The City as Collaborative Field. Tackling Informal Spatial Practices in Bucharest

Tudor Elian
PhD student, "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urbanism, Bucharest
tudor.elian@yahoo.com

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Contemporary urban phenomena such as shrinking, sprawling, social and economic inequalities and civic unrest seem to have placed urbanism under the sign of helplessness even while it covets a position of control and power. Such matters challenge the universal and generic visions, projects and tools that shape urban design professions, while hinting at the need for establishing "a contemporary public and political platform for a renewed commitment to the city."[1] Increasingly elusive to planned urbanism – which struggles between the use of abstract tools, the implementation of somewhat utopian solutions and a more progressive theoretical line that fails to be absorbed by practice – the city and its issues are ever more real and tangible for citizens who have to cope with them in ever more creative ways.

In the Balkans, social, economic and political constraints imposed on city-making processes in the communist and post-communist era have led urban planning and architecture to follow a local combination of "indiscriminate privatization and marketization; by losing their critical role in the city, they have lost the city as the constitutive subject and purpose of the profession."[2]

Furthermore, "Dissatisfaction with the contemporary city has not led to the development of a credible alternative", asserted Rem Koolhaas in his essay 'Whatever Happened to Urbanism', "it has, on the contrary, inspired only more refined ways of articulating dissatisfaction. The profession persists in its fantasies, its ideology, its pretension, its illusions of involvement and control, and is therefore incapable of conceiving new modesties, partial interventions, strategic realignments, compromised positions that might influence, redirect, succeed in limited terms, regroup, begin from scratch even, but will never re-establish control."[3] Koolhaas suggests instead a "new urbanism" based on creating potential, possibilities and multiplicity, rather than one oriented towards producing order and omnipotence, new rules or limitations. Aimed at "the reinvention of psychological space"[4] rather than the permanence of the physical one, this approach establishes a keen interest for the existing city; seen not as artefact but as lived, spontaneous, informal and honest experience – the city of practices, relations and atmospheres.

This brings to mind the urban exploration methods developed by Guy Debord and the French Situationist International in the 1950s: *psychogeography*, as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals"[5], and the *dérive*, its preferred method of exploration, aimed at searching experiences and diverse ambiances risen from the interactions between unplanned urban practices and the planned city.[6] As the experienced city seems to unfold between the two,

1 Milica Topalovic, "Exhausted City," in *Urban Report 1*, ed. Cosmin Caciuc (Bucharest: Zeppelin, 2011), 31.
2 Milica Topalovic, "Exhausted City," 30.
3 Rem Koolhaas, "Whatever Happened to Urbanism," in *S,M,L,XL*, Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 962.
4 Koolhaas, "Whatever Happened to Urbanism," 963.
5 Guy Debord, "Introduction à une critique de la géographie urbaine," in Œuvres, Debord, Guy, ed. Jean-Louis Rançon (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 204.
6 Guy Debord, "Théorie de la dérive," in Œuvres, Debord, Guy, ed. Jean-Louis Rançon. (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 251.

although it can be analysed from many objective perspectives, there seems to be no substitute for the actual personal experience of a place: "whether encountered by foot, public transit, or car, while sitting on a bench, listening and observing, or through participation, the present city is the taken-for-granted everyday that surrounds us."[7] Could it simply be then, that modern and contemporary urbanism have not been searching for answers in the right place?

In truth, in western countries, the past 60 years have been partially marked by the design profession's attention to the normal, lively city and for the program of enabling daily life. In spite of this however, its considerable and very diverse efforts have mostly amounted to little more than planned simulations, mainly due to an abstract approach oriented towards formalizing urban patterns rather than being concerned with real everyday vitality.[8]

Local Context – Bucharest and the Balkans

On the contrary, European ex-communist countries were marked in the past century by a distorted relationship to the city, which had primarily become a means to exhibit and enforce the totalitarian regime. Design professions too were controlled by political power and private initiatives totally crushed. As any sense of belonging, of shared, collective experience of the city or of self-expression in the public space was denied, after the fall of communism, the transition to democracy was marked by an explosion of individuality as a way of expressing one's freedom.

The communist state-planned city was quickly substituted by a boom of private initiatives, investments and improvised practices – "instinctive reflexes of self-defence, brutal actions springing from the violence and aggressiveness expressed by each of us in the public space"[9] as described by Bucharest-based architecture office StudioBASAR – these are ways of reclaiming the city and of expressing a long-time repressed freedom, all the while paradoxically prolonging a "mentality of closing-up, lack of involvement and escape in the private space. The articulation and negotiation between public and private are becoming weaker and weaker."[10]

Thus, separate but intertwined phenomena, urban improvisation brought to a new level and the privatization of the city and its experience, both become forms of defence, resistance, contestation of authority and estrangement from the other. This is all the more true in post-communist countries (and perhaps most in the Balkan region), where "the tendency to resort to informal construction can be understood as a direct reflection of lost trust in institutions, together with a lack of experience in collective and civic organizing – and as a direct form of resistance to official developmental politics."[11]

As improvisation and individuality have thus become the new norm, they have also resulted in a new, mostly unconscious, form of contesting public authority, whose mechanisms of regulation are no longer repressive like in the communist era, but often incomplete and still largely undemocratic. In parallel to the informal uses of the city, public authorities have developed their own self-regulated mechanisms as well, manifested as lack of transparency and of interest in community needs, opinions and positions and revealed in uncoordinated urban design projects and in their careless materialization.

