

# TENSIONS OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN POST-SOCIALIST CITIES: THE CASE STUDY OF COMMUNITY –BASED INITIATIVE FOR PRESERVATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF OPEN PUBLIC SPACE IN BANJA LUKA

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### ABSTRACT

Fundamental institutional reforms, as well as changes in the political, economic, and social system, are the cause of the very complex and dynamic urban development of post-socialist cities. The transition from the single-party socialist political system into the system of parliamentary democracy and the decentralisation of public state institutions and administration led to a greater responsibility of the local community for the creation of urban policies. The reduced role of the state in the economic system, the established capitalist principles of private ownership and market-lead economy have significantly influenced changes in the management of urban development, which is mainly driven by short-term goals and private interests. In conditions where local communities have insufficient financial resources to implement public policies, the role of the private sector in urban development becomes dominant, and the needs of citizens are neglected. Due to the low level of involvement of civil society in the decision-making process of urban planning, which is only declarative, but also due to the non-transparency of the process itself, it is also evident that citizens are not interested in participating in planning of urban development. This often results in the emergence of urban resistance movements and non-acceptance of imposed planning solutions.

This paper deals with the problem of the “bottom-up” planning approach in the transformation of post-socialist cities. The aim of the paper is to point out the complexity of the process of post-socialist transformation of cities and to re-examine the role of civil society initiatives in the urban planning process. The paper presents a case study of the action of a civil initiative with the aim of preserving and transforming open public space in a residential area in the centre of Banja Luka. The presented example indicates the importance of informal and formal forms of self-organisation of citizens for strengthening social inclusion, improvement of neighbourhood and preservation of community interests. Finally, the example indicates the need to change the current planning approach and develop new planning tools aimed at achieving a higher level of citizen participation in the planning process and long-term social goals of the sustainability of the urban development of post-socialist Banjaluka.

KEYWORDS *\_ post-socialist cities, urban transformation, community-based initiative, Banjaluka*

## Introduction

Different actors with diverse interests and level of social and political power shape and direct urban development worldwide. In this uneven balance of power, needs of citizens are not recognized or are completely ignored, even in urban planning systems of democratically developed societies. On the other hand, active participation of the public in decision-making process is of greatest importance for creating public values, achieving socially sustainable solutions and better quality of life in cities, and avoiding the failure of top-down urban planning approach. Many researchers agree that meaningful participation and community engagement, which foster a positive relationship between a government and the public in decision-making process are the imperatives of contemporary democratic society (Maricic et al., 2018) and solution for key global problems (Poljak Istenič and Kozina, 2020). This assumption brings public participation as a priority topic within the urban planning studies.

The efficacy of public participation is particularly challenging in urban planning system of post-socialist countries, particularly in non-EU member states like Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this country democratic principles are more slowly adopted and the transition to a democratized open-market society is still ongoing due to war in the 1990s and isolation on the global scene. Post-socialist urban planning has been influenced by a slow transition from protected and highly directed economies to systems based on competition, international trade, and free markets (Keresztély and Scott, 2012). Also, local governments have acquired wider administrative responsibilities and a new political importance due to decentralization, what has reinforced the political power of new political elites and business interests (Keresztély and Scott, 2012). The reduced role of the state in the economic system, the established capitalist principles of private ownership and market-lead economy have significantly influenced changes in the management of urban development, which is mainly driven by short-term goals and private interests. The main development directions are defined by partial area plans, which are “easily modified without extensive legal wrangling to suit the aspirations of any private developer” (Hirt, 2012: 76). The emerging practice of developers is based on strict profit principles that are usually opposed to proclaimed public interests and “usually do not take care of social justice requirements, subject to which all citizens are entitled to have an access to basic urban services and resources and to enjoy a good quality urban environment” (Cavrić, Toplek and Šiljeg, 2008: 47). In these conditions, top-down approach to citizens’ participation, regulated by law, is applied in urban planning. This approach lacks mechanisms that provide greater citizens engagement and give equal chances to all citizens. Besides, decision-makers are neither motivated to accept participation as method for better governance nor skilled enough to implement it (Poljak Istenič and Kozina, 2020). Involved citizens are just mere passive participants without being able to affect any planning decision.

