

Architects' Involvement in Local Communities

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(Published online 28 February 2016)

Abstract

Architects and urban planners are seen as solution providers. In Romanian context, programmatic decisions are taken by other actors like clients and representatives of public authorities (that lack specific expertise). In today's society the role of architects and planners is switching towards a position where they are first identifying problems or needs. Another problem is the deficient communication between experts and decision makers. This article wants to explore the potential planning workshops have in bringing together decision makers and experts from different fields (architects, sociologist, urban planners, political scientist, academia etc.) in a process of research by design. In this article we will look at two case studies: two workshops organized by the Centre for the Built Environment in Făgăraș and Drăguș. We will look at the specific context of each workshop, at the methodology applied and the results in order to assess their impact. The main question we will try to answer is whether and how multidisciplinary urban workshops can effectively support development processes.

Rezumat

Arhitecții și urbaniștii sunt priviți ca cei care oferă soluții. În România deciziile programatice sunt luate de alți actori cum ar fi clienții sau reprezentanții autorităților publice (cărora le lipsește expertiza profesională). În prezent rolul arhitecților și al urbaniștilor se schimbă către o poziție din care ei sunt cei care identifică probleme sau nevoi. O altă problema este comunicarea deficitară dintre experți și cei care iau decizii. Acest articol încearcă să exploreze potențialul atelierelor de planificare în a reuni factorii de decizie cu experți din diferite domenii (arhitecți, urbaniști, sociologi, politologi, actori din mediul universitar etc.), într-un proces de cercetare prin design. În acest articol vom analiza două studii de caz: două ateliere organizate de Centrul pentru Mediu Construit în Făgăraș și Drăguș. Ne vom uita la contextul specific fiecăruia dintre cele două ateliere, la modul în care au fost organizate și la rezultate în încercarea de a evalua impactul. Întrebarea principală este dacă și cum atelierelor interdisciplinare pot sprijini eficient procese de dezvoltare urbană.

Keywords: workshop, stakeholder engagement, planning, architects, local administrations, collaborative decision-making, multidisciplinary action.

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1. The Planning Workshop

Even though the principles for a sustainable built environment are clear what is needed is a high level of integration of disciplinary insights and stakeholders' perspectives, taking into account the various time and space dimensions of an urban development process [1]. The problem appears when it comes to the realization and implementation of sustainability in urban projects. Strunk and White notice three dimensions of complexity in urban projects: “the complexity of the urban system, the technological complexity of potential solutions; and the political complexity stemming from the many actors involved.” [2]. At this point stakeholders often seem incapable of concerted action and the results are often meager [2].

Running a planning workshop may offer a solution to the complex problems that occur in the process of urban change. A workshop has been defined as “a usually brief, intensive ... program for a relatively small group of people in a given field that emphasizes participation in problem solving efforts” [3]. This kind of actions is taking place in different areas of the world, adapted to local needs and contexts [4, 5, 6].

There are several initiatives like this that took place in Romania: the rural workshops organised by INTBAU in Bran (August 2006) [7] or in Petrova (July 2008) [8] or the workshops focused on the industrial heritage of Petrița [9] or Baia Sprie [10]

The Centre for the Built Environment is a Non Governmental Organisation that reunites a pluridisciplinary team of experts that focus their expertise on the development of built areas. In the last years the NGO focused their attention on areas that proved to be lacking expertise (small cities, rural communities etc.). A research based on data from 2009 from the The Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration runned by Klaus Birtler showed that even though in Romania there are over 13000 administrative units the number of architects employed in chief architect positions in city halls is less than 40.

We will look at two workshops that took place in Făgăraș in 2012 and in Drăguș in 2014. Both are located in the same region characterized by underdevelopment and are at the moment struggling to absorb funds and to invest in public projects in order to offer better living conditions.

2. Two case studies: Făgăraș and Drăguș

2.1 Făgăraș

2.1.1 Context and motivation

Făgăraș is a city in the center of Romania in the south of Transylvania. In the last years the population decreased from over 45000 inhabitants to less than 30000.