The lack of a clear vision or strategy for the city and the absence of consensus around the question of "public interest" have led to a process of random urbanization, with a provisional

7 John Kaliski, "The Present City and the Practice of City Design," in *Everyday Urbanism*, ed. John Leighton Chase et al. (New York: Monacelli Press, 2008), 89.

8 For a clear history of the search of everyday vitality in western urbanism beginning with the 1950s, see Kaliski, "The Present City and the Practice of City Design," 89-103.

9 StudioBASAR, "Bucharest: the State of Uncertainty," in *Evicting the ghost: Architectures of survival,* StudioBASAR (Bucharest: Centre for Visual Introspection, 2010), 111.

10 Ştefan Ghenciulescu, "Non-public. Urban Space in Bucharest after 1989," in studioBASAR, *Evicting the Ghost,* 177.

11 Milica Topalovic, "Exhausted City," 27.

character. In Bucharest, the capital of Romania, disparate evolutions, multiple-layered cities and various unclear visions follow their own rules, coexisting, intersecting or clashing without ever negotiating, collaborating or accepting each other as a given. These urban realities and the challenges they raise clearly surpass the possibilities of the two main architectural and urbanistic practices that locally govern the profession today: mediocre architecture which mostly goes along with non-coagulated and uneducated trends dictated by individualistic needs; and the tendency towards generic urban planning derived from globalized images, ideals, methods and tools. Both types of practices stem from personal egos and megalomaniac projects which express themselves at all urban levels and scales. The few examples of "good", or rather contextual, architecture and urbanism are usually overwhelmed by the complex situation on the field and remain too few to form a critical mass.

Could it be, however, precisely in multiplicity, in the local and authentic social fabric, in its diverse spatial practices, that the Balkan city may find a local blend of urbanity, based precisely on negotiation? As Kai Vöckler puts it: "A western European understanding of planning cannot simply be transferred. Planning strategies are needed that do not aspire to autocratic or bureaucratic solutions but instead address the population directly – a population that must collectively agree on the future of its own commonwealth."[12]

Going a step further, could it be possible then to look at informal spatial practices as incentives to formulate a new approach and re-define both the city and the professional practice? Could the unplanned be seen as a source of positive scenarios, as a starting point for rethinking and relating to the city?

In summary, could addressing the everyday life of the city directly (on the field and in its complex architectural, political, economic and social dimensions) be a solution for the impotence of the profession? How can this be possible when the profession is usually cut off from the very citizens it addresses and when the two are separated by very different visions of the city, by very different ways of envisioning urbanity?

The Everyday City[13] or Undermining Urbanity as a Professional Construct

Everyday urbanism is the discreet yet ubiquitous unregulated layer of urban living based on peripheral, parallel or conflicting spatial practices. It is made up of personal or collective desires and needs, of improvised urban performances, short-term uses and unplanned modifications that ordinary people produce in the city at hand, without resorting to the help of a design professional and independently from local authorities. These practices are themselves architectural, in the sense that they shape the city by generating distinctive spatial forms, all the while combining spontaneity, desire and habit. Moreover, they are inscribed in a sphere of autonomous action and self-determination within the constraints that are imposed on them, thus becoming political, local means of reaction or resistance to a *status quo* describing unclearly formulated visions and partial alternatives. They are a massive movement without a program.

The city is as much defined by informal practices as it is by official ways of planning and building. This produces the "diffuse landscape of everyday life, which tends to be banal and repetitive, everywhere and nowhere, obvious yet invisible. Ambiguous like all in-between spaces, the everyday represents a zone of social transition and possibility with the potential for new social arrangements and forms of imagination."[14]

12 Kai Vöckler, "Turbo Urbanism in South Eastern Europe," in *Evicting the ghost: Architectures of survival,* StudioBASAR (Bucharest: Centre for Visual Introspection, 2010), 192.

13 The studies on informal spatial practices on which this paper is based are the research led by Margaret Crawford, John Leighton Chase and John Kaliski on *Everyday Urbanism* in Los Angeles, that defined the main theoretical framework, local investigations focusing on the phenomenon in the Balkans or specifically in Bucharest (such as the *Urban Report* series led by Zeppelin architecture magazine or conclusions of local architecture practices such as studioBASAR) and personal field work.

