FORUM THEATRE – ASSESSING OPENNESS TO TEMPORARY PARTICIPATORY USE PRACTICES OF THE SOMEȘUL MIC RIVER AREA IN CLUJ- NAPOCA, ROMANIA

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Abstract

We present the research results after administering a questionnaire survey about perceptions of the forum theatre as a participatory temporary use practice of the Someșul Mic River area in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The study aim was assessing inhabitants' willingness to get involved into the forum theatre activity, putting it into practice and proposing solutions for riverside development. We concluded that the forum theatre could be used to promote ideas and community-based solutions for urban renewal.

Keywords: forum theatre, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, voluntary activities, urban regeneration, territorial planning

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FORUMSKO GLEDALIŠČE – PRESOJANJE ODPRTOSTI ZA PRAKSE ZAČASNE PARTICIPATIVNE RABE OB REKI SOMEȘUL MIC V MESTU CLUJ-NAPOCA, ROMUNIJA

Izvleček

V članku predstavljamo rezultate raziskave o percepcijah forumskega gledališča kot prakse participativne začasne rabe ob reki Someșul Mic v mestu Cluj-Napoca, Romunija. Namen raziskave je bil presoditi pripravljenost prebivalcev za vključitev v dejavnosti forumskega gledališča, njegovo uresničitev v praksi in predlaganje rešitev za razvoj obrečnega prostora. Zaključujemo, da lahko forumsko gledališče uporabimo za spodbujanje idej in na skupnosti temelječih rešitev za urbano prenovo.

Ključne besede: forumsko gledališče, Cluj-Napoca, Romunija, prostovoljne dejavnosti, urbana regeneracija, teritorialno načrtovanje

1 INTRODUCTION

In this exploratory study on inhabitants' willingness to use forum theatre in urban renewal activities we considered that it might be a possible temporary use and planning practice and an occasion for identifying other possible ones for the Someșul Mic area, in Cluj-Napoca city, Romania. The reason for approaching this subject is that of underlining the necessity of urban regeneration practices, considering social inclusion (i.e. irrespective of age, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation), discussing sensitive topics and community building. We analyse the opportunity of implementing a temporary use of the territory in a non-formal framework (i.e. the forum theatre), focusing on improving relations among those using the riverbanks of the Someșul Mic and on territorial planning ideas for the respective area.

Why would it be useful to organise a forum theatre activity nearby the Someșul Mic? This would enable gathering in one place the voices of many people and the opportunity to listen to them, where communication limits among categories of people could be effaced. Forum theatre could be a temporary or long-term leisure and creative space for non-formal activities benefiting the local community. This will be further discussed below.

The problem we identified was the limited knowledge about inhabitants' willingness to get involved into voluntary cooperation activities based on arts (i.e. the forum theatre) in urban open public space, such as the riverbanks of the Someșul Mic, in a context in which non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are becoming increasingly active aiming at environmental-friendly practices and at social revitalization and cohesion. The

study aim was assessing inhabitants' willingness to participate in the forum theatre activity and to propose solutions for riverside development. The research questions were the following: What are the population's opinions about their possible involvement into a forum theatre activity? What are their proposals for riverbank activities?

Until now, there has not been implemented any large size top-down project by the local public administration. However, the urban space along the river has already been hosting a series of bottom-up initiatives (mostly introduced by NGOs), involving inhabitants in transforming and experiencing the river.

Thus, the public space along the river is re-appropriated, while socio-spatial and cultural practices, including building temporary architecture and creating community events (Samson, 2010; Someș Delivery, 2020; Veer, Moga, Mateiu, 2015) enable the construction of belonging (Bell, 1999). Our proposal of implementing the forum theatre could be one of these activities, in the framework of happenings and temporary interventions having the function of urban catalysts (Oswalt, Overmeyer, Misselwitz, 2013), targeting the riverside community and lifestyle through everyday urban rituals (Tiwari, 2010).

