

TRANSFORMATION OF CULTURAL CENTRES AND THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT

Significant institutions in the promotion of culture and community are represented by cultural centers, architectural objects within which various events take place such as performances, public debates, exhibitions... On the territory of the Republic of Serbia, these objects were mostly built after the Second World War in the era of socialism and mostly in each place has only one such object type. These objects have not significantly changed their original appearance or function, and considering that art and various cultural activities are developing and taking on a new form, a space is necessary that will adequately support these new activities. The paper discusses the possibilities and methods of transforming the space of the cultural centre through the participation of citizens and the expression of their ideas and needs. The study aims to show that such involvement highlights the value of culture and community, raises awareness about preserving architecture, and promotes a sense of care for the environment and well-being.

KEYWORDS

Culture centre; social inclusion; revitalization; community participation

1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural centres on the territory of Serbia are closely related to the post-war period, the formation of Yugoslavia and the introduction of the socialist political system. In accordance with the political strategies of the time, the construction of a large number of cultural centres was planned, and the special focus was on the construction of these facilities in less developed settlements. The reason was the perceived need for the existence of a central point for the development of the cultural needs of the inhabitants. In addition to cultural and artistic content, cultural centres also organized entertainment events. In the first period of construction (1945 - 1950), it was planned to build 1600 cultural centres in rural areas. Although the planned objectives were not fully achieved, their construction represents an ambitious project for that period. The aim was to decentralize culture through the distribution of cultural objects, and to affirm local communities culturally, but also politically. At the end of the 20th century, with the collapse of Yugoslavia, as a result of the transition and other political events, cultural centres in the countryside failed to survive due to unresolved legal issues and were dissolved. Residents also lose the right to use a large number of cultural centres, and these facilities become periodically devastated, even though they were built in representative positions. The

paper discusses the possibilities and methods of transforming the space of the cultural centre through the participation of citizens and the expression of their ideas and needs. The possibilities of creating and implementing new organized structures that contain a motive for cooperation and correspondence of different social groups represent a contribution to the struggle for social equality. The research aims to point out the importance of community participation in the transformation of the cultural centre because primarily visitors perceive these objects as very important in their social aspect of life. The results should suggest that the importance of culture and community is achieved in this way, awareness is raised about the preservation of existing architecture, but also freedom in approaching adequate revitalisation through creating a sense of care for one's environment and well-being.

2. SIGNIFICANCE AND CURRENT STATE OF CULTURAL CENTRES IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

In the modern era, the neglect of rural settlements is a problem that can be considered global, and

the main goal of the policy of the development of rural areas is the preservation of the socio-economic vitality of rural areas. Cultural centres can be defined as public facilities whose "basic function is the diffusion of culture". Given that cultural centres represented mostly the only institution concerned with the socio-cultural field of activities of the rural population, their importance used to be very great. The construction of these facilities was one of the primary strategies for the development of populated areas. Thus, cultural centres as institutions encouraged "cooperatives, collective education and cultural development of the population" (Ristić 2014). However, due to the unresolved property-legal status, a large number of cultural centres become inactive and occasionally devastated. (figure 1) Although abandoned, the residents are still emotionally attached to the cultural centres, because the previous generations actively participated in their construction and hope that the cultural centres will be reactivated. Also, with the closing of cultural centres, the only institution dedicated to culture in rural areas disappears, thus residents are deprived of this type of socialization and are forced to move to larger settlements.



Figure 1. An example of an abandoned cultural centre in a village in southern Serbia. Source: (Author 2023)

3. POSSIBILITY OF TRANSFORMATION AND MODERN COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

The connection between society and culture is very complex, and cultural centres represent a platform where this communication and connection is realized. Given that cultural centres represent a kind of authentic and aesthetic component in smaller towns, they contain the potential for renewal, rehabilitation, and transformation.

3.1. Criteria of visual and spatial transformation

In order for a cultural center to start reactivating, it is necessary to analyze its previous state, whether it meets the criteria and guidelines for its transformation.

The criterion of the legislative and institutional framework: The first limiting factor for reconstruction is the issue of ownership of the cultural centre. It is necessary to ensure the possibility of intervention at the abandoned cultural centre - in this context, the active participation of local administrative and legislative institutions is necessary. Although these objects in most cases are not under protection as architectural heritage, it is necessary to consult the Institutes for the protection of heritage.

The criterion of the size of the settlement and the number of inhabitants: Depending on the size of the inhabited area and the number of inhabitants, the dimensional framework of the cultural centre also depends, because the cultural centre represents a platform for community unity. then the possibilities of extension should be considered. As there is a demographic decline in most of the smaller towns, the spaces of the cultural centres should be of satisfactory size. Therefore, it is still necessary to direct the plans towards the use of the existing space and adaptation to the renewed atmosphere of the common centre. The feelings aimed for are pleasantness, safety, comfort, belonging.

