

“The Right to the City”: An Example of a Struggle to Preserve Urban Identity in Zagreb

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ABSTRACT A public debate on the reconstruction of a block in a city square in Zagreb has shown once again that a decision-making process at an urban level includes the confrontation of various social interests and aspirations as well as related development strategies.

The aim of this paper, through the study of the Cvjetni trg case, is to examine the role of various social participants involved in the processes of urban transformation: town administration, entrepreneurs and citizens involved in civil society associations. Particularly, the article stresses the way in which civil societies and associations attempt to find their place in the debate on town projects. The case of block reconstruction in Cvjetni trg deserves attention because it mobilised quite a number of citizens inspired by youth organisations and independent culture organisations in a common initiative called “The Right to the City”. Apart from a theoretical frame which comprises various social interests and strategies, this paper is based on the results of a survey on students’ attitudes. The research was conducted using a questionnaire administered to students of sociology and students of architecture. The aim is to understand their attitudes on block reconstruction, their participation in demonstrations organised by civil society associations, and their attitudes on ways of using urban public areas in the centre of Zagreb.

Key words: city, Flower Square, development strategies, social participants, students’ attitudes.

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1. Introduction

A public debate on the reconstruction of a block in a city square in Zagreb has shown once again that a decision-making process at an urban level includes the confrontation of various social interests and aspirations (of different social groups and actors) as well as related development strategies. Arguments and counterarguments during the debate opened up some issues and underlined the importance of understanding public spaces as sites through which different social identities are negotiated. From a sociological perspective, the most interesting are: the role of the local community in city planning, the concepts of social engagement, forms of trust and social network, the relation between “urban memory” and re-semanticisation of the urban environment as well as the process of gentrification. Croatian society as a transitional society is rather sensitive to issues of democratic participation of different, sometimes even opposing social groups, especially in the process of urban transformation. Public-private partnership is considered the most successful model in Western countries when it comes to redevelopment of urban areas. “Public and private sectors share mutual interests although they have different goals in city development. The public sector goal is to carry out those ideas that will contribute to the consistent development of the city as a whole, while the private sector aims to maximise profit that can be accomplished through that kind of development policy” (Šimović & Rogić-Lugarić, 2006.:1904). However, the authors emphasize that the model used in Croatian urban transformation processes is based on the city budget and weak attempts to create any kind of public-private partnership. Reconstruction at Flower Square (Cvjetni trg) has shown that public-private partnership, used as an urban development model, unless transparent and socially sustainable, can create serious social conflicts. The case of block reconstruction in Lower town Zagreb deserves attention because it has mobilised quite a number of citizens inspired by non-government organisations and independent civil organisations in a common initiative called “The Right to the City”¹ supported by the “Green Action” civic group. In this article, we would like to show, based on a case study, some of the issues that are encountered when attempts are made to revitalise Lower town blocks in the very centre of Zagreb.

This research is based on students’ attitudes regarding urban redevelopment in Zagreb. Student groups are known as initiators and active participants in different kinds of social movements so their attitudes on contemporary urban issues could point out some relevant issues regarding reconstruction at Flower Square. Our hypothesis is based on the assumption that students of architecture and sociology are informed and interested in current urban redevelopment issues. In addition, it is also expected that they will have different opinions on issues and priorities in urban redevelopment attributable to different study backgrounds.

¹ The “Right to the city” (Pravo na grad) initiative is a network of 30 NGOs with youth and cultural programmes.

2. Urban centre revitalisation processes

Debates on public space, particularly concerning urban areas, is the focus of scientific discourse. New approaches to urban planning (Purcell, 2003., Harvey, 2003., Albrechts, L., Healey, P., Kunzmann, 2003., Healey, 2004., Vigar, G., Graham, S., Healey, P., 2005.), which stress the role of the public in urban planning also expose new issues that are important for sociology.

The terms city renovation and revitalisation most often refer to privatisation and commercialisation of public space, which frequently implies the homogenisation of space (Kärrholm, 2008.). These processes represent the complete urban core in large world megalopolises, while in small European cities they are used to describe the very centres of these cities. The old European urban historic centre is polyfunctional, a frequented zone of various social interactions in the everyday life of its citizens. Renovation projects for targeted areas anticipate gentrification and specialisation of a certain part of the city for specific use (Ottolini, 2005.). Global changes have an impact on the urban centre: the accent is on commercial, entertaining and consumer sectors, in an economic and therefore urbanistic sense; this often appears to be the subject of discussions and conflict among actors. "In addition, the growth of new urban economies and new economic sectors is nourished by cultural and leisure industries, while the appearance of new types of urban development, renewal and regeneration is encouraged by the creation and expansion of new cultural, leisure and consumption spaces. (Gospodini, 2006.:312) Despite the fact that revitalisation projects are most often drafted in such a way that they stress the social function of the new space with the aim to justify the need for it among the general public, their primary function is to generate profit.

