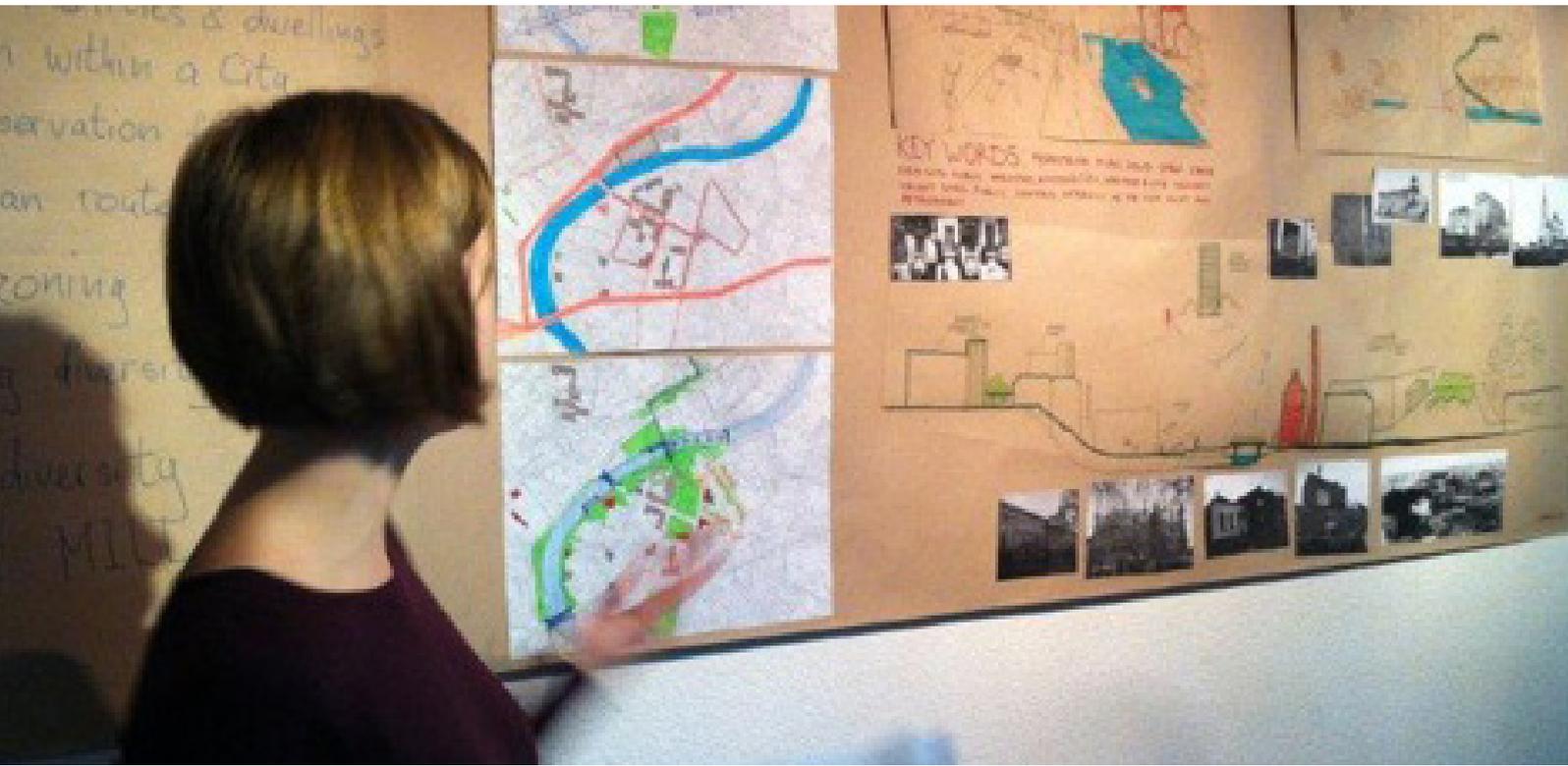


OCTOBER 23-25TH 2013



NEW URBAN TOPOLOGIES

KHARKOV



KHARKOV

TO BURY OR TO BUILD?

Kharkov in the Ukraine is a city looking for a new direction. Thriving on and famous for its heavy industries the city was traumatized by the dissolution of the Soviet Union which caused many large plants to close and consequent sudden unemployment, leading to poverty and an increase in crime rate. Kharkov, however, survives as a hub for higher education with a great many universities and colleges of good reputation in Eastern Europe. Ukraine's economy nevertheless remains weak and the political direction is uncertain because fairly equal forces pull in different directions – one towards economic re-integration with Russia, the other towards seeking closer relations with the EU. Both camps are subject to foreign pressure. The lack of direction experienced by engaged stakeholders is so acute that it was described by a participant as an ultimatum between “Bury or Build”.

