Beyond the masterplan. A case study on widening engagement in the Romanian planning system

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Introduction

The past decades have seen an emergence of a variety of planning theories which seek to redefine the role of planning practitioners, not as much in terms of its substantive fields, as in terms of approach and process (Sandercock in Douglass and Friedmann, 1998). Some theoretical contributions have placed an increasing weight on an "advocacy planning model" (Davidoff), others have focused on a radical political economy approach (Castells, Harvey), while a more transactive, communicative style of planning also emerged (Healey, Friedmann). Not least, the wider understanding of planning as integrating economic and social forces has given rise to urban ecological models which draw heavily on complex or open system theories, taking a more holistic stand (Davoudi, 2012). In spite of their variety, such theories have proven to be congruent in two ways: (1) a greater awareness of the need to take into account conflicting interests and the multiplicity of stakeholders and (2) a greater reflection on the capacity of professionals to trigger changes in the unequal distribution of power involved in planning. Nonetheless, the majority of such theories draws heavily on Western literature and on the evolution of planning and governance systems in Western countries towards a more local agenda.

In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the legitimacy of urban planning was challenged fundamentally in the eyes of citizens and was not a political priority (Nedovic, 2001). The shift from completely centralized planning towards market mechanisms is the most frequently quoted feature of CEE planning. However, academic research has focused less on the establishment of planning frameworks after 1989 and more on the effects of economies of transition, privatization of land and housing and the (re)introduction of property rights (Nedovic, 2001, Stanilov, 2007). As a result, there is little evidence on the actual tools and methods employed by urban planners in practice to negotiate conflicting interests and on the process of redefining the role of planning.

This paper aims to provide evidence on the responsive approaches undertaken in CEE in the effort to better address local needs. It aims to critically review the changing role of planners in a post-socialist context and to identify the ways in which non-planners, particularly civil society groups, have contributed to diversifying the range of stakeholders engaged in urban planning. To this end, it will discuss the case study of a think tank in Romania and its role in facilitating the process of opening the Romanian planning system to a wider range of professionals and to varied stakeholders. The paper draws on national legislation and policy documents and on policy briefs which the authors produced in the past four years as an independent think tank. The literature and case study review is validated through in-depth interviews with senior professionals involved in Romanian planning in the past 25 years. We argue for a stronger role of urban planning professionals in multi-stakeholder engagement and for a wider understanding on the rationale and implications for various tiers of stakeholders of the planning profession in CEE.

The collaborative, communicative shift in planning theory

Although not a "monolithic block of axioms set in stone" (Brand and Graffikin, 2007, p. 284), the emergence of a variety of theoretical models in the last half a century breaking with the tradition of rational, comprehensive planning has clearly marked a paradigm shift in urban planning as defined by Kuhn (2012). In spite of epistemological differences between these models, communicative, collaborative and transactive planning have all equally challenged the value of scientific, objective knowledge in planning practice (Healey, 1997; Sandercock, 1998). Moreover, they have triggered valid debates on the role of planning practitioners, based on a more relational understanding of space, power relations and complex systems.

The question of what a planner does is essentially linked to defining whom planners should serve. Comprehensive planning had allowed for planners to act as objective, neutral experts who served public interest by providing a greater rationality in public decision making, and acting as mediators between state and the market (Campbell and Fainstein, 2012; Sandercock, 1998). The key shift here is between viewing "the public" as a homogenous, undifferentiated group and acknowledging the multiplicity of stakeholders – invariably situated in unequal positions - involved in planning and decision making. As a result, much of the writing arguing for a collaborative, communicative approach in planning is based on the idea that the planner, as a professional, cannot be separated from his personal values. Thus, Healey's collaborative project is "motivated by a commitment to social justice" (Healey, 2003, p. 104), others are driven by an impulse of "grassroots democracy that gives voice to the voiceless" (Sarkissian in Brand and Graffikin, p. 288), while finally it is acknowledged that "planning is well to the left of the political center" (Friedmann, 1993, p. 483). This link is most clearly acknowledged by Davidoff, whose advocacy model urged planners to become involved in the political process, by becoming "proponents of specific substantive solutions" (Davidoff, 1965, p.333). His idea of pluralism demands multiple plans, corresponding to the variety of stakeholders, and that planners should advocate for certain groups – particularly the disadvantaged or the marginalized. On a more middle ground, collaborative or communicative action theorists emphasize a more mediating, broker, or counselling role (Healey, 1996; Forester, 1996). Planning knowledge is called upon to bear directly on the action, and to rely more on interpretive inquiry, by understanding the unique and contextual (Friedmann, 1993; Innes, 1995).