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Urban regeneration

Experiencing the place of daily living can be realised through various means. H. Lefebvre (1991) defines this lived space as the space of everyday life, where social relations take place, a space of representation, while E. Soja (1991) calls it third space and defines it as experienced space (the mixture between H. Lefebvre's perceived and conceived space). Studying how people experience space is done by geography among other sciences (architecture, urbanism, psychology, etc.) and this can be realised by exploring inhabitants' practices in relation to places. Such practices include activities of functional reconversion or of urban regeneration. In such a context, the co-production of an architectural culture and of community values is crucial.

Urban regeneration is defined as the large-scale process of adapting the built environment according to various degrees of direction from the state (Jones, Evans, 2008, p. 2, quoted by Ilovan et al., 2019, p. 330). Nevertheless, a series of factors other than the state have been considered so far for the redevelopment of urban Romania, with scientific debates on the topics of territorial identity (Ilovan et al., 2016; Ilovan, Voicu, Colcer, 2019), of resilience (Bănică, Muntele, 2015; Bănică, Istrate, Muntele, 2017), in the context of the social economy and volunteering (Drăgan, Popa, 2017), of spatial restructuring (Jucu, 2016) or of industrial restructuring (Voiculescu, Jucu, 2016).

Although urban regeneration was approached by pointing out the need of qualified professionals (Ilovan, 2018; Ilovan et al., 2019; Veer, Moga, Mateiu, 2015), through

our research, we aim to show that citizens' involvement is equally important for improving the urban area in both a creative and sustainable manner. Therefore, educational experiments for the young to experience urban regeneration through direct involvement into projects (Buzasi, Csete, 2017; Caneparo, Bonavero, 2016; Ilovan, 2018; Ilovan et al., 2019; Sassano et al., 2017) and for the other age groups, focusing on participants' cooperation in finding solutions to local community's needs, are paramount for empowering people to make their urban planning, economic, social and cultural choices, where the civil society has a say (Potluka, Špaček, 2019).

Romanian experience in urban regeneration, however recent, is varied enough to offer the knowledge background and tools for successful outcomes (Asociația Komunitas, 2015; Medeșan, Panait, 2017). Such an educational experiment for the larger public is the forum theatre that could be assimilated as an innovative urban regeneration workshop or activity mobilizing people and ideas.

2.2 Forum theatre as a participatory method for urban regeneration

Forum theatre, besides image theatre, invisible theatre, newspaper theatre, the rainbow of wishes (Boal, 2017) and legislative theatre, is among the main forms of the Theatre of the Oppressed (Borș, 2017). It is known as the Boal method of theatre and therapy, when internalised oppressors live in the head of the oppressed (Boal, 2017, p. 26, note 1). The Theatre of the Oppressed is a concept promoted by *Augusto Boal (1931-2009)*, Brazilian playwright, inspired by *Paulo Freire (1921-1997)*, the founder of the critical pedagogical movement (Boal, 2017). Between 1960 and 1980, many countries in Latin America (Brazil, Argentina, Peru, etc.) coped with poverty, dictatorship, and conflicts. In 1971, Boal, as a cultural activist, was exiled to Argentina by the Brazilian military regime. There, in 1973, he published *Theatre of the Oppressed* and founded the first companies and centres of Theatre of the Oppressed in Peru, Ecuador and Argentina, involving workers, the poor and inmates. After returning to Brazil, in 1986, he set up in Rio de Janeiro the *Theatre Centre of the Oppressed* (Borș, 2017).

Forum theatre may be performed in two ways: (a) a script prepared by actors or non-actors is used and (b) the play is based on improvisation. Any participant may step in a situation presented on stage. The dynamics of the entire activity is obvious when participants get more and more involved in the unfolding of the play. When participants act as stage characters, the idea of forum is amplified: the moment becomes a public debate on societal problems.

Forum theatre type activities were implemented in schools, hospitals and in the street. Organising debates about various topics (human trafficking, domestic violence, substance abuse, corruption, etc.), seen from different perspectives, attracted researchers' attentions (i.e. psychologists, sociologists, geographers), leading to an interdisciplinary approach to forum theatre. It was adopted as an educational component of

managing daily issues about self-esteem (Howard, 2004), refugees and the homeless (Day, 2002), social problems (Sanders, 2004), and the practice and ethics of medical professions (Garett, 2010). We considered some of these topics for our questionnaire.

