguished Platform 9.81 from conventional architectural practices (Visual Culture, 2006).

The political tension surrounding urban space sharpened these experiments. Initiatives such as “Operacija: grad” (“Operation: City”) at the Badel complex in 2005 became flashpoints over who controls public space and under what conditions. When independent initiatives gathered diverse, politicized publics, they often met conservative backlash and institutional resistance. These confrontations exposed the limits of informal occupation and underscored the need for more durable, institutionally negotiated access to space (Mrakovčić & Pejić, 2023)—a trajectory that several groups, including Platform 9.81, later pursued through collaborations, policy dialogues, and cultural-institution partnerships.

In this first phase, the emphasis fell less on protest than on spatial literacy, public pedagogy, and tactical engagement. The publication “Superprivate” (Platform 9.81, 2004) exemplified

this approach: combining architectural research and critical urban theory, it analyzed the patterns of privatization, ad-hoc construction, and fragmentation shaping post-socialist Croatian cities. Without idealizing the socialist past, it showed how weakened planning and commodified everyday life were producing new regimes of exclusion and informality, eroding the public sphere of urban space (see Buden, 2020). Other projects—such as “Zagreb: Cultural Capital 3000” (2003–2005) and “Tourist Transformations”—linked architecture to media, curating, and planning questions, widening the addressees of architectural work to include cultural actors, policymakers, and international collaborators. These initiatives unfolded alongside broader, albeit nascent, professional debates about unchecked coastal construction and the absence of coherent urban planning in the face of investor-driven developments (Galović, 2004). Such concerns about coastal overbuilding and the erosion of spatial order have persisted in the decades since, voiced not only by activists but from within the professional mainstream—although on grounds of heritage and landscape protection rather than the political-economic critique foregrounded here—reaching established institutions, as in the recent “Declaration on Croatian Space” (AAUZ, 2023).

In parallel, other engaged initiatives took shape within the independent scene. ARCHIsquad—Division for Architecture with Conscience—was founded in 2006 at the Zagreb Faculty, with Platform 9.81 as both a touchstone and collaborator. ARCHIsquad’s early experiences with student exchanges and work in contexts of scarcity (including in the Global South), together with Yugoslav legacies of internationalist cooperation, exposure to critical theory, and feminist orientations, led to what members later called a “quieter, more subversive” approach to community engagement and educational work (see Dragović, 2024). Their repertoire—free architectural counseling in disadvantaged communities, collaborations with cultural venues, public workshops and discussions—operated as civic labor: working with(in) local contexts on concrete problems while building skills, confidence, and relational ties that could sustain collective action.

Seen through a wider post-socialist lens, these Croatian experiments were part of a broader regional reactivation of critical spatial knowledge. With limited access to feminist spatial thought, critical urban theory, and post-Marxist critique in mainstream curricula, para-academic reading groups, cross-border collaborations, and project-based learning helped fill gaps and ground theory in local material conditions (see Carl & Jovanović Weiss, 2007; Tucakov, 2024.). These processes unfolded across the post-Yugoslav space; in Croatia, they were rooted in the independent cultural field, where architecture’s tools started being utilized for co-producing knowledge and building civic networks.

Materially, the work remained modest—temporary, underfunded, and precarious—but it yielded durable capacities. The infrastructures built in this period (forums, publications, archives, pedagogies, and networks) supplied scaffolding for later, more confrontational mobilizations and, eventually, for purposeful engagement with institutions. Analytically, this phase consolidates the three dimensions of architecture as civic praxis: it experiments with hybrid roles (architects as educators, researchers, and organizers), develops knowledge infrastructures that make spatial conflict legible and shareable, and begins to encounter—through conflicts over access—the problem that later motivates institutional repertoires. These shifts were neither linear nor free of contradictions, but they opened a critical space in which architecture could be understood as a field of public concern, social imagination, and political possibility, preparing the ground for the commons-

oriented mobilizations that would define the late-2000s to mid-2010s.