It is precisely this facilitator, consensus-building role which has attracted criticism, both from a theoretical and practical perspective. On one hand, the main assumption of communicative rationality, that of consensus building and open speech, does not provide solutions for when such consensus is not reached or when the stakeholders involved do not strive for enhanced democracy (Tewdwr Jones and Allmendinger, 1998). On the other, there is a fear that the wider relations of power involved in the objects of planning – land development, built environment – might be overlooked when focusing merely on the process (Huxley and Yftachel, 2000). But if we take into account the fact that collaborative planning should not be used as a prescriptive, step-by-step recipe of attaining consensus, but rather as a filter for looking at current practices (Healey, 1999),

there is opportunity for a deeper understanding of power as embedded in social relations. Otherwise said, "Simple opposition of conflict versus consensus is unlikely to capture the dimensions of the power struggles being played out in governance contexts" (Healey, 1999, p. 1132).

This idea is based on an understanding of planning as an interactive process, a governance activity that takes place in a "dynamic institutional environment" (Healey, 2003, p. 104). If power is embedded in the interactions between different actors, in deliberative practices and cultural assumptions, then planning is equally shaped by "wider economic, social and environmental forces that structure, but do not determine, specific interactions". (ibidem, p. 104). Finally, this more relational understanding of space has much in common with complex system theories, characterized by fragmentation and uncertainty (Brand and Graffikin, 2007, p. 285). It is by no means surprising that the emergence of resilience planning – drawing on ecological metaphors – coincides with the rise of communicative approaches. If planners have ceased to be seen as systematic, objective thinkers, urban systems themselves are adaptive, cyclical and non-linear and react to external shocks by moving to new equilibriums (Davoudi et al, 2012).

Given that collaborative planning largely draws on the idea that planners are actors in the world, it would be strange to ask about the relevance of such theories to practice. Nonetheless, as rightly acknowledged, "Many planners continue to use the comprehensive approach as the model for their work" (Campbell and Fainstein, 2012, p. 19). It is, therefore, more worthwhile to analyse the ways in which practitioners attempt to trigger changes of current assumptions and to find adequate alternatives in the context in which they operate. Lastly, if there is one critique that holds stand, collaborative planning still largely draws on theories and practice developed in Western countries, particularly in the UK and the US. It is therefore necessary to look at their relevance for urban planning in non-Western societies as well.

Urban planning in Central and Eastern Europe

Urban planning, or more largely spatial planning, is intrinsically linked to development, as described by key international conventions. The European Regional/Spatial Planning Charter, also known as the Torremolinos Charter was adopted in 1983 and represents the backbone of how the European Union (EU) understands spatial planning. Thus, spatial planning is considered to give "geographical expression to the economic, social, cultural and ecological policies of society" (Council of Europe, 1983, p. 13), being at the same time "a scientific discipline, an administrative technique and a policy developed as an interdisciplinary and comprehensive approach direct towards a balanced regional development and the physical organization of space according to an overall strategy" (Council of Europe, 1983, p. 13). According to the OECD, spatial planning primarily deals with the coordination of policies. Specifically, "spatial planning considers the interaction among policy sectors according to different territorial units, national, regional and local, across a wide range of policy sectors addressing different kinds of problems, economic, social and environmental"(OECD, 2001, p. 11).

Indeed, these definitions, or better said guidelines, are at best working concepts meant to streamline dialogue and modes of practice at European level. While acknowledging the rich history and development of schools of thought tackling urbanization and urban planning internationally (which motivated both to us to choose this area of research wholeheartedly), for the scope of this paper we will employ these working concepts.