Organisation stages of the forum theatre activity are script development, unfolding the play without solving the problem, the forum, and interventions (Boal, 2006). Its components are: the dialogue between Joker and participants (Day, 2002; Grădinaru, 2013), preparing the moments based on a script that does not involve solving the problem (Thambu, Balakrishnan, 2014), participants memorise the script for the stage moment considering body language, customs, communication capacity with other participants (Passila et al., 2013), capacity to interpret the moment by activating critical thinking and one's feelings for other participants (Rae, 2013; Reiman, Dotger, 2008), making decisions based on interactions among participants (Jung, 2008), transforming forum theatre into a form of public art on prevailing topics such as vice, social bias and ignorance (Levy, 1997), controlling emotions and capacity to accomplish this intervention (Thambu, Balakrishnan, 2014).

3 STUDY AREA

The study area is represented by the riverbanks of the Someșul Mic, in the city of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, an urban area with more than 300,000 inhabitants and a multicultural heritage (Figures 1 and 2). From west to east, on a length of over 15 km, the Someșul Mic river crosses the city of Cluj, which is situated in the convergence area of two valleys: of the Someșul Mic River and of the Nadăș River, and of other shorter valleys (Pop, 2007, p. 124). The corridor of the Someșul Mic River is outflanked by Feleac Massif and by the Transylvanian Depression on the right, while the Hills of Cluj and Dej outflank this corridor on the left, respectively (Pop, 2007, p. 71). Because of the infrastructure works, this urban part of the river divides the city. Returning the river to the city or turning citizens' face towards the river and to adapting practices in using it has been an endeavour of architects and urban planners recently (Mitrea, 2011), in the public sector (i.e. the public administration of Cluj) and in the private one (NGOs such as miniMASS Association and its initiative *Someș Delivery* and PRACTICA architecture office studio – the latter having won a contest for implementing an urban regeneration project of restoring the river).

Figure 1: Study area: Someşul Mic River in Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

Figure 2: Location of study area within Romania.

The proposal to activate the riverbanks of the Someșul Mic was considered starting with 2015, with the *Someș Delivery project* (Someș Delivery, 2020a). Organisers decided to have many activities attracting people to varied leisure spaces, using their imagination to combine natural and human-made components within creative areas. During the five editions of *Someș Delivery*, the following activities were organised: theatre, film projections, extending the riverbanks through temporary architecture (Figures 3 and 4), exhibitions, interactive games, etc. Most of their activities consist of events and territorial arrangements aiming at: knowing better the area, informing the larger public and the inhabitants nearby, transforming places, organising and taking part at new experiences, improving population's experience of space, reconnecting to the river and improving

connections among citizens in the urban area, entertainment, creating safe, comfortable and permanent access to the river and its banks, providing protected places for small scale events, offering a new perspective upon the river (i.e. a source of inspiration due to its resources), setting up an environment for dialogue about planning, maintaining and improving the biodiversity of the river and riverbanks, creating pedestrian connections, involving the community in all transformations, raising awareness and enabling them to understand the potential of the area (Someș Delivery, 2020b).

Figure 3: Temporary architecture on the Someșul Mic riverbanks in 2018; upper right corner: connection between Armătura Park and the Nadăș River, tributary of the Someșul Mic, confluence (photo: G. Moțco).

Figure 4: Dwellings nearby the Someșul Mic riverbanks and Armătura Park, in 2018 (photo C. Ursu).

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Methods and research material

Data collecting and processing was realised through quantitative and qualitative research methods. We administered a questionnaire survey on Facebook, from the 27th of June 2019 to the 7th of March 2020. Respondents live in Cluj-Napoca. The questionnaire was conceived to be addressed to any inhabitant of the city or user of the Someș riverbank. Such a questionnaire could be addressed in the future to those living nearby the riverbanks for narrowing down the group of users, depending on the location of a proposed activity at a certain moment.