Defending the commons: Spatial activism and civic mobilizations (late-2000s–mid-2010s)

If the late 1990s and early 2000s were marked by experimental departures in the independent cultural scene, the following years brought a decisive turn toward organized and confrontational spatial activism. Resistance to commercialization and enclosure in Zagreb widened and diffused the repertoire—geographically and thematically—through new alliances among organizations, collectives, and professional actors. These developments resonated with a regional surge in commons struggles against dispossession and environmental harm (The Commons Working Group, 2014) and with the consolidation of a “new Balkan left” (Štikis & Stojaković, 2021). As Dolenec et al. (2017) argue, the urban became not only a site of neoliberal restructuring but also a laboratory for imagining and enacting alternatives; Bilić and Stubbs (2015) similarly show how post-Yugoslav mobilizations grew around public space as a key arena of contention.

In this context, organization Right to the City—emerging from the 2005 “Operacija: grad” efforts (Mrakovčić & Pejić, 2023)—became pivotal. What began as a coalition around youth and cultural policy radicalized in response to the Zagreb city government’s prioritization of private over public interests, culminating in the 2006 struggle against privatizing development in Flower Square/Varšavska Street, a conflict emblematic of investor-driven urbanism (Bilić & Stubbs, 2015; Dolenec et al., 2017). As the campaign intensified, the initiative expanded its network and conceptual reach. The National Forum for Space in 2007 connected activists, professionals, and NGOs concerned with spatial justice across Croatia, amplifying local conflicts and elaborating a shared vocabulary of protest. In 2008, the coalition organized the conference “The Neoliberal Frontline: Urban Struggles in Post-Socialist Societies,” published its newsletter in English (Kovačević et al., 2008a), and issued “Operation: City – A Handbook for Life in Neoliberal Reality” in Croatian (Kovačević et al., 2008b). These publications localized critical urban theory, featured debates on spatial planning and privatization, and articulated architects’ potential roles in urban struggle. For a younger cohort of socially engaged architects, they also provided a first systematic encounter with Harvey, right-to-the-city arguments, and the proposition that urbanism is political. Reflecting on coming across the “Operation: City” book by happenstance in their teenage years, one of them recalls that it was “perhaps the first time I realized that there was a field called the politics of space, or spatial politics—that urbanism was not something that simply happens, but something people struggle over” (INT-5). Similar repertoires circulated regionally in dialogue with the Croatian scene. In Belgrade, the Fifth Park initiative (2005–2010) told the story of their attempt to preserve a neighborhood space against private development through the exhibition “Peti Park – A Struggle for the Everyday”; part of their process was a “Right to the City” reading group that discussed Harvey, Lefebvre, Don Mitchell, Neil Smith, and others, which illustrates the connection between theory, community organizing, and neighborhood defense tactics (Belačević et al., 2011). The parallel is instructive: reading circles, exhibitions, and situated research operated as civic tools for legitimizing claims to shared space, while official planning mechanisms continued to enable investor capture.

Institutionally, the architectural field was initially cautious. The Croatian Architects’ Association (CAA) was reluctant to confront

structural critiques of privatization and power, yet the intensity of Varšavska protests left traces in professional understandings of public responsibility. Tactically, the campaign moved through creative disruption, media work, legal challenges, and mass protest; in 2009, Right to the City registered as an NGO to strengthen legal standing. While it did not stop construction, the campaign delayed the project for four years, halved its scale, and pushed the City Assembly to reverse General Urban Plan changes that had enabled the intervention, thereby preventing similar projects in other central blocks (Dolenec et al., 2017).