If urban planning is such a heterogeneous area, the same can be said about the Central and East Europe (CEE) region. Having come to be regarded as a common space in light of recent historic events, the region is in fact diverse and highly fragmented as political thinkers such as Hanna Arendt clearly emphasized when discussing the nation-building process in the area(Arendt, 1973). The violent ethnic conflicts from the 1990s sadly confirmed these arguments and marked a troublesome period of reconstruction. Nevertheless, the common socialist past of CEE countries informed similarities in the courses of action for their transition from a single to free market system.

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Path-dependency traits from the socialist past, especially those tackling the urbanization through industrialization aspects, as well as the restitution of urban processes after the collapse of the single (and controlled) market have informed a large body of knowledge (not to say paradigm) for post-socialist cities. Housing issues, from the slow restitution process towards the new types of informality emerging on the residential market, have received significant attention in the academic realm (Stanilov, 2007; Wallace & Latcheva, 2006). Also, noteworthy research has been dedicated towards exploring the conundrums on the ability to offer equitable access towards public services (public utilities as well as social services) for residents of post-socialist cities (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2013). New social phenomena has been analysed such as gentrification, sometimes understood as "primitive accumulation" (Chelcea, 2006) or urban renewal triggered by the "capitalisation of the land and housing"(Kovacs, Wiessner, & Zischner, 2013), addressing the homeless population (O'Neill, 2010), the appropriation of public space (Ioan & Mihali, 2009) and urban sprawl (Hirt, 2007; Suditu, 2012).
The (urban/spatial) planning function and system *per se* has been an omnipresent element in the post-socialist cities literature. Either belittling its purpose – for cities can grow on "auto-pilot" as the anecdotal evidence presented by Hirt shows (Hirt, 2009, p. 42) or calling for a reform (Maier, 2000; Nedović-Budić, 2001), the urban planning processes have been under intense scrutiny. Not the same can be said on evidence brought on the distinction made by Faludi concerning the capability of policies of transferring meaning and influencing actions for the stakeholders involved (Faludi, 2001). The mere existence of a more stable system for urban planning does not entail that a transfer of meaning and acknowledgment of roles of various urban actors.

Methodology

Our motivation to reveal some of the mechanisms of widening engagement in the Romanian planning system has stemmed from our observation of the transformations of urban development as a field of practice. It was also triggered by our own experience of attempting to better inform policy making in Romanian cities throughout the past 5 years.

In our interpretation, much of the academic literature on Central and Eastern Europe does not yet fully reveal the tactics and strategies employed by planners and non-planners to respond to conflicting interests in urban development. As a result, we became interested in investigating the way in which the meaning of "planning" – as a field of practice – has been transformed in Romania in the past 25 years. We also aimed to identify the ways in which non-planners – particularly civil society groups – have contributed to diversifying the range of stakeholders engaged in urban planning, including communities and professionals with diverse academic backgrounds. The methodology chosen to answer these research questions has been a case study review, based on our own experience as a think tank, complemented by policy and legislation analysis. Such a case-study approach can provide a more useful insight into routines, discourses and practices and in analysing the creative response undertaken in practice. The case study analysis, largely made up of policy briefs which the two authors have produced jointly in the past 5 years, included a peer review with three experienced planning and urban studies professionals. These had the purpose of testing the validity of our analysis and consisted of three, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews which took place in January 2015.

The policy and legislation analysis included a critical review of the main national regulations which define the scope of planning, of the planning profession as well as the norms implemented in public consultation, namely: Law No. 350/2001 (Romanian Urban Planning Law) and its subsequent amendments, General Urban Plan methodological norms, the functioning regulations of the Chambers of Architects of Romania and of the Romanian Registry of Urban Planners, Government Order no. 2701/2010 on Public Consultation in Urban Planning and its subsequent changes. Based on the case study policy briefs, the national policy and legislation review and the interviews, our findings were divided into three themes: the changing role of planning professionals (1), cities as complex systems (2) and the contribution of contribution of NGOs (3). Altogether, they portray the practices and challenges of the attempts of opening up the planning system.