The semi-structured questionnaire aimed to enable us to assess whether such an activity – forum theatre – raises the local community's interest. At the beginning of the questionnaire, we presented how the forum theatre activity could be organised. Next, we considered the following aspects that we should assess: population's involvement, topics, relationships among social groups based on age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and the relevance of riverside regeneration events for the respondents. We asked respondents to come with proposals for temporary activities in the river area. Personal data about respondents were collected (age, education, occupation, ethnicity). The research material is represented by the answers (of 118 respondents) to the online questionnaire. We interpreted its results using textual analysis and graphical representations.

In addition, we searched for information about urban regeneration in general and in Romania, about participative practices in territorial planning and about forum theatre. Field trips in the city enabled us to identify possible locations for the forum theatre activity. Considering the qualitative methods, the discourse analysis was used to analyse the answers to the open question in the questionnaire survey.

4.2 Participants

There are small differences between the demographic structure of the sample and the demographic structure of the city of Cluj-Napoca. Thus, one may consider this a limitation of the study in terms of representativeness of the sample. 6% more women participated than men. The most open to participate at the survey were the young, accounting for 58% of the respondents (Figure 5), while the young population of the city (15–29 years old) is one third of the total population. It may be concluded that they are the most willing for creative activities based on improvisation and spontaneity, as the questionnaire announced in its title and aim description that it focused on a theatre activity. However, this result may be augmented by the fact that the other age groups, and especially the old, have less online access/activity (on Facebook) to get to fill in the questionnaire. Romanians were the majority to answer and 7% were Hungarian ethnics.

Considering respondents' education level, over 50% had a Bachelor's diploma, followed by M.Sc. and Ph.D. graduates (compared with around 40% of the population of the city), then by those with high school education; a small percent graduated secondary school. 46% were employed and 30% were university students having a job. The less represented were pupils, retired persons and the unemployed. G. Raagma (2002, pp. 69–71) showed that those with higher education levels and better paid jobs are more interested in volunteering for their community.

Figure 5: Respondents' age groups.

Source: Answers to the questionnaire survey.

5 RESULTS

The analysis refers to populations' availability to get involved into the forum theatre to discuss personal/societal issues and temporary arrangements of the Someşul Mic area. 77% of the respondents agreed to get involved into forum theatre activities. Concerning *the daily issues to be debated in the forum theatre*, respondents chose mainly corruption, thus reflecting a problem of the Romanian society, while substance abuse was not an issue (Figure 6). This item allowed for multiple answers.

Figure 6: Daily issues.

Source: Answers to the questionnaire survey.

Respondents were open to communicating with others irrespective of their age, race and ethnicity (almost 100%). Most of them agreed to interact with persons having a different sexual orientation to theirs (83%).

Regarding the *importance for the respondents of cultural events organised on the riverbanks*, they considered a 5-point Likert scale where 0 (not at all) up to 5 (very important) were the options. 45% considered these events very important, 26% chose 4, 19% chose 3, 6% chose 2, and 2% of them chose each 1 and 0.

Through an open question, the respondents were asked about their ideas for arranging the riverbanks of the Someșul Mic. Their answers were highly varied. 64 respondents came with new and creative ideas. Several of them were proposed by a similar number of respondents: leisure spaces and activities, sports, theatre, music, festivals and fairs, debates (Figure 7). In the category of *leisure spaces and activities*, we grouped those related to relaxing, walking, having picnics, reading, interactive games, quizzes. Proposals for sports activities included marathons and other sports competitions, cycling, fishing, rowing, sailing, horse riding, and dance. Types of festivals mentioned were the music (modern and folkloric) and culinary ones. One may see that the theatre (for adults or children), was in top three in their hierarchy concerning the activities that the river and its banks could foster. Therefore, considering these answers, the forum theatre is as much an option as the other activities situated at short distance (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Respondents’ proposals for arranging the riverbanks of the Someșul Mic.

Source: Answers to the questionnaire survey.