14 Margaret Crawford, "Introduction" to *Everyday Urbanism*, edited by John Leighton Chase et al., 6.

When looking at urbanity in terms of opposing official practices with informal ones, it is useful to resort to two modes of operating in the city, theorized by the French philosopher Michel de Certeau: on the one hand, strategies – plans formed on a top-down basis by those in power who possess the time, space, tools and resources to coherently accomplish a task, and on the other hand, tactics – informal actions of "the weak", which are not authorized by official power structures and which subsequently involve improvised, immediate actions done with what is at hand.[15] Tactics are therefore partial operations, reduced in scale and scope, usually searching for short-term results with low costs and resources. "Without a proper place, tactics rely on seized opportunities, on cleverly chosen moments, and on the rapidity of movements that can change the organization of a space."[16] They are forms of creativity which contribute to the physical and social urban tissue.

A direct consequence of the opposition between tactics and strategies is the improvised nature of informal practices that work with the existing and hijack the quotidian. Theorized in the past century by several philosophers and sociologists under the term *bricolage*, this attitude is described by Claude Levi-Strauss as "concrete science", as opposed to exact and technical science,[17] by Jacques Derrida as "the creative and intelligent use of resources at hand"[18] and finally by de Certeau as "the politics and poetics of 'making do'."[19] In this landscape of improvisations the main agent of the spontaneous city is the *bricoleur*, an individual or collective actor who tunes his environment by using whatever tools and resources at hand and who unknowingly turns everyday place-making into a micro-political practice.

Reading the Informal City

The diversity of this un-regulated urbanism can be further understood by following several reading grids.[20] According to the number and types of agents involved in its production and use, it can be read as collective or individual, and as autonomous or mediated by a second party, such as local NGOs fighting for the Right to the City. Taking into consideration the features of the process itself – objectives, continuity and legality – these local initiatives can be reactive (aimed at changing or improving adverse conditions) or proactive (directed at building new and better situations); they can also be singular, or part of a process spanning a wider amount of time; and they can be legal, illegal, or fall in the moral cracks between the two, especially when the legitimacy of official rules is not recognised by the citizens or when local mores are neglected by the establishment. Finally, according to the features of their results – reiteration, finality and use – urban tactics can be replicable or not, that is, generated by very specific conditions and resources or repeatable elsewhere; they may be an end in themselves, part of a negotiation or simply an intermediate stage achieved either as an experiment or in the absence of better resources; finally their use may be public (open to all), collective (open to a community or a group of people, perhaps the ones involved in the making) or individual (closed to the other).

When looking at its causes and purposes of existence, the urban vernacular seems to fall into several large categories: firstly, there are those spatial practices guided by pragmatic, immediate or even survival reasons (such as the *shanty houses* of Bucharest, occupying side-walks with improvised structures made of furniture and other materials at hand, which serve as provisional homes for evicted families); secondly, there are those claiming rights or spaces (such as the improvised sitting-place built in an empty bus stop in the Ferentari neighborhood of Bucharest);

15 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 34.

16 Crawford, "Introduction," 9.

17 Claude Levi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Pocket, 1990), 31.

18 Jacques Derrida, *L'Ecriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 418.

19 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 20.

20 Although the paper is based on larger studies concerning the Balkans, the example of Bucharest has been chosen to illustrate the theoretical systematization of informal urban practices and its relation with traditional urban-planning.

thirdly, there are those reusing space and experimenting with uses (such as artistic squatting practices); and finally the ones triggered by deeper inner reasons, such as the search for legitimacy in the eyes of one's self and of the other (for instance, the building of over-sized illegal houses erected to express social aspiration and in craving for social recognition).

All these considerations amount to the following classification of informal urban spatial practices:

Informal economies – activities generating profit outside the official spaces and rules of the establishment. An interesting example is that of the illegal vendors who turn Bucharest's public transport into temporary trifle shops for one or two stops. Transporting passport casings, band aids, Chinese medicine and other strange nick-knacks in their pockets or in raffia bags, they use city buses or trams (less surveyed than the underground system) to announce their list of items for sale and occasionally find a customer, either genuinely interested in the purchase or moved by human circumstances. This shows the inventiveness of the *bricoleur*, who can find potential in any situation, and proves that public space is the place of overlapping, simultaneity and intersections of uses.

Creative uses – Sometimes informal practices just involve a temporary definition of place by simply performing the city without leaving any physical traces. Surprising or natural, exceptional or true everyday uses can give new meaning to public spaces through activities, movement, light, sound or smell, and can suggest new parallel urban scenarios. This is the case with independent street festivals (organised without the support of public authorities) that succeed in temporary activating spaces and offering opportunities of expression to social or cultural categories which are less represented in the public sphere. Also, more daily uses of the city that can be witnessed on the banks of the River Dâmboviţa in Bucharest are another example. Intensely used by local fishermen, but also by children coming from underprivileged backgrounds who swim and dive in the water to flee the summer heat – although it is forbidden –, the river is experienced genuinely, thus escaping its schizophrenic nature: that of an artificial, purely aesthetical presence in the city, in theory, and of an actually uninviting, dead space, absent from the public life.