While Zagreb’s mobilization gathered force, a parallel one took shape in Pula. Beginning with a 2006 workshop at the former military zone Katarina–Monumenti (Jaklenec et al., 2012), the architects who would form Pula Group articulated a counter-vision to privatized tourist mega-projects. Through exhibitions, lectures, and policy critique, they challenged speculative urbanism but were either rejected or ignored by the local authorities (Dragović, 2024; Franceschi, 2013). “The Red Plan of Pula” (Pula Group, 2008) documented protests and proposed planning grounded in transparency, self-organization, and spatial commons; the 2009 “Post-capitalist City” congress—organized with international experimental practices—culminated in “The Pula Declaration,” which called for the communal as “a shared territory, an autonomous zone, a place of new utopias” beyond the public/private binary (Pula Group, 2010a, p. 224). In 2011, Pula Group founded Practice Cooperative, an engineering cooperative that responded to post-2008 austerity and precarity through collective organization, pairing theoretical–activist work with commissioned design and execution.

Reflecting on this period, Pula architects emphasize youthful enthusiasm and volunteerism but also a strategic learning curve. As one Pula Group member put it, the early assumption that “once politicians see the beautiful maquettes of an alternative future, they’ll realise it’s better” proved “an illusion that lasted three months”; in time, they saw that “if we wanted to keep examining, translating, and thinking these things through, it would have to be done outside institutions, largely in conflict and confrontation with the political administration” (INT-2). The civic initiative “I Love Pula – for Muzil,” formed in 2009, opposed the Brijuni Riviera luxury tourism scheme and advanced participatory alternatives (Marčetić, 2012; Pula Group, 2010b). Producing those alternatives was itself unpaid civic labor: lacking any official drawings of the militarized Muzil peninsula, Pula Group organized “a small army” (INT-7) of architecture students to map the area by hand over two summer weeks, and described the activities as funded through “samodoprinos”—the citizens’ contribution to financing community infrastructure in Yugoslav self-management. The hope was, as one of the organizers reflected, that this work would “build knowledge and a collectivity that may later spill into another kind of energy and bring change” (INT-7). These collaborations extended to the National Forum for Space, which linked Pula with Varšavska in Zagreb and the “Srđ is Ours!” campaign in Dubrovnik (Pula Group, 2012a), consolidating a movement landscape to which architects were integral as organizers, researchers, and translators of spatial claims.

Concurrently, the profession’s internal debates sharpened and began to produce more explicitly political forms of professional responsibility. In Istria, members of Pula Group assumed leadership of the CAA’s local chapter in 2011, turning it into a forum for debating architects’ roles in Adriatic coastal struggles (Dragović, 2024; Otvoreni Muzil, 2011). In Split, members of the local chapter’s presidency resigned collectively in 2011, criticizing clientelist relations with city government (Društvo arhitekata Splita, 2011). In Dubrovnik,

the local CAA chapter supported “Srd is Ours!” through expert analyses and exposed planning irregularities that were intended to hide the project’s luxury real-estate ambitions (Bušnja, 2011). As then-CAA president Hrvoje Hrabak later acknowledged, the Association’s limited systemic involvement during Varšavska Street protests was shortsighted, but the momentum it created ultimately generated “a completely new kind of professional elaboration to support civic initiatives” (Sančanin, 2013). The 2010s thus opened a more politicized understanding of professional responsibility *vis-à-vis* the erosion of public space and spatial commons, with the CAA increasingly present in spatial debates. The standing of professional associations as actors in spatial decision-making—and their tendency, in the context of post-socialist transition, to abdicate the defense of public interest—has been analyzed directly by Petovar (2012); read against her writing about the Serbian context, the CAA’s gradual shift from silence to advocacy shows a contrasting case of a professional body recovering its public-interest-oriented role.

Analytically, this phase consolidates architecture as civic praxis under—and sometimes against—NGO-ization pressures by intensifying all three dimensions of the framework: hybrid roles, knowledge infrastructures, and institutional repertoires. Right to the City’s 2009 formal registration is not a shift into donor-driven service delivery, but a tactical move within a repertoire that remained protest-led, public-facing, and coalition-oriented—precisely the hybrid forms that scholarship urges us to recognize beyond narrow NGO categories (Jacobsson & Korolczuk, 2019; Jacobsson & Saxonberg, 2013). Architectural tools (mapping, spatial analysis, professional planning critiques, exhibitions, public counseling) functioned as civic labor that built networks, enhanced spatial literacy, and helped sustain coalitions across cities. The activist infrastructures built around Varšavska, Muzil, and Srd generated formats, alliances, and languages that would later be translated into more purposeful engagement with institutions—professional bodies, participatory procedures, and, eventually, municipal platforms. In short, commons-oriented mobilizations politicized planning while preparing organizational and epistemic groundwork for selective institutional advances.

