

## Architecture / Fashion / Design

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# Agents of Change: "A new role for the profession"

Is architecture political? For "Platforma 9,81", architecture is nothing if not political, especially now, right now in Croatia.

The designer and architectural group "Platforma 9,81" (Damir Blazevic, Dinko Peracic, Marko Sancanin and Miranda Veljacic) from Zagreb is one of the four partners in the project "Zagreb-Cultural Kapital of Europe 3000". This initiative has dedicated itself since 2003 to strengthening the free arts scene in Zagreb.

On 25 June 1991, Croatia declared its independence and became yet another new state to attain its autonomy. The country changed quickly and radically, as did politics, the economy and, not least of all, the cultural scene. Globalization and the emergence of neo-liberal economic policies seriously affected the structure of Croatian society. In the past, globalization led not only to a heavy concentration of urban areas and regions in Europe, but also to the shrinking of cities, which can be observed in part in Zagreb. In the Croatian capital, the sudden abolishment of public property and far-ranging privatization of state-owned assets became a societal and urban planning problem. "Platforma 9,81" took on the task of conducting a study to determine how the space and architecture of Zagreb had been changed by privatization and what the city's inhabitants might do to respond to these changes.

Damir Blazevic, co-founder of the group: "This led to a total change: social assets were privatized, vacant industry sites and abandoned army bases left territory uncontrolled, public housing projects from the modernization era were stopped, a small private initiative was launched, as the only force for structuring the space of new Croatia." This was reason enough for the architects of "Platforma 9,81" to respond to what were not always positive changes: "Members of Platforma 9,81 were not brought together by their designer preferences or similar architectural discourse. The collective was founded for clearly political reasons in a specific context."

Blazevic on Croatia's transitional phase at the end of the 1990s: "As public institutions weaken and state control is increasingly transferred to private interests, architects are called on to influence urban policy as advocates of the public domain. We believe that architecture practiced as pure discipline cannot respond to these new social dynamics." The members of "Platforma 9,81" saw the givens in their lives as architects also change. Instead of focusing on the purely representational role of constructing as many other colleagues, they view themselves as "space managers" and deal with urban planning changes, which in best case scenarios they contribute to shaping.

Platforma 9,81 believes architects can play an essential role as champions of public space and urban planning." The initiative has attempted to shape Zagreb's urban development

since 2003 not just by interventions in points. But it has also taken on the vacant, undefined space as material matrix in order to endow the city's spaces with new sustainable structures for the future. This group's top priority lies in communication. It has become a must, explained Damir Blazevic: "Dialog, the exchange of knowledge, and interdisciplinary work were not only virtually absent in Zagreb's cultural scene, but also there was no sufficient space or adequate infrastructure."

In collaboration with its partners, the Zagreb "Center for Drama Arts (CDU), the curator group "What, How, and for Whom" (WHW), and the Multimedia Institute (mi2), they stage symposiums, performances, artistic interventions, lectures, and workshops. The primary objective is to utilize abandoned buildings or spaces with dilapidated infrastructure as venues, as they did in the project "Invisible Zagreb." The aim is not a short-term occupation of these forgotten, undefined, and abandoned places in the city. Instead they seek to explore the city on a large scale, to categorize the spaces, and to render the places useable for future architectural projects after their own projects have been completed.

#### Cooperation with the city

It is therefore not enough to involve people in the independent arts scene. This work also requires cooperation with existing institutions, developers, architects, investors, and the government. The architects are optimistic: "Everyone is interested in creating a temporary network for public spaces." The events they staged in the former slaughterhouse on Heinzelova Street, an industrial complex on the list of historical sites in Croatia, put this site back on the mental map of the city. It is just one example of how the experiences and knowledge acquired could be incorporated into the city's future planning culture. These efforts could lead to public competitions. Blazevic: "We try to accomplish that by collaborating with the City of Zagreb (the owner of most of the properties involved in project) and its different

departments, and different actors interested in the lots/buildings we map and activate."

Using these sites as temporary venues for their events, marks the beginning of the process. The results of workshops, seminars or symposiums are constantly summarized and made available to the city leaders and officials, all in keeping with the initiative's far-ranging communication objective.

#### Urban planning instruments

Urban planning in the 21st century has long been relinquished by planners and architects. And because the nation state keeps handing over more responsibility to private investors, the city, as a reality, is subject to different mechanisms and in fact cannot be planned ahead any more. . In his book *Architecture of the City, 1975*, the Italian architect Aldo Rossi spoke about the processes of "constructing and shaping" as "primary and permanent elements" for the "continuity and identity" of a city. Most of this is now out of architecture's sphere of influence.

Yet only a few architects are reacting adequately to these new machinery of urban planning - which grapples with individualization and organizational structures and have also become a representation of our culture. Critically interpreting one's own reality and regaining knowledge of its potential are just as important here as short-term interventions. The "Zagreb3000" project is heading in this direction. Spatial resources are catalogued and linked up with concrete initiatives, and thereby activated. Furthermore, the statistical and documentary research is crucial for providing urban planners with useful instruments again. Ideally, this research will lead to concrete results, if communication is effective.

**Some of the architects and artists who have participated in the projects of Platforma 9,81:  
Studio 3LHD, Luciano Basauri, Dafne Berc, Stefano Boeri, Studio Bradic&Nizic, ENOTA  
studio, Group CHILDRENS' ROOM, Don Foresta, Dario Gabric, Lada Hrsak, Aleksandar  
Battista Ilic, Mladen Josic, Ivana Keser, Branko Kincl, Nande Korpnik, Boris Koruznjak, Jurij  
Krcan, Vedran Mimica, Njiric & Njiric, Veljko Olujic, Dinka Pavelic, Penezic+Rogina ,  
Zvonimir Prlic, PROPELLER Z, Pero Puljiz, Bojan Radonic, Goran Rako, Randic+Turato,  
Saskia Sassen, STEALTH group, Brett Steele, SVA, Slaven Tolj, TOWER 151, Studio  
URBANA, Zlatko Uzelac, Videcnik+Oman, Sung Wo Kim**