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Case study: how to go about changing a planning system

(Traces of) Romanian spatial planning

In Romania, spatial planning is referred to as territorial development and urbanism and is regulated by Law No. 350/2001 (with subsequent amendments). It applies to both urban and rural localities, and similar to the international body of knowledge, its main aim is to harmonize national, regional, and local policies on economic, social, environmental, and cultural development, as well as to ensure a balanced development of all regions, and to increase cohesion and socio-economic relations between these regions (*Legea Nr. 350/2001*, n.d.). Simultaneously, urbanism has as a main objective the sustainable development of localities through the realization of short- and long-term (zoning) strategies/plans.
There are three levels of government which share the planning function: the central government, the country local authority and, thirdly, cities and communes local authorities. Consequently there are three main types of spatial plans for each government tier: national territorial development plan (NTDP), the county territorial development plan (CTDP) and the general urban plan (GUP). Except for the NTDP, which is technically approved by the Romanian Government with the final approval of the Romanian Parliament, the other plans need technical approval from the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration (MRDPA), as well as from the local government tier which is the final beneficiary and the autonomous government institutions and relevant territorial and local agencies.

In practice, the GUPs are the most utilized instruments and their provisions on zoning inform the subsequent procedures for building and development permits. Given their overarching character and various lacunae of capturing in detail the reality on the ground, several micro-plans have been approved in order to further refine the directives and zoning recommendation embedded in the GUPs. These micro-plans are the zonal urban plan (ZUP) and the detail urban plan (DUP), which are generally made at neighbourhood and site-specific level. There are several guidelines on the contents and process for the GUPs, ZUPs and DUPs, including the necessary drawn and written parts (Ministerul Lucrărilor Publice și Amenajării Teritoriului, n.d.).

While the micro-plans can sometimes bring a noteworthy expansion of the directives of the GUP in question, they have been largely used to eschew the directives of the GUP and to hamper coherent and predictable local development. Such practice came to be known as “derogatory planning” and several professional bodies such as the Chambers of Architects of Romania warned on the dangerous *status quo* of having an “exception to the exception”(Ordinul Arhitecților din România, 2012a).

Given such ecosystem, the provisions on public consultations have been, at their best, regarded as mere tokenism or bureaucratic procedures, and at their worst, with suspicion and mistrust. The Government Order No. 2701 (GO 2701/2010) is the main legislative document which details the timeline and procedures for public consultation, which must occur in all stages of a planning project: the preparation of documents, the elaboration of background studies, design drafts and final proposals. The obligation of consultation is valid for all spatial tiers (including national and county ones), but the duration of consultation varies depending on the complexity and the stage in the elaboration of the proposal.

In spite of relatively specific provisions of GO 2701/2010, several limitations have substantially reduced its scope in practice. Firstly, Romanian public authorities generally do not have a department dedicated to public consultation and inquiry and, by and large, the majority of public servants are merely administratively trained. As a result, Urban Planning Departments are usually responsible with public engagement as well, in addition to the technical implementation, approval and review of plans. This obligation is generally bureaucratically dealt with. Secondly, the vast majority of provisions in GO 2701/2010 refer to publicizing information on current development proposals, such as online and offline information notes and boards. Thirdly, where citizens are able to react

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to such proposals, the legislation merely ensures recommendations and observations will be answered, but not that they will be integrated in the elaboration of the respective proposal. This corresponds to different degrees of tokenism, in Arnstein's terms (Arnstein, 1969). Lastly, a subsequent amendment to GO 2701, taking place in 2014 (GO 835 / 2014) literally abolished the article which ensured that any planning not undergoing public consultation would be declared null and void. The amendment was largely criticized by professional associations as a departure from democracy and a five year setback from the opening up of the planning system (Ordinul Arhitecților din România, 2014).

The Creative Room and civil society organisations in Romania

Government Order no. 26/2000 is the main legislative document overseeing the setting up of non-profit organizations in Romania. All non-governmental organisations must be registered in the Registry of Associations and Foundations as a part of the founding procedure and a database composed of this information is managed by the Ministry of Justice of Romania. Nonetheless, given that its purpose is rather bureaucratic – juridical, taxing or administrative – the Registry cannot provide a comprehensive image of existing typologies of non-profit organisations in Romania. Furthermore, there is no overall coding system which allows organisations to define their purpose or object of activity in a centralized manner and is, thus, difficult to provide a portrait of organisations involved in urban development and planning. A survey implemented regularly by the Civil Society Development Foundation (2011) hints that the percentage of NGOs involved in community / local development is rather small, compared to other more traditional sectors such as social service delivery (less than 19%, compared to more than 50%). Urban development and planning organisations tend to be very new and their real number is likely to be much smaller, considering that local development is an umbrella term for a mix of levels of action: intercommunity associations formed of local public authorities for metropolitan areas, grassroots organisations, etc.

