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THE CULTURE OF URBAN SPACE OCCUPATION IN LJUBLJANA OR HOW DO THE CITIZENS APPROPRIATE THE CITY THROUGH BOTTOM-UP APPROACHES

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POVZETEK

Kultura zasedanja urbanih prostorov prek začasne uporabe ali okupacije je v Ljubljani prisotna zlasti od 1990-ih let dalje. Take oblike okupacije so sredstvo za zadovoljevanje zahtev in potreb prebivalcev, ki jih tradicionalne institucije ne obravnavajo. Zagotavljajo storitve prebivalcem Ljubljane in dodajajo vrednost mestu. Kljub temu pa se take prakse soočajo s pomanjkanjem legitimnosti zaradi svojega normativnega položaja. Njihove vrednote in obstoj so običajno predmet nenehnih bojev. Ta članek želi poudariti, da alternativne okupacije prostora v svoji raznolikosti zapolnjujejo vrzeli tam, kjer tradicionalne institucije umanjajo.

KLJUČNE BESEDE

okupacija, začasna uporaba, institucija, vrednota, participacija

ABSTRACT

The culture of occupying urban space through temporary use or squatting is present in Ljubljana, the capital city of Slovenia, particularly since the 1990s. These occupations are a means for the residents to satisfy by themselves their demands and needs, ignored by the traditional institutions. They provide services for the residents of Ljubljana, and they add value to the city. However, they suffer from a lack of legitimacy because of their normative position. Their values and existence are typically subject to ongoing struggles. This article tends to emphasise that these alternative occupations of space, in their diversity, stand where the traditional institutions are missing.

KEY-WORDS

squat, temporary use, institution, value, public participation

1. INTRODUCTION – PROMOTING ALTERNATIVE UTILISATION OF THE CITY

In the 1950s, a critical thought about modern architecture and urban planning emerged, which tended to regard functionalist and consumer-oriented architectural and urban planning practices as responsible for a monotonous standardisation of lifestyles (Trancik, 1991). This thought has been carried further by the Situationist movement, with Guy Debord and Constant Nieuwenhuys as the main standard-bearers, and considers the city as the place of a “revolutionary transformation of existence, through the participation of citizens and the reintegration of the poetic into the ordinary” (Simay, 2009, p17). In this sense, architectural practice must serve the citizens to enable the construction of situations and the reinvention of their urban life. The inhabitants should be able to appropriate their city, and urban planning should be carried out in the service of this appropriation. The Situationists campaigned for the introduction of desires, lifeforms and eventalism into the city, creating “unexpected dizziness and disturbances” (Simay, 2009, p21). They call for adventure”, as indicated by Constant (1958).

In his book *The right to the city* (1968), Henri Lefebvre defends the idea of the city as an experimentation field. Indeed, in his Marxist philosophical approach to the city, he presents the urban as intrinsically linked to social relations and class struggle: “A mental and social form, that of simultaneity, gathering, convergence, encounter (or rather encounters). It is a quality that arises from quantities (spaces, objects, products). [...] The urban is based on the value of use. Conflict cannot be avoided” (H. Lefebvre, 1968, p89).

The “right to the city” constitutes a manifesto against a certain way to build the city, that is “de-urbanising and de-urbanised”, against the control of the dominant classes over urban planning, and against the de-collectivisation of urban work. It calls to rethink the city as a common good, inhabited, experienced and habitable, where one can invest socially and politically, and where people can meet and gather: “the right to the city manifests itself as a higher form of rights: the right to freedom, to individualisation in socialisation. The right to work (to the participatory activity) and the right to appropriation (distinct from the right to property) imply the right to the urban life” (H. Lefebvre, 1968, p155). Lefebvre thus calls for the reappropriation and the transformation of the city. In the 1960s, Lefebvre and the Situationist movement developed the idea of the reappropriation of the city, as a fundamental and universal right, emphasising it as a necessity to regain control over urban life.

These innovative visions of the urban, particularly the right to the city, played a certain role in the protests and uprisings that erupted two months later in France – that is hardly measurable. The events of May 1968 not only marked a major social movement in the second half of the 20th century, but also contributed to the democratisation of squatting practices in France, as well as across Europe (Adinolfi, 2019). Lefebvre’s work played a significant role, serving as a vector for key squatting concepts: urban reappropriation, self-management, and political awakening. Squats are characterised by their practices focused on urban intervention, their models of direct democracy, their notions of collective commitment, horizontal consensus, and distrust of urban speculation, private property and consumerism. The ideology of squatting in Europe is thus, among other things, based on Lefebvrian notions of the right to the city; they “impose the demand to live differently and thereby confer the freedom to inhabit differently” (Colin, 1982, p88).

