



BRAILA LABORATORY
approaches to scarcity within a shrinking city

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Master Studio | Spring 2015 | Bergen School of Architecture

Using the city of Braila in Romania (a post-industrial, post-communist city with economic and population decline) as the field of operation, an international group of students and teachers have been exploring forms of operational capital that go beyond economy to develop architectural approaches. As such we have been working both in the studio in Bergen and on the field in the city to explore and ignite latent potentials derived from the particularities of the context - latent potentials such as the creative potential of users, the undervalued Communist era heritage, new forms of micro-urbanisms, an abundance of space and building stock formed as a result of economic and demographic contractions and so on.

As part of our field work, we have sought ways to test and calibrate the architectural approaches through direct actions, such as built interventions, participatory processes, interviews or presentations. And further looked to anchor these approaches in the local communities, institutions and individuals that constitute the life of the city. This as an exploration into ways of thinking and doing architecture as a dialectical process of "how to" maximize the affect of latent capital with limited means as a way to evolve a city's future potential.

Teachers BAS:

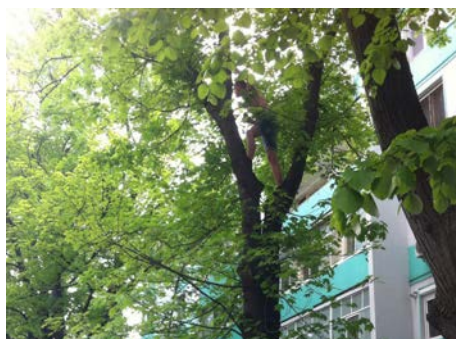
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REALITY

Economical and demographic growth are important parameters to set the horizon for the future of a city, which explains the frequent presence of architecture within developing areas and metropolises. Yet these are not the only parameters that underpin and define the future of all cities. In cases of demographic and economical decline, other forms of latent urban capital can serve as foundations for a positive evolution, whether it be its urban structure, its natural conditions or the social web of communities, institutions and individuals. The most relevant contribution architecture can give in a context of economic and demographic scarcity is to circumscribe other forms latent capital, define their potential and find ways to make them operational drivers of a city's future well being. Reality is finally the only ground for dreams.



FIELD OF OPERATION

Brăila was founded as a small settlement on the Danube river in the 14th century. Two important growth periods coupled with two distinct global architectural movements have structured the city and given it a particular urban fabric. The first was its evolution into one of the country's most significant ports coinciding with the "city beautiful" movement at the turn of the 20th century. The second being the formation of a communist state following WWII and the development of the socialist city on the tenets of the international style filtered through a regional identity. If public life and space played a central role in the city's initial development, the addition of new neighbourhoods during the socialist period gave little attention to community life. Massive investments in industrialization, an agglomeration of people, as well as the ideological mechanisms employed to carry out these actions - standardization and new rules sought to obey a new political order – led to a concentration of the public life within designated and programmed places and events. Following the fall of Communism in '89, the city began to experience demographic and economic decline. The shift from a collectively structured society to one of individual pursuit has made it difficult to reconcile the individual growing needs with the existing common conditions. In this context various forms of individual initiatives varying from the appropriation of former standardized shared spaces to innovative adaptations of one's dwellings or plots present new opportunities for the community to re-establish itself and grow from within using the survival tactics developed during this transition period.



INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVE AS AN OPERATIONAL MODEL

A reduced capacity for planned, centralized mechanisms to support a city's physical fabric and the life within has caused a vacuum within which individual initiatives have become the norm. Their groundings are often personal, opportunistic, of small scale and rely on the particularities of the situation. They are forms of survival tactics that rely on a clever, sometimes intelligent and optimistic approach of dealing with what reality offers. When considered as a whole, these singular acts come to form a critical mass that rivals, and often substitutes the affect of centralized planned initiatives on the evolution of the city.



ARCHITECTURAL APPROCHES TO SCARCITY

How to maximize effects within a restrained field of possibilities

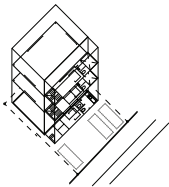
One could say that scarcity is an unavoidable condition of architecture. There is always the possibility of wanting more, which is to say to not have enough. This can occur at all scales as soon as one tries to transform reality, whether it concerns the size of furniture or the extense of a master plan. And it is particularly relevant when exploring the specific conditions within a shrinking city, within which means and resources are limited - and as such have a greater resonance.

This “how to” collection of architectural approaches aims to synthesize from existing projects, realised or not, a “toolbox” of strategies that address the question of doing as much as possible with as little as possible.

A few examples of the collected “how to” strategies:

How to concentrate fixed programs in order to enlarge flexible space(s).

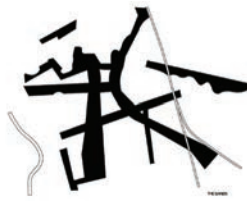
Project: Sakai-keishi Third Quarters
Location: Osaka, Japan
Year: 2005
Size (sq m): 341.76 sqm
Budget: -
Team: Akao Kuro-Wase
Initiator(s): -



How to not transform, but enhance existing specific qualities and provide minimal physical infrastructure in a building, to facilitate a certain program.

How to prioritize focus by identifying the limits of what you can and cannot do or influence.