Modern world economic trends pay great attention to the use of urban land, to city development, and particularly to revitalisation, that is, to urban regeneration of old urban centres. This has an impact, among others, on the creation of social phenomena such as gentrification. "World-wide economical interests and the growing discrepancy between social needs and economics are affecting all levels of society, but particularly local level, where it is possible to verify a new exclusion form: the urban displacement" (Ottolini, 2005.:1). Gentrification is a process that was defined in the 1960s by Ruth Glass. She used an example of the demographic and social change that was a result of investment into the districts previously less attractive to the middle and high classes. "One by one, many of the working class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle-classes—upper and lower. Shabby, modest mews and cottages—two rooms up and two down—have been taken over, when their leases have expired, and have become elegant, expensive residences [...]. Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working-class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed" (Glass, 1964.:18). The gentrification process has now assumed a global dimension and is closely connected with both capital flow and the condition in the real-estate market. Smith relates national policies

for regeneration of cities to gentrification. He stresses that nowadays “strategic appropriation and generalisation of gentrification as the means of global interurban competition finds its most developed expression in the discourse of urban regeneration” (Smith, 2002.:352).

Gentrification currently occurs when some urban areas change their socio-demographic structure due to the private investments of individuals, firms or multinational companies supported by national politics. The revitalised urban areas attract a well-off social class, thus increasing the value of real property and consequently segregating citizens. In accordance with this, two opposing basic models are identified: disneyfication, in other words, bronxification of districts (Hamelink, 2008.). The urban centre turns into a designed theme park, while the periphery turns into no go area, whether because they are dormitories with no facilities or zones famous for being lawless, the zones of violence and crime (De Caeter, 1998.). Due to urban boom, major European cities encourage the policy of urban space control (De Caeter, 1998.). One of the extreme features of such physical planning includes the militarisation of urban space, which explains the rise of new urban strongholds, i.e., buildings or even settlements controlled by cameras and caretakers, encircled by fences or walls, and only the chosen ones may enter. The modern city is in a way obsessed by control, most obvious in public places, ever more frequently controlled by cameras. Spaces such as squares and parks are closed off during the night to provide protection and security for citizens. “The generic city is obsessed by closing-off, safety and control” (De Caeter, 1998.:4).

Investment into urban centre regeneration is a sensitive area where it is important to understand the way space is used and the significance that space has for city dwellers. In the modern globalized world, cities are trying to find their new identity that will make them recognisable, that will distinguish them on the global map of homogenous megapolises; however, the result is creation of the generic city², in other words generic urbanism, without an identity (De Caeter, 1998.). Urban trends in a consumption society are changing the urban environment by spreading suburbs, creating urban sprawl, encircling the city with shopping centres or other commercial non-places, which is opposed to modern new elements in historic centres, which should renew the centre and offer the city new panoramic visions. It is therefore worth recalling the dilemma as formulated by Lefebvre almost half a century ago, “It is not possible to imagine the renovation of an old city; but only the construction of a new city, differently based, at a different level, under different conditions, and in a different society. The task is: there is no return towards the

² Koolhaas defines a generic city, as a modern city with visions that avoids urban rules that correlates to his viewpoint that urbanism as such does not exist, “Urbanism does not exist. It is only an ideology in Marx’s sense of the word. Architecture really exists, like Coca-Cola (...) (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995.). A generic city is characterised by homogenisation and repetition of certain models such as skyscrapers, while city streets are left with mass tourism, cars and speed (Koolhaas, 1995.).

traditional city, no escape forward, towards colossal and shapeless agglomerations" (Lefebvre, 1976.:18). Symbolic values of a certain public space, which comprise both the social identities and social energies, create resistance towards changes in both the functional and architectonic sense. Therefore, the issue of revitalisation is a multidisciplinary discourse that should be examined carefully.