Makeshift interventions – Perhaps the best examples of such practices in Bucharest can be found around the issues raised by the communist blocks of flats that have remained unanswered by local authorities: problems of ownership and dereliction of the immediate surroundings, overwhelming uniformity, deficient design and poor execution of both buildings and public space. Here the urban *bricoleur* walks in once again to reclaim and domesticate his unfriendly surrounding environment by addressing individual or collective, physical, psychological, social or even aesthetical needs. This is achieved through multiple tactics: the impressively creative and dedicated urban gardening movement, conducted in unclaimed and unkempt green spaces around the blocks of flats; do-it-yourself urban furniture, placed mainly at the entrances of blocks of flats as small scale social amenities; uncoordinated and mostly illegal interventions on the existing architecture of the buildings whereupon the residents glaze their balconies, or demolish their interior walls, or paint and independently cover the façade of their apartments with heat insulation.

Guerrilla-type actions are usually clandestine, anonymous practices that public authorities consider a form of vandalism, unlike the improvised, almost domestic adjustments described previously, which occur in plain sight, that have a declared, known author (the downstairs neighbor or the handy block-administrator) and which usually do not bother the authorities due to their small scale and impact. Although they are usually individual claims of an underused or improperly used space, they can sometimes address a city-scale issue. An example in this sense is a "guerrilla-garden" made as a form of protest in the middle of a demolished side-walk of Bucharest, a ruin of an unfinished official initiative to modernize the street, which caused several months' disturbances to the pedestrians and the residents in the area. After the intervention was strongly broadcast through the media, the works on the public road were immediately resumed and finished.

Art in the public space is a particular form of guerrilla-type action, enacted by an artist with the purpose of framing a manifesto or raising awareness by spotlighting a particular urban-related subject. A local example is a project enacted by Daniel Gontz and Gianina Cărbunariu who started placing a large blue dot on the major kitsch buildings of the capital. Based on the reference of the red dot announcing the buildings susceptible to major damages in case of earthquake (which the public authorities placed throughout the country), the artists claim that the blue dot signals the aesthetic crisis "shaking" Romanian cities in the past years. Similarly to the well-known red dot, the blue dot announces a different type of danger, a cultural one, not only to be warned about but also to protest against.

Pop-up space – the temporary activation of spaces which explores possibilities of uses and proves the existence of in-between spaces in the cracks of the system, places that are not in the scope of the authorities and that escape traditional definitions based on long term use, property or value. They favour ephemeral practices which are often secured by mere access to a site. Street Delivery is a local example of a three-day yearly event which closes the Arthur Verona Street in Bucharest to car traffic and opens it to pedestrians. During the event, the street is occupied by pop-up street furniture and kiosks where local artists, NGOs and students propose projects that re-define the use of public space, explore forms of urban culture, urban interventions and social-responsibility campaigns.

Community initiatives – Civic action groups coagulated around the idea of fighting off aggressions on their community or of supporting productive measures for their common space. This is the case of tens of NGOs or civic groups targeting illegal buildings, such as the "Save the Dămăroaia and Bucureștii Noi Neighborhoods" Association.[21] Their purpose is to monitor, unmask and stop the illegal interventions in a protected area of Bucharest, threatened by increasing real-estate pressure, which has already altered the character of the area. Local residents who are part of this initiative are constantly developing mechanisms and tools to put pressure on the local authorities to take action and stop the chain of corruption that enables this massive illegal building phenomenon.

Squatting – the long-term occupation of abandoned or unoccupied buildings or unbuilt spaces, most commonly with the purpose of inhabiting them. In Europe squatting has changed from illegal occupation of spaces without the owners' consent to a more formalized, accepted and sometimes even encouraged experience, usually associated with the creative class; in Romania this newer definition of the term is still in its larval stage. Although the potential of Bucharest's abandoned places is sporadically reconsidered and has recently started to be mapped, squatting is rather associated with its first meaning, that of the temporary use of unoccupied spaces for different purposes. In Romania squatting is still rather a form of survival than an artistic practice, closer perhaps to its original purpose, of contesting and resisting the *status quo*.

Beyond these rational approaches to a complex and diverse phenomenon, self-regulated urbanity is a very present and real experience. In Bucharest, it is ubiquitous and one can hardly avoid interacting with or contributing to it. The city becomes a place of mediation between social classes, between the informal and the planned and between legal and illegal activities. Apart from obvious examples such as buying from street vendors or simply living in neighborhoods defined by informal practices like graffiti or urban gardening, a more complex specimen of this interaction is what John Leighton Chase calls "trash as charity". He refers to a practice common in Bucharest as well, where people, instead of throwing or recycling clothes, home appliances or other out-dated but still usable objects, leave them in the street in spontaneously designated places to be picked up by the underprivileged. This points to "trash as […] a medium of exchange between income groups that acts as a privatized and informal form of welfare."[22]

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21 "Save the Dămăroaia and Bucureștii Noi Neighborhoods" Association profile description, http://www.ascdbn.ro, accessed October 8, 2015.

22 John Leighton Chase, "A Curmudgeon's guide to the Wide World of Trash," in *Everyday Urbanism*, ed. John Leighton Chase et al. (New York: Monacelli Press, 2008), 58.