Today, even though squatting still partially enjoys its image as a liberating, emancipatory practice with popular empowerment, it is often associated with a more negative image, that of the parasitic squatter (Bouillon, 2011). Indeed, squatting conveys a sense of insecurity, disorder and downgrading, compounded by associations of images between squats, drugs, a dangerous population and immoral values associated with this way of living. Squats thus convey different images, ranging from struggle to parasitism, and evoke various emotions, “from declared hostility to outright solidarity, passing through total indifference” (Bouillon, 2001, p24).

These two images are reflected in the case of squatting practices in Slovenia, which, due to its dynamism, serves as an interesting case study to examine the diversity of contemporary practices of these alternative forms of occupation.

2. SLOVENIAN CULTURE OF SQUATTING OR OCCUPYING VACANT PLACES

In the 1980s, Slovenia witnessed the emergence of social movements, primarily led by young people, that challenged the established order. These movements, including punk and gay movements, all shared the characteristic of being apolitical, which already represented a form of political dissent for that time. It marked a distinct opposition to the socialist party and the political identity of the country (Založnik, 2017). The punk movement was indeed one of the first social movements to openly oppose the regime, both in Slovenia and in Eastern Europe in general, by playing with societal norms. According to A. Cerar (IPOP interview, 06/07/2023) these movements played a significant role in transforming the Slovenian system and in declaring its independence. They also have participated to improve the consideration of the social movements by the Slovenian society. These movements were also the ones that initiated squatting practices in Ljubljana by occupying and declaring autonomy over certain unused spaces, to satisfy the need of space to exist, to produce, etc. The Slovenian social movements of the 1980s – and particularly the punk movement – represent a starting point for squat culture and the occupation of vacant spaces in Ljubljana.

The unstable political context of that time also contributed to the emergence of the occupation practices. With the departure of the Serbian army, several large spaces and military buildings, sometimes located in the city centre, were left vacant practically overnight. Furthermore, with its freshly acquired independence, the country was in a phase of political and societal reconstruction. Social movements were able to take advantage of this conducive context to occupy certain neglected spaces. The nascent Slovenian government allowed this to happen due to a lack of resources and interest at that time: larger construction projects were underway and occupied the centre of their attention. It is in this rather favourable context that the first Slovenian squats emerged in the capital city (Siegrist, 2023).

Beyond its squats, Ljubljana stands out for the quantity and diversity of uses that are made of its public spaces. The lawns in its parks are occupied by playing children, students gathering, and sports groups enjoying the large open spaces. Open air cafes are attended at all times of the day, and the banks of the Ljubljanica River are taken over by young people for socialising over a drink and some music, readers enjoying temporary library installations, and individuals simply soaking up the sun on the loungers provided by the city. The pedestrianised squares and streets in its city centre are regularly used for

various events, ranging from public concerts and dance festivals to markets, flea markets or villages of charitable associations. During good weather, it is rare for a day to pass by without the public space being used in some way by the residents. This form of urban space appropriation culture takes various forms, from official and tourist-oriented events such as markets and public concerts, to a more recreational and less institutional use of its parks, for instance, as outdoor living spaces for nearby residents. At the same time and to the contrast to the public open spaces in the city's core, the public open spaces of the more suburban areas are much more characterised by still or running traffic (Nikšič, 2014).

3. SETTING THE STAGE AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

While the regular forms of occupation involve a formal use of public open space, more informal forms of occupation are generally more political, or at least conveying messages, claims and promotion of an alternative use of urban space – a form of reclaiming the city. These alternative ways of occupying space consist in appropriating a place, closed to the public. Some of these occupations are fully legal, involving a temporary usage contract with the owner, while some others, such as squats, can have an unclear status, depending on the interpretation of laws (O'Mahony & Cobb, 2008). These forms of occupation driven by alternative movements, aim to transform a closed and unused space into an open public space for the residents of the city.

Thus, considering these alternative modes of occupation and active participation in the city, this paper will explore how the residents of Ljubljana are appropriating the city and urban space. Despite the plurality of formal uses of space available in Ljubljana, alternative forms of occupation continuously emerge, disappear and reappear. The question arises what motivates these groups of residents to decide to occupy these places? Furthermore, in their plurality and diversity, these squatting practices – in this case study – are intended to be open to the public and aligned with a logic of advocating for the right to the city – what do they concretely bring to the city and its residents? Finally, the institutional legislative framework is complex and may not necessarily be designed to facilitate these forms of occupation. Therefore, it raises the question of how such occupations are possible and what relationships squatting groups maintain with formal institutions?

