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Rog: from bike factory to 'experimental asylum'

The story of an autonomous political, cultural and social space in Ljubljana, Slovenia

The fragile and tense relationship between cultural practices and urban development can be best observed in urban spaces of transformation. One such space is Rog, a former bicycle factory in Ljubljana.

It is located at the eastern edge of the centre between the Ljubljanica river and Trubarjeva cesta, a lively street packed with small shops and cafés that is a favourite spot of the hipster tourists. Of course, some signs of gentrification have started to appear in the neighbourhood as more and more hostels, wine bars and designer boutiques pop up. Rog's main building is the factory facing the waterfront, which dates back to the early twentieth century and is a protected heritage site. In the whole area (just under 10,000 m², surrounded by a wall), there are a number of other buildings of different sizes, shapes, ages and conditions. The recent history of the place reflects several shifts in economy, society and culture that have deeply affected not just Europe, but communities worldwide: Rog has turned from a factory, an unquestioned site of industrial production, into a grassroots cultural, social and activist centre, and thus a contested site of urban development. In this sense, Rog can be seen as an exemplary case of the entanglement of, among other things, city planning, artistic production and emancipatory politics. It is one of many such places in European cities where otherwise latent conflicts between the hegemonic policies of maximising profit and the needs of groups with little or no access to power (young people, emerging artists, ethnic minorities and others) to have 'free spaces' become tangible as they are acted out.

Chapter I - From factory to vacancy

The Rog story can be told in three distinct chapters. First, Rog experienced the country's turnaround from a partly planned, partly market economy to a free-market model, taking away its original function. Until the 1980s, Rog bicycles used to be sold in all of Yugoslavia, so when Slovenia gained its independence in 1991, large parts of the market collapsed. Soon afterwards, production was shut down due to this and various other reasons. In 1996, a study by the Slovenian Institute of Urbanism on new urban development strategies (Dimitrovska Andrews et al. 1996)  (*2) used Rog as a test subject. The study remains highly relevant to this day since it explicitly states that "[...] the basic motive of investment into new activities is the expected growth of profits and certainly not the altruistic motives of the wellbeing of a broader community. The role of the city-entrepreneur or the residents' elected representatives is exactly this: to guarantee a growth in profits for all voters." (ibid.: 59)  (*2) The continuing paragraph refers the neoliberal urban policies of the UK in the 1980s and '90s, known under the concept of 'vital and viable', as good examples of urban renewal. The core message of these statements is revealing: Not only does it establish the maximisation of profits as the main principle guiding urban development, but it also conceives of the city as an enterprise and reframes the concept of citizenship from a political community to some kind of 'shareholder committee'.

When the factory was de-nationalised in 2001 and given back to its former owners, the municipality did not make use of its right of first refusal. Instead, it was sold to

Hypo Alpe-Adria *(1). Just one year later, the municipality signed a leasing contract with Hypo Leasing and finally acquired Rog in 2013 for a price at least twice the estimated value *(2). During all of these years, the factory remained empty and was used only twice for short-term exhibitions.

Chapter II - The factory comes back to life, but different

Then, in 2006, a group of artists, activists and students, coordinated by a collective called TEMP (cf. Škufca et al. 2015,  (*6) Kirn 2009  (*5)), opened Rog for self-organised cultural, social and political uses. The collective critically addressed ongoing processes of privatisation and the loss of public space and advocated for the communal revitalisation of abandoned industrial urban areas. To this end, a two-week festival was to be held at Rog, with the initial permission of the municipality. One day before its start, though, this permission was unexpectedly revoked. Confronted with this setback, the organisers decided to carry it out in the factory nevertheless. In the following weeks, attempts to cooperate with the municipality failed, since it repeatedly revoked previously made commitments (such as a contract for temporary use, or the provision of basic infrastructure) at the last minute. Despite all this, numerous activities and initiatives evolved, among them a concert hall, a large indoor skate park, several artists' workshops (sculpture, graffiti, painting etc.), artists' collective spaces for literature and performing arts, a bike repair workshop, a social centre and an initiative called Second Home, which serves as a cultural and social space for refugees and 'sans-papiers'. In the meantime, the municipality of Ljubljana worked on its own plans to develop the site. After an architecture competition, a detailed urban plan was elaborated and finalised in 2010. To carry it out, a public-private partnership was envisaged.

Chapter III - From temporary to (temporarily) permanent

As a final step in Rog's exemplary story, the detailed development plan could not be put into practice; there was no investor to be found as the financial crisis had hit Europe by then. While the municipality struggled to find a private partner to invest the money, Rog gradually evolved into an autonomous political, cultural and social space, where not only the aforementioned activities, but also basic infrastructure such as electricity, heating, sanitation and general maintenance were self-organised, with all of the advantages and disadvantages this brings.

