

## Transforming the second floor: an illustration of critical spatial practice<sup>1</sup>

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In the following essay I shall give an example of a student exam which was developed as an art/activist intervention in the space of the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade in Serbia. The intervention has been invented and realised within the optional subject Adult Education, Activism and Human Rights, Department for Pedagogy and Andragogy and it reflects an ongoing effort to develop learning methodology within a formal educational intuition that will support students to actively participate in their environments, to influence power structures and to create educational intervention that would challenge status quo and address the issues that they recognize in their own micro worlds and communities. The basic postulate of the subject is to support a learner to become a maker instead of a knower and to facilitate knowledge that emerges in between and through building relationships and invention of new spaces and possibilities (Maksimović, 2016). The struggle that we faced is how to break the division between formal education that exists within academia and those of creative practices, performance and activism. The aim was to encourage students to map their particular situation, understand the defined ways of student participation and react creatively in order to address their needs.

It is important to mention that Faculty of Philosophy has a rich history of students' political engagement and protests that started at the beginning of 20th century and continue throughout communist era when student participated in the famous '68 student protests when some of the initiators of the events were expelled from the Faculty and their passports were taken away.<sup>2</sup>

Students' demonstrations also took place in 1991 and 1996 against Milosevic regime. The protest in 96/'97 was an attempt to overthrow dictatorship of then president Milosevic after he annulled elections because of the victory of the

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1 I would like to express gratitude to all students that attended subject Adult Education, Activism and Human Rights and to my colleagues who were also creators of the subject concept.

2 The film *Lipanjaska gibanja* by Želimir Žilnik speaks of student demonstrations in Belgrade, 1969 and of the critical quality, enthusiasm and discipline of this form of protest. It was the most powerful public criticism of "red bourgeoisie" - members of communist apparatus, who suppressed creativity and affirmation of new generations throughout Eastern bloc. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npj\\_jKXWwCY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npj_jKXWwCY)



opposition party (Milic, 2008)<sup>3</sup>. The room 106 at the Faculty of Philosophy was a place where the organisers and some of the participants would meet in order to plan activities and further strategies. The protestors engaged in a practice of walking as a way to express their discontent:

Walking became political (Jansen, 2001) and its participants wore badges naming Setac or Setacica (Walker - m/f). The protest presented itself as performance of self-conscious citizens, which was elucidated by the banner 'Cogito ergo ambulam' in Latin for 'I think, therefore I walk'. Apart from reinforcing the idea that this was a protest by flaneurs and other people with intellect and education, it evoked the Cartesian rationalist axiom, which underlies enlightened 'European civilization'. This carnival of characters now confused the government's media machine. Who causes this vast 'public disorder' that is spreading daily by scooping thousands

in its spiral? The Walkers became fascists, bogus refugees, foreign journalists, manipulated citizens, Karadzic's soldiers, turbo-folk singers, ultranationalists, CIA agents, drugged, and degenerate elements... "It was as if it were a new form of rapid and radical mutation which had caught the whole society off guard..." (Curgus and Babovic, 1997). (Milic, 2008)

The most recent event at the Faculty of Philosophy occurred in 2014 known as Blockade of the Faculty of Philosophy. The students occupied the Faculty and disabled lectures and activities for almost two months. The blockade was openly profiled as a social, anti-neoliberal, and the attempt to connect with workers and lawyers in a strike clearly indicates in which key it should be interpreted (Mladenović, 2014). During the time spent at the Faculty "the management switched off electricity and heating at this faculty, and students were trampled on by the exclusion of water if they did not withdraw. One evening, during the blockade, students locked private security inside the faculty" (Nedeljković, 2014).

The very brief history of the students protest has been presented in order to introduce a reader to the unique context of the institution and its political significance, and to shed light on the link between students' engagement, collective action and space. However, in spite of political character of the Faculty, memories of its past are covered due to acceleration of student caused by Bologna process and the mayor shift in student identity from politically engaged critical citizen to future neoliberal worker.