The city has a beautiful fortress currently being restored. There were at that moment several uncoordinated projects concerning the public space, developed by the Mayor of Fagaras. Many of these projects were designed by traffic engineers even though the area is a heritage site and having a registered architect in the team is compulsory according to the Romanian regulations. The chief architect position is occupied by an engineer and the local authorities have no capacity of generating a coherent vision for the city. Furthermore, the General Urban Plan (PUG) is expired and the one being under development was never presented for public consultation.

In terms of urban structure the city has two areas with a great potential of attracting people and

developing a more dynamic image: the main square and the fortress, that even though are close to each other do not work together. The fortress has the entrance bridge on the site opposite from the main square and is surrounded by traffic on all sides. Also in the main square there were several parts ceased to for traffic and parking in the last years and the same was supposed to happen in other pedestrian areas of the city center.

2.1.2 The workshop

The workshop took place over one week in the summer of 2012. It gathered a team of 7 experts and 10 students (architects, political scientists, landscape designers, civil engineers). During the week participants spent in Făgăraș they had a first assessment consultation with the mayor, several local councilors, the chief architect and the members of the planning department of the city hall. After that, in order to better understand the need of the locals there were two public presentations. The first one was aiming to gather more date and also to present the first views the team had and check different assumptions that were made. The last one tried to explain the final proposal and discuss it publicly with the citizens, local architects and representatives working in public administration (Figure 1).

A week later the final proposal was illustrated in a comprehensive graphic manner and presented in an exhibition that was visited by more than 7800 people over four days, out of which 383 filled a survey regarding the proposed interventions

This workshop was fully financed by the Mayor of Făgăraș.

2.1.3 Outcomes

There were no specific goals at the beginning (except the idea that the city center should work as a whole) and the team wanted to shape a workshop agenda after the first assessment meeting. The first outcome of the workshop was to produce a development grounding study, identifying key spots in the city center tacking into account the existing situation, the projects that were in process at that moment and the needs expressed by the people that were interviewed. Based on that study the team proposed a series of principles for future actions (key relations at the city scale, traffic taming interventions, ways of enhancing the coherence of central public spaces).

The results were grouped into two categories. The first one was a general design scheme for the whole historical area characterized by uncoordinated planning. This design was developed as a tool that will help the authorities prepare their strategies and programmatic documents over the next few years. The second one comprised a series of themes at the city level: the reactivation of the intermodal transport node near the railway station (at the moment all regional bus routes have their stations in the center of the city), better connections with the nearby villages that would avoid generating traffic in the city center, the transformation of a large empty area in the center of the city in a central public garden (in the context where the only park of the city is positioned in the periphery), better connections with the surrounding green areas (mainly with the green corridor along the Olt River) etc..



Figure 1. Făgăraș. Before and after visualization for the public consultation session

2.1.4 Follow-up

After the workshop the Mayor asked the team to get involved in a project for the temporary arrangement for the Fortress Festival that takes place every year in the historical area. This opportunity resulted in a series of proposals that activated neglected spaces and enhanced connections that proved to be used even after the festival.

The workshop helped the local authorities form a new vision concerning urban development. Several projects undergone at that moment were stopped (for example a plan to partially replace the fortress promenade with parking spaces) and the Mayor commissioned a new Zonal Urban Plan for the Historical Area that would include the principles proposed during the workshop (like the revision of the traffic scheme in order to push transit traffic away from the city center and connect the two main central areas – the fortress and the historical main square – with a pleasant pedestrian promenade). Also, several amendments were made on the General Urban Plan (PUG) of Făgăraș.

2.2. Drăguș

2.2.1 Context and motivation

Drăguș is a village in Făgăraș area that was the focus of several sociological studies (1929, 1970, 2004), the first one being one the first sociological studies undergone in Romania. This, together with some well-preserved traditions and elements of folk culture, lead to a local pride regarding the local cultural and the built heritage. It is one of the few Romanian villages characterized by a positive migration of new inhabitants.