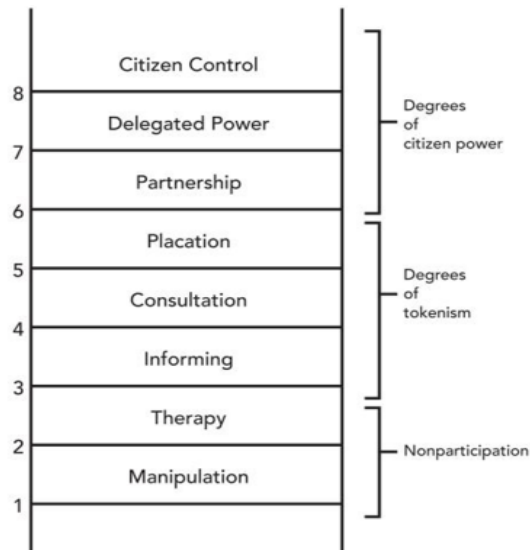
This paper deals with bottom-up planning approach in post-socialist urban context with the aim of deeper understanding of civil activism as a driving force for more active involvement of citizens in decision-making process. The paper is structured as follows. First, theoretical framework for studying citizens involvement in the process of urban planning in post-socialist countries is presented. Then, contemporary trends and tendencies in urban planning of Banjaluka (the second largest city in Bosnia and Herzegovina) are analyzed, including formalized practices of participation and informal bottom-up participatory practices initiated by citizens. This is followed by the case study of community-based initiative for preservation and transformation of open public space in Banjaluka, which is an example of successful self-organization of citizens and meaningful bottom-up tool for active participation in the process of urban development.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PARTICIPATION IN THE URBAN PLANNING PROCESS IN POST-SOCIALIST COUNTRIES**

Meaningful and efficient public participation and community engagement in decision-making process that affects public interests is an important imperative of contemporary democratic society.

Participation is a cornerstone of democracy and a fundamental way to empower citizens. Public participation in urban planning refers to the direct involvement of citizens in compiling plans that might affect them (Maricic et al., 2018). Participation essentially means allowing people to be involved in the planning of urban development and shaping their environment. Similar term often mentioned in literature is community participation which is described as a means for creating opportunities that enable people in a community to influence and shape development processes (Midgley, 1986 in Maricic et al., 2018).

The public participation in urban planning is mainly rooted in the concept of consensus seeking (Bajmócy, 2021), and the main pre-requisite for consensus reaching is constructive dialogue. Due to the many actors, with diverse interests, involved in urban planning (citizens, profit and non-profit organizations, planners, public administrators and private entities), the conflict is inevitable part of the process (Healey, 1997; Forester, 1987 in Maricic et al., 2018). On the other side, participatory planning approach makes use of its stakeholders' knowledge, resources, and commitment (McTague and Jakubowski, 2013 in Poljak Istenič and Kozina, 2020). The most common mechanisms of participation in planning are different activities such as civil debate and communication, consultations, activities division, partnership, etc.



**Figure 1:** Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969)

The most influential theoretical framework for participation in urban planning is described in Arnstein's paper *Ladder of Citizen Participation* (Arnstein, 1969). Arnstein (1969) developed a concept of ladder to emphasise the extent of citizens' power in determining the plan and the level of citizen participation in urban planning (figure 1). At the lowest level of participation (nonparticipation), which refers to two bottom rungs of the ladder *manipulation* and *therapy*, people have no influence in decision-making process. At this lowest level of participation, the aim is not to enable people to participate, but to enable powerholders to "educate" or "cure" them. The medium level of participation (tokenism) refers to the *informing* and *consultation* in which people are allowed to hear and to be heard, but again without any possibility of intervening. The highest level of tokenism is *placation* in which members of the public are allowed to advice, but the powerholders retain the continued right to decide. Finally, at the highest level of participation *citizen control*, power is distributed through the collaboration between public and powerholders. Citizens can enter a *partnership* that enables them to negotiate and engage in exchange with powerholders. At the two topmost rungs *delegated power*

and *citizen control*, citizens obtain the most of or full managerial power. The greatest importance of this eight-rung ladder concept is in pointing out the significant gradations of citizen participation. This provides deeper understanding of the increasing citizens' demands and confusing responses from the powerholders (Arnstein, 1969). Many other authors based their research on Arnstein's theory. Starting from different levels of participation, Anokye (Anokye, 2013) introduced main participatory approaches: the higher transformative, the lower instrumental, and mixed approach. In transformative approach, which correspond to Arnstein's *citizen control* rungs, there is a powerful public involvement, and this approach uses bottom-up strategies for information flow. Instrumental approach advocates for the top-down communication with no effort for consensus building. The main factors that affect which model is applied in participation system are socio-cultural, economic, situational, and developmental factors (Neysmith and Dent, 2010 in Anokye, 2013). However, socio-cultural factors are the most important factors in determining an individual's willingness to participate.