3.1 Legitimacy & “bastard” institutions

We will explore these questions through the lens of an approach developed by the sociologist Everett Hughes (1897-1983). In his work *The Sociological Eye* (1971), Hughes defines what he calls “bastard institutions”, in contrast to ordinary institutions. The latter are considered legitimate in assisting the community, unlike bastard institutions, which suffer from a lack of recognition and consideration. According to Hughes (1951), ordinary institutions diffuse goods and services, they are the legitimate agents for satisfying legitimate human needs, simultaneously distributing religion, leisure, art, education, food, drink, housing and many other things. They define the norms of the needs that the population is supposed to have.

However, this arbitrary definition of human needs, in practice, does not fully satisfy the diversity and plurality of human needs under all conditions. Thus, bastard institutions satisfy “illegitimately legitimate” needs or satisfy needs that are not considered legitimate. Bastard institutions have the particularity of emerging outside the formal institutional framework. Thus, they are devoid of legitimacy and respectability regarding ordinary

institutions, to the extent that their very existence is sometimes ignored by authorities (Becker, 1997). This form of institution, however, is commonplace and generally «these squats are ... supported by public opinion, although often only by a portion of the community» (Becker, 1997, p34).

In this study, we will use these concepts of legitimacy and bastard institution as a framework to analyse the various practices of alternative use of urban space in Ljubljana.

3.2 Discovering the places and meeting the players

To address these questions, the research uses interviews with the stakeholders from squats and other kinds of occupied spaces in Ljubljana. The aim of this approach is to highlight the perspective of those residents who occupy urban spaces and contribute to the community.

The interviews took place between May and July 2023 in the different places studied in Ljubljana. The choice of interviewing on site was made to get a better understanding of the atmosphere and activities taking place there. In case where the place does not exist anymore, we met the players in a coffee shop or at their desk. The data collected in this article is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with the players in four locations in Ljubljana: Krater, Metelkova, Onkraj Gradbišča and PLAC (see Figure#). The interview covered the following themes:

- The context of development, including what triggered the creation of the structure, the process of creation and the players that carried it out.
- The missions, including the description of the objectives and actions carried by the organisation, their evolution, and the perceived impacts.
- The organisation in itself, how it is structured.
- The role within the city, including the place they occupy in the urban life of Ljubljana's residents, and what kind of population is visiting.
- The relation with institutions, including both qualitative and quantitative descriptions of these relations and what they expect from them.
- The political dimension, including their political position, and what they expect to change through their actions.

The interviewed players will remain anonymous as they demanded. They were all active players of the places they represent at the time since the creation of the structures. Only one member of each place has been interviewed.

The cases of study include three squats and two temporary contractual occupations of vacant spaces. The first case of study is Metelkova, the iconic squat in Ljubljana, occupying a former military barracks in the city centre. It offers activities related to art and culture, hosts parties in its clubs and bars, provides residences for artists and is known for attracting many tourists. The second squat is called PLAC. It has been established in 2022 outside the city centre. It offers spaces for gatherings and hosts various cultural, sport or political activities. The Krater project involves the temporary occupation of a wooded vacant lot, where activities related to agriculture and biodiversity take place. The Onkraj Gradbišča project was also a temporary occupation lasting 12 years, focusing on a project of shared and self-managed gardens by the neighbourhood residents.

The study explores the fifth case study too – the ROG Factory squat, another example from Ljubljana. However, it has not been possible to meet with actors from this squat as it has been