3. The Right to the city in a transitional context in Croatia

The key change typical of transitional societies is the range of actors that now make decisions regarding changes to the city. In socialism, the only actor was the state, while now private investors and multinational companies are now involved and concerns whose plans should be matched by the Master Plan (Čaldović & Šarinić, 2008.). Private investments, as a rule, are motivated by profit with little interest in the social dimension of space, the result being uncontrolled construction in the periphery, or in the new constructions in the city centre. Lefebvre's thesis advocating that it is urbanism that replaced industrialisation as a propelling power of capitalist economy often rings true (Smith, 2002.). Since administrative and legislative frames in transitional countries do not change fast enough, the development of a grey economy in the real-estate and construction market occurs. The consequences of such a system have direct implications on the status of public space and the regimes of its use. The privatisation concept that has been actual since the change in the political system united city authorities and private investors. Since their roles are not transparent, the first major open conflict regarding urban centre renovation, which included citizens, experts and theoreticians belonging to cultural, architectonic, economic and sociological circles, was triggered. What the concept of the right to the city implicates is the very right to communication, in other words as Hamelink stresses "the quality and sustainability of life in the city will largely depend upon the ways on which the urbanites manage to deal with their conflict" (Hamelink, 2008.:293).

The vague vision of development, the incomplete elaboration of rules and regulations for future decision making, and the lack of active citizen participation in decision making, brought about the preservation issue of Zagrebian urban public spaces that have a strong symbolic significance. Including citizens into the process of decision making in the city, according to Purcell is the future of democracy, which is no longer based on the state-level decisions but on the levels of urban space production, controlled by its very citizens (Purcell, 2003.).

4. Flower square – a lower town block reconstruction case study

Although a democratic society supposes the engagement of its citizens and the development of a civil society, this Croatian example shows that citizens' interest is not considered in the development of civil society. Rather, they are in an active state of dissatisfaction. It is the activism of civil society, which is one of the es-

sential reasons why we have chosen the example of a block renovation at Flower Square for our analysis.

The urban development of Zagreb comprises three periods: the medieval town, when the Upper town (Gornji grad) developed, followed by the first modernisation at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries under the influence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire when the Lower town (Donji grad) developed, and by the second modernisation, i.e., the socialist period when Zagreb developed southwards (Čavrić & Nedović-Budić, 2007). The modern urban period is characterised by the fast development of business and residential objects in the area or within the pre-existing parts of the city.

Simultaneously, the first modern new elements were built at the most attractive city squares, such as the skyscraper at the central city square, Ban Jelačić's Square (Trg bana Jelačića) in the 1950s, and the business building Željpo ("Ferimport") at Marshall Tito's Square (Trg maršala Tita) in the 1960s. The complexity of constructing new elements at the squares of symbolic and identity significance for the city is evident in numerous controversies and critical opinions by experts and the general public (Vukadin, 2007). Analysis of the "Ferimport" project reveals basic issues that follow the realisation of a building in the historic core: "Although the Željpo was constructed in the 1960s, it contains elements that are equally relevant in contemporary realisations: starting from the influence of investors, via the misunderstanding of architectonic and conservation professions as well as the issue of authority pertaining to certain institutions, all the way to (lack of) competitions and (lack of) respect for authorship" (Vukadin, 2007.: 226).

In the course of the first and second modernisations, the Upper and Lower towns (Gornji and Donji grad) are defined functionally and symbolically as the city centre surrounded by squares: to the south King Tomislav's Square (Tomislavov trg), to the west French Republic Square (Trg Francuske republike), to the east Kvaternik's Square (Kvaternikov trg), and to the north Illyrian Square (Ilirski trg). Within this broad area, due to the fast development of the city, especially due to the increasingly complicated traffic organisation, the pedestrian zone is defined around the very central square, where Cvjetni trg is located as well. Generally, the square has always been a place of meeting, gathering, the centre of social life and a part of public space used daily by the citizens. In Lefebvre's concept of space production, the square is a part of living space that as a basic element of citizens' social life includes the right of citizens to use the space and the right to participate directly in the production of space. "Therefore, the process of producing space necessarily involves constructing rhythms of everyday life and producing and reproducing the social relations that frame it" (Purcell, 2003.:577).

The project of revitalisation and renovation of the block at Flower square was presented to the public at the end of 2006 as a renovation solution for a derelict Lower Town block. As an ambitious project of the residential-business type, this includes

a residential business complex with luxurious flats, shops, cinema theatres and a garage.

Ways of doing business Croatian routine almost regularly includes non-transparent dialogue between the investor and the city authorities. However, the debate on the block revitalisation project near Cvjetni trg included a significant number of citizens. Their signatures (54,000) on a petition³ and public demonstrations clearly expressed their dissatisfaction and support for civil associations: the Green Action (Zelena akcija) and The Right to the City (Pravo na grad) (Svirčić-Gotovac & Zlatar, 2008.).

This article refers to the events that took place from 2006 to 2008. It is important to emphasize that this article reflects the debates and events that were ongoing at the time.