In the year 2018 the country is again under totalitarian regime of Aleksandar Vučić which considerably influence the urbanism and the reconstruction of the city. The post-socialist and transitional period is characterized by market led economy, dominance of private ownership with limited citizen participation governed by the non-governmental sector, and the beginning of reconstruction projects initiated by a foreign investor (Cvetinovic, Maricic, & Bolay, 2016). There is no citizens' participation in the decision making process regarding the transformation of the city. The struggle of the citizens to counter hegemonic dimension of urbanism has been going on for several years without significant achievements and changes regarding decision making process. "In the totalitarian societies of recent times, large

3 The project Balkanising Taxonomy has developed from working with memory that I started in spring 2008. The discourse of memory then dispersed around all the possible fields of research on the Balkans that I had started conducting years ago. I always expected to explore Belgrade's protest of '96/'97 through the joint lens of culture and politics, but the sites of memory I begun to tackle called upon more interests around the subject of investigation and reached far beyond my expectations, mapping a vast framework which I now see as crucial to operate under if to offer an adequate representation of this event (Milic, 20xxx). The project is available at: <http://www.kulturklammer.org/nm/>

public spaces serve as military parade grounds – a raw display of power to impress citizens as well as enemies” (Hou, 2010, p. 3)

The above written serves as an explanation of the huge interests of the students in the issue of participation, space and decision making process regarding the organisation of public space. Therefore, the students that attended the course Education for Activism and Human Rights decided to create “critical spatial practice” Rendell (2006). The student exam has been organized as a collective activity that would address their needs and foster their agency. One of the important issue for them was the fact that the Faculty building lacks a space that would serve as a learning site for students where they could gather, spend time, do group projects, study, etc. During the lectures they were engaged in the discussions regarding public pedagogy and they visited artistic occupied space in Belgrade that offer a kind of example and inspiration for students’ work. We explored the concept of public pedagogy as defend by Biesta who claims that it is an educational processes that focuses on the concrete practices of citizens engaged corporeally in social interactions which unsettle established notions of living together. Biesta (2012) accentuated the importance of the interest of ‘publicness’ as the main characteristic of public pedagogy. Public pedagogy is a specific form of doing educational ‘work,’ in which pedagogy ‘operates’ in a public way. Through the conversations with students we agreed that public sphere at the Faculty would be a hall on the second floor that connects the rooms where students have lectures. All rooms are locked and before the lectures professors take a key from the security which is at the ground floor of the building. They also give their name and return the key when lectures are over. The time in between their lectures students spend in the hall which is a kind of a liminal space as its function is only to wait “in between” learning activities.

Empty hallway of the Faculty. It’s not really empty. There are chairs, plants, a coffee machine, but it is empty. It’s empty of the function, empty of the meaning. Sometimes it seems to me that there are empty people in it. (Student’s reflection)

Therefore, the place is organized as a waiting room and there is no record who constructed the place and what

was the rationale behind. Students use the hallway, but no one moves the furniture or disrupt the given order.

On the subject “Adult Education, Activism and Human Rights” we asked ourselves who created “waiting” on the second floor of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade? Who has distributed those chairs and why there is nothing but them? For how long it has been like that and does it have to be so? Why do students behave in accordance with the design of space and the design of the “waiting” idea? Are we afraid to damage a frame that already exists or we unconsciously live it? (Student’s reflection)

Furthermore, the departments of the Faculty are distributed to different floors and andragogy students do not make connections with the students from other departments (for example Philosophy, Sociology, History of Art, etc). There is no obvious student gathering at the halls or discussions about students’ issues.