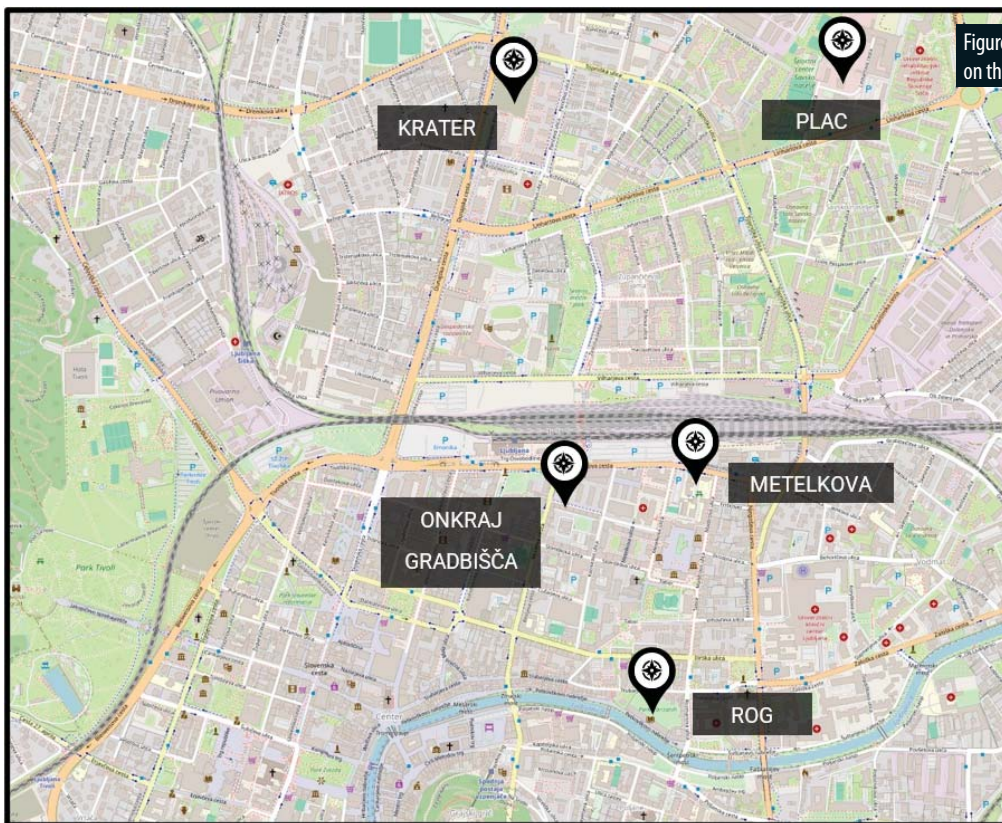


Figure 1: The locations of five case studies shown on the map of Ljubljana (on OpenStreetMap).

evicted in January 2021. This squat has been studied by researchers from different countries, and will be presented through the literature review, including “The Value of Autonomous ROG” (Ntounis et al., 2021) and “A Chronotopic Evaluation of Autonomous Rog: The Spatiotemporalities of a “Quasi-Public” Urban Squat” (Kanellopoulou & Ntounis, 2023).

Finally, one more interview has been done with Aidan Cerar, a sociologist and project manager at the Institute for Spatial Policies (IPOP), that has been working on several research projects about squats, particularly about the ROG Factory squat. This interview dealt with topics such as squatting practices history in Slovenia and his experience as a researcher about squats.

The choice of sites was made to ensure diversity in case studies and was also influenced by constraints in terms of time and resources (direct contact and proximity). In this article, we will first revisit how these squats emerged before delving into the diversity of their statuses and uses. We will then highlight the contrasting relationships with local public authorities and how the “bastard institutions”, despite the services they provide, may find themselves opposed by the “ordinary institutions” to the point of facing threats to their survival.

4. SQUATS – A VECTOR FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION RENEWAL?

4.1 The expression of needs as the driving force behind occupation projects

In each of the studied examples, the expression of needs is at the heart of the dynamics of occupation projects. For instance, both the Metelkova barracks and the ROG factory were squatted to meet the need of housing for local artists who generally could not afford to rent an apartment in the city at the beginning of their careers. In the early 1990s, artist residences were

practically non-existent in Ljubljana, despite the avant-garde nature and dynamism of Slovenian artistic movements:

« The biggest motivation was the urgent need for spaces for young artists or organisation that produce cultural work anybody who wants to have some artistic production suffered because there were not enough places. » (Metelkova Interview, 31/05/2023)

In the case of PLAC, the need for free and open space to organise events of all kinds, prompted a group of a few dozen people to squat this place. After the eviction of ROG, there was a need to find a non-privatised space where people could gather freely. This need was also coupled with the desire not to be consistently in a consumer-oriented or service-client relationship. Since these expectations could not be met by ordinary institutions, the group of citizens decided to take matters into their own hands and satisfy their requests themselves.



Figure 2: Krater (photo by Marius Gatouillat).

The Krater temporary occupation project has been triggered by the need of a natural space of an organisation – called Trajna, to carry out its activities related to invasive plants and bio-sourced materials.

In the case of Onkraj Gradbišča, the location was identified by an organisation before the expression of any specific need. Indeed, the surprise of finding a neglected vacant space in the middle of a residential area, with great potential to be valued for the city and its residents, led to a temporary contractual occupation project with the municipality, and the subsequent project that would take place there. The organisation players then organised citizen assemblies to determine its use and define the project for this place. The needs of the neighbourhood residents were defined on this basis: to have a local green space for gardening and gathering.

Thus, projects of occupation always form with the logic of addressing a need and with the idea of satisfying one's expectations. These projects then develop in various forms.

4.2 Legitimate occupation, squatting and in-between

These projects address different needs, from different people, and with different cultures. The forms these occupations can take are thus multiple. While Metelkova, ROG and PLAC are squatted places without a contract, and sometimes without a request to the owner, Krater and Onkraj Gradbišča are temporarily occupied spaces, under contract with the owners, following the model of transitory urbanism (Belaud, 2018).