In this context, our case study focuses on the "Creative Room" – a think tank based in Bucharest, set up in 2010, with the mission to increase understanding of urban and regional development processes in Central and Eastern Europe. This particular NGO was chosen not only because the authors have been involved in its setting up, but also because it is one of the few organisations which has aimed for a "think tank" role in Romanian urban planning. With a core team of 5, the organisation has been involved in the development of methodologies for participation in urban planning (visual, interactive methods for explaining urban development processes) and working on local development and capacity building. It has also taken a role in opening up to international debates, by holding international workshops both in Bucharest as well as during the UN-Habitat's World Urban Forums 6 and 7.

Findings

The (changing) role of planning professionals

The prevalence of general urban plans reflects a significant master plan thinking, signalling not only a top-down approach, but mostly a demarcation of the role and scope of professionals. The Romanian Registry of Urban Planners (RRUP) manages the professionals with the right of signature for spatial plans. Signature rights represent the authorization to develop spatial plans. In 2010 a new set of regulations was enacted to further clarify the status and signature rights for various professionals from architects-urbanists (!), urban planners (urbanists) to multidisciplinary professionals such as economists-urbanists, sociologist-urbanist, geographer-urbanist, engineer-urbanist, landscape planner (MO 577/13.12.2010, 2010). Similarly, as in many parts of the world, another specialized body (in Romania, the Chambers of Architects of Romania) manages the signature rights for architects, mostly related to the intricate processes of planning, designing and constructing a building or other physical structures (Ordinului Arhitecţilor din România, 2012b).

Signature rights signal "guild-like" behaviour, as the interviews revealed, and a clear designation of who should be the professionals in charge with spatial planning. Leaving aside the common sense arguments on the technical aspects of the profession(s) which cannot be contested, nor can they be externalized, the current legislative and professional body setting marks a struggle for entitlement on the powers of the urban planner. UN-Habitat's report offers a good overview on the changing role of planning and planning institutions in transitional CEE countries, distinguishing three key phases: (1) the early 1990s when planners seem to be a vanishing profession, (2) medium-late 1990s when there is renewed need for planners, sometimes expected to plan and sometimes just to be reactive and solve problems and (3) post-2000 when in the context of the new "integrated" planning tools, urban planning becomes "socially accepted planning profession with its institutional autonomy" (Hirt, 2009, p. 44) and the planner is sometimes regarded as a facilitator.

And indeed, the timeline sketched by Hirt almost matches the current Romanian setting. Starting from 2000 there was a clear revival and propitious re-establishment of institutions around urban planning, as it is easy to note from the years of enactment of the main national regulations reviewed for this paper. The struggle for the consolidation of the role of the urban planner over other professions related to spatial planning, not to mention the end beneficiary (the resident!), is however significantly different from the facilitation trends described by Hirt. The fact that in 2010 the RRUP regulated which other socio-economical professions can be involved in spatial plans indicates on the one hand a much needed coherence for the planning process, and, on another hand, it re-affirms the fragmented way in which other professions can engage in the planning process, and that only if they have fulfilled the conditions to be part of the "guild".

As the interviews uncovered there is still a much needed cross-fertilization between the self-entitled urban planner, a product of "urbanism" and the 19th- early 20th-century "regulatory planning", and the "urban studies" professional. Urban studies breach disciplines and teach a bit of the language and competences of the "others", so that the future dialogue between an architect and an ecologist will not a resemble a dialogue of the deaf. This was particularly highlighted by one of the interviewees, in light of the current highly closed education system and labour market in the field of spatial planning. Quite a paradoxical situation, given that planning during communist times was quite interdisciplinary, in spite of the "small" drawback that planners saw the territory as a *tabula rasa* waiting for new cities and industries to grow.