The criterion of position within the urban structure: In accordance with the position in the urban structure of the settlement, which is usually in the central part, the transformation of the cultural centre should take place in the direction of restoring the role of a representative landmark. From this aspect, it is necessary to see at what level of devastation the cultural centre is located, at what level of maintenance the free green and pedestrian areas. The cultural centre is a space where cultural and educational activities aimed at all age categories take place, so the architecture must be connected to the environment. The arrangement of free spaces within the cultural centre should ensure communication with passers-by and respect for cultural activities. This space should become a space for exchange between the local population, it should offer spaces for gathering, the formation of occasional open exchanges of goods, exhibitions that can be oriented towards nurturing traditions or familiarization with contemporary cultural and artistic tendencies.

The criterion of architectural potential and suitability for the development of cultural content: Residents are predominantly attached to the cultural centre as an architectural object, especially due to the fact that their family members participated in its construction. From this aspect, the architecture of cultural centres should not be significantly changed but should be adequately adapted to the contemporary needs of the residents. Also, the possibility of safe use should be achieved beforehand and the necessary rehabilitation of the building should be carried out due to damages that occurred during the years of inactivity. By renovating the cultural centre, residents would be able to have a closer encounter with cultural content, and also motivate for the further development of the centre's cultural strategies. Today, the visual expression of spatial art (photos, video, installations, ambient settings) and applied art (industrial design, illustrations, textiles)

is especially present. These types of art can achieve a certain dialogue with the ambient space of the cultural centre built in the 20th century because a smaller space is sufficient for exchanging experiences in this way. The existing architectural potential should be used for the development of cultural content. It should be pointed out that the spatial dimension is not always proportional to the dynamism of events and the participation of residents. Nevertheless, the aesthetic component of the architecture of the cultural centre is influential for affirmative and stimulating action in the community (Mikić 2012).

The criterion of economic dependence: To realize the transformation, arrange the premises of the cultural centre at a satisfactory level and equip it with adequate equipment and consumables, a larger financial investment is necessary. Also, it is necessary to determine a certain plan and strategy for the functioning of the cultural centre in order to collect and allocate funds for financing further activities. (Mikić 2012) Creating a strategy that would provide insight into annual revenues, as well as the possibility of securing external financing support for the work and promotion of the activities of the cultural centre, would ensure clearer directions of investment in its restoration, but also further work.

3.2. Community participation in the transformation of architecture

Transformative planning can be defined as a practice whose goal is to create a radical social change based precisely on the significance of those introduced changes. Transformative planning is not only the transformation of a certain place and architecture, but it includes a wider range of transformations - transformation of interpersonal relationships, stimulation of cultural and creative patterns of individuals and communities, strengthening of the community and its participation in its

own interests. This type of practice is based on "creating radical alternatives" whose focus is "quality of life, sustainable development and social justice" (Albrechts 2010).

The process of transformative planning implies changes in values and concepts, discourses and practices, planning approaches and instruments

Due to large financial investments for larger architectural undertakings, transformative practice resorts to the adaptation of space not necessarily on an expensive approach, but adapted to current conditions and possibilities, to enable the functioning and use of that space. As the current conditions are individual for each cultural centre, a generally accepted concept and structure of action cannot be established, rather it is fluid and adaptable. The main role in shaping is given to the community, which analyzes its needs, current and desired experiences in the cultural and social aspects of life, and then works on the development of strategic transformation planning. Forming a social vision is a very complex activity because the number of actors is greater, thus experiences and needs are very different, and analysis and mutual understanding are necessary, as well as respect for other people's views on cultural contents and their presentation (Albrechts 2010).

What characterizes transformative planning is the politics of redistribution (affecting changes at the national level), the politics of empowerment (affecting the main axes of social power) and the politics of place (affecting the defence of people's living space). These types of action are accessible for work at the regional and local levels of planning. (Maruna 2024) With this procedure, in addition to reaching the goal that signifies the reactivation of the cultural centre, residents acquire new knowledge and develop empathy, positively influencing the collective consciousness. Studies have

shown that social engagement and the "modern discipline" of architecture are high and important, especially at the local level. Insisting on community involvement through activist approaches and actions can be best implemented through micro-actions that have clearer goals and would be understandable to all community actors. Of course, it should be emphasized that such actions do not only involve the action of the community but it is understood that the leading actors are experts in the field of architecture, as well as other educational profiles, as well as members of local administrations. Also, in order for this practice to give better results, it is necessary to include as a final segment the "model of evaluating one's own contributions". This makes it possible to analyze what a certain procedure contributed, and what were the aggravating circumstances and possible negative impact (Cigić 2024).

