URBAN ACTIVISM IN POST-SOCIALIST CITIES

Tallinn, 14-20 June 2012

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Urban activism – definition

Urban activism is about INTERACTION, ACTIVITY, PARTICIPATION and DISCUSSION.

Urban activism is NOT about putting visual “make-up” on a building it’s about creating social interactive change.

Introduction of the intervention area

PAE DISTRICT IN LASNAMÄE, TALLINN, ESTONIA

Area: 8 ha
Population: 14 002 (for the whole Pae district)
Functions: Residential area, Kindergarten,
Playground for 2/10yrs
Socialist era housing estate
Modernist, Rational Construction
Predominantly rental apartments

Observation:

In the course of the on-site observation the team identified several important characteristics of the area. As a general observation, it was agreed that at first sight the area seems to have reasonable facilities and the living conditions for the residents were at average level, in terms of available public green spaces, modern amenities, play areas and a low traffic density.
Research:

The group decided to approach the task by talking with local residents and made a small informal interviews/research. We tried to find out about the needs and perceptions of the neighbourhood by asking around 10 people a list of pre determined questions.

The questions were focused on the physical environment and the social interactions in the neighbourhood. The survey tried to cover various age categories, ethnicities and gender. Based on the gathered information and the onsite observations, the group identified three major topics of discussion: PEOPLE, ENVIRONMENT and FACILITIES.

Interview Findings

Participant 1
Russian women married to Estonian
- More parking space
- Russian and Estonia people to mix more

Participant 2
Russian women lived in the area for 2 yrs
- Less drug addicts and alcoholics
- Wants a Closed and gated community
- I have no interaction with my neighbours and I am not concerned with them
- The Children have a play area yet there is nowhere to sit but I want it to be in a grassed area with a gate
- Big problem with people not cleaning up after their dogs need for bag dispensers and bins
- Old people are the majority nothing for teenagers

Participant 3
Boy 12 yrs and Girl 14 yrs
- We want a skate ramp we are looking for somewhere to skate

Participant 4
2 Estonian women lived in the area for 16/10 yrs
- Miss place for the dogs to run
- Miss benches we use to have them but drug addicts broke them
- Children have it all here
- Young people go to the city they have nothing here
- People don’t care
- Don’t want to meet neighbours

Participant 5
2 Young Estonian men in late 20 yrs
- Firstly we would kill all Gipsies then the Chinese and the Russians
- Only Stupid people BBQ on the square we want a closed BBQ

Participant 6
Russian Man in 30yrs
- I would like to see a real park in the area
- The City wouldn’t give us a gift and I wouldn’t know what to ask for
Findings:

People:
- Privatisation wanted
- Tension - aggressive forms of nationalism
- No available space for youth (13-18 years old)
- Individual activities in the area
- Predominantly elderly residents
- Very weak social interaction between people

Environment:
- Unsafe
- Green areas
- Disused building and surroundings
- Many dogs (a typical dog for the district)
- Lack of places for real social interaction
- Peaceful but cold
- Privatisation wanted
- "Mae-up" on walls

Facilities:
- Good living conditions
- Some facilities for small children
- Nearby shops
- Need for dog park
- Consumism vs Free entertainment

Communication

Interaction
Problems:

- Minimal social interaction ↔ prejudice
- No rational use of the central area of the district
  - No sitting communal area
  - No youth area (13-18 yrs)
  - No dog facilities

Strategies:

- Strategies/solutions
  - Facilities
    - Outdoor community cinema
    - Sports facilities: Football field; Skate ramp; Table tennis (built by local residents)
    - Bird feeding facilities
    - Dog park with painted fence local resident building initiative
    - Half-fenced sitting area + BBQ
    - Dual use for kindergarten - for teens also in the evening
  - Community activities
    - Guerilla Gardening
    - Vegetable/flower gardening
    - Collective design and building of urban furniture
    - Murals, made by locals
    - Collective painting
    - Discussion chalk board
  - Events
    - Announced through a community newspaper published every 3 months
    - Picnics
    - Free cultural exchange events - music, theatre, concerts etc
    - Workshops allowing people to enable and organising events (empowering)

Long term scenario:

METHODOLOGY

- Creating a network of local residents that could from a group for long term interaction and development of the site, perhaps contacting local House Unions and Kindergarten. Initially formed through workshop development to enable skills, then left to form through their own conviction.
- Finding a local meeting place to facilitate the meetings of the resident group (could be a school or a kindergarten when there are no classes);
- Help accessing and raising funding (local and European). With a NGO such as Linnalabor
**Space intervention**

We intended to create a hand painted message on the roof of a disused building in the middle of the main communal area that is now used irrationally as its overgrown and purposeless. The message had to be viewed by the most of the apartments from the windows with its central location.

The message “Reclaim Your Space” should have been written in both Estonian and Russian to aid discussion for both and to reunite the neighborhood as two functioning entities. The Invitation is extreme in its use of space naturally with its inaccessibility to the general public yet this was a tool we considered to try and make the people think of mapping the space in their own ways on perhaps a ground level, during our field trip we found evidence of guerilla gardening yet on a solo level not a community so the thought is there yet it need to be activated on a community level.

BUT WE FAILED. We did not manage to get on the roof, so we had to look for another solution. We decided to paint the same message on a small old football pitch, close to the same building.

BUT WE FAILED AGAIN. The surface was so dirty that we could not paint anything on it. Then we decided to scratch with sticks our message on the same place.

AND IT WORKED!
The undertaken fieldwork in the neighbourhood (interviews, analysis of the environment, etc), incite the group to think about how important would be to break the daily routine of the neighbours in order to create interaction among them and interaction with the space (the environment) at the same time. The intervention in the space, marked with a message, aims to redefine the space. It means that, abandoned or spaces with no function, could start to have a new meaning. This simple and temporary sign highlights the possibility of change. It also aims to change the point of view of the users of that space. The space that used to be simply a rooftop, is now also a place of communication. In consequence, one space designed long time ago for a specific purpose could change. On the other hand, the message itself is communicating idea. If we could analyze the sentence, it is an affirmative one. It is a suggestion but without the pretension of being an imposition. Our intervention is, simply, an invitation, a provocation of the viewer.

We already mentioned the possibility to change the condition of any space. The condition of any space is, in the most of the cases, determined by the activities that happen within it. For these reason, it is so important the active interaction of users within space. The neighbours are those who should start with the change and they are the ones that have the opportunity to decide in which way their environment should develop.

To sum up, these are the two reasons, for which we decided to act on the rooftop: Communication and Autonomy of the user. With the choice of the intervention space, only the local people would be able to see the message. Far from the question of privacy, it is more like something about which public we decided to communicate to.

Obviously, when we decided to change the target and act on the sand playground, the limited interaction only with the local people was gone. In consequence it contrasted with the intervention on the rooftop, also because the new proposal will disappear in few days. Possibly, the weather or the users of the playground (hopefully) will make this happen.

Taking into account the potential for development of the proposal, this is not a solution for any of the problems that we identified within the fieldwork. It is our current position about how important is to analyse, communicate and create new environment. At the end, we are talking about a symbolic action saying how important is that the external people should offer only possible solutions, without intervening themselves.