Even the theory and practice of participation have been integral part of the urban planning practice for decades, in post-socialist countries it gains attention only in the framework of EU accession process and urban planning requirements imposed by the EU funds. This is the reason why the great legacy of post-socialist countries are lack of participation and top-down planning approach. Participation is usually present at the level of non-government organizations and civil initiative activities (Svirčić Gotovac et al., 2020). The question of participation is even more challenging in non-EU countries with less developed democracy. The position of citizens is weak "in triangle of business, authorities and politicians, and citizens" (Maier, 2012). Citizens are formally involved in planning process but are passive participants who are assigned the role of data and information providers. They can be heard but have no influence on decision-making process. This tokenism level of participation stems from the legacy of socialism in which social equality, collectivism and economic prosperity were main paradigm of development, while political freedom was not advocated. Unfamiliarity with democracy is the socio-cultural reason for the lack of civic will to participate in development projects. Besides, weak participation (nonparticipation) is positively correlated with economic development, which is lower in post-socialist countries (Hafner Fink, 2012 in Poljak Istenič and Kozina, 2020).

Nevertheless, results of the studies conducted in post-socialist countries are indicating that the extend of the weak participation has started to change gradually and that more interest groups will be represented in planning process (Maier, 2001). In Arnstein's terminology this is understood as *climbing the ladders*. According to Maier (2001) the process of strengthening the participatory planning is two-dimensional. The first dimension refers to gaining recognition of "weaker" participants, while the other refers to the changing of the power relations. The same author highlights that the effective participatory approach is learning processes for all interest groups, and it implies combination of bottom-up and top-down initiative.

## **THE RISE OF BOTTOM-UP INITIATIVES IN POST-SOCIALIST URBAN CONTEXT OF BANJALUKA**

Banjaluca is the second largest city in Bosnia and Herzegovina and political, financial, administrative, university and cultural centre of one of the entities of the country- Republic of Srpska. As many other post-social cities Banjaluka is the place of dynamic socio-economic and spatial transition and transformation. In socialism, Banjaluka had a well-earned international reputation of the Yugoslav industrial and green city with a vast range of open spaces, and today is a city of different administrative and political shifts that largely influenced its urban development (Špirić, 2018). The increased role of local administration, capital principles of private ownership and marked-lead local economy have brought urban changes which are characterised as changes exclusively for the benefit of private capital or investors urbanism. The role of the private sector, whose only aim is profit, becomes dominant in management of urban development, which is the reason why places of public interest are shrinking. This phenomenon is the cause of the increasing dissatisfaction of citizens of Banjaluka

whose needs are neglected, and voices rarely heard. With the aim of better understanding of less balanced power between all stakeholders of urban development it is important to re-examine current trends and tendencies in public participation in Banjaluka.

Since strategic planning document Urbanistic plan of the city of Banjaluka is missing, urban development is commonly based on preparing the implementing planning documents (preparing physical and urban planning documents as regulatory plans, urban planning and design and parcelling out plans). Important questions are in which phase of a planning or policy process stakeholders are invited, and in which role, and what degree of participation should be aimed for (Edelenbos et al., 2021).

The main legal act that regulates participatory planning in Republic of Srpska is Law on Spatial Planning and Construction (2013, 2015) which implies that the public is informed through the public enquiry prior to preliminary draft preparation. The public has 15 days to express its attitude towards exposed documents. The exposed documents include a decision of the City Assembly with text that provides an explanation of initiative, an excerpt of strategic planning document and drawing of a pre-existing state. After the closing date of the informing the public without effective collaboration, the process of initial program setting is completed, and planners start with preparing the preliminary draft. During public insight into the draft plan, the public is allowed to make objections to the plan proposal within the 30 days. After public insight is closed, the public is invited to a discussion about objections filed to the proposed plan. Planning practice dealing with implementing planning documents indicates that plan proposal prepared in accordance with initial program, shall not be substantially transformed in the final stage of the planning process regardless of public opinion. This means that the urban planning process in Banjaluka applies extremely top-down method of participation with superior position of local government. In addition, only two formal forms of public participation are public insight and public discussion on draft plan. Since informal participation is not legally binding, alternative tools for motivating all stakeholders to get involved in compiling plans do not exist.