The Planned and the Informal – Conflict and Collaboration

While exploring the city and noticing the diversity and presence of its self-regulated spatial practices, one easily tends to overlook the forest for the trees, as the urban vernacular is constituted of apparently insignificant, isolated, weak acts. However, these testify to the life of small gestures, habits, customs, and daily rituals that the planned-city usually tends to overlook and which, multiplied a hundred thousand times over, make the everyday city.[23] An ephemeral city which exists both in parallel and in spite of the planned one.

This coexistence points to a contradiction between several types of urbanities, understood as the cultural construct which expresses and gives human scale to both the desire of making the *city* (the usual realm of the design professional) and the *polis* (the space of citizenship).

Firstly, urbanity can be seen as the assemblage of norms of behaviour in the city, which (among other things) define those spaces representative for the moral character of the city. This ideological and ethical approach to the term is however problematic in a world defined by (urban) pluralism and conflicting or competing morals.

Secondly, urbanity is conceptualized by those who assume the responsibility of giving shape to the relation of the subject with urban space, making the transfer between *urbanity*, seen as ideological and normative construction, to the *urbanism of lifestyles*, perceived and imagined also as an ideal of urbanity. This implies an obvious gap between the makers of the city and the ones that experience the consequences of their decisions and actions. Civil society's protests against urban projects enacted by the city hall are examples of such conflicts. For example, the case of Berzei-Buzești Street in Bucharest speaks of massive demolitions and legally questionable expropriations conducted by the city hall in 2011 and 2012, in the name of "embettering the urban fabric", in reality yielding the city to cars. Considered abusive and destructive, the measures were opposed by different urban actors who repeatedly protested, trying to stop the demolition; even an alternative project was volunteered to show that the action could be accomplished with minimum damage to the neighborhood.[24] As in many other cases, the unresolved contradictions between ideological and experienced urbanity in this area led to functional and social scars that keep on marking the local community, the collective memory, the city and its urban fabric.

Thirdly, the un-regulated city, the stage of everyday life, which hacks or hijacks part of the decision making process involved in the production of urban spaces, is the tactical ground from which the individual constitutes himself as subject of his own urbanity. To put it in other terms, this type of experiential, informal urbanism generates individual or collective definitions of a lived urbanity. It is this personal unconscious ideal of one's city, neighborhood or even back yard that drives the *bricoleur* to handle certain situations on his own, by resorting to urban tactics. In some cases this perspective on the city also empowers groups of individuals to start proactive projects, which replace the lack of official initiative and intervention. Such is the case of most NGOs active in the public sphere.

Moreover, the polysemy of everyday urbanity does not reside solely in the diversity of its manifestations but also in its local nuances, specificities and particular relations to precise local contexts. Although informal urbanism is a global phenomenon too, it might prove to be a key to seeing cities beyond their generic appearance and supporting or making local authentic urban situations. So, in spite of the global influences tending to shape urban design theory and practice as well as the desires of urbanites (that is, in spite of contemporary trans-cultural urban cultures), a local blend of urbanity seems to have been hidden right under our very noses, in unplanned urban everyday practices.

Subsequently, there are several distinct urbanities: those constructed, idealized and somewhat abstract, as opposed to those simply produced, without a clear program or an ideological

23 Kaliski, "The Present City and the Practice of City Design," 89-90.

24 For the occasion, a coalition of professionals, that named themselves the "Volunteer Architects", was formed to propose the parallel project.

background. From this distinction arise the conflict between the way the city is conceptualized and the way it is practised or lived, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the improbability, impossibility and uselessness of trying to found the city on a total consensus, as its very nature resides in accommodating and overlapping multiple visions and actions, if not even conflicts.[25]

Although still possibly a little naïve, the logical outcome of the opposition between these different approaches to thinking the city is to imagine a third kind of urbanity, of collaboration between cultivated abstract thinking and the practical experience of the context, capable of diverse ways of imagining the city, of creating complex links and strategies and of offering a grass-roots approach to the city.

This would demand however a transfer of power and responsibility from the professional expert to the citizen. As Crawford puts it: "widespread expertise in everyday life acts as a levelling agent, eliminating the distance between professionals and users, between specialized knowledge and daily experience."[26]

Looking with some naiveté at the urban everyday landscape, it is almost like the city is doing just fine on its own, precisely through the islands of autonomous practices, which constitute vernacular urbanism and the territory of *bricolage*. Albeit in a disorderly, sometimes bothersome or unattractive manner, the *bricoleur* might be saving the existing, real city one place at a time, by bringing it closer to his ideal city. So why should the design professional turn his attention towards the informal and try interacting with it, when it seems to be thriving precisely on the apparently inauspicious local environment it hijacks?