Over the years, activists, like projects, have come and gone. Rog has survived, among other things, more than ten years of seesaw with the municipality, as well as an attempted demolition and a brutal neo-Nazi attack. Additionally, the city government has filed lawsuits against some of the activists, who now face serious charges. But even though its future is unclear, the place remains vital and more active than ever. When we - the PhD candidates from the doctoral program *Die Künste und ihre öffentliche Wirkung (The arts and their public impact)* - visited Ljubljana in January 2017, I had the chance to meet several people active in Rog and have an extensive discussion with them. The following interview is based on this discussion and was carried out via email for the eJournal p-art-icipate in March 2017 with local activist Rastko Pečar.



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To be continued ... - A conversation on Rog, it's past and it's future

Speaking from the insider's perspective, how would you describe Rog's main concerns and its prevalent activities?

Rog is an extremely heterogeneous grassroots community of individuals, social groups and collectives, such as students, artists, skateboarders, breakdancers, silk dancers, young and not so young people in precarious living conditions, various marginalised and criminalised groups (asylum seekers, illegalised immigrants, erased people *(3)), gender minorities and groups whose civil, human or worker rights are being abused. The personal backgrounds, opinions, needs and interests vary a lot. But people come to Rog to be together as equals, debate and communicate the differences among each other and to a great extent self-govern and self-manage the place they established. That is why Rog should primarily be understood as a political community.

All the activities are self-organised. Most of them are open to the public, non-profit and run on users' contributions or donations from visitors who attend the concerts, performances or sports activities, for example. We understand Rog as a platform or social infrastructure that people can use without being subject to an institutional regime (hierarchies, division of labour, legal and administrative rules, etc.). If you want to organise something, you don't have to deal with permissions, licences or institutions but can start working on a circus show, a skateboarding contest, a protest or a philosophical reading seminar right away.

How would you describe the role and 'place' of Rog in Ljubljana's structure and civil society? How does it relate to the cultural, artistic, political, etc., spheres of the city?

In the context of broader processes of increasing social inequalities, economic dispossession and an atomised and depoliticised liberal society, Rog functions as a 'black hole' where all the problems produced by the current mode of development converge.

In a more physical way, Rog stands as the last locale on the city riverfront that is not yet renovated, beautified and gentrified. In the last decade, under the office of liberal-left mayor Zoran Jankovič, the city administration has carried out a project of physical and programmatic urban renewal of the city centre. Historical buildings and public spaces along the river Ljubljanica are gradually being renovated and made attractive for tourists, who provide a substantial share of city income. For ordinary citizens, though, for disadvantaged people, low-income groups, elderly people, etc., the city centre is gradually becoming less accessible. Small shops and services for daily errands are gradually being replaced by more profitable uses such as designer shops, fancy bars and hostels. The streets are newly paved, but also increasingly controlled by the recently established city police.

What is the position of the municipality and its relation to Rog?

The municipality is not acting coherently, but there are contradictory positions within Ljubljana's administration. In 2007, for example, the main factory building was declared a historic monument, which saves it from being taken down or turned into apartments, as was the original development plan. Parts of the city government are also trying to set up a participatory renovation project. At the same time, though, other, more influential players are more interested in real estate speculation, large-scale construction projects and giving concessions to local cafe owners.

Rog actually became a squat (a de facto illegal occupation) only after the attempted demolition of parts of Rog in the summer of 2016. The municipality entered the area with a bulldozer and a private security firm in the middle of the night to start a project which they say is fully devoted to culture and serving public interest – when in fact it only creates a suitable environment for creative industries and attracts private investors to build a design hotel as well as upscale apartments. This attempt was blocked by a vast social movement that protected Rog and called for a new, financially less demanding renovation project in accordance with the community needs, its specific mode of organisation and non-profit activities. Just a few days later, Rog was attacked again, this time by an organised group of extremists that threw pyrotechnics and granite cubes into the courtyard full of people attending a cultural event.

Of collectives, collaborations and autonomy as 'a semipermeable membrane'

The people who have been active in Rog in the last ten years are very heterogeneous: They come from various backgrounds (arts, social work, architecture, etc.) and have different, sometimes conflicting ideas about the place – how it should be run, how decisions are to be made, who should be responsible for what, etc. Additionally, there has been a 'generational' change, since working for and at Rog is exhausting in many ways. Can you tell me more about the different groups in Rog and their respective ideas and strategies?

The modes of organisation differ a lot between the various collectives, varying from hierarchical arrangements to horizontal schemes. They depend upon collective attitudes, individual characters and material conditions, but also upon physical factors such as infrastructures, the location of particular places inside the compound, accessibility and even bioclimatic conditions such as sun or wind exposure.