But even if we take into account the slow but real diversifying of "urban studies" offered in the academic realm in Romania, this phenomenon is generally taking place at MA or MSc level. Even then, the curricula is made of different perspectives on the subject (e.g. urban economy, anthropology, real estate law) each teaching a different set of concepts which rarely reconcile. Moreover, the interviews revealed that there is still quite a large gap in practice in the way this interdisciplinarity can be operationalized. The introduction of more diverse curricula can fail to have an echo, as long as the practice of bringing together varied backgrounds and negotiating competing ideas is not yet widely spread. Even though, according to one interviewee, there are good examples of "limited consultation in professional groups", they tend to have a sporadic and heterogeneous character. For example, the development strategy for one of the largest Romanian cities benefited from one of the most extensive involvement exercises of diverse professionals. Lead experts from diverse thematic areas were approached, assigned a coordinator role and asked to form their own working group, by bringing together more professionals from the same academic area. But such a practice is very unlikely to be scaled up as it largely depends on the contextual, such as the openness of one municipality or the other and the availability of contracted professionals to engage in extensive data gathering and feedback processes.

An important distinction is to be made here between the regulated spatial plans as described in the previous section and diverse planning tools, part of which have emerged independently from the control and monitoring of the "guild". Local development strategies and integrated urban development plans are a clear example of the latter, two cases in which "the market developed faster than the RRUP managed to regulate these instruments" (Interview, urban planner). Even though clearly trigged by

requirements of accessing European funding at the municipal level, they stand as examples of an emerging need for urban planning at a broader scale and to diversify the tools planners use in order to work with the city.

Addressing the master plan-like thinking and the guild-like behaviour described previously, the first project undertaken by the Creative Room was a methodology for engaging youth in urban planning and, in a larger context, showing various tactics for collaboration. The project called "Habitat" took form of a physical board game designed to reflect the zoning and urban strategy effects on neighbourhood level. All elements of the game, including drawings and renderings, were inspired from the 2010 Bucharest. The purpose of the methodology was the expose young people (16-25 years old) to basic concepts from the Romanian urban planning system- including a ZUP, height coefficient, heritage legislation, as well as to a system-thinking that enabled players to win only if they figured out to implement measures at neighbourhood-level rather than scattered plots they owned (Odaia Creativă, n.d.). In recognition to the "real-world" dynamics, the game also included urban situations that integrated corrupted systems, such as the ability to build an office tower in a historical district, but also counter-measures as the exposure of these illicit practices by the civil society and the loss of a significant amount of wealth from the earnings of the player in question. "Habitat" proved to be fun, successful among its target group and intensively played in the various leisure places in Bucharest where it was available in 2010-2011 and, most importantly, an effective way of opening up a dialogue with the "guild". As the 2012 Urban Report explains, initiatives such as "Habitat" for Romania or "Europoly" for Serbia "talk about a factual reality and push you to raise questions more boldly and directly than any other kind of discourse"(Zeppelin Association, 2012, p. 7). As a result, "Habitat" was not only a way of facilitating youth to become familiar and perhaps more assertive to their living environment and its governance structure, but also a way in which a group of young professionals from various non-urbanism fields found appropriate to put their competences at work and be entitled to tackle (partially) urban planning. The "gamification" approach proved also a non-radical way to address significant disruptions in the urban planning system, such as the widespread graft and corruption, as well as "no man's land" attitude fuelled by the lack of vision, procedures and institutions in the 1990s.

Cities as complex systems

As one of the interviewees highlighted, metaphors from ecology signal the "the non-error". Indeed, cities are complex systems and there should be a healthy tendency of learning from mistakes. However, oftentimes, the lessons learned come down to the need of a "different" way, with no clear ideas on the how aspect. Thus, the operationalization of this "different" may take the shape of a "(disruptive) process", "regeneration" or "resilience thinking". This is not to be seen as a crisis, but rather as a timely reminder that living in a habitat is a process, which may have the same structure (house with four walls, a city with public utilities), but inside there are still many beautiful unknown forevers, to paraphrase Katherine Boo's book.