What if, instead, the everyday city should be protected from design and not the other way around? In this case, the limits of planning can be learned from the vernacular. It can help us understand the city, its diverse phenomena, desires and challenges and lead to collaboration between the informal and the planned city. Just as well, it "can help us discover what cannot – indeed, what should not – be planned. It can suggest what should be protected from design and should be left to its own devices, free to find its own form."[27] An example is the *Magic Blocks* project initiated by Archis Interventions, Zeppelin, Point4 and Arhitectura in 2009 as a research into scenarios for communist collective housing estates in Bucharest. In 2010, the project included a case study focused on the blocks of flats boarding the Moşilor Boulevard and the historic urban tissue they concealed. The proposed strategy was directed at revitalising the existent unbuilt space as real lively public space, through micro-interventions, and at creating a more complex strategy that would halt the wild development which attacked the historic tissue. The adopted solution was to partly relinquish control over the city, recognising its natural tendency toward densification, and accepting the informal building practices which it generated. Thus, a permissive area was proposed between the blocks of flats and the protected historic tissue that would absorb future large scale building and accommodate unplanned situations – a somewhat unregulated territory, an urban vernacular reservation.

Still the question persists: why address self-regulated urbanity?

As Margaret Crawford puts it, "continually being re-inhabited in new ways and reinvented by its residents, the city challenges us, as design professionals and academics, to engage with it in a productive way."[28] It might just be then that the professional needs to relate to the everyday city just as much as we might think the city needs him: in the reciprocal relationship between the two, the professional both *needs* to act in the city, in order to legitimize his status once again and give new meaning to his mission, and *is needed* to act, for his skills and knowledge which have the potential to support isolated tactics and articulate them into more complex civic networks.

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25 For more on the politics of conflict see the writings of Markus Miessen and Chantal Mouffe.

26 Crawford, "Introduction," 9.

27 Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, "Performing the City: Reflections on the Urban Vernacular," in *Everyday Urbanism*, ed. John Leighton Chase et al. (New York: Monacelli Press, 2008), 19.

28 Margaret Crawford, "The Current State of EverydayUrbanism," in *Everyday Urbanism*, ed. John Leighton Chase et al. (New York: Monacelli Press, 2008), 12.

From the professional's point of view, informal practices can be seen as valuable as they offer unique perspectives on reality, on ways of addressing it through design and on professional practice itself – all three directly related to the problem of urbanity.

Firstly, the study of everyday urbanism can be seen as a way of accessing the untapped popular wisdom of the city as well as its intimate mechanisms:

> one can analyse the microbe-like, singular and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress, but which have outlived its decay; one can follow the swarming activity of these procedures that […] have reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy […] and combined in accord with unreadable but stable tactics to the point of constituting everyday regulations.[29]

More than a measuring tool, this approach is able to extrapolate the complex, usually invisible, social, economic and political processes and causes which have led to the development of informal urban practices. In this respect, urban tactics may be understood as emerging behaviours that show deeper issues or trends to be taken into account when relating to the city.

Secondly, this better understanding of the everyday city can, therefore, show those characteristics and elements of urban life, which still remain elusive to the design professional – ephemerality, cacophony, multiplicity, and simultaneity – thus defining new design principles (and perhaps solutions as well) for addressing them. This is achieved not only from the knowledge acquired on the field but also by directly probing and determining the tactics that have been proven to work. In this sense, informal projects could be seen as prototypes for future planned interventions, and the city as an already active urban laboratory and testing ground.

So finally, interacting with the everyday develops a professional gaze aimed at the existing city, not only for practical purposes but also in order to redefine deontological aspects (which is not saying necessarily abstract ones!), to question fundamental aspects in the way we, as planners, see ourselves but also in the way we look at, interact with and make the city. "Design within everyday space must start with an understanding and acceptance of the life that takes place there. This goes against the grain of the professional design discourse, which is based on abstract principles, whether quantitative, formal, spatial, or perceptual."[30] Therefore, gazing at the everyday might redefine the ethics and aesthetics of the profession, outlining a new approach of what is "good" and "bad" (perhaps rather in terms of functionality or usefulness) and what is beautiful and ugly by both filtering and appropriating to a certain degree the citizens' point of views, that is by giving more importance to lived experience than to the physical form in defining the city and by accepting and cultivating pluralism. This is to say that "everyday urbanism demands a radical repositioning of the designer, a shift of power from the professional expert to the ordinary person."[31] It remains to be seen whether this will eventually turn success into the ultimate urban value and place all actions on the city in the realm of the amoral, as Koolhaas has suggested time and time again, or whether it will only create professional affiliations to new ideals and new ways of making the city.

Relating to the Informal City

Which, then, are the contributions that planned urbanism might have in the spontaneous city? We suggest a reading grid summarising different types of planned interactions with the everyday, focused on three main attitudes: passive, reactive and constructive.

The passive positions would mean:
– Acknowledging the existence of informal practices by first perceiving the everyday city in a conscious and critical manner;

29 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 96.

30 Crawford, "Introduction," 7.

31 Crawford, "Introduction," 9.

– Tolerating, accepting or appreciating it as a natural urban phenomenon either by accepting the city as the realm of multiple others (along with their distinct desires, visions and behaviours) or by simply appreciating the outcome of these practices (from a functional, social or aesthetic point of view);
– Understanding informal practices by investigating their forms, tools and reasons.