Basically, each collective or place strives to secure its autonomy inside the community, which results in various strategies (isolationism, temporary or long-term alliances or disputes, neutral positions, non-involvement, etc.). Geopolitics could

perhaps be an adequate analogy to study and understand how Rog functions on the micro level. But taking into account the diversity that is constantly producing tensions and disputes, the community acknowledges its common needs and interests and it manages them through the form of the general assembly.

Rog is not the only large squat in Ljubljana - Metelkova is another one that has been there for quite a while. Their histories, strategies, interest groups and actors differ a lot, though. How would you describe the relationship between Rog, Metelkova and other grassroots projects in the city?

Metelkova was established in the early 1990s. The two places share a similar history of struggle with the city; Metelkova has succeeded in securing its legal status as an autonomous cultural zone vis-à-vis the city, which does not, however, mean that it is free from state inspections, police patrols or even occasional raids. There are strong collaborations between the two places and firm political ties resulting in jointly organised (political) initiatives and projects, shared resources, etc. The two places differ in terms of organisation and program: Rog is less structured and more fluid. In terms of programme, Metelkova is – comparatively – more consolidated. Its activities are split along two axes: the political and the economic; there are profitable, not immediately political activities (in terms of content, most of the music cultural events in the evenings) and there are others that remain strictly non-profit and politicised.

This hasn't happened in Rog (yet). Most of its spaces are multifunctional and not dedicated to a single use; activities migrate between various spaces, depending on current needs (heating, audio-visual equipment, enough space for large crowds, etc.). The various collectives are still open, fluid and collaborative – everything is overlapping and flowing in Rog. But that does not mean it will stay like that forever or that Rog is safe from, e.g., commercialisation. From my point of view, the biggest threats are the twofold split I mentioned before – the polarisation of activities into (non-)political and (non-)commercial ones – as well as the collapse of internal solidarity.

Both places connect with other squats in Slovenia, local grassroots activities, progressive student groups, specific institutions and translocal social movements. They host student gatherings, study groups, lectures and seminars and organise events such as food or flea markets, for example. Although marginal in the broader political and social sphere, they nevertheless exercise influence by addressing crucial questions (precarity, environmental issues, gender inequality, migration, etc.) as well as connecting to and mobilising social movements. One such example is the Antiracist Front, established during the 2015 refugee 'crisis'. It immediately responded to the humanitarian crisis at the borders, built networks with similar self-organised movements along the Balkan Route, tried to correct the mainstream media's negatively biased discourse on refugees and set up a grassroots integration model emphasizing a two-way cultural exchange, solidarity and self-help.

I've come to know Rog as a place where non-mainstream artistic and cultural activity takes place, but also as a place for social work, political activism and empowerment. What are the relationships between those activities and the 'outside world'? And would you consider Rog an 'experimental space'?

If we look at such places as a whole and from an external perspective, it seems there are no divisions between the activities you mentioned. The organisation seems chaotic; the areas seem to be physically isolated to a certain extent from their surroundings and somewhat detached from society. This spatial and organisational discontinuity is usually referred to as autonomy and is commonly

understood as a separating line between inside and outside that you mentioned. This perspective is legitimate for waging a struggle for survival against a violent outside (police raids, state regulations, political enemies, economic exploitation, majority standards, xenophobia, prevalent values and public morale) but should not be the dominant framework for understanding or conceptualising autonomous spaces. First of all, Rog is not a completely autonomous and self-sufficient whole, since it is internally disparate and individuals and collectives are entangled or affiliated with various external institutions and secure their subsistence elsewhere (jobs, projects, social support). So the relationship between the 'inside' and the 'outside' is characterised by dependencies, exchanges, alliances and antagonisms.

Rog is certainly a place of social experiment, where new practices, relations and attitudes are invented or tested. However, in a political sense, Rog refuses and continually blocks any change or 'invention' on the level of its organisation to prevent the centralisation of political power by a hierarchical structure or coercive individuals. In economic terms, the community also rejects productivism and similarly blocks attempts to transform cultural, social, artistic or recreative activities into productive activities (professionally organised and profitable on the one hand, paid and passively consumed on the other). This should not be misunderstood as an unwanted result of assumed deficiencies – it is a conscious decision. Institutionalisation (which usually comes with hierarchies) and productivism aren't rejected because of Rog's inability to innovate or be more efficient, but because the community actively wards these mechanisms off.

Personally, I think that since the users are attached to other institutions, arrangements or social structures besides Rog, the notions of inside and outside are somewhat problematic. Some in Rog understand autonomy more like a semipermeable membrane that regulates various flows: it allows some to enter and filters others out. I think the value of liberty should be critically reflected vis-à-vis the social arrangement we live in. For me, a social experiment worth conducting would be to leave behind liberalist subjectivities and to collectively provide for material subsistence and reproduction outside prevalent apparatuses instead.



