

Urban Cultures at the Crossroads – *Interuniversity Center, Dubrovnik* *September 2015*

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Urban cultures are increasingly constituted at the crossroads of cultures, religions, and ideologies at the local, regional, national and global levels. Intensified global interconnectedness can potentially open up and enrich the diversification of urban cultures. However, researchers, activists and artists have increasingly observed how conflicting agendas of development, conservation and urban planning amongst different interest groups are contributing towards growing dissatisfaction of urban life and culture across the globe. This brings attention to the importance of broadening the understanding of the complex socio-cultural, political, economic and environmental interrelationships and challenges we are faced with today.

It was with special anticipation that a group of 30 researchers and activists met at the Dubrovnik Interuniversity Center on September 14, 2015 to rethink and develop more sustainable ways of planning our city spaces, necessitated by rapidly increasing urbanization worldwide. For those of us who had been following the activities at the IUC since the early days when the center functioned as an east-west meeting place for free and unfettered discussion it was with special pleasure to see this function of intercultural debates renewed and expanded to include urban cultural and social issues.

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Responding to the tendency of excluding democratic, grass-roots participation in urban planning and development, many recent case-studies indicate that citizenship groups and NGO's seeking common ground have succeeded in exploring and finding alternative and creative solutions to urban challenges. Some ideas and projects initiated at the grass-roots level have furthermore found resonance and support amongst city managers and have met the aspirations of the general public. In some research environments in cities like Bangkok, Osaka, Zagreb and Dubrovnik the cultural sectors of art and music have furthermore been able to contribute to such explorations in fruitful ways. Representing the arts sector were Amra Toska from the Academy of Music in Sarajevo, showing how the polyphonic traditions of rural singing serving regional identity and social cohesion differ from the urban lyrical monologues of the Sevdalinka love songs. Muhamed Tufekcic presented and demonstrated regional Balkan folk dances while Marie Ingand focused on how arabic philosophy, science and the arts in cities like Bagdad and Damascus prepared a fertile ground for the cultural flowering on European soil in the medieval city of Granada. Christina Kobb of the Norwegian Academy of Music referred to the rich instrumental culture of 19th century Vienna, ending with a few suggestions on how to bring classical music back to a broader audience.

There are many conceivable ways and media in which one can approach urban culture research and tangible and intangible spheres of intervention and cultural forms. In her talk on Norwegian theatrical art at the crossroads of the urban and the regional Hilde Kvam of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology described the process of cultural democratization that led to a flowering of theatre culture in her native Norway.

From a social sciences perspective topics explored included:

‘To what extent and in which ways can urban grass-roots initiatives contribute towards a paradigmatic change away from the dominant neo-liberal, capitalistic logic which govern most urban habitats?’

‘Where and how can individuals and groups find the spaces for adopting sustainable and alternative livelihoods and life-styles within contemporary urban contexts?’

Sandra Uskokovic (The University of Dubrovnik) and Boris Bakal (Shadow casters, Zagreb) presented their comprehensive research project Urban Hum (see separate report) while Celine Motzfeldt Loades (University of Oslo) presented Social change and Urban development in UNESCO-listed Dubrovnik pointing to the local challenges of urban depopulation, cultural commercialization, homogenization and ‘museumification’ of Dubrovnik’s historic center.. Other Balkan related themes were Socially engaged architectural practice in Montenegro (Tatjana Rajic, Kotor Center for Sustainable Spatial development), Rithinking Prishtina (Eliza Hoxha Faculty of Architecture, Prishtina) Skopje 2014: Hegemonic and speculative urban narratives (Ivana Sidzimovska, Faculty of Design, Bauhaus University, Weimar) Dalibor Prancevic, Department of Art History, University of Split reported on the

artistic activism of the Contemporary Art Association KVART and its close relationship with the local community while Fillip Jovanski from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Skopje brought up the issue of erasing buildings and rebuilding in styles against public will.

Similar concerns were voiced by Agata Ruchliewicz - Dzianach, Academy of Fine Arts, Gdansk, Poland who asks Can urban interventions at the first stage be based on citizens interactions more than on costly operations and large-scale investments? Christian Frost of Birmingham City University investigating the relationship between architecture and ritual in late medieval Florence asks whether the near total eradication of civic ceremony in Europe today has contributed to the increasing isolation, segregation and violence often encountered in modern European cities. Michael Dring of Birmingham City University likewise noticing that postwar urban development often was driven by post-war reconstruction through acts of creative destruction showed how the material infrastructure is implicated in the sociality and identity of the city.

Michael Wimmer of the Vienna Institute for Cultural Policy and Management EDUCULT reminds us of the fact that more than 50 % of the pupils in primary schools in Vienna have a migrant background and that in fact Vienna for centuries has been a multi-ethnic city, which is easily forgotten in the debate about the interculturality of European capitals and insufficiently reflected in present cultural policy. This was supported by Najah Alwi of the University of Nottingham, England in her ethnographic exploration of social life in megacity Jakarta, asking for city administrators to always be responsive to the needs of the people through preserving and enlarging green spaces and providing a number of social benefits hitherto unrecognized. Morida Siagan from the University of Sumatera Utara, reporting on her research study on interethnic habitations in a district of Medan found that while some traditions gradually disappear, social relationships between the communities have successfully generated new social spaces that strengthen the vibrance of the city today.

Although there are a numerous other perspectives on how to accommodate for sustainable futures of urban life and cultures, there seems to be a large degree of consensus about what are the necessary goals. In order to address the pressing challenges of a rapidly globalizing world we need to reopen our cities as living, communicative spaces, bringing into our lives a sense of residing together in shared spaces. We need to re-envision the urban fabrics as constituting of living, thriving and sustainable communities. The UN Post-2015 Agenda calls for a new participatory and collaborative effort in studying and consequently making informed recommendations and decisions about our future course. Recognizing these pressing needs the organizers invite researchers, practitioners, politicians, students, activists and artists to collaborate in the quest for a sustainable urban future and by participating in our conferences. We encourage participants to meet again at the Interuniversity Center on September 19 - 23, 2016 for the conference on Cities at Risk- from Humiliation to Dignity and to contribute with their own fruitful research questions and perspectives on how to achieve sustainable

urban futures. Cooperating with the leadership of the Inter-university Centre in Dubrovnik, conferences focusing on urban culture studies are being planned as annual occurrences.