Reactive measures would suppose:
– Repressing such practices;
– Controlling informality by offering incentives and alternatives or through rules, boundaries, limitations or sanctions.

Constructive actions would consist in:
– Replicating or formalizing the informal by either creating an official urban planning tool emulating an informal example or simply officially accepting and legalizing informal initiatives.
– Learning and doing by understanding their instruments and rationale and integrating these ingredients in the development of new tools and practices for similar contexts;
– Advocating, understanding informal practices as local reactions to bigger issues and addressing its causes by acting as mediator between the local community and the institutions capable of dealing with the matter;
– Empowering local communities by helping them assemble around common interests and acting jointly to improve the concrete quality of their environment. Citizens can thus directly influence the more or less top-down decision making processes aimed at their community. This is the definition of community organizing.

Although it might seem that this taxonomy portrays an ascending scale of enlightenment in the design professional's relationship with the tactical city, perhaps similar in some small aspects to Sherry R. Arnstein's "ladder of citizen participation" (1969), this is only an impression due to a logical order of classification. While it is tempting to get caught up in the attraction or admiration for the unplanned and to judge some of the types of planned interactions described above as limited, retrograde, conservative or formal, in reality all of them make sense depending on the context they address. Unlike the ideas proclaimed by Reyner Banham, Paul Barker, Peter Hall and Cedric Price in the famous 1969 article "Non-Plan: An experiment in freedom" and by the subsequent anarchical architecture discourse, the attitudes proposed here cannot refer to a way of abandoning the city solely to its citizens while discrediting both the role of the professional and of the decision maker but rather to the collaboration between the top-down and the bottom-up. "The cultivation of a self-regulated urbanity does not seek to eliminate existing urban dynamics, but to understand how to maintain lively controversies instead of deadly quarrels, how to create smart means for constructive exchange among the divergent states of existence."[32] Thus from the coexistence of planned urbanism (understood as traditional design practice, unlikely to disappear but inclined to slowly evolve) and the informal ways of making the city, arises a third type of practice: a design approach based on a new critical contextualism. Margaret Crawford defines this approach as Everyday Urbanism, a "widespread but not yet fully articulated attitude toward urban design […] which put[s] urban residents and their experiences at the centre of the enterprise, encourage[s] a more ethnographic mode of urban research, and emphasize[s] specificity and material reality."[33]

The practice of Bucharest based architects StudioBASAR is an example in this regard. Their approach is to act as a *Search-and-Rescue* team that investigates the dynamics of contemporary Bucharest by looking at marginal topics such as banality or improvisation as active ingredients of the local urban culture. Their urban observation later serves as a foundation for developing negotiation tools that take the form of public space interventions, art installations or further urban researches.[34] What results is a professional approach that also becomes political practice as it

32 Ivan Kucina, "Conditions of Self Regulated Urbanity," in *Urban Report 2*, ed. Cosmin Caciuc (Bucharest: Zeppelin, 2011), 11.

33 "If upper case Everyday Urbanism still designates a design approach, lower case everyday urbanism has become an accepted term to positively describe ordinary urban places and activities" – in Crawford, "The Current State of Everyday Urbanism," 12-13.

34 studioBASAR profile description, http://www.studiobasar.ro/?page_id=3&lang=en, accessed July 15, 2015.

appropriates and resorts to tactics rather than strategies and adopts a more critical perspective on official visions on urbanity, on the planned city and the authorities who produce it.

Another local example is that of the new direction that the Bucharest branch of the Romanian Chamber of Architects has recently adopted. Largely due to the fresh vision of its new president, architect Şerban Sturdza, its new-found openness toward the larger public and especially towards NGOs and civic initiatives was best shown in the 2015 edition of the Bucharest Architecture Annual. Suggestively entitled "Building the Community", the six month long festival was composed of the expected workshops, exhibitions and conferences, but also of 18 separate events organized throughout the entire city either by or for local communities, civic initiatives, NGOs and architecture studios interested in public space and the everyday city.

The Limits of Informal Urban Practices

Still, returning to the central theme of conflicting urbanities, the concrete case of the contemporary partially self-regulated city, with its excesses, illegal buildings and privatization of public space, questions the ideals of the approaches described above. This is doubled by the existence of competing or conflicting everyday practices. Both cases are problematic, as a professional approach oriented toward the recognition and empowerment of the informal city can only be based on the desire to make places open to communities. Thus, context challenges contextualism.

This can be seen, for example, in the case of urban gardens which happen to sustain other practices that disturb the neighbors. Forms of privatization of a public or common space, these gardens are typically kept by enterprising individuals or families and are usually accepted and appreciated. An exchange takes place through which the theoretical property of unkept and unclaimed green spaces around the blocks of flats (whose real ownership is unclear) is transferred by the community to the individual on the condition that he take care of the place and contribute to the "beauty" of the neighborhood. Use and aesthetics therefore become exchange values which can be traded one for another. Sometimes, boundaries are transgressed and the deal is put into question when the use of the garden defies the community's peace and calm. Such is the case with urban gardens also used for open-air private barbeque parties with loud music, for instance, which become a source of air and sound pollution but also of envy, resentment and grudges between neighbors.