5. Analysis of survey research results

Architects and sociologists, as experts in their fields who are interested in urban planning, often participate actively in discussions on public space planning. However, their notion of city is often very different. This research is based on the very presupposition that there is a difference in the way students of architecture and sociology experience interventions in the urban environment depending on their ideas and knowledge acquired in their respective study group. Although students lack social legitimacy as experts in the field, it is assumed that they are interested in specific urban issues. Considering their discipline, interest in these issues is either from an architectural and urbanistic aspect or from a social sustainability point of view.

The survey research was conducted in May and June 2008 with 175 participants (n=175), students of architecture and sociology. The sample structure consisted of 73 (41.7%) architecture students and 103 (58.3%) sociology students out of which 31.1% were first year students; 34.3% were second year students; while 7.4% were third year and 21.1% fourth year students. Research was based on a questionnaire with 19 close-ended questions (17 scaled questions and 2 yes/no questions) and one open-ended question.

The aim of the research was to investigate students' attitudes regarding the "Cvjetni trg" project and to compare the attitudes of architecture and sociology students regarding urban and spatial interventions in the historic core of Zagreb.

The survey questionnaire included a few groups of questions/topics:

³ Number of 54.000 signatures on a petition refers to the period from February 2007 till April 2007.

- i. identification of social actors with the highest impact on the development and transformation of the city:
- ii. models of planning the historic core (Lower Town):
- iii. use of Flower square as a public urban space – habits and perspectives:
- iv. the actual Flower square block renovation project:
- v. personal demographic questions on age, gender, place of birth and sense of belonging to the city.

6. Results and discussion

In recent literature, the importance of including social actors of general spectre into the processes of city transformation is also stressed in the concepts of “communicative planning”, “argumentative planning”, “planning through debate”, “inclusory discourse”, “collaborative planning” (Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2002.). They share an emphasis on interactive understanding of urban planning and development. “Such orientation mostly arises from the fact that planning is an interactive discipline, into which many disciplines such as sociology, social theory, economics, philosophy and other sciences have contributed, both theoretically and practically. Sensitivity to the ‘local’, promoted since the 1980s, refers to both the physical and social dimensions of place” (Mišetić & Miletić, 2007.: 834).

6.1. *The influence of certain social actors on the decisions regarding urban transformation of the city*

Results from the survey conducted among students, revealed a discrepancy in the perceived impact of local authorities, politicians and multinational corporations, and businesspersons in comparison to the citizens, non-governmental organisations, and even experts (Diagram 1). Clearly, the city government has the largest influence on city development (90%) while citizens (12%) are perceived as those with the least influence. No significant difference between the opinions of architecture students and sociology students was identified.

When asked to express an opinion on the extent to which interdisciplinary studies are relevant during urban planning processes, most respondents (69%) stated that those studies are only partly taken into consideration. Only 2% of all respondents think that interdisciplinary studies are completely taken into consideration during urban renewal processes (Diagram 2). Therefore, it is not surprising that the degree of satisfaction with the state of dialogue between the city government and citizens shows that the respondents are mainly dissatisfied with this condition (Diagram 3).

Diagram 1.

Who has the largest influence on city development and transformation?

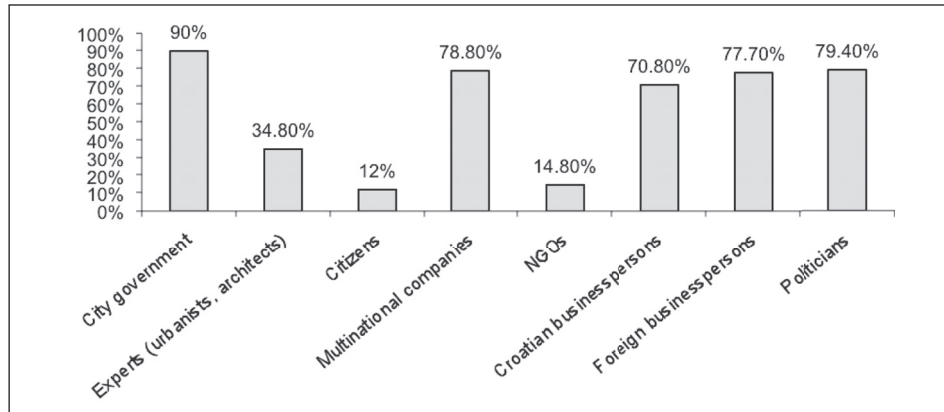


Diagram 2.

In your opinion, to what extent are interdisciplinary studies taken into consideration during the urban planning process in Zagreb?