Nowadays the village is characterized by one of the higher rates of absorption of EU funds in Brasov County with several ongoing projects (a new sewerage system, sport facilities, restauration projects for public buildings etc.) and prospects for a new road (“county road”), connecting it with a

touristic resort nearby and with one of the European road (E68) in the region.

The chief architect position is occupied in this case by the Village Hall secretary.

The main reason for choosing Drăguș as a location for a workshop was to evaluate the impact that all the initiatives mentioned above have on the vernacular heritage of the region and to find solutions that would integrate modern facilities without affecting the rural scape. (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Drăguș. A traditional house from the 20's and a house from the 60's recently restored.

2.2.2 The workshop

The workshop took place over the course of one week in September 2014, bringing together a team of ten experts (architects, political scientist, urban economist) and two students. In this case the assessment meeting at the beginning of the workshop was replaced with a visit in the village accompanied by the Mayor and representatives of the local authorities. As in the previous workshop there were two public meetings with the locals, the first one in order to obtain more data and also to verify the proposals made during the week and the second one aiming to present the view the team of experts had on the future development of the village (Figure 3).

In this case the workshop was financed by the Romanian Order of Architects and the Mayor of Drăguș, together with a sponsorship from a private investor from the area. Having several sources that financed the program also meant coagulating the interest of several key actors on the same topic, all of them meeting in this process.

2.2.3 Outcomes

As discussed in section 2.2.1 there are a lot of infrastructure related undergoing projects in Drăguș. For the workshop team this meant that a series of principles for future actions regarding the street scape was urgently needed. Another important topic was the way private vernacular buildings are transforming. The concern regarding the housing heritage lead to the development of a series of principles for architectural interventions supporting the idea that vernacular architecture can incorporate modern comfort and still preserve its character, what are the proper materials to be used etc. (Figure 3, 4).

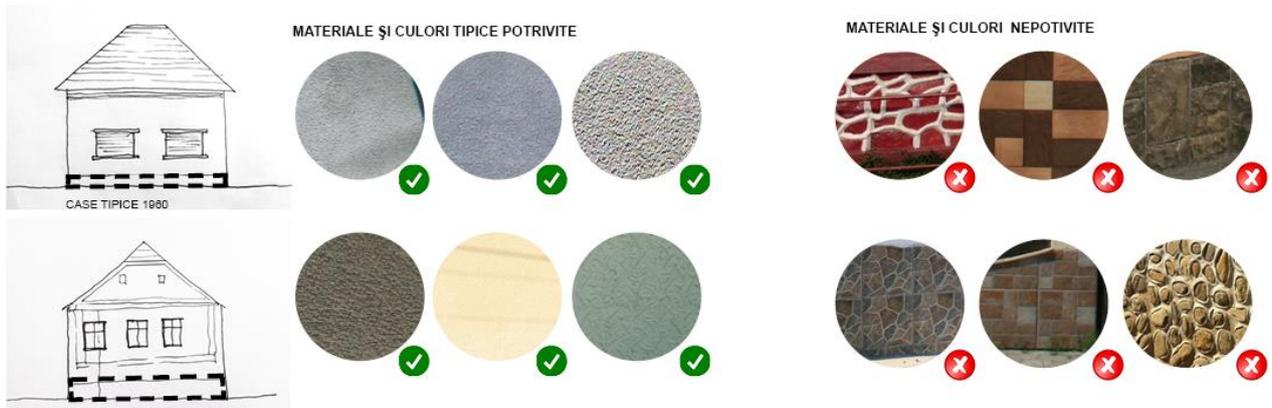


Figure 3. Drăguș. Graphic materials used in the presentation illustrating in a comprehensive manner the proper materials and colors to be used in a restoration process.

Secondary to the main topic, several other themes were addressed. The team noticed unsustainable patterns of village expansions. In result they identified the most suitable buildable areas that would help preserve the historical level of density and the organic street pattern. During the presentation, the participants aimed to raise residents' awareness concerning the built heritage of their community.