Involving students and the public into educational activities was a recurrent solution: “thematic outings, debates on educational topics”; “activities for children, maybe also in Școala Altfel [School in Another Way] programme”; “lectures in the open space, conferences”; “ecological education involving students, observing the birds, geographical education”; “round-table type events on various topics, with professionals (non-formal education, biodiversity, cultural heritage)”; “theatre for children”.

However, one respondent objected: “I don’t think that cultural events are appropriate. I propose only activities for leisure and sports”. Nevertheless, one may acknowledge that respondents’ proposals were varied and encompassing multiple categories of activities coming in one answer: “debates, activities for children, observing the local fauna, live music shows, thematic evenings, fairs, workshops”; “walking, cycling routes, places for reading and leisure, thematic circuits featuring various river-crossed urban sections”; “activities for informing the public of Romania’s situation, leisure activities and interactive games for groups”; “organising events (cultural, culinary, with flowers, sports, and music)”.

One respondent pointed out that other factors should have been taken into account when proposing activities, besides the presence of the river: “Considering the geographical area, multicultural events could be organised for getting to know and accept other ethnicities’ traditions and customs”. Similarly, another respondent, besides proposing activities, underlined that it would be useful to consider the example of other rivers and cities: “More film projections, theatre plays, cleaning the Someşul Mic, larger spaces for leisure such as the ones of Mureş, crossing Arad city, or of Tejo in Lisbon”.

Respondents were open to sharing ideas and experiences in the framework of the forum theatre, as it enabled the creation of networks among participants with common interests and joint experiences of collaboration for knowledge production on a certain topic or on related topics.

The social, environmental and economic benefits of the forum theatre could be assessed if it becomes a usual activity in the proximity of the river, promoting both the riverside communities and the river, by involving both the locals and the river. Through the forum theatre, current chances and challenges in riverbank regeneration can be explored, setting the scene for future debates and activities. It can ensure the knowledge and skills necessary in fostering grass-root initiatives. Thus, the critical engagement of the people in participatory bottom-up approaches is promoted, starting with practices of urban/community/place regeneration in the proximity of the river and enabling eventually their informed engagement in urban renewal policies.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The performative act (Thrift, 2008) of the forum theatre could be integrated within the bottom-up initiated spatial practices, encouraging inhabitants’ participation and cooperation in discussing community and societal issues, as well as how such issues could be solved or at least alleviated by using the space provided by the river and activities associated with it, developing inhabitants’ taste and skills for common initiatives (Sennet, 2012). Using the forum theatre to develop other experiential learning practices aiming at urban sustainability, ecology and overall regeneration, as well as constructing community belonging and place-attachment is supported so far by the

total or partial success of other grass-roots initiatives in the city (La Terenuri [At the Playgrounds], Someș Delivery – for instance, with temporary architecture in Armătura Park, H33 among many others – cf. Ilovan et al., 2019 on the Urban Regeneration Workshop in Cluj-Napoca, Romania; Ilovan et al., 2020a, 2020b). Moreover, forum theatre, as a small-scale event, could be organised in Armătura Park (Figure 8), nearby the Someșul Mic and its tributary, the Nădăș.

Through the forum theatre, people develop their intercultural and social competences (to cooperate in a constructive manner, to discuss with each other on sensitive topics, to tolerate the new, the unexpected, to be open to diversity), and spatial ones (i.e. to explore and represent the urban space).

Figure 8: Armătura Park in Cluj-Napoca, appropriate place for the forum theatre, on the Someșul Mic riverbanks, in 2018 (photo: M. Crengăniș).

The aim of our exploratory study was to get insight into population's perceptions of organising or participating at the forum theatre activity, in the framework of activating the riverbanks of the Someșul Mic, in Cluj-Napoca city, Romania. The questionnaire used could be addressed in the future to those living nearby the riverbanks for narrowing down the group of users, depending on the location of a proposed activity at a certain moment.