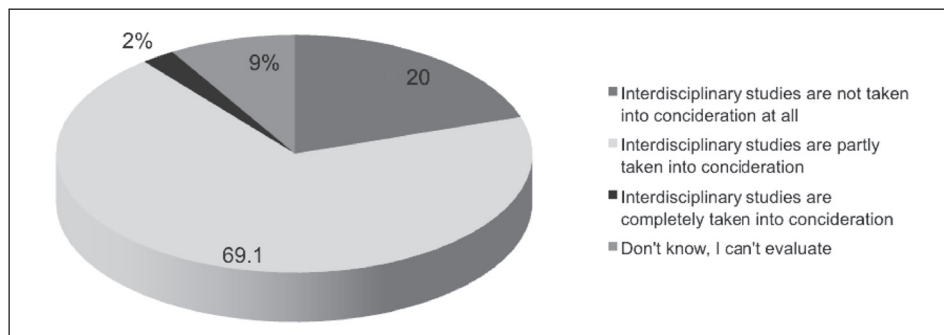
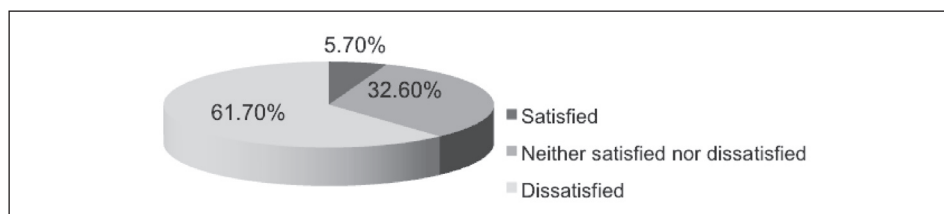


Diagram 3.

Are you satisfied with the dialogue between the city government and citizens?

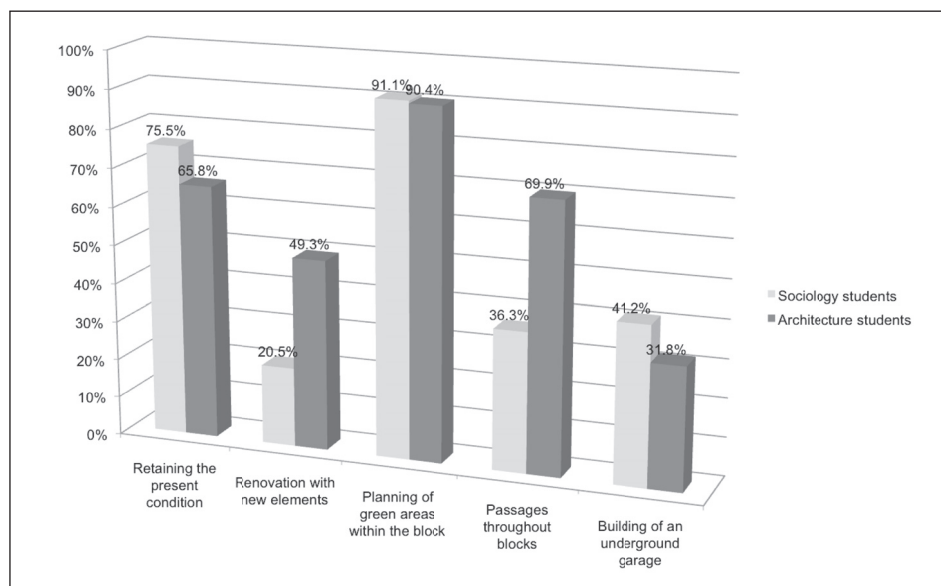


6.2. Models of planning historic core – Lower Town

Among the few proposed options for the urban planning of *Lower Town* blocks, respondents rated the ones related to ecological issues (*planning of green areas within the block*) as the most favourable. They also expressed the desire for renovation that would *retain the pre-existing condition* (Diagram 4). In other words, students are prepared to introduce new elements nor are they ready for a change. As expected, the statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) is shown in the issue of new elements and passages, which are more acceptable to students of architecture than to students of sociology.

Diagram 4.