Between protest and governance: Shifting strategies in contemporary architectural activism (mid-2010s–2020s)

By the mid-2010s, the wave of spatial activism that had emerged in response to privatization, investor urbanism, and top-down planning began to transform. Repertoires forged in the previous decade contributed to more overtly political organizing, first through localized engagements with institutions, and then through municipal platforms. In Dubrovnik, the 2013 referendum led by “Srd is Ours!”—though unable to immediately halt the golf resort—mobilized broad public backing and brought three initiative members into the city council, signaling a passage from protest to parliamentary representation (Srd is Ours, 2014). In Pula, by contrast, the 2014 planning decision that favored luxury tourism despite mass support for “I Love Pula – for Muzil” underscored the limits of movement victories under investor-driven regimes (Matić, 2014). Across cases, activists, including architects, responded by redirecting energy toward building longer-term capacities.

One important victory was the 2014 National Forum for Space campaign that gathered over 500,000 signatures against the highway concession, contributing to the government’s withdrawal of the proposal and demonstrating the power of coordinated, cross-sector mobilization with trade unions (Dolenec et al., 2017; Štiks &

Stojaković, 2021). In Zagreb, actors clustered around Right to the City converged in the municipal platform “Zagreb is Ours!” (2017), which later evolved into the green-left party Možemo! (We can!) and won city-wide elections in 2021. These developments reflected a broader strategic shift: efforts to convert movement repertoires into organizational and political forms capable of acting across arenas.

While some socially engaged architects entered representative politics and municipal structures, others sought to reshape institutional terrain through professional organizations. By 2017, local chapters of the CAA intervened more explicitly in planning debates, often aligning with civil society against predatory developments. The election of Emil Jurcan (Pula Group) and Ana Dana Beroš (ARCHIsquad) to CAA leadership crystallized a program to reform and politicize the profession by building alliances with civic actors and reframing architecture’s role within broader spatial politics. This orientation shaped the 53rd Zagreb Salon (STEALTH.unlimited & Jurcan, 2018), which read the 2008–2018 decade through political economy and ecology rather than through isolated architectural projects, emphasizing community-anchored futures and collaborative roles for architects.

Public-facing venues also served as sites where movement knowledge was translated into professional and civic discourse. Several Croatian contributions to the Venice Biennale of Architecture made community-centered work the centerpiece, framing architecture as connective infrastructure that does not shy away from ethical responsibility (Pula Group, 2012b) and supports collective capacities within civil-public partnerships, a new model of collaboration between public authorities and cultural initiatives (Peračić et al., 2016). The institutionalization of civil-public partnerships signaled attempts to translate movement repertoires into governance forms; however, the uptake of this model remained uneven (Vidović, 2018). Beyond Zagreb, sustained implementation was difficult: resource scarcity, political shifts, precarity and out-migration weakened local alliances, particularly along the coast where deindustrialization and touristification eroded organizing capacity (Dragović, 2024; Travar, 2023). In Rijeka, ambitions to anchor the European Capital of Culture (a title the city held in 2020) in community organizing were curtailed by COVID-19, and subsequent strategies appear oriented toward large infrastructural and logistics agendas with limited citizen involvement (Dokonal, 2022).