The extensive closure of manufacturing has resulted in vast areas of abandoned or only partially used industrial buildings. Kharkov, devastated during WW 2, has since grown in leaps, from few inhabitants after the war, to 1,5 mill. at the present time. The population growth is manifest in large tenement building areas, increasingly as towers, encircling the city in rings expanding from decade to decade. Since the transformation from a command economy to capitalism, Ukraine is experiencing a replacement of old and sometimes historical buildings by modern condos or office buildings, at times built on speculation and remaining more or less empty because of excessive price levels. At the same time, quite central areas of summer cottages, “datchas” on very small plots of land, are being renovated or demolished and replaced by modern one-family villas. While improving the housing standards in the city these two phenomena contribute to creating segregation between the economic elite and the ordinary citizens. Also, there is a need to preserve and restore the rather few remaining pre-revolutionary buildings as well as examples of constructivist architecture from the USSR era. Another issue of concern is new buildings – allowed by authorities because investors hold considerable means of influence - that block city views and street perspectives.

Remaining heavy bureaucracy from the Soviet times, exacerbated by widespread corruption and deep mistrust of the authorities by the citizenry and of civil society by the government impede communications and transparency with regard to the transformation of the city. Such were the issues that NUT Kharkov set out to grapple with.

THE SEMINAR

DESTRUCTION, DIVERSITY AND DEFICIT IN COMMUNICATION

At the first day seminar city presentations of Kharkiv, Stockholm, Beirut, Minsk and Mostar provided cross-border outlooks on city planning for the purpose of comparison and as an overture to the discussions, along with an overview of international urbanism projects undertaken by the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm. Kharkiv shares a sad history of destruction by war with Beirut, Mostar and Minsk. In the two former cities armed conflict erupted because of ethno-religious differences. Kharkiv, also a city of many ethnicities, possesses potential assets in terms of multiculturalism. Also on the positive side, all four cities are now at a stage of reconstruction, revitalization and reconciliation and can draw on each other's current experiences. Concrete cooperation in this sense – as a result of NUT-exercises – has by the way already been established in the shape of a joint Mostar-Beirut research project, to be followed next year by a new NUT-project and exhibition by Färgfabriken in the two cities.

A core area for improvement is consultation and communication between the administration, the professionals and the citizenry, a remnant of the fact that Kharkiv, Minsk, Mostar and Riga have emerged from authoritarian systems of government. Participants revealed that students from the Kharkiv faculty of architecture have participated in discussions on city planning in the capital, Kiev, for several years at the invitation of the municipality, but that those exercises have left no foot print on the ground. One reason for the difficulties in this regard in the Ukraine is the just mentioned juxtaposition of political forces which tend to lead to a stalemate in government action. Methods and examples of how to deal with communication and transparency were exemplified by the Stockholm presenter.





Minsk, like Kharkiv, experienced fast expansion in the 50's, resulting in shrinking of green areas and the replacement of ruined historical buildings by replicas. The presenter from Riga highlighted the issue of the role of nostalgia in city planning, problematizing what he termed "ghost buildings" and questioning the drive to rebuild what has been destroyed just in order to satisfy a public memory that anyway may last only for one or two generations.

During the ensuing general discussion the issue of public spaces was foremost, as has been the case in all "NUT cities". Several participants maintained that the role of architects is not to create public spaces but to facilitate the use of such spaces, created by the general public, through making them attractive. Others said that there was no culture of public spaces nor any public activity in post-Soviet society; people were not used to create activities and areas of common use at their own initiative. There was a big gap not only between the administration and the people but also between professionals and the people. Participants argued that over-intervening or over-designing did not work well for public spaces. Instead, public spaces should be created from a sociological and pedagogical point of departure.

THE SEMINAR

GEOGRAPHIC CASE STUDIES

A day long excursion, divided into a general survey of the city by bus and a subsequent exploration on foot of areas specifically designated by the Kharkiv hosts, took place on the second day. Participants were divided into three groups for the study of

- The public space around the Opera Theatre,
- The Feierbach district – a mixed purpose area,
- A Kharkiv riverside area.

OPERA THEATRE

The first group studied the use and accessibility of the grounds around the great, modern Opera Theatre building, which is located in the heart of the city. The surrounding area consists of a public square and at the backside of a park, currently stigmatized as a location for hoodlums. The group found that the theatre building does not communicate with the neighboring installations, viz. a skating rink and an amphitheater, one reason being that the establishment of these installations had taken place without prior consultation with the stakeholders. Some spontaneous activities take place in the surrounding area, which the group proposed to “civilize” and integrate. The group suggested a “wailing wall” for graffiti, political messages or even as a physical object to let off steam on. Participants stressed the importance of cross generational measures for transition; temporary and mobile projects placed e.g. in containers and enhancing of the environment by installation of large “bioballs”, lit up from inside. The theatre building itself should be relieved of its many posters and banners in order to expose its original, “neo brutal” concrete architecture.