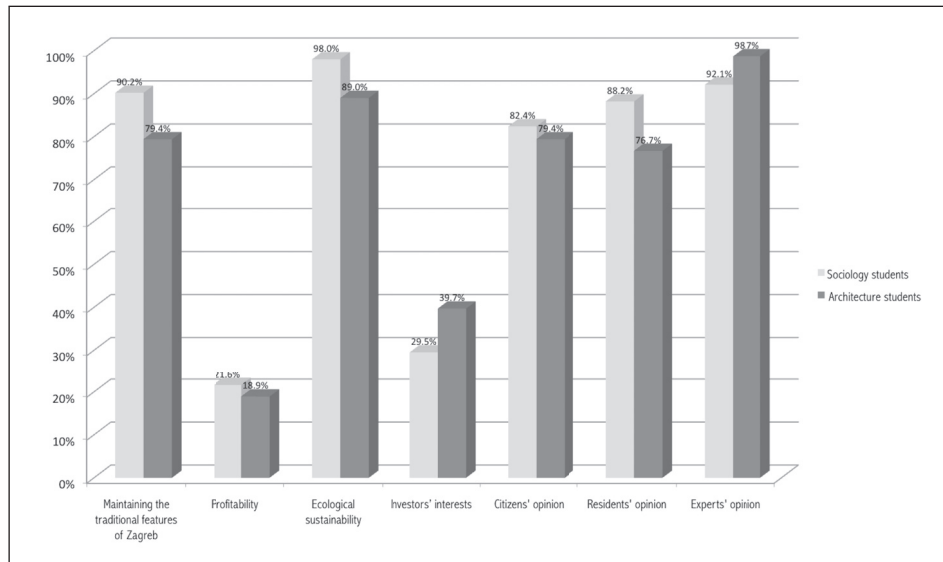
The acceptability of possible options for the urban planning of Lower town blocks



Ranked by the criterion of “importance” the arguments that should be considered the most during urban planning and transformation of *Flower square* show that students generally give significant priority to socio-ecological criteria in comparison to economic criteria (Diagram 5).

The majority of respondents rated, concerning planning and renovation of public space, the opinion of experts as the most important criteria. Besides, a statistically important difference ($p < 0.05$) is shown in attitudes on the importance of certain arguments when planning urban public space. While students of architecture (98.7%) regard the opinion of experts important in making decisions on urban planning, students of sociology (98%) consider that ecological acceptability of urban solutions is more important.

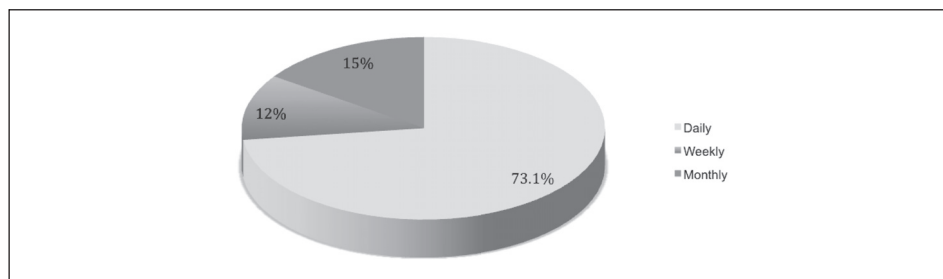
Diagram 5.
Which criteria should be the most important in the planning of 'Flower square'?



6.3. Flower square – an example of the use of public urban space

Flower square is one of the most popular squares in the urban historic core – *Lower Town*. Therefore, revitalisation of this square should be seen in a wider context and this should be taken into account in the planning process of *Lower Town* blocks. The survey research results show that 73.1% of all respondents visit *Flower square* at least once a day (Diagram 6).

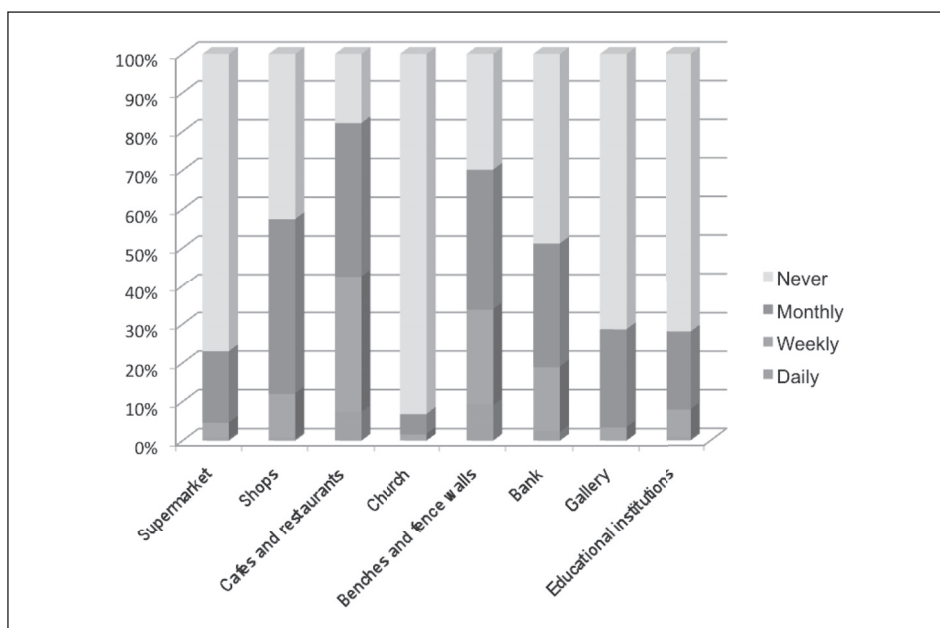
Diagram 6.
How often do you visit Cvjetni trg?