As a result, there is a gap between these two types of occupation. While temporary occupations are contractually legal and accepted by most stakeholders, they have a universally shared legitimate dimension. They are an integral part of the formal associative landscape, have the approval of authorities, and act in partnership with ordinary institutions. Squats, on the other hand, face more challenges in finding a place in the city's legitimate associative landscape. The stereotypes associated with them and the perceived illegitimate way of occupying lead to various opinions within institutions and the population.

However, each case has its own specificities. For instance, Metelkova squat enjoys a special status, as it is recognised by the municipality as a major player in the culture of Ljubljana. It appears on the city's tourist brochures; subsidies are offered to it – but generally refused to maintain the squat's indepen-

dence – and the mayor has publicly stated a desire to protect it. Metelkova has thus managed to increase its legitimacy, find a place in the common associative landscape, and become ingrained in the urban culture of Ljubljana. Nevertheless, it remains a squat. Its actions and legitimacy are still the subject of debates and controversies, both from authorities and the population. It represents an example of an in-between situation, an institutionalised and relatively accepted squat, especially for its role in the capital's tourism:

« [...] they are probably kind of okay that Ljubljana has something like [Metelkova] because the tourists are massively coming, so there is also this interest. So [we are] part of their amusement park which they are building nowadays you know, everything for the tourist and much less for the locals. So we are nicely contributing into the tourism. » (Metelkova interview, 31/05/2023)

Thus, these occupation projects take various forms, ranging from traditional squatting practices to a form of contractualised temporary occupation. Once designed and created, these places serve multiple purposes.

4.3 Multiple and diverse uses of these spaces

The uses of occupied spaces, although centred around social, cultural, artistic and environmental aspects, are indeed diverse and varied, both in the concrete projects developed within them and in the ways they are carried out.

In concrete terms, these occupied spaces serve as artist residences, as seen in Metelkova or formerly in ROG, where artists are sometimes invited, sometimes accepted upon request, for variable periods and all kinds of productions. They function as environmental laboratories, as seen in Krater and Onkraj Gradbišča, where techniques of gardening, biodiversity preservation and research on natural materials are developed. They all serve as places for meeting, exchanging and educating, providing environments conducive to creation and the dissemination of specific knowledge and cultures.



Figure 3: ROG (source: @squat.net).



Figure 4: Metelkova (photo by Marius Gatouillat).

These spaces offer conferences, workshops for everyone and support for students. They were and are open to the non-member public, either permanently or at certain times. Metelkova also hosts a large panel of events in its clubs and bars and provides significant space for alternative cultures to express themselves (punk, LGBT+, etc.). PLAC uses its space as a public living room open to everyone, where individuals can freely engage in activities in agreement with all its users. The ROG squat was known for its skate park (the largest indoor skate park in Slovenia) and as the meeting point for social movements in the capital.

These places are also spaces of experimentation, where the perception of shared public space differs from the view of traditional institutions and governing structures. For instance, the volunteers at Krater have a vision based on biodiversity and its natural rhythm. Thus, their goal is to develop their activities in harmony with this biodiversity and based on it. Another example could be the first activity conducted at Onkraj Gradbišča: a local artist invited by the organisation left a goat in the place and followed it throughout the day. Based on her notes, she devised a plan to develop this wild area, in accordance with natural rhythm of the observed animal.

Finally, squats also promote a different approach to urban space based on an alternative to private property, on the right to the city and on autonomy. For instance, ROG squat had the particularity of being used by numerous different groups with diverse connections, varying over time and using a given space within the squat in multiple and autonomous ways. This quasi-anarchistic use of space resulted in a multitude of uses and ways of utilising the space, difficult to quantify but with powerful creative potential.

Thus, these space occupation projects emerge from popular needs, take varied forms that influence their recognition by residents and institutions and offer multiple and varied projects as well as an alternative use of space.

5. THE VALUE THESE PLACES OFFER TO THE CITY AND ITS RESIDENTS

5.1 Unconventional engagement: 'Wild' participation across culture, art, sports and socializing

Through the use of these occupied spaces, services are provided to the Ljubljana community, and added value is brought to the city. These places provide services that address the needs that originated the occupation projects. For instance, Krater engages in research, raises awareness, and maintains urban biodiversity in the space it occupies. PLAC offers a free and open-access space for anyone wishing to spend time there, while Metelkova, like the former ROG squat, hosts artists in residence and provides a space conducive to artistic creation.