THE FEIERBACH DISTRICT

The second group studied the Feierbach district, located in the immediate vicinity of the river. The river itself and a connecting bridge help to link the district with the city center. The district is favorably located and has a clear zoning pattern with a public park, industrial and residential buildings. The physical cultural heritage is varied and manifest in low-rise residential buildings from the mid 1800's, a beautiful but derelict water mill plant, a secularized former church, a former high school, a university faculty for transport, a 19th century post office and a clinic, built as a residence by a famous architect. Some rooms in the area are rented by university students.

Despite the bridge across the river and the vicinity to one of the city's main arteries, the Feierbach district remains somehow closed off. One reason is a fenced off area by the river which the group suggested should be opened up. Participants thought that the riverside area should be cleaned and made accessible to the general public, perhaps to build a pedestrian bridge to link the faculty of transport to a faculty of architecture on the other side of the river, to develop the water mill into a museum of technology and to restore the historical post office building, maybe as a student club.

The university and its students, a night club and an “underground” art gallery already serve to enliven the district but some participants also suggested the encouragement of locally connected businesses. Others saw dangers in a gentrification which would risk ousting present residents because of increased rent levels.

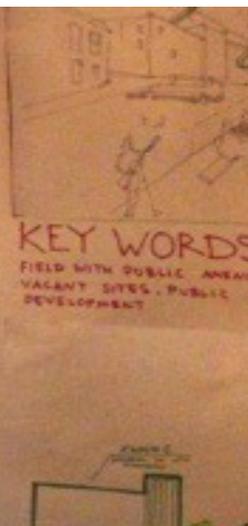
THE KHARKOV RIVERSIDE

The third group looked at an area by the Kharkiv river. The neighborhood is working class and has some social problems, thus inhabitants in general can't afford to maintain its buildings. The urban structure is turned away from the waterfront and some buildings are empty or left to decay, while others are being fixed or (illegally) extended. It was found that users of the area shift at sunset.

The group placed emphasis on social relations and examined if and how regulations that inhabitants complain of but can't do much about, could be changed, and what new rules for planning are needed. The group recommended to set the neighborhood alive by introducing new public programs, sports, jogging tracks and bicycle lanes by the river. It was noted that an Academy of culture is in the area, as well as a medical center which could be developed to provide art therapy and rehabilitation. A sweets factory should be renovated and perhaps turned into a museum of sweets.

The group suggested cooperation around social issues, educational workshops, art interventions along the river and liaisons between medicine and sports, medicine and business, culture and leisure etc. Core issues were whether to encourage new people to move in, to bring new programs and/or new regulations but also to make good use of extant cultural assets.

- RIVER
- bridge
- student facilities & dwellings
- position within a City
- good observation from outside
- pedestrian route & bridge
- clear zoning pattern
- density diversity
- visual direction



CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Seminar presentations were relevant and inspiring and the participants were of different generations and different walks of life. Academics, practitioners, artists, activists and students worked well together and with great enthusiasm. The ideas presented at the workshops were innovative and creative but clouded by pessimism with regard to possibilities of implementation.

The absence – or rather last minute regrets - by the city's chief architect was a disappointment which blurred the intended focus on communication, transparency and consultation. The unexpected no-show of the municipal official who had followed NUT Kharkiv throughout the preparation phase raises the question of whether his absence was caused by instructions from higher authority and if so, speaks clearly of the communication problems we set out to tackle.

On the other hand, Färgfabriken's impression is that the implementation of NUT Kharkiv contributed to building trust and friendship between the participants from six countries and to encourage the youth of Ukraine in their quest for closer ties and exchanges with the European Union.

- A homework given to the Ukrainian participants was to ponder how the suggestions and recommendations of the project can be communicated with the city authorities. In parallel to their endeavors, Färgfabriken recommends that Swedish diplomatic channels be used to achieve a meeting with the Kharkiv mayor and city planners, including of course Färgfabriken's local partners.

- In this context, Bojan Boric of KTH recommended a visit to Belgrade to learn how good communication solutions for urban planning have been attained, albeit with great effort.

- A follow-up that will seek to satisfy the Ukrainian partners' quest for being heard and in order to improve local communication and transparency seems mandatory and should be prepared in consultation with them and the third country participants. Färgfabriken will seek additional funds for a follow-up.

- On the organizational level Färgfabriken will strive to renew the NUT programs so that:

a) the massive block of lectures during the seminar day for pedagogical reasons be eased by asking some presenters instead of talking ex cathedra to preside over and animate working groups with their knowledge and experience from home

b) verbal presentations be interspersed with films or videos illustrating other NUT projects

c) continue to document NUT projects visually and upload such documentation to the Färgfabriken website

d) encourage local partners to increase artistic, social and anthropological aspects in the intellectual process and to steer the workshop substances towards thematic issues, since otherwise purely architectural issues tend to dominate deliberations.

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