Cafes and restaurants are the most visited venues at *Flower square* daily (73.1%) as well as weekly (15%). Public benches and fence walls are also regularly used by

students: 24.6% at least once a week (Diagram 7). Other facilities such as shops, banks, galleries, and educational institutions are mainly used on a monthly basis.

Diagram 7.
How often do you use the facilities at 'Flower square'?



This clearly shows that that *Flower square* is a place of extreme social significance, a place that people frequently and willingly visit during their free time. Correspondingly, as already mentioned, respondents consider that an important argument in urban space planning for spaces such as *Flower square*, should be retaining the traditional features of Zagreb, which would preserve the characteristic way of living of a public space (Diagram 5).

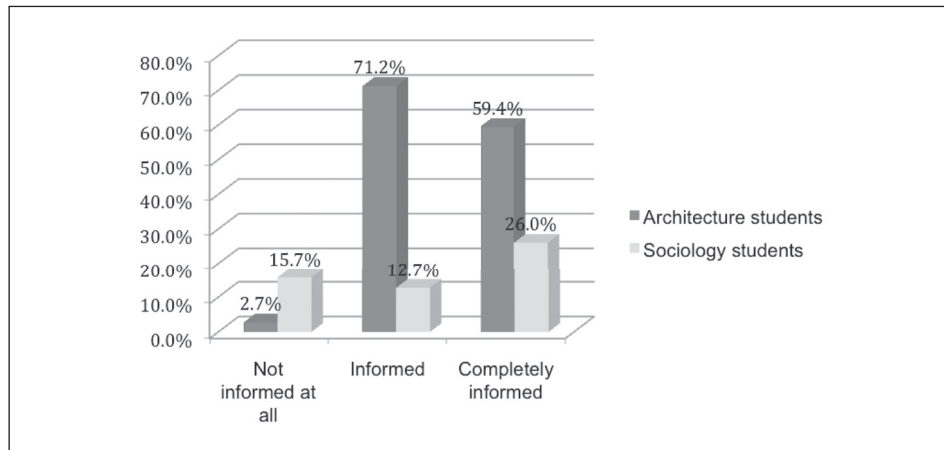
6.4. Actual block reconstruction project at Flower square

Survey results of attitudes on a concrete suggestion related to block reconstruction near *Flower square* show that 89.7% respondents are informed about the project. Many respondents (71.4%) consider that they are partly informed about the project, and 18.3% respondents say that they are completely uninformed.

Yet, the results show a significant difference concerning the study group (Diagram 8). Students of architecture are better informed about the project.

Diagram 8.

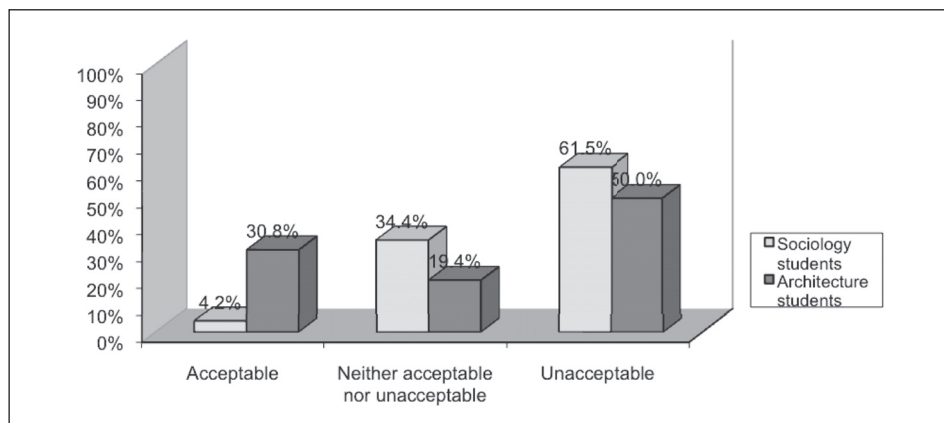
How informed are you about the reconstruction project at 'Flower square'?