The services and value provided have expanded over the evolution of these places, the establishment of the organisation and their development. For example, Krater has developed its activities and now welcomes more than 300 students annually to raise awareness about biodiversity, natural materials and specifically the utility of invasive plants. It also supports architecture or design students with their projects. It provides additional alternative education for children:

« The space has all these workshops: the wood workshop, the paper workshop, the mycelium biocomposite laboratory. So these workshops are open, if a students or anybody have a



Figure 5: Onkraj Gradbišča (source: @OnkrajGradbišča).

design, art or architecture project, that want to develop it here or need our help, they are welcome to come and plan their activities in the workshop » (Krater interview, 31/06/2023).

PLAC is increasingly offering more activities, conferences, gatherings and events as the place organises itself and establishes connections with other surrounding organisations. PLAC's vision is to become a place for the community, a neighbourhood social centre where residents can come together, participate and organise activities, projects or events. Metelkova squat, on the other hand, plays a key role in promoting alternative cultures overlooked by traditional institutions. The squat serves as a launching pad for young artists, providing them with a platform to perform and benefit from the national and international visibility of the venue. The ROG squat also used to offer cultural and artistic activities, as well as a place for political and civic engagements, serving as a focal point for various movements, hosting numerous debates and exchanges and featuring sports activities, including the city's largest indoor skate park. Onkraj Gradbišča not only provided a cultivated plot tailored to each family within the neighbourhood (while all the city's shared gardens are on the outskirts), but also a green space, a connexion with nature in the city, and shade during the summer heat. Additionally, notable plant species were preserved at the conclusion of the project: participants were allowed to take home the plants they desired, while the new project for the place needed to clear all the vegetation. The municipality even allocated funds to replant the large trees that grew on the site in other locations across the city.

Furthermore, all these places also provide spaces for socialising, reunions and discoveries for the city's residents and its neighbourhoods. They embody experiments in new urban lives and, in this sense, contribute to the exploration and experimentation of what public space can be, the role of a citizen within the city and its planning, and what urban life can be.

These occupied spaces, on one hand, address the needs that led to their development, but also provide numerous other services to the city and its residents. In this way, they actively contribute to the city of Ljubljana and to the urban life of its inhabitants through forms of "wild" participation, meaning they break free from institutionalised and formalised participatory framework (Reuchamps & Caluwaerts, 2008). These participatory efforts, by their autonomous and bottom-up nature, aim to transcend the traditional framework typically led by the state and municipalities. They originate from the residents, overtly advocating for and typically being controlled by them.



Figure 6: Plac (source: @squat!net).

5.2 The squat is defined through the plurality and diversity of the values it creates

The diversity and plurality of services provided, and the added value brought to the city make it challenging to define these occupied spaces in broad terms. According to Cerar (IPOP interview, 06/07/2023), it is incorrect to define a squat with umbrella statements. Indeed, a squat does not have a precise nature characterising its entirety but rather a wide range of diverse natures that each one of them characterise one of its multiple facets. Squats are thus diversified and generally have a broad spectrum of different identities. For example, the ROG squat had the particularity of being vast and having a very anarchic organisation: each group was composed of members that sometimes varied from day to day, conducting activities as they wished at any given time. Everything was in constant evolution. It seems then impossible to establish a precise map of the production of the different groups and members of the squat:

« I've never met a person that could describe, for every level or every place in ROG, what happened there. There will always be blind spots. Some people come to their place in ROG, and don't even know what happens behind the wall of the room they're in. » (IPOP interview, 06/07/2023)

Therefore, the ROG squat had numerous identities. Some of them delivered certain values for the city, while others did so less or not at all. As Cerar (IPOP interview, 06/07/2023) stated, this is how we should view these occupied places – both squats and temporary contractual used places: through the values they offer to the city. Defining alternative occupations of urban spaces by the services they provide and the value they bring to the city helps us to understand the role they play within it and how they contribute to its quality of life.

6. THE CONFLICTED RELATIONS WITH INSTITUTIONS

6.1 A perpetual struggle

Even though these occupied spaces bring numerous benefits to the city and its residents, the recognition of the work they provide varies significantly. These places, especially squats, may be perceived, by a part of the populations and the authorities, as illegitimate in carrying out actions and offerings of services.

Their status refers to the concept of “bastard institutions” (Purenne, 2016), contrasting with governmental or state-supported institutions – the “ordinary institutions”, which, on the contrary, are considered legitimate to carry out their actions. The case studies fluctuate between bastard institutions and legitimate institutions, oscillating between relatively acquired recognition and an ongoing struggle for acknowledgment of their ideal projects, or even their existence.