3.3. Community participation in the activities of the cultural centre

The renovation and transformation of the cultural centre in smaller populated areas has a large number of benefits. After reactivating the cultural centre as an architectural space and as an institution, work should be done on the regularity of organizing cultural-educational and entertainment activities. In order to increase and maintain attendance, the continued participation of the community as the leading users of the centre is also important. The regularity of holding various events not only contributes to the maintenance of the cultural centre through economic prosperity but also has an even greater share in non-economic prosperity in the context of improving the quality of life of the community. Cultural-educational activities ensure the establishment of continuity and development of culture, increase of general cultural level, level of socialization and increase of awareness about preservation of cultural heritage and living environment (Mikić 2012).

It is absolutely certain that the establishment of positive social values (moral principles, socialization, tolerance, trust, acceptance of new ideas, collective and individual motivation, system of habits and customs, etc.) is a general good for every society.

Cultural centres as institutions should enable a wide range of activities and events where residents could participate as active organizers and creators, but also just as an audience (Eriksson, Hansen, Nordentoft 2023). On the example from research in Denmark, users of the cultural community come to the cultural centre to express themselves creatively or to look at the artistic creations of others, as well as to be interested in debates concerning social issues, education of various types. However, the biggest motivation is participation and being part of the social community. Cultural centres when active can offer different types of activities in which users can actively participate - such as public forums, music workshops, dancing, handicrafts, art workshops, traditional values, gardening, animal husbandry, reading club... There are also activities in which users are not active participants, namely concerts, exhibitions of artistic paintings, sculptures and other contemporary forms of art, concerts, film screenings, plays, literary evenings... Cultural centres should encourage users to participate in the planned activities, but they should also encourage and encourage users to actively influence the proposals and organization of desired upcoming events in the cultural centre. It is also important to report on the work and activities of the cultural centre. In order for the work of the centre to progress, it is recommended that members of the local community apply as volunteers, as well as volunteers from outside the local population and cooperate with other associations. The ways in which the community can influence the work of the cultural centre depends

primarily on the organization of each individual cultural centre, but it is mostly done in the following ways: organizing an official annual gathering of employees and selected community representatives, forming committees where ideas and suggestions can be presented periodically, organizing spontaneous and informal meetings where the centre's cultural strategy is discussed. This kind of citizen participation encourages the institution's interaction with users, but also users with other users, which means developing a quality dialogue and encouraging different attitudes and needs. Volunteer work for specific activities and clear work guidelines so that volunteers do not feel like a useless workforce, but conscientious activists and residents involved in the work of the cultural segment of their heritage. It is mainly aimed at younger age groups who need to gain awareness of the importance of community and contribution to it. Participation of older citizens... On the other hand, younger generations have a different approach to organizing events and it is necessary to adapt events to all age categories, and not separate events by specific groups. The necessity of a variety of forms of activity leads to dialogue and mutual recognition of needs. Therefore, the space is adapted to the needs in the functional context). It is important that all these forms coexist and positively affect the community, reducing conflicts and valuing the space of the cultural centre more. The forms of participation identified through research are co-habitation (sharing the centre and its spaces with other users or cultural actors), aesthetic attention (participating as an audience for cultural events or products), knowledge sharing (attending educational activities), co-creation (creating specific objects or events together), physical exercise or play (participating in physical or play-based activities), sharing-economy (sharing materials and technical equipment with others and engaging in sharing economies), publics (engaging in collective, verbal exchange), co-

decision (engaging in democratic decision-making processes) (Eriksson, Hansen, Nordentoft 2023).

The values of participation: well-being (feeling good physically and/or mentally), feeling of togetherness (getting a sense of belonging with others), social inclusion (including marginalised individuals or groups), empowerment (having the courage to organise a new music festival or workshop), cultural/political reflection (reflecting critically/creatively on society and alternative ways of living together), sustainability (creating environmental sustainability), local development (changing the cultural centre or the local area: e.g. by transforming an outdoor area or influencing local politicians), learning (acquiring special knowledge or skills: e.g. playing music or collaborating), creativity (relating creatively to materials and surroundings), aesthetic intensity (having one's sense stimulated and being influenced and moved by artistic/cultural experiences (Eriksson, Hansen, Nordentoft 2023).

After the establishment of efficient and regular operation of the cultural centre, networking with other cultural centres or institutions of similar activities at the regional, national, and international levels should be considered. Exchanging experiences, networking, and gaining insight into different social and cultural criteria with critical thinking can lead to the improvement of the quality of work of the cultural centre, thereby increasing the well-being of the community in the context of cultural and social aspects of life. (Rankovic 1996).

4. POSSIBLE IMPLEMENTATIONS AND FUTURE STRATEGIES

By harmonizing and respecting the previously introduced terms, models and possibilities of application to cultural centres in rural areas on the territory of the Republic of Serbia can be considered.