It is not clear whether the Romanian planning system has reached a reorganisation or creative destruction phase as pointed out in the academic literature depicting evolutionary resilience cycles. But as resulted from interviews and from the case study, significant tensions do exist and the emergence of civil society groups points towards a need for changing current practices. It is such a need for change that the workshops organized by the Creative Room in the frame of UN-Habitat's World Urban Forums (WUF) in 2012 and 2014 represented.

As pointed in the interviews and policy reviews, they challenged the representation of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) as a geographical space, particularly taking into account the relatively limited contribution so far of post-socialist countries to the global urban agenda. The workshops told a different story of CEE, for certain one that is facing

the challenges of transitional economies, but also one of best practices and ongoing transformation. For example, the Creative Room showcased "Habitat" as a best practice methodology in engaging youth in sustainable urban planning.

They also posed the question of who gets to be represented in the decisions aiming for more prosperous cities: "The applicability of equitable principles will be analysed through the statutory and non-statutory instruments that dominate the field of urban planning, as well as through bottom-up approaches aimed at disrupting and improvement of the process." (Odaia Creativă, 2014). Most notably, they lobbied for an inclusive urban planning, particularly for the inclusion of youth: "The workshop results indicate that cities need to change their way of thinking and developing towards a more open notion of urban planning, which should involve youth, local communities, NGOs, policy makers and informal groups" (Odaia Creativă, 2012).

Not least, they challenged the idea of representation itself. Although central public authorities have the mandate to represent the needs and objectives of Romanian urban dwellers in relation to a global urban agenda, a relatively small think tank such as the Creative Room was one of the first Romanian organization to actively participate in the WUF.

The contribution of NGOs to widening engagement in urban planning

The relatively closed Romanian planning system as highlighted above indicates that there is a considerable gap between the current reality and the ideal of representation of multiplicity of interests. Participation practices, by and large, as described by one interviewee, tend to be formal, connected to validation of documents or decisions and ensuring transparency (even so with severe gaps) rather than actual involvement in the process of designing solutions. "Consultation" is seen by public agents usually as a burden or delay of decision-making and is easily confused with informing or making information accessible, without actually guaranteeing public debate (Institutul pentru Politici Publice, 2013; USAID, 2014). Sometimes done out of obligation or necessity, due to lack of internal capacity, other times for populism, participation "is not yet authentic, at least for the time being due to the evident intention of local public authorities to not lose the reins of power (…); but sometimes the same public authorities like to parade with this accomplishment, expectation and engagement" (interview, urban planner).

In a survey conducted on 314 NGOs, 17% of these reported that public authorities had lobbied to stop the organization's interventions and 37% of these considered that NGOs are not able to influence public decisions due to the poor organization of the consultation process (Fundația pentru Dezvoltarea Societății Civile, 2011). A thorough review of the practices of local and central public authorities has pointed to least two possible causes: the insignificant penalties as per current legislative norms when local authorities do not ensure public transparency and a lack of capacity of civil society (namely, non-governmental organisations) to pressure public authorities when such norms are not obeyed (Institute for Public Policy, 2013).

In this context, the emergence of a plethora of non-governmental organisations is usually perceived as a reaction to the mainstream practices as pointed above. The (mis)perception of such during the interviews hints to their potential and limitations. Sometimes seen as "initiative and experiments", other times as a part of different typologies – "militating" versus "governmental" NGOs, "pressuring" versus "nostalgic" NGOs – they portray an eclectic and heterogeneous picture of usually small-scale initiatives. If we leave aside the "militant" groups which have taken a clear advocacy or watch-dog role, these "experimental NGOs" have functioned as laboratories of interdisciplinarity, creative exchanges and proposals for solutions or tools which have not been experimented before.

It is under this label that the setting up of the Creative Room NGO was perceived by the interviewees, much due to the diverse, non-planning backgrounds of the founding members: "what you proposed was not yet consolidated, but had a dose of innovation, novelty, on one hand in content and on the other hand, as people involved, from related domains".

The think tank and mediating approach – aiming to open up a dialogue between stakeholders – proved an understanding of the local context but also differentiated the group from the more "reactive" grass-roots initiatives. In this case, a small organisation, and not yet visible was perceived a good indicator. It also went hand in hand with the acknowledgement, at least from the side of the Chambers of Architects of Romania, of a need for dialogue outside of the profession: "it was a reflex to support the Creative Room, we acted before or alongside developing a strategy in this sense".

