

Common Space: Cooperative Planning Methodology and Creative Process Program for Local Governments Studio Metropolitana Urban Research Institute, Budapest

Mission and objectives

Studio Metropolitana's *Common Space: A Cooperative Planning Methodology and Creative Process Program for Local Governments* is an innovative new project predicated on the idea that revitalizing neighborhood public squares not only strengthens neighborhood identity but contributes significantly to local connectiveness for residents, social interactions and through higher self-esteem of space and residents alike, to the identity and quality of life in the city as a whole.

Budapest's public spaces, particularly those in disadvantaged areas of the inner city, large housing estates and the city's outskirts, have diminished greatly in importance in recent decades, and as a consequence, their condition and functions have deteriorated rapidly. A shifting emphasis to market economy as well as diminishing municipal budgets have resulted in an emphasis to private green space over public. In addition to this, the 23 municipalities that make up Budapest as a whole, as well as the municipalities in the agglomeration, still tend towards rigid, top-down decisionmaking mechanisms and fragmented policy. Furthermore, historically, terms such as „public hearing” or „residential forum” have a pejorative connotation more associated with protest and discontent than with a constructive dialogue between residents and municipal authorities.

The project's main emphasis is on providing municipalities with the know-how and skills for making vital, exciting neighborhood spaces. The municipalities who submit grants applications are not applying for funding, but rather, asking to be part of this innovative new process of learning cooperative planning by doing it. Studio Metropolitana brings a multidisciplinary professional perspective to the project, as the staff is composed of representatives of several professions from economics to sociology to landscape architecture and architecture and the organization has considerable experience with various urban planning projects in the European Union and many international cooperations as well, and so there is enormous potential for knowledge and skills transfer to the participating municipalities. Common Space targets Budapest's municipalities with smaller, lesser-known sites rather than large or well-known tourist sites because, although these should be a vital part of the urban fabric meant for daily leisure, recreation, festivals, social interaction and other activities, many have been reduced to run-down interstitial spaces, just places to transit through and not a destination in themselves. Many lack any real social function, do not connect to the adjoining neighborhood, do not reflect the needs of the residents, have lost their historic meaning or local identity, and are plagued by vandalism and neglect. Some are considered unsafe. Common Space starts with an open tender process and continues with Studio Metropolitana forming partnerships with local governments in Budapest and its agglomeration to revitalize 13 neighborhood public spaces, 10 of them in the capital and 3 in the surrounding area. In addition to our organization's staff - which includes landscape architects, urban planners, sociologists, economists and architects - we have assembled an advisory panel of outside experts from business and the arts to assess the applications and also to provide continuous consultations throughout the process. While as urban practitioners Studio Metropolitana seeks to influence and improve the aesthetic and functional quality of urban design in Budapest, the parallel goal is to introduce a new decisionmaking mechanism to local governments and shape a new way of thinking through participatory methodology. While working closely with the municipalities for two years to produce a total of 13 revitalized neighborhood places is the immediate, concrete objective, Common Space's broader objectives include:

- Changing the way municipalities and residents view the design and use of public spaces
- Providing municipalities – and through them, the broader community – with an innovative and diverse range of tools and skills for community-based planning
- Making it standard practice for public space design to be an interactive, democratic process that results in high-quality landscape architecture and urban design that accurately reflects the needs of the surrounding community and considerably improves the quality of life for residents.

Project implementation, organizational aspects

The project begins with an applications phase, resulting in partnerships with 10 Budapest municipalities and 3 from the agglomeration, each of whom have nominated a specific site. The applications are juried by a panel of independent experts from the arts and business sectors, who will choose 10 Budapest sites and 3 from the agglomeration. All 23 of Budapest's district governments are qualified to apply, as well as settlements with a population of 10,000 or above from the agglomeration. Basic criteria is that the site have actual or potential economic activity, that the site is an essential element of the district's identity, and that there is established local stakeholder interest in revitalizing the site on the part of individual residents, a civic organization and/or a public institution such as a school.

This is followed by an implementation phase, during which we take the municipalities through the process of participatory design, involving the community every step of the way by organizing happenings and events on the sites, assembling a multidisciplinary design team, inviting residents to hearings and forums, setting up impromptu community design centers, and similar activities. Because sustainable financing is a key aspect of the training, we will put special emphasis on developing public fund drives, adopt-a-tree campaigns, public-private partnerships, etc. Bringing in local businesses to the mix is especially important since it not only can result in efficient financing mechanisms, but also can contribute to the public space's vitality if businesses such as art galleries, cafes, and others are involved in the development.

The publications phase, which includes the creation of a toolkit and anthology of best practices derived from the 13 sites, will serve as a comprehensive resource of ideas and techniques for other municipalities who want to go through the same process.

The project's final phase will be the creation of a toolkit and anthology of best practices derived from the 13 sites.

Current status: We have begun the training element to great success. At the end of January, we conducted a workshop for chief architects and mayors from local governments to stimulate interest in the project and signal the official launch of the applications process. In addition to presentations by our staff on the specifics of the project, we also hosted lectures and roundtable discussions featuring landscape architects, urban planners, municipal architects, civic activists and university professors on topics including:

- Innovative public-private partnerships
- Fostering stewardship and responsibility among residents for sustainable public spaces
- The public space as the city's 'living room,' and what characterizes a good public space
- Participatory planning
- Involving children in the planning and design process
- Neighborhood revitalization and inclusiveness
- The process for creating of a successful, lively semi-pedestrian commercial street



A local bookstore owner explains during the training how he got involved in revitalizing his street and organizing festivals

Key Aspects

Participatory methodology has never been employed on this scale before in Budapest or even Eastern Europe, so the project is pioneering in every sense. It is also unique and innovative because it is not direct financial or material assistance that we are offering, but rather, an intensive training program that provides skills that have been proven effective elsewhere but that no other organization in Hungary has ever offered.

Expected results

1. 13 revitalized neighbourhood public spaces that are examples of high-quality landscape architecture that engage and invite residents. This then leads to stronger social ties because people have an attractive place for social interaction.
2. A deep sense of stewardship and responsibility on the part of the residents who use these spaces, which in the long term means increased use, increased social activity, decreased vandalism and visibly vital, more interactive neighborhoods.
3. New methodology, skills and attitude on the part of the municipalities in redesigning public spaces, which then gets passed on to the residents through cooperative planning

Financing

The training that Studio Metropolitana provides the municipalities addresses many aspects of financing public space renewal, however, this is a training partnership and not a grantmaking project. Since our emphasis is on helping municipalities seek sources rather than providing the funds ourselves, this enables us to keep project costs low. An essential element of the training involves the municipalities learning innovative new ways of sourcing funds for public space revitalization, including public-private partnerships, innovative public campaigns such as adopt-a-brick or adopt-a-tree, or other methods. The latter also connects with the idea of getting the community to actively invest in the project, which then fosters stewardship and responsibility. Historically the municipalities have always funded such projects, as part of the same top-down mechanism that characterized planning. However, they are no longer financially capable of handling this all themselves, and the condition of many of these squares certainly demonstrates that they are not capable of managing the maintenance without implementing innovative new measures such as public-private partnerships and community involvement. It is also for this reason that we have created an institutional network with such important companies as the Budapest Garden Maintenance Company and others who can contribute significant professional resources to the participants. Studio Metropolitana, in addition to the significant contribution of staff time, has set aside funds in its own budget for the program's 2008 phase of between 20 and 30 million Hungarian forints (76,000-115,000 Euros). This would primarily be to finance training events. We anticipate allocating a higher amount for the 2009 phases.