Throughout, CAA chapters increasingly acted as intermediaries between citizens and institutions, pressing for more participatory and publicly accountable planning (Dragović, 2024). Confrontation, however, remained part of the repertoire. When “Zagreb Manhattan”—a conglomerate-backed redevelopment promoted by Zagreb’s longtime mayor Bandić—surfaced in 2019, Zagreb Society of Architects (DAZ) publicly opposed the move, convened debates, and criticized non-transparent changes to planning documentation, joining Right to the City and others (Društvo arhitekata Zagreba, 2019a, 2019b; see also International Network for Urban Research and Action [INURA], 2019). The contrast with Varšavska a decade earlier—when professional silence predominated—marks a cultural turn: architectural institutions were now expected to articulate civic responsibility and contest speculative urbanism publicly.

Interviews focusing on this period illuminate how “getting inside” institutions brought a mixture of hope and ambivalence, requiring an alteration of activist tactics. Former street-level organizers who moved into advisory, departmental, or professional roles describe a double task: translating activist languages—right to the city, commons, spatial justice—into administrative routines

(participatory procedures, design briefs), while defending minimum standards under budgetary and legal constraints. Several interviewees frame this work as “trying to prevent more damage” amid legacy contracts, fragmented competencies, and rigid bureaucracy, but they also point to incremental gains: piloting open calls that prioritize public interest, codifying design-quality criteria in tenders, and expanding consultation practices beyond the formal minimum. This insider view supports the article’s broader claim about expert activism as civic activism: architecture-trained experts operationalize repertoires learned in movements—spatial analysis, participatory mapping, coalition-building—into governance instruments, while remaining accountable to communities they previously organized with before entering the city hall. In doing so, they expose the limitations of Schumacher’s (2012) hegemony-first account, in which architectural agency is restricted to translating client-set agendas and political meaning only “counts” once linked to empowered actors within formal politics. Here, political relevance is made, not awaited: architecture as civic praxis, through creating knowledge, supporting coalitions, and engaging with procedures, patiently builds up the very civic forces capable of shifting the agenda.

Meanwhile, the activist landscape continues to evolve in this new setting. As some long-standing networks aged and entered institutions, new generations of architects are still being politicized, and new socially engaged initiatives continue to emerge—examples include *Odaziv* (Response), *Prednji plan* (Foreground), *Društvo i prostor* (Society and Space)—sustaining public dialogue and non-formal knowledge production, alongside architectural theorists who translate critiques of capitalist spatial production for wider audiences (e.g., Cingel, 2023). International pedagogical circuits also mattered: the 2018 European Architecture Students Assembly (EASA) in Rijeka modeled self-organization among students and reinforced activist and interdisciplinary orientations in architectural practice. Interviewees from this cohort treat the socially engaged practices of the 2000s as a reference point, while seeking ways to sustain critical work without perpetual volunteerism or burnout. In this landscape, the existing CAA’s infrastructure remains important as an organizing platform and a starting point for new iterations of engaged practice.

Taken together, the mid-2010s to 2020s reveal a strategic broadening rather than a linear departure from protest. Across cases, architecture as civic praxis persists through a shifting balance of its three dimensions: hybrid roles, knowledge infrastructures, and institutional repertoires. The success is far from guaranteed (e.g., the failure to alter the spatial plans for Muzil and Srd), and once activists enter institutions, their perseverance is constantly tested by bureaucratic rigidities and the tribulations of political organizing within a party (e.g., *Možemo!* in Zagreb). Still, it persists—moving between streets and institutions, supporting community organizing with concrete tools, and converting episodes of contention into civic capacities that do not wait for political validation but constitute it, in precisely the grassroots, capacity-building sense Jacobson and Korolczuk (2019) identify.

Architecture as civic praxis: What the Croatian case contributes

This article has argued that over the last three decades in Croatia, socially engaged architects shifted the relationship between expertise, publics, and institutions by turning architectural knowledge outward as civic labor—organizing communities, building capacities, and translating movement repertoires into

institutional procedures. The analytical value of the Croatian case is an empirically grounded contribution that widens what counts as civil society in CEE by specifying how expert activism operates as civic activism, and by identifying mechanisms through which civic capacities endure beyond episodes of protest. Across the three phases traced here, architecture as civic praxis persists through a shifting balance of hybrid roles, knowledge infrastructures, and institutional repertoires.