Besides formal obstacle, the other obstacle is planning professionals and their "disinterest, mistrust, scepticism, animosity, arrogance and fear to connect with citizens and include their opinion, knowledge and wishes in plan making" (Maricic et al., 2018: 9). Planners work for clients with private goals, and they tend to ignore public opinion and omit citizens' demands. On the other hand, there is a lack of theoretical and methodological knowledge about formal and informal tools and techniques for involvement of citizens in urban planning process. In these circumstances, there is a great distrust in institutions and citizens perceive the process as non-transparent and often are not willing to participate.

Despite the transition to democratic society, planning practice in Banjaluka is not developing into effective planning with meaningful public participation. Yet, as response to top-down participatory process many local civil initiatives with different impact and performances begin to develop and grow during the last decade. Community-based initiatives, as a specific kind of civic engagement, are common urban phenomenon in developing countries, due to weak state and governance structures, corruption, and scarce (financial) resources (Edelenbos et al., 2021). These initiatives are a form of "self-organization in which citizens mobilize energy and resources to collectively outline and implement projects aimed at providing public goods or services for their community" (Edelenbos et al., 2021: 1692). They arise from dissatisfaction or complaints about governmental policy or actions, or from "nonaction" due to the budget cuts. The growing consciousness of the residents of Banjaluka, that resulted in urban movements and community-based initiative, gradually changes the balance of power. Local actors (society, stakeholder groups or NGOs), confronted with local government decisions, are self-organizing to make a collective action against imposed plans. This bottom-up approach is gaining an extreme form of participation- organized, voluntary and independent. The most prominent initiatives in Banjaluka are, i.e., "Park je naš!" ("Park is ours!"), "Ne damo Gradjiš!" ("Gradjiš belongs to us!"), "Rekreativna zona Banja Luka" ("Recreational zone Banja Luka"), "Gradjanska inicijativa BORIK" ("Civil society initiative BORIK") etc. One of the most successful initiatives in which driving force were residents, and the one that indeed made a difference was Civil society initiative "Gradiš".

## THE CASE OF COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVE “GRADIŠ”

Community-based initiative “Građiš” is a decade-long initiative for preservation of open public place located on the roof of the underground bomb shelter in Sime Šolaje Street in city centre in Banjaluka. This public place popularly named “Građiš” or “Građa” has been an improvised children’s playground in a residential neighbourhood for decades. Even it was just a concrete surface and didn’t look like playground from picture books with greenery and swings, it was the only playground they had (figure 2).



**Figure 2:** “Građiš” as the roof of the underground bomb shelter

The story about this initiative started in 2011 when children’s playground should have been converted into a parking with 74 parking spots, which was in accordance with the valid Regulation plan Centre adopted in 2007. In September 2011 everything was ready for “levelling” and the excavators were already on the site. A group of boys and girls, who didn’t want a parking lot but a real playground, were seating in front of excavators during the day, shouting “We don’t give up on Građiš!”, and scattering building material at night. Soon after children received the support of their parents and other tenants, who joined them in a peaceful and almost everyday protests. Besides, they signed many petitions and addressed them to the city authorities. With the help of some media that reported daily on the events on the playground and the Ombudsman for Children’s Rights of the Republic of Srpska who met with city officials, this civil resistance paid off after a few months and the City Administration initially abandoned the idea of using Građiš as a parking lot. On this occasion they made promise to the citizens that the amendment of Regulation plan would be initiated and new children’s playground would be built. This decision marked the beginning of more significant operation of the community-based initiative.

Although the promised playground was not built the citizens did not give up their struggle for many years afterwards. In the following years citizens organized many events and activities, but this time with the help of formal civil society organizations from Banjaluka. In September 2015 an international public event PARKing Day was celebrated at Građiš place with music, poetry, frisbee throwing, drawing and playing social games. This is the event, organized by Centre for Environment, in which citizens, artists and activists together temporarily transform a public parking lot into a public space accessible to all citizens. The aim of celebrating PARKing Day at this site was to point out the growing need for open public spaces and to start a public discussion about how public spaces are created. The Organizer wanted to show what Građiš place would look like if there was a park on it. Next year in December, Centre for the Environment with few more organizations organized a public forum “Citizens build the Building” with the aim of presenting the results of the survey on the development and design proposal for this public space. The forum was also attended by representatives of the City Administration who came to hear (once more) the needs and problems of the citizens of this

neighbourhood. During the seven-day survey 165 citizens were questioned, and the results have shown that only 6.1% of citizens are in favour of building a parking lot at this location, over 77.6% of them are in favour of a children's playground, and a large number also suggest occasional activities that could be held at Građiš, such as creative workshops, a flea market, clothing exchange, humanitarian actions and an organic food market.