Serving as a vehicle of social relationships, public discourses, and political expressions, public space is not only a physical boundary and material setting. Henaff and Strong (2001: 35) note that public space “designates an ensemble of social connections, political institutions, and judicial practices.” Brill (1989: 8) writes that public space comes to represent the public sphere and public life, “a forum, a group action, school for social learning, and common ground.” In the Western tradition, public space has had a positive connotation that evokes the practice of democracy, openness, and publicity of debate since the time of the Greek agora. Henaff and Strong (2001) further argue that the very idea of democracy is inseparable from that of public space. (Hou, 2010, p. 2)

At one of the lectures we got freedom. Freedom to adjust the space that suit us, the freedom to move chairs, plants and add whatever we want. After 10 minutes it was no longer an empty space. Turn, rotate, move, add and finally sit together with others. The feeling was different. We were no longer waiting. We naturally sat down and talked, held a lecture. There was a place where it was

created. Is Freedom the Keyword? Does anyone need to give us freedom in order to change something? (Student's reflection) <sup>4</sup>



In order to reshape the patterns of behaviour, the students decided to reconstruct and reinvent the space by using existing furniture and adding new located at the Faculty but is unused. They wanted to make a place for encounters and learning by reorganising the space for one week and to observe how students occupied space and how it transforms micro practices at the Faculty. They also decided to use the glass of windows to draw and write and to ask questions on the posters about the change in order to evaluate the action and involve other students to participate. Before they started the action they had to learn the Faculty procedures that ensured participation. One of the ideas behind was not to criticize existing order but to directly interfere in space by making spatial interventions. The aim was to “question, refunction and contest prevailing norms and ideologies, and to create new meanings, experiences, understandings, relationships and situations” (Pindar, 2008, p. 730).

Each of us brought what he/she thinks can contribute to make this space different. We brought books, magazines, papers, pens, crayons, social games and puzzles. Turning the chairs into circles, making new table from the two old ones, leaving papers there and waiting for Monday to see what's going to happen. Will this hallway remain just a grey place to wait? (Student's reflection)



<sup>4</sup> All photos of the hallway are made by the students



The message that student sent to other colleagues was very clear and powerful: this is our space and we can transform it according to our needs. It is not unchangeable nor given, but flexible and ours. The students noticed that others who did not participated in the action started to change the environment, but also to care about it. The second floor became a place of gathering and connections, “a

zone of social transition and possibility in the potential for new social arrangement and forms of imagination” (Crawford, 1999, p. 9). Furthermore, the employees began to give their own suggestions and to support students in their actions. The students observed that the whole atmosphere became positive and that “colleagues from other floors” joined them and spent time with andragogy students. The hallway stopped to be transitional space and gain multiple functions that transform every day. The posters that are put on the walls became a forum for discussion and exchange of knowledge. The action created influence and the students from the third floor expressed an interest to transform their hallway into learning environment.

The presented illustration serves as an example of a simple intervention that can transform the existing order in what is consider to be a public space for students of the Faculty of Philosophy. Their engagement with public pedagogy allows for a more detailed understanding of the everyday politics of relational placemaking and brings to the fore issues of power inequality, destabilization, and social exclusion in and through the materialities of space.

12,000 years in history, the society uses public spaces to interact with strangers, as I learned from the lecture of Professor Seth Low, why we would not continue to build and to create space for us and within us. We all together managed to create something where people really want to be. The place where people stay because it feels good to spend time there, to learn, to meet colleagues, friends and create ideas there. In the end, it’s not important a space, but an emotion that we create in and with it. (Student’s reflection)

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### Travelling Cinema

You can't touch what is in my suitcase.

If you reach for pictures,  
they disappear and your hand  
lands on its sides, images  
caressing your skin, fading out and  
vanishing like the smoke.

You see life moving  
across the white in-lining.

The births and birthdays,  
Families and holidays,  
Loves and weddings,  
Deaths and funerals.

You watch the whole nation  
on a long protest march  
creating the waves, sea of people  
whilst dancing down the streets.  
You hear laughter, horns and whistles,  
the beating of pots and pans.

Pieces of revolution,  
caught in kaleidoscope,  
a mosaic of memories  
instead of a diary and  
nothing else to declare.

- Poem by Nela Milic