One of the interviewees referred generally on the organizations similar to the Creative Room as "pocket NGOs", that undergo reactive initiatives vis-à-vis the mainstream as represented by the current system described in the first part of this paper. These NGOs or atomized groups of two or three people or even individual initiatives, have as triggering point a certain frustration of the status quo. From the observations of the interviewee these vary from pure denial of the official system to a genuine curiosity of unaddressed situations such as an urban void, a kindergarten etc. (but not necessarily needs). As a result, the behaviour of these "pocket NGOs" is a continuous "trial and error" process, which may or may not inform in time a vision of action.

The Creative Room underwent a similar "learning by doing" process, which can only partially be explained though the limited capability to sustain a vision for change. While from its emergence the Creative Room aimed for a "think-tank" role in Romanian urban planning, it took a series of "pilots" to understand the advantages and limitations for a variety of tools: policy briefs, experimental urban studios, international workshops, designing consultation methodologies etc. The secondary explanation lies however on the funding structure for such "pocket NGOs". Given the urban planning ecosystem described previously, it is easy to guess that there is no concrete funding targeted on a widening engagement of the citizen in the urban planning processes, nor funds for applied urban studies/policy measures. It is perhaps for this reason that the Creative Room, as many other NGOs in the field, have a project-based approach, rather than a programme-oriented one. Moreover, it had to brokerage funding from other more mainstream domains such as cultural initiatives, heritage preservation, youth, and transparency in the decision-making process, which in turn resulted in a partial deviation of the scope of action.

Interviews revealed that "pocket NGOs" have an essential role on provoking change in the system of urban planning. Given their small character, which is also highly mobile and fast-responding, they can cultivate a much needed alignment to the last twenty to thirty years of best practices in the field, mainly in the line of more inclusive urban studies and consequently, urban practice. Also, perhaps they represent a more sure bet than other inertia-driven institutions, as architectural/ urban planning national universities.

At large, civil society entities, including naturally the "pocket NGOs" connected somehow with the eclectic field of spatial planning, manage to signal to the local public authorities that there are "others" who should be invited at the debate table. If the current legislative setting and "guild-like" behaviour has perpetuated an understanding that the mayor as the representative of a local public authority is to speak only with the chief-architect or other professionals, than it is such initiatives which also engage the "public" in various ways.

Limitations and conclusions

This paper aimed to bring a contribution to academic debates on the need for inclusionary approaches in spatial planning. We were interested in identifying the way in which the meaning of planning and hence, the role of planning professionals, had been transformed in Romania in the past 25 years. We also aimed to identify the ways in which civil society groups have contributed to creating alternatives to a mainstream, top-down practice. By showcasing a case study, which is less a keen academic observation, and more our answer to the advocacy call formulated by Davidoff decades ago, several key aspects pertaining to "embeddedness" were revealed.

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Planning institutions and practice have known a reestablishment in Romania in the past 10 years, much typical for the typology of post-socialist countries as highlighted by the literature review. Attempts to widen the planning system, both in terms of diversifying of expertise as well as ensuring procedures for consultations are young and they remain formal, with a much wider scope for them being implemented in practice. As one of the interviews clearly synthetized it, public bodies - from local public authorities to professional networks such as RRUP- have developed antibodies to change. There is a remembrance that the *status quo* has been in place for "a while" and even if new prerogatives (largely imported from EU recommendations) appear in the legislation connected to the field, they can be handled in a purely bureaucratic way, as this paper explained the process of public consultation for spatial plans.

It is perhaps at this level, that the role of civil society groups explores meaningful ways of engaging their constituents in the future city's fortunes. In spite of their fragmented character and sometimes futile mode of action, they do manage to raise questions on nuances of "collaborative planning" and the meaning embedded in the urban planning profession, institutions and proto-policies. Nonetheless, their dynamic character and their versatility, which has offered space for innovation and experimentation, can wear out on the long term. The success of a wider-scale change of engagement in planning depends on their capacity to scale up and to better define their proposals, products and constituents.

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