In July 2017 the same civil society organization invited all citizens to make additional effort towards transformation of this site into children's playground and a space for young people through art and drawing floor murals. This action named "Građani grade građevinu" ("Citizens are building the building") was conducted within the framework of initiative "Naš prostor" ("Our space") which goal is to promote a greater citizen participation in the process of drafting and adopting spatial planning documentation, ranging from individual parcels, through local communities to city territory. Similarly, In July 2020 one-day activities of the Graffiti Jam event were organized by several organizations from Banjaluka with the aim of raising awareness of the importance of preserving green areas and children's playgrounds. Despite all these activities, and long after 2011, Građiš has not been reconstructed and converted into playground and green area. On the contrary, very often it serves as an informal parking lot, which makes citizens to take photos of cars and send them to the municipal inspection through the citizen patrol application.

After almost 10 years of struggle, the Mayor of Banjaluka announced that the construction of the children's playground is planned for 2019. The playground was supposed to be part of the green roof project which should have been the largest green roof in BiH. Since the city was not able to finance the project and find donations this initiative failed again, and the issue of conceptual design continued in the following years. At the beginning of 2020 city officials and architects presented new design for park and playground. This design solution included 10 parking spots and was presented as "compromised solution". The citizens were explicit about the parking and thus rejected the new design proposal. Since then, the new design hasn't been completed.

Meanwhile, new Regulation plan of part of the central area of Banjaluka was adopted in 2018. The playground on the Građiš site is finally planned by this implementation document, which was principal goal of community-based initiative. However, the plan envisages the construction of a large high-rise residential complex on the neighbouring plot, which, in the opinion of this community representatives, would additionally impair the quality of life in this settlement. Due to the formal irregularities in the adoption of this plan and based on the initiative of the residents of this settlement, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Srpska declared the Decision on the adoption of the plan unconstitutional. This means that the Regulation Plan from 2007 is still in force.



**Figure 2:** "Građiš" as "Citrus Park"

Finally, the story about Građiš gets an epilogue in July 2022. The roof of underground bomb shelter was designed and decorated as the colour park "Citrus Park" (figure 3). The park, inspired by vibrant colours and citrus fruits, is divided into three functional zones: sport zone, the children's zone and the free zone. Although the primary requirements of the community were not met in terms of creating a green oasis with an equipped playground, this compromise solution was approved by the residents. The case of Građiš is example of persistent community-based initiative which had power to preserve open public place and prevent it from becoming parking. This is the reason why this case is a symbol of the success of the activism initiated by children.

## CONCLUSIONS

Public participation in urban planning of post-socialist cities is mainly rhetorical and doesn't have any influence on the power relations. It is conditioned by top-down planning model with superior position of local government. Results of the analysis of urban planning process in city of Banjaluka indicate the deficiency of the formal planning system recognised through the lack of sufficient planning tools for motivating all stakeholders to get involved in compiling plans. The only two formal tools for public participation are public insight and public discussion on draft plan, while informal alternative tools don't exist. This means that people are informed about plan proposal only when it is already drafted, which is one of the reasons why they are not interested in participation. Yet, in last ten years new actors emerging in urban context of Banjaluka are able to articulate group interests, including the interests of groups negatively impacted by urban transformation processes. Such example is community-based initiative "Građiš" for preservation of open public place in city centre which was raised in 2011 and finally got epilogue in 2022. Even this case showed a limited role of civil initiative in urban planning process, it is a symbol of persistent activism and urban resistance. This is the initiative in which citizens' self-organizational capacity improved over time and was gradually built through small-scale and place-making activities, what is the reason why this community gain more credibility in negotiations with city officials.

Considering the above, it can be argued that there is a need for more transformative participatory process in which participants are equals in terms of power, resource and voice (Poljak Istenič and Kozina, 2020. p. 33). This points to the need for improvement of legal framework and introduction of formal and informal planning tools that can help planners to identify relevant stakeholders and empower citizens to take an active role in development process. Only substantial informing of the public at the initial stage of planning process using adequate visual and physical methods may assure constructive debates, harmonisation of interests and sustainable solutions that meet the needs of (almost) all the stakeholders. Finally, it is recognised that citizen activism and community-based initiatives are powerful transformative force in strengthening the bottom-up planning approach. To be more than "just" credible and to be able to continue "climbing the ladder" civil initiatives need to be proactive and opportune.

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