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Political space, asylum, urban common

In our discussion, I learned that many activists reject the notion of 'culture' when referring to Rog and their activities. They don't see it as a 'cultural space' but rather as a 'political space', and they'd rather use the notion of 'art' to describe what is

happening at Rog. One of the participants summed it up like this: 'Politics is a praxis that makes a work of art.' Why is there such a divide between the notion of 'art' and 'culture' in the activist's view? What makes Rog a 'political space'?

Some people don't like the notion of culture, since they associate it with counter- or subculture, which they feel is somewhat passé or politically disempowered, since punk and the long march through institutions didn't deliver.

Another reason could be that artistic production or culture in the broader sense have become an instrument for economic restructuring into so-called creative societies and smart cities to attract investments, tourists and the so-called creative class. In this context of commodification and commercialisation of culture, many people in Rog who are affected by these processes tend to avoid such notions and, through the political framework, reject the implicit productivism that is attached to them. Therefore, to frame Rog as a political space means to reject the productivist blackmailing and liberal social relations based on individual freedom, constant exchange and self-improvement. It means to assemble a community of interrelations, addressing and accepting the differences, developing solidarity and collective responsibility.

Some of the activists refer to Rog as an 'asylum' or a 'psychiatry' - a refuge for people who literally have no other place in the 'beautified' city of Ljubljana. What is your opinion on this concept?

As I already mentioned before, Rog is a black hole that attracts all the abnormalities. People who are not statistically average, who don't have the right skin colour or gender identity, who refuse to take prescribed drugs, who don't like to shave or don't earn enough to be 'good' consumers (and don't want to be), people without asylum status and other illegalised populations converge on Rog. Often, it is full of conflict, but the remarkable thing is that various frustrations and aggressions rarely produce a serious conflict.

*In an article on Rog, the activists are described as 'liberators of public space' rather than occupiers (Tomsich 2017)  (*7) and in a documentary, someone says Rog 'is a medium both inside and outside.' (Gram Media 2016)  (*4) To what extent is Rog a public space? How is 'the public' addressed? What means of communication are used?*

Here, the distinction between community and society is crucial. A lot of people who are socialised into a mass society, so as to work for somebody, obey orders, maintain social relations based on exchange and reciprocity and 'respect the official hours', for example, see Rog as a closed and exclusive space, and this is true to a certain extent. The Rog community, as opposed to this kind of society, functions very differently. In Rog, trust, reputation and relationships become important. There is a really low degree of division of labour and the particular activity a person is performing (studying, painting, community, political or social work, etc.) is never separated from a general social interaction. At the same time, politics is not an independent sphere that exists apart from other activities but that is strongly interlinked with them.

Also, nobody will do things for you. If you are preparing a lecture on Plato, for example, you will first need to find out who has the key for the room and get it. Then to buy some gas and start the generator, light up the furnace an hour before your presentation and leave the place as you found it afterwards. Of course, people help each other and divide the responsibilities, but nothing is taken for granted or as a job description. People who come to Rog oriented towards goals and efficiency

are usually very frustrated because nothing is prepared, nothing simply works and things develop so slowly. People who can't or won't adapt to this and change their way of relating to one another tend to criticise Rog for being exclusive and shut off.

Still, by focusing on the activities and the ways they are organised, I would argue that Rog is a self-organised public good. It is an accessible infrastructure for gathering, learning, working together on projects and collective self-empowerment. It certainly is a public space put to a social use, although it is not managed by a public governmental institution (be it state or local). In this sense, Rog is an urban common.



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//Fussnoten

- *1 *Hypo Alpe-Adria was an Austrian bank allegedly involved in several problematic activities since the 1990s. It had to be nationalised in 2009 in the aftermath of the financial crisis and was subsequently split up and partly sold. Allegations of fraud and corruption continue to be investigated (as of May 2017). Cf. dossiers on Hypo Alpe Adria in the Austrian newspapers Der Standard and Die Presse (in German):* <http://derstandard.at/r4695/Hypo-Alpe-Adria>, [http://diepresse.com/layout/diepresse/files/dossiers/hypo/\(02.05.2017\)](http://diepresse.com/layout/diepresse/files/dossiers/hypo/(02.05.2017))
- *2 *The 1996 study (Dimitrovska Andrews et al. 1996) assessed the value of the Rog premises at € 4.1 million. The total price the municipality paid was € 9.2 million, according to Biščak 2002.*
- *3 *The so-called 'Erased' are people who were illegally erased from the permanent residence register when Slovenia gained its independence in 1991. Their documents were confiscated and destroyed. Many were deported to other former Yugoslav republics, which were war zones at that time. Cf. European Court of Human Rights 2012.*