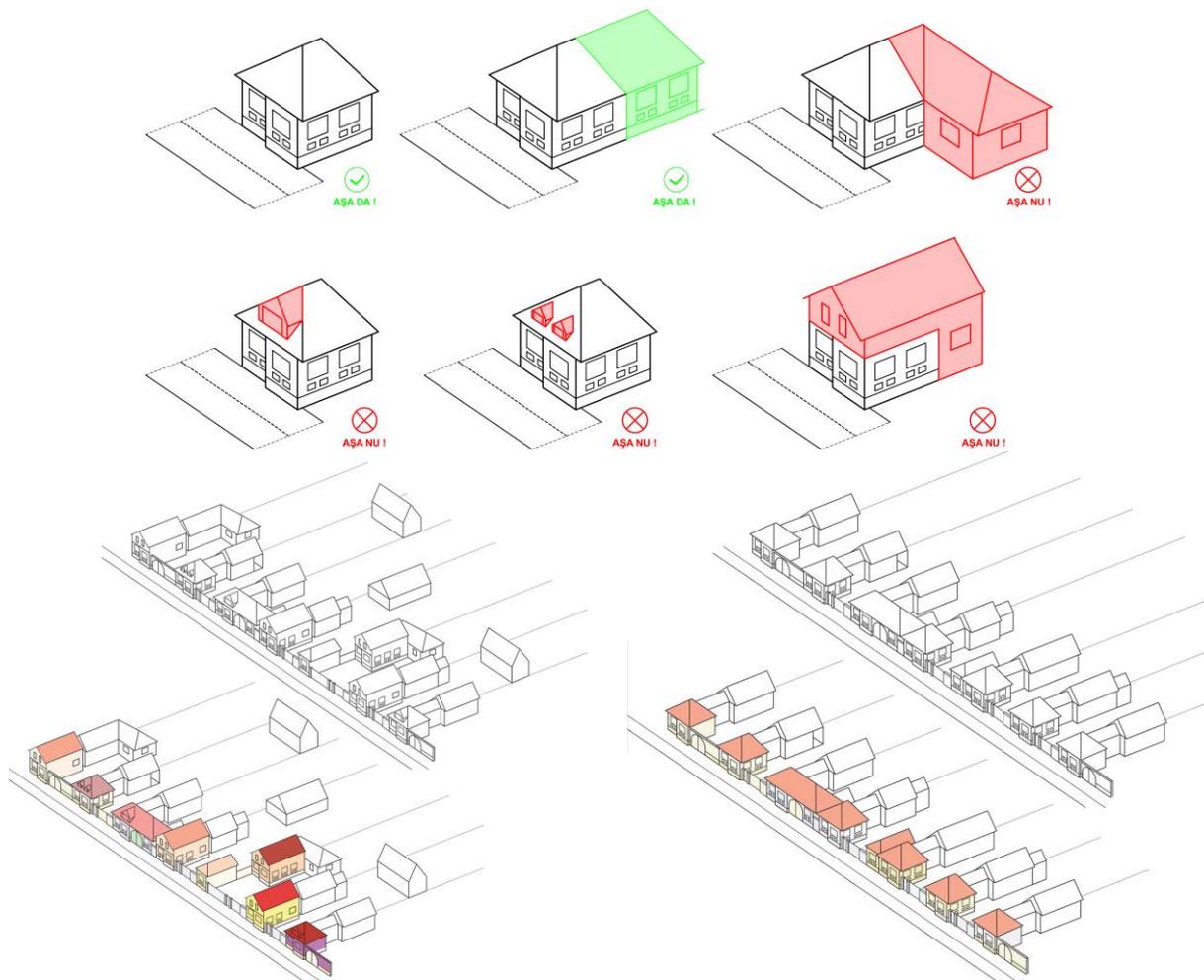


Figure 4. Drăguș. Graphic materials used in the Architecture Guide illustrating in a comprehensive manner ways of adding new volumes in the existing fabric in order to preserve the local image

Also, the materials produced during the workshop constituted the basis for an Architecture Guide for the protection of local heritage. Hopefully this guide would be part of a series of similar materials. The Rural Action Group from the Romanian Order of Architects manifested their interest to support several other similar initiatives.