This is the case of the former ROG squat. While the beginnings were marked by an oral agreement between the squatters' groups and the municipality – the owners of the place, their relationship gradually deteriorated. The municipality was determined to regenerate the squatted old factory to create a new cultural centre, while the squatters were determined to stay and prove the importance of the role they played within the city. A long-standing struggle ensued, leading both the parties to the Slovenian Supreme Court. This last qualified the ROG squat as “quasi-public” due to its nature, open to the city and hosting a large audience. This status allowed the squat to remain in place for a while. However, with issues related to drug consumption, the slowdown of its activity due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the ongoing battle against the Municipality of Ljubljana, the squat ultimately lost its fight for existence in January 2021 and was demolished at the municipality's order.

The PLAC squat and its participants are also constrained to a form of struggle for their project and legitimacy. The forty-six people involved in this squat have been taken to court for squatting and now must defend themselves. This struggle differs from that of ROG since it does not concern protecting the physical existence of the squat, but rather the judicial integrity of its occupants. In both cases, it results in a threat, the mobilisation of means and time and a necessity to defend themselves, to assert their actions.

The case of Metelkova is particular. This squat has been recognised and legitimised on several occasions by public figures of the Municipality of Ljubljana, notably because of its attractiveness for tourism. The struggle led by the “forum” (the representative assembly of all groups within Metelkova) is to keep the squat in place - its culture and identity, to face attempts of formalisation and to defend their interests. This forum is thus an organised way to fight for defending the claims and the desire for independence of the squat.

Temporary contractual occupations are less affected by this phenomenon of ongoing struggle, given their contractual, legal aspect, and thus their legitimacy to exist and work with traditional institutions. In the case of Onkraj Gradbišča, the position of a partner was deliberately chosen. Indeed, the project's players wanted not to create a squat but a contractual occupation, to avoid being in a defensive position and to develop directly a partnership:

»It was important that [our activity would be] done somehow in a dialogue with the city but also through education, raising awareness. We expected that the city needs time to be more open to this kind of civic public partnership, to allow this kind of experiment in space« (Onkraj gradbišča interview, 01/06/2023).

Note that a struggle began towards the end of the project to maintain green spaces, to turn the area into a social space, and to construct affordable social housing. Part of their request has been accepted, leading to the construction of social housing and some funds to replant the largest trees of the site.

Thus, there is a gap between the position of squats, which have the particularity of being in a continuous balance of power with the municipality, and temporary contractual occupations, which are in a more collaborative relationship with governance institutions. Squats must continually position themselves and assert their claim: showing the utility of the place, proving its relevance, while expressing and standing by their opposition to the policies of authorities. Squats thus stand as "guerrilla sites" (Purenne, 2015), through to their determination to prove their legitimacy and role in the city.

6.2 Conflictual cooperation dynamics

These perpetual struggles manifest as conflicts, at times open and at times more discreet, in which alternative spaces players defend not only their legitimacy but also their values and cultures, constituting their identity.

In this context, dynamics originating from ordinary institutions, such as the municipality, may align with those of informal institutions, such as a squat. This alignment can give rise to "conflictual cooperations" between the two parties, manifesting in concrete projects or unintentional collaborations. These conflictual cooperations are characterised by both cooperating entities continuously seeking to influence each other, striving to compel the other to adapt to their respective visions, values, and cultures (White, 2001). Despite the inherent conflicts, these collaborations can be fruitful and lead to tangible positive outcomes.

For instance, in the case of Metelkova, a notable cooperation involves the municipality acknowledging the existence of the squat and promoting it, in exchange for the squat to accept its role as a tourist attraction. This cooperative arrangement is at the heart of conflicts: the squat would prefer not to be a tourist attraction and endeavours to persuade the municipality to reconsider this characterisation. However, from this partnership emerges a space for artists and countercultures that might not otherwise find such a vibrant existence within the city.

7. ACT OF RESISTANCE, DESIRE FOR CHANGE

In a broader context, urban space occupations embody a means for individuals or groups to transform the city in alignment with the values they uphold. They represent an act of resistance against a neoliberal society that marginalises the vibrant, human

and social aspects of the city in favour of free trade and economic development. It is a way to fight for, or even to bring some change, in a society that leaves little to no room for minorities. These practices represent a way to express oneself, to showcase and promote one's culture and values. The studied examples all demonstrate a desire to transform, to change something in the city, and to promote an alternative vision of what urban life can be.

These desires to make a difference are as diverse as the occupied space practices themselves. The Krater project, for instance, reflects a desire to change the collective imagination of invasive plants, to acknowledge the importance of living things in the city, their utility and indispensability. It is a determination to "give a voice to these places" so that biodiversity is consistently considered:

»Our political statement is obvious: we're not alone, we're not the only inhabitants of the city. And green areas support all those other inhabitants, and we have to take care of anybody. In the end, it supports the quality of life of everyone [...] because it's all connected « (Krater interview, 31/05/2023).