The majority of all students (56.5%) regard the project as unacceptable. However, variance analysis shows a statistically significant difference in the acceptance of the project, depending on the study group of respondents (Diagram 9). For the students of architecture the project is more acceptable than for students of sociology. As for the participation in the civil initiative, 22.3% of all respondents signed the petition against the project while 7% of respondents participated in the demonstrations held at *Flower square*. Regardless of the differences concerning the general acceptance of the project and participation in public debates, there is no difference in the personal participation between students of architecture and sociology.

Diagram 9.

In your opinion, is the winning project an acceptable solution for the renovation of a city block?



7. Conclusion

Apart from the classical issues on the processes of gentrification in urban cores, on the social role of planners, on ethics and professionalism, there is also the issue of “public interest”. It is important to mention that the urban public is not a homogenous group. They consist of many social groups, with different interests and aspirations, which are sometimes of a partnership type, sometimes opposed, and often simply different. This is why dialogue and an interdisciplinary approach are of great importance. This research deals with only one segment of the public, that is, a student population. Although students are expected to have a great interest and fervent attitudes on urban issues and are considered one of the important actors of social action, surprisingly, we still find a lack of interest in personal participation in public discussions and actions among respondents. Characteristically, most students are in favour of retaining the traditional spatial and social identity of the square. Advocating the *status quo*, this position can be explained because of the lack of trust in the procedures of urban planning and construction in the city, the lack of dialogue between the city government and citizens, and a general imbalance of influence on city development by various social actors, which do not want to consider citizen rights.

As for the student population, of course, they are not a homogenous group either. In this research, we showed that there is a difference in the way the revitalisation of public space is experienced, depending on the study group. The survey shows that architecture students aspire towards constructing and new elements in the city centre, unlike sociology students who pay more attention to the importance of sustainable urbanisation that emphasises interests and values of the local community in the urban planning process. Such an orientation can be a result of their education, reached through their study programmes, where students of architecture are usually taught to solve urban issues by designing, whereas sociology students are encouraged to examine the social dimension of urbanisation. Within this meaning, the two professions can act in a complementary way, which shows once again that the processes of successful urban transformations can be organised and conducted as interdisciplinary projects.

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“Pravo na grad”: Primjer borbe za očuvanje gradskog identiteta u Zagrebu

Sažetak

Javna rasprava o rekonstrukciji bloka na jednom od središnjih zagrebačkih trgova još jednom je pokazala da proces odlučivanja na nivou grada uključuje odmjerenje različitih socijalnih interesa i aspiracija i s njima povezanih razvojnih strategija.

Na tom tragu, cilj ovog rada je kroz studiju slučaja “Cvjetni trg” preispitati ulogu različitih društvenih sudionika uključenih u procese urbane preobrazbe: gradske uprave, poduzetnika i gradske javnosti organizirane u udruge civilnog društva. Identificirati njihove stavove, metode kojima pribjegavaju kako bi ostvarili svoje ciljeve i uspješnost afirmacije vlastitih ideja. Osobito će se staviti naglasak na način na koji civilna društva i udruge traže svoje mjesto u debati o gradskim projektima, te o mobilizacijskom potencijalu civilnog sektora.

Važno je istaknuti slučaj rekonstrukcije bloka na Cvjetnom trgu koji je mobilizirao veliki broj građana potaknutih djelovanjem organizacija mladih kao i organizacija nezavisne kulture okupljenih u zajedničku inicijativu “Pravo na grad” koji su započeli proces prosvjedovanja protiv isključenosti većine prilikom odlučivanja o novoj funkciji centralnog javnog prostora.

U radu će se pokušati odgovoriti na pitanja o pluralizaciji modela donošenja odluka u upravljanju gradom i oblikovanja gradskog identiteta kroz dijalog različitih socijalnih aktera.

Osim teorijskog okvira u kojemu će se iznijeti različiti socijalni interesi i strategije u konkretnom slučaju, rad donosi rezultate istraživanja stavova studenata o rekonstrukciji bloka na Cvjetnom trgu. Istraživanje je provedeno anketim upitnikom, na skupini studenata sociologije i arhitekture, a cilj mu je ispitati stavove sudenata o rekonstrukciji bloka, sudjelovanju u prosvjedima koje su organizirale udruge civilnog društva te o načinima korištenja javnog prostora u centru Zagreba.

Ključne riječi: grad, Cvjetni trg, razvojne strategije, društveni sudionici, stavovi studenata.

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