2.2.4 Follow-up

As said before, after the workshop an Architecture Guide for the protection of local heritage was prepared.

The mayor of Drăguș asked the CBE team to prepare the guideline for two design schemes that are supposed to replace cast concrete paving with stone and green surfaces. Following advice given during the workshop, works begun for removing impermeable surfaces (like replacing the concrete pavement with pavement made of local river stone) in order to improve the street scape and rain water management. The mayor started to replace all metal roof tiles with ceramic tiles from several buildings owned by the local administration. Also the workshop team now works with the Mayor of Drăguș to implement an eco-friendly public lighting system that would not affect the vernacular aspect of the streets.

Probably one of the most important achievements are that during the workshop CBE established the basis of a grant scheme to help the locals renovate the facades using traditional materials and preserve the village vernacular image. At this moment this initiative is at the second call for projects. Following the principle that each house owner receives the grant only if he follows the instructions that he receives, the goal is not only to help people repair their houses, but also to make them aware of the way reparation work should be done.

At the moment a third workshop is planned in the same area, focused on the touristic area around Sâmbăta de Sus Monastery.

3. Research by (voluntary) design

Engaging in a planning workshop proved to offer several opportunities for the participants. They were able to study urban or rural environments from a wider perspective working closely with experts from other fields and with public authorities engaged in the process. It was also an opportunity for practicing stakeholder's engagement in the development of the built environment and an opportunity for developing techniques of public engagement and also teach local authorities how to engage the citizens (a practice almost missing in the administrative practice in Romania [11]) (Figure 5). We had a chance to experiment how different communication techniques as questionnaires, public presentations or the choice of graphic materials [12] influence the quality of the feedback received.



Figure 5. Drăguș. The workshop team preparing drawings for the final presentation and the team presenting the workshop results in front of the villagers.

The workshop experience offered an opportunity for studying local contexts, vernacular architecture and cultural heritage characteristics in an international environment and also an opportunity for understanding the problems faced by small communities in areas with economic problems. We revealed strong connections between proper development of the built environment and economic development. The quality of the built environment is often translated in a cause for population migration and, maybe more important, in a cause for migration of economic activities.

We also managed to raise awareness regarding the architect profession and the expertise brought by an architect, urban planner etc. and a design team while also offering an opportunity for students to work together with graduate experts.

Started from 2015 we included the study of the Făgăraș area in the curricula of the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism in the discipline “Architectural composition” for the fifth year. This year 4 team of students studied other four villages in the area: Cârțișoara, Sâmbăta de Jos, Șinca Nouă and Șona. The resulting materials would be integrated in an extended version of the architecture guide, offering better advice to the inhabitants.

4. Conclusions and future intentions

Even though we were criticized by some colleagues for “working for free”, the two workshops raised awareness about the architect’s role and generated other projects (for example in Făgăraș the mayor commissioned new plans that would include and further refine the design principles proposed during the workshop). Now the Centre for the Built Environment is asked to consult on several development plans in the area.

Due to the architect’s concentration around important economic centers we noticed there is a huge need of professional expertise in small cities and rural areas and that the lack of expertise results in the degradation of the built heritage. There should be developed mechanism that would encourage experts from different field practice their profession in this kind of areas.

We noticed that there are some key groups that should be involved in this kind of processes beside local authorities and the team of experts. Having involved local investors or people that own businesses in the area is ensuring support and feedback from entities that have a strong economic interest. Also inviting actors that worked in similar context or that have a common background is helping to build bridges and demonstrate the degree of feasibility and opportunity of the proposed ideas.

Alternative ways of funding future actions (private sponsorship, fundraise events etc.) proved to be not only about raising money but also about increasing the visibility of the initiative. Crowdfunding mechanisms, philanthropic sport events etc. were some of the best tools to engage large numbers of people in the process.

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