The second example is similar in nature but regards conflicts concerning self-building. Here too, a local consensus is usually reached whereupon everyone is entitled to make changes to their house or flat and even build anew (usually without involving an architect) with no official building permit, as long as it does not infringe on the neighbor's rights. When these boundaries are crossed, relations between neighbors deteriorate and usually appeal to a higher authority, starting with the land lord, in minor cases, and ending with public authorities. This is the case in the previously mentioned 19th century Bucureştii Noi district of Bucharest, whose inhabitants are presently torn into two factions: the newer residents who have started a violent and illegal high-rise high-density building process, in areas where only low-rise houses with gardens are authorized, and the deep-rooted local community who is fighting for the preservation of the character of the neighborhood which was founded on the garden city principles.

A local agreement can be reached for conflicts with less at stake. In Bucureştii Noi however, the law will decide, as residents living in the area for a longer period of time have started a desperate but relentless legal fight against all urbanistic illegalities in the neighborhood. This confirms that, while in their places of tactical action, the agents of the informal city, defined by self-governing partly isolated territories, continue to be part of the city as a whole (at least when it suits them). Still, when informal social hierarchies are clear enough, they can reinforce a local order of things and generate, temporarily or more lastingly, local replication processes of power – legislative, executive and judicial.

The main conflict, however, resides once again in the clash between self-regulated urbanity and the official unclear vision for the city: "in the absence of an urban strategy with clear rules

and laws valid for all, [informal urbanism] takes place following internal regulations, clearly pragmatic, without giving anything back to the city."[35] As such informal processes are based on this common approach to the other, the collective and the city itself, their results can easily become abusive, hasty and dangerous not only to the informal practitioners themselves (when building an improvised house without any engineering help, for example), but mostly to the city as a whole. As post-communist cities show, public space can easily be transformed into a multiplicity of small private islands, which guarantee no true relation to the other or to the whole. Furthermore "the sum of all these different interests and the ensuing activities does not necessarily serve the interests of society as a whole."[36]

This brings us to the possibility of repressing or controlling informal practices and to identifying who will decide what is right or wrong, who will enforce this decision and, most of all, how it can be accepted in contexts defined precisely by rules which are relaxed and laws which are selectively enforced. Yet, on behalf of whose values shall this be accomplished? Although the question immediately points to official laws and rules as the logical answer, everyday urbanism is precisely defined by bending or ignoring established rules. So, does multiplicity mean total relativism?

A change of mentality is certainly needed, but not only on the part of urban design professionals or local authorities. As they become more open to the "messy" everyday and to the informal, so too must the *bricoleur* become open to the other. This points to the direction of a city based on a larger variety of agencies which does not place citizens, public authorities and urban design professionals on opposing sides and which introduces investors and local NGOs in the heart of the discussion.

In Bucharest, NGOs have started to be present in schools and in the public sphere to promote a new relationship to the city. They cultivate involved citizenship, openness and respect towards the other by growing knowledge of the city and making it accessible through teaching (history and urban culture), workshops of community organization and role-play (focusing on the interaction between different urban actors and on developing an active engagement in the community and city life) and urban exploration (free urban guided tours, treasure hunts and the use of multimedia technologies to look at the city differently), just to name a few of their approaches. Other local associations are oriented toward creating and offering accessible tools and frameworks for participation, such as CeRe (the Resource Centre for Public Participation), which is mainly focused on community organizing, or ATU (the Association for Urban Transition), which is currently developing tools to make urban planning understandable for those outside the profession.

While the design professional can prove to be an intermediary between authorities and citizens by adopting Everyday Urbanism as a method of action and of being truly present on the field (not only an abstract invisible force), local organizations and other agencies resulting from the city of multiplicity, involved in fighting for the Right to the City, already play an ever increasing role as well. They also serve as means of communicating ideals and desires from one side to the other and as means of shrinking the gap between the visions that shape our cities.

For professionals keen on working with the informal, the challenge resides in becoming supporters or catalysts of the vibrant everyday city while still holding on to an ideal of urbanity, reformed but not consumed by experienced urbanity. The examination of informal practices should not imply a return to individuality or the transformation of the profession into a purely political practice, consumed by relativism.

While both producing crisis and fostering diversity and local autonomy, the contemporary city, its challenges and desires might just prove to gradually generate a resilient concept of urbanity, perhaps not with a clear agenda but based on a common ideal, "the attempt to constitute a contemporary public and political platform for a renewed commitment to the city."[37]

35 Cosmina Goagea, Introduction to *Urban Report 2*, ed. Cosmin Caciuc (Bucharest: Zeppelin, 2011), 3.

36 Kai Vöckler, "Turbo Urbanism in South Eastern Europe," 190.

37 Milica Topalovic, "Exhausted City," 31.

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