An innovative approach to discussing current urban regeneration issues, the forum theatre can bring together community leaders, regular inhabitants, activists, cultural associations, practitioners, entrepreneurs, public authorities, etc., in trying to raise population's awareness and empower it by getting involved in answering their needs. The forum theatre could be used successfully to promote social and cultural ideas for urban renewal, while the juxtaposition with the riverbank regeneration of the Someșul Mic brings to the fore an environmental perspective on community-based solutions. In Cluj, cultural innovation can be built on this background to promote cultural and social inclusion in a framework of community governance and urban renewal.

The transferability of this practice to other places, not necessarily nearby rivers, is another strength. Respondents' answers showed that people wanted to discuss their daily problems in a forum theatre and that they could provide various proposals for river and riverbank activities.

Further research should involve more inhabitants while putting the idea of the forum theatre into practice, possibly with the help of volunteering professionals (architects, geographers, sociologists, psychologists, actors, etc.). Thus, the impact of the activity could be assessed on both people and territory.

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FORUMSKO GLEDALIŠČE – PRESOJANJE ODPRTOSTI ZA PRAKSE ZAČASNE PARTICIPATIVNE RABE OB REKI SOMEȘUL MIC V MESTU CLUJ-NAPOCA, ROMUNIJA

Summary

Prispevek obravnava t. i. forumsko gledališče (Boal, 2017) kot mogočo začasno rabo in načrtovalsko prakso na območju ob reki Someșul Mic v mestu Cluj-Napoca (Romunija). Analizira priložnosti za implementacijo začasne rabe prostora znotraj neformalnih okvirov forumskega gledališča, pri čemer se osredotoča na izboljšane odnose med uporabniki obrežij reke Someșul Mic in na ideje za teritorialno načrtovanje na obravnavanem območju.

V okviru raziskave je bilo izvedeno anketiranje prebivalcev mesta Cluj-Napoca, ki se je osredotočalo na njihovo pripravljenost za vključitev v dejavnosti forumskega gledališča. Pokazalo je, da bi se bilo 77 % anketirancev pripravljenih vključiti v tovrstne dejavnosti.

Forumsko gledališče lahko spodbuja udeležbo in sodelovanje prebivalcev v razpravi o skupnostnih in družbenih vprašanjih ter o tem, kako je mogoče ta vprašanja rešiti ali olajšati z uporabo prostora, ki je na voljo ob reki, ter z dejavnostmi, povezanimi z njim, pri čemer se razvija tudi odnos prebivalcev do skupnih pobud. Skozi forumsko gledališče ljudje razvijajo svoje medkulturne in družbene (za konstruktivno sodelovanje, za razpravljanje o občutljivih vsebinah, za toleriranje novega, nepričakovanega in za raznolikost) ter prostorske kompetence (npr. za raziskovanje in reprezentiranje urbanega prostora).

Kot inovativen pristop k razpravljanju o vprašanih urbane regeneracije lahko forumsko gledališče združi voditelje skupnosti, prebivalce, aktiviste, kulturna društva, ljudi iz prakse, podjetnike, javne oblasti itd. v poskusih ozaveščanja in opolnomočenja prebivalstva na ta način, da se odziva na njihove potrebe. Forumsko gledališče je mogoče uspešno uporabiti za promocijo družbenih in kulturnih idej za urbano preno, povezava z regeneracijo obrežja reke Someşul Mic pa postavlja v ospredje okoljsko perspektivo na skupnosti temelječih rešitev.

Ena izmed prednosti te prakse je njena prenosljivost na druga območja. Odgovori anketirancev so pokazali, da si ljudje želijo razprave o vsakodnevnih problemih v okviru forumskega gledališča in da lahko dajo različne predloge za dejavnosti na reki in ob njej. Nadaljnje raziskovanje bi moralo zajeti več prebivalcev, hkrati pa bi bilo treba forumsko gledališče uresničiti tudi v praksi, morda s pomočjo prostovoljcev (arhitektov, geografov, sociologov, psihologov, igralcev ...). S tem bi bilo mogoče ugotavljati vpliv tovrstne dejavnosti tako na ljudi kot na prostor.

(Prevedel Dejan Cigale)