First, the case advances a more precise account of expert activism in CEE. Rather than treating architects as technocrats or as a classic “epistemic community” quietly advising elites, it shows networks of experts acting with communities and through institutions, intervening in how spatial problems are known, named, and governed. This outward orientation destabilizes the binary that opposes NGO-ized service delivery to contentious politics: architects move between repertoires (research, mapping, planning workshops, exhibitions) and arenas (streets, cultural venues, professional bodies, municipal platforms), producing effects visible in procedures (expanded consultation practices and rules), professional norms (a politicized CAA), and political outcomes (civic coalitions and municipal platforms). In this sense, the Croatian case deepens CEE civil-society debates by demonstrating that “citizen-experts” in clientelist systems can strengthen civic struggles not primarily through privileged access to policymaking, but by communicating with the wider public, organizing communities, and building shared vocabularies that make spatial knowledge more accessible and usable in contestation.

Second, the article specifies the importance of architectural knowledge production as civic infrastructure. Maps, planning analyses, readers, exhibitions, and theory written for broader audiences function as civic tools: they scrutinize how space is produced, make decision-making processes legible, and build a shared language through which communities and movements can articulate claims and contest official narratives. Their value lies in their continued circulation and reuse, which allows critiques, methods, and reference points to travel across sites and years. This perspective also raises practical questions about what educational frameworks and movement-based support are needed to maintain, update, and build on such tools across cycles of contention.

Third, the findings contest the view (e.g., Schumacher) that architectural political work becomes meaningful only when empowered political actors take it up. The Croatian case shows the reverse: political relevance is made through organizing, knowledge work, and the gradual construction of procedural tools and coalitions that enable the translation of contested claims into actionable programs. When municipal power in Zagreb shifted in 2021, activists-turned-public servants could act and introduce new policy (in spatial planning, land use, and public services) because civic infrastructures—and the repertoire of purposeful institutional engagement—had already been built within movements, before any stable “hegemony” was secured.

These claims have limits. Institutional entry revealed hard constraints—legacy contracts, legal obstacles, budget lines—that activists hoping to change the system from within ran up against. At the same time, civic networks lost some of their prominent organizers to elected office and public institutions, leaving the independent scene with less capacity to articulate new progressive demands and to keep producing knowledge and politics from below. The uneven geography of capacity in Croatia underscores that infrastructures require ecologies: organizations dense enough to reproduce themselves by renewing labor, shared vocabularies, and supportive regional and national frameworks. The article therefore proposes

reframing “failure” (lost civic campaigns; partial municipal reforms) as diagnostic—an indicator of where civic infrastructures are thin and what is needed to strengthen them.

For theory and CEE debates, this implies, first, a conceptual widening of civil society: treating expert activism as a core form of civic action, rather than an outlier. This brings socially engaged architects and other professionals with spatial knowledge fully into civil-society analysis and recognizes them for the civic labor they perform, rather than reducing them to expert “stakeholders.” Second, analysis should focus on mechanisms. The three mechanisms outlined here—expert activism as civic activism, knowledge production as civic infrastructure, and purposeful institutional engagement—offer analytic tools for other CEE settings, extending standard typologies (advocacy, service delivery, grassroots contention) with processual accounts of how civic capacity is built and sustained. They also refine urban-movement scholarship by showing how the “right to the city” becomes actionable through concrete repertoires, tools, and procedures.

For architecture, the case legitimizes architecture as civic praxis: strategic, situated, collective labor that does not await political validation but helps constitute it. Its legacies are not just buildings or plans, but vocabularies, procedures, and alliances that reconfigure how urban futures are imagined and decided. In an era of polycrisis, this is a disciplined ambition: to treat architectural knowledge as a civic resource, calibrated to organize communities, prioritize public interest, and make room, materially and politically, for more just urban life.

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