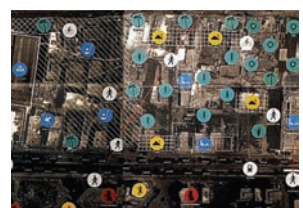
Project: Wilson Grant, Villa Navarra
Location: Madrid, Spain
Year: 1980
Size (sq m): 1000 hectares
Budget: -
Team: Berni Rodríguez, Vero Bruckner, Susana del Gajón, Miki Gogoy, Luc Sheen
Initiator(s): City of Lille (Pierre Maréchal, Mayor), CRM Equilibre (Jean-Paul Baudouin, General Manager), Association Lille Grand Nord (Jean Babin, Mayor), Villa Navarra
Initiator(s): -



How to transform a space through the use of narrative.

How to inventory and alter/evolve existing conditions (physical and non-physical) rather than create anew

Project: Rural City, Competition The long walls
Location: Athens, Greece
Year: -
Size (sq m): -
Budget: -
Team: Alain Gauthreau, Dominique Bouillard, Eric Barthele, Audin Frechen, Laurent Lagarde, Nicolas Gaudin, Noma Pirel
Initiator(s): -



How to empower the individual in the local use of existing assets.

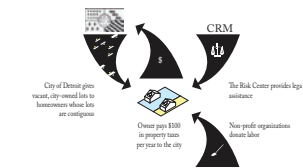
Project: Palais de Tokyo
Location: Paris, France
Year: 1991-2002
Size (sq m): 7800
Budget: €1.08 million
Team: Lacaton & Vassat
Initiator(s): The culture ministry (Ministère de la culture, Délégation aux Arts plastiques)



Project: Rural City, Competition The long walls
Location: Athens, Greece
Year: 1996
Size (sq m): -
Budget: -
Team: Alain Gauthreau, Dominique Bouillard, Eric Barthele, Audin Frechen, Laurent Lagarde, Nicolas Gaudin, Noma Pirel
Initiator(s): -

"It brings together scenes from Cincoita studios or Berlin, Barcelona's Barrio, Central Park, the Butler Chaumont, the Avenue Foch, Beirut, Giza, a tradition of archaeological site, a rice field city (see Stuttgart), a volcanic plain. This is certainly a strong place and valued by the population."

Project: Hausener Intercontinental
Location: Detroit, USA
Year: 2000
Size (sq m): 10,000
Budget: 10-200 Euros (from competition)
Team: National Cultural Foundation of Germany
Initiator(s): -





9 architectural approaches to a shrinking city

approach 1 Frede Vik + Tiina Johanna Teräs
how to transform (without money) a wasteland into a park by repositioning local resources

approach 2 Rune Nautvik
how to shelter the daily urban life by providing a roof to the European cultural capital 2021 committee

approach 3 Adthe Illyrian Belegu
how to advocate and preserve the common interests of three different communities with a temporary infrastructure

approach 4 Patricia Miho Tsunoushi + Winnie Sanna Sahara Westerlund
how to deconstruct a widespread vernacular typology and reassemble its components into a contemporary dwelling

approach 5 Jessica Chang + Martin Hauge
how to upgrade apartment block courtyards by not discarding the prefabricated garages

approach 6 Siri Borten
how to improve access to the wetlands and respond to the common needs of its communities with a modular kit

approach 7 Goda Luksaite + Anton Huhn
how to improve a school ground through participatory actions that tailors the architectural proposal on users and appropriators to ensure both its functionality and assimilation

approach 8 Wei-Hsiang Tseng
how to intensify the urban relation to the Danube through the installation of 15 play structures

approach 9 Karl Emil Søddegren + Sebastian Uthaug
how to box the communist architecture of Braila, in order to unbox a discussion on its heritage

Bergen Arkitektthøgskole (BAS) was established as an educational alternative to the public architecture schools of Norway in 1986. Since then, the program has developed a tradition of social oriented architecture that engages with reality through an experimental, hands-on and collaborative approach to spatial production. This approach is often influenced by complimentary areas of study such as art, anthropology and ecology. Multiple courses, workshops and events held over the years in Norway and countries across the globe have served to ground an open and active relationship between the education and practice of architecture as they relate to a contemporary local and simultaneously global society.

Universitatea de Arhitectură și Urbanism „Ion Mincu” (UAUIM) is the oldest and most important academic institution within the architectural discipline in Romania. It continues a long tradition in architectural higher education, with its inception, in the second half of the twentieth century, strongly linked to the modern development of Romania and its new cultural structures. For 16 years the Department of Urban Planning UAUIM undertakes a permanent contact with Romanian urban reality through direct involvement in both urban life and in international academic cooperation.

“BRAILA LABORATORY - Alternative approaches to urban peripheries within a shrinking city (B-LAB)” is an interdisciplinary exploration of the conditions of shrinkage and scarcity faced by many of today's European cities, and particularly exemplified within the port city of Braila, Romania. It seeks to identify and develop various forms of latent urban capital which go beyond economic and demographic growth, are not subject to centralized planning mechanisms, and are often cloaked within the banality of everyday life. Emphasis is placed on direct engagement within the field of operation (Braila) and the involvement of local communities, institutions and individuals to construct new perspectives and architectural approaches which could define the future evolution of the city. More information about the project can be found at **www.urbanmarkers.ro**



Project promoter



Universitatea de Arhitectură
și Urbanism
“Ion Mincu”

Project partner



Bergen Arkitektthøgskole
Bergen School of Architecture

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BRĂILA

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