Analysis of the previous state and development characteristics: In order to start an adequate process of reactivating the cultural centre, it is necessary to conduct qualitative and quantitative analyses of the previous state. This implies the gathering of an expert team of researchers and practitioners in the fields of architecture and urban planning, cultural heritage protection, sociologists... After the analysis of the existing situation, possible concepts of transformation and models of resident participation should be analyzed. The concept of transformation should be viewed from the urban, architectural, cultural-social and economic aspects. The development of concepts, plans and strategies should refer to the principles of solidarity, equity, social cohesion, sustainability, care for the community and the living environment.

Initiators of the project of transformation/regeneration of the cultural centre: The role of the state in cultural policy, decentralization and restoration of the architecture of the settlement is of the utmost importance, because it can, in accordance with the law, strategically coordinate decisions concerning the regeneration of populated areas, as well as the allocation of budgets and financing of such undertakings. Therefore, as the main initiators of these projects, it would be most desirable for them to be state and local governments. Local authorities should invest more in cultural development in their territory, taking into account the current situation, community needs and current international and traditional tendencies. Also, the initiator can be the local community itself, that is, the community encourages the local authorities to approve the regeneration of the cultural centre. The least relevant is that the initiators are private stakeholders. In this case, it is not guaranteed that the potential initiator is oriented towards developmental social effects, but financial prosperity.

Aims of the transformation project: Greater participation of residents in the organization of cultural policy should be set

as a general goal for all local communities in Serbia. The transformation process of cultural centres in smaller towns creates a stimulating and pleasant environment, which is expected to influence the development of the cultural needs of the inhabitants, promote education about the importance of the aesthetic experience of the cultural centre as an architectural object, as well as the education and practice of communication between members of the community, between the community and the cultural centre, between the cultural centre and the immediate surroundings. Types of applied measures/activities: In order to persuade people to take part in the transformation of the cultural centre and its future activities, it is necessary to promote such a way of cooperation between local authorities, professional teams and the local community. After that, each community is unique in its characteristics and should take into account its goals and its capacities. In order to more easily determine the direction, SWOT analyzes can be carried out, where the current development of the settlement, the diversity of the inhabitants, the existence of certain sensitive categories, the distribution of age categories, the level of education, etc., will be taken into account. Through the participation of citizens through active assistance in the transformation of the cultural centre, through public debates and gatherings, workshops, strategy development, an analysis of the lifestyle of the residents, their traditions, habits and customs, as well as the events that they like to visit, can be carried out in parallel. The strategy implies the development of a plan of concrete activities with expected results, period of realization, leading actors, necessary financial resources, sources of financing and evaluation.

Types of actors represented: Actors are local authorities, engaged expert teams from different fields, local community. The local community is also the main User of the space, the audience and the potential audience. These actors should clearly communicate and cooperate in order to implement the

planned measures. It is very important that when it comes to the local community, citizens of all categories participate. These can be individuals chosen from the majority, a smaller interest group, or a spontaneous application to the meeting. Represented sources of funding: The state should introduce incentive funds for the implementation of measures of transformation and adaptation of existing cultural centres. This would allow the initial steps in implementing the reactivation of cultural centres to be implemented. Financial resources can also be sought through cooperation with organizations and institutions from the cultural sphere, citizens' associations and various non-governmental groups, as well as through individual donations from citizens. Also, the introduction of controlled commercial content within the cultural centre can be considered, which would bring constant sources of income (Tucakov 2011).

Sublimation of project effects after implementation - hypothetically:

It is expected that in this way, by increasing the participation of residents in the process of transformation and maintenance of the cultural centre, various social skills will be developed, understanding and adoption of different ideas of co-existence, a sense of community, and the adoption of a sharing economy (exchange of items, donations). Residents are motivated to further participate in actions and events and develop innovative approaches to new cultural strategies using available tools, with the aim of creating social inclusion and cultural development.

5. CONCLUSION

Cultural centres are multifunctional objects and very important institutions. Their reactivation would regenerate the populated area, because the space, as well as the institution, which enables the development of the cultural and social aspects of the residents' lives, would be provided again. By gathering, socializing and

various types of interactions, people of different statuses, values and educations encourage and nurture understanding, spreading awareness and general education. Also, by reactivating the cultural centre, and not by demolishing it, an example is given of valuing the inherited architectural structure and the possibility of adaptation to modern tendencies without excluding the connection with the past. At the same time, this approach is open to the future and improvement. Cultural centres in smaller towns, although currently neglected in cultural policy, are also important factors in the decentralization and promotion of cultural values outside the larger cities. By focusing on the restoration of these institutions, other problems faced by local communities will also be looked at, and community participation in the formation of the cultural life of the settlement has psychological, sociological and aesthetic benefits.

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