The players of the PLAC squat manifest a desire for a city where there are free, public and open spaces for everyone to gather, envisioning "properties of the people" as neighbourhood community centres:

» The aim of this place is also to be as I said a property of the people, of the people that used this place, and it opens a discussion about private property « (PLAC interview, 12/06/2023).

The Onkraj Gradbišča project revealed the residents' desire for spaces to garden, showcasing their ability to create and organise projects independently. The project also aimed to illustrate the possibility of temporary space usage and its potential for broader democratisation. Finally, the Metelkova squat reflects a desire for the independence of the space from institutions and a commitment to providing a platform for alternative cultures.

This visible, open form of resistance and assertion can also take more discreet forms within these squats, as described by James C. Scott (2006) as "infra-politics". This constitutes another dimension of the act of resistance, operating in the "discreet domain" of political struggle carried out daily by subaltern groups "beyond the visible spectrum" and through a tactical choice "born of a cautious awareness of the balance of power" (p25). It is informal and leaves little trace, often going unnoticed. Nevertheless, this kind of resistance explores, tests, challenges and serves as a means of defence for the "powerless" in a society where citizen participation in public political life is rare.

To delve deeper into this phenomenon, the mere existence of these places invokes a specific part of this discreet domain of political struggle: "the art of presence" (Purenne et al., 2023). The art of presence describes how people manifest, claim, resist and fight against oppression through common, ordinary, daily actions. It expresses a form of spontaneous demand for recognition and justice, taking various forms, such as wearing specific clothing choices or occupying precise spaces. Here, the occupation of spaces can be a way to combat the neglect of social and human aspects in the city, for instance.

Thus, the occupation of urban spaces, in its plurality, constitutes an act of resistance through the actions carried out, the underlying infra-political dynamics, and the simple fact of existence.

8. CONCLUSION – TEMPORARY OCCUPIED PLACES OCCUPY FUNCTIONS AND PLAY ROLES THAT ARE NEGLECTED BY ORDINARY INSTITUTIONS

The exploration of urban spaces through squats raises intriguing questions about their role in citizen participation renewal. The common thread across the studied examples is the central role of expressing and fulfilling residents' needs as the catalyst for occupation projects. Whether addressing the housing needs of artists or creating open spaces for community events, these projects emerge organically from the residents' aspirations and necessities.

The diversity in forms, from traditional squats to temporary contractual occupations, adds complexity to understanding their place in the urban fabric. While Metelkova stands as an institutionalized squat, others like ROG, PLAC, Krater, and Onkraj Gradbišča demonstrate various facets of contractualised temporary occupations. This diversity reflects the dynamic nature of these spaces, each serving a unique purpose driven by specific needs and aspirations.

Examining the value these places offer to the city and its residents unveils a rich array of services and contributions. From cultural hubs to environmental laboratories, these spaces evolve over time, expanding their services and impact. The conflicted relations with institutions, especially squats facing challenges in gaining recognition, highlight the perpetual struggle for legitimacy and acceptance within the broader urban context. Despite the conflicts, these spaces act as agents of positive change, providing services that directly address the needs fuelling their inception. They serve as laboratories for new urban lives, challenging traditional notions of public space and urban planning.

The conflicted relations with institutions illuminate ongoing struggles, with squats navigating a delicate balance of power to assert their legitimacy and ideals. The concept of «conflictual cooperations» emerges, showcasing instances where cooperation and conflict intertwine, leading to positive outcomes despite inherent tensions.

In a broader context, these urban space occupations represent acts of resistance and a desire for change. They embody a counterbalance to neoliberal urban development, championing human and social aspects often marginalized in pursuit of economic goals. The diverse desires to make a difference underscore the multifaceted nature of these projects, each contributing in its unique way to shaping an alternative vision of urban life. In their different dynamics, these places express the will of groups of residents to transform the city, bring diversity, new dimensions in areas of neglect – perhaps sometimes rightfully – by authorities and ordinary institutions. In this sense, these alternative places occupy functions and play roles that are not addressed by these ordinary institutions.

The fact that citizens dedicate their time and personal resources, even breaking the law to some extent, highlights that what they are doing is sorely lacking in the city. This suggests that these places shall be considered as sort of laboratories, revealing what the city and its residents need. This is illustrated, for instance, by the skate park in the ROG squat, which was created by volunteers with their own means and attracted skateboarders from all across the country, or by the fact that younger generations lack spaces for them through the example of the PLAC squat.

These places thus help to address certain shortcomings in cities

by providing concrete means for residents to meet their own needs. As shown by Ntounis & Kanellopoulou (2017), these places represent “spatial otherness” where a touch of alterity into the sameness of everyday life is injected, and our perception of normality within a given culture and the environment that surrounds an area is disrupted.

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