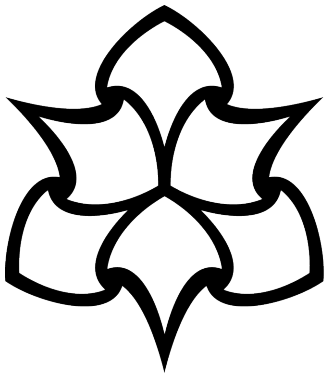

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The Value of Autonomous

Rog

The Value of Autonomous Rog

Manchester, Ljubljana; June 2021

Manchester Metropolitan University
IPM Institute of Place Management
The British Academy
IPOP Inštitut za politike prostora Institute for Spatial Policies

About the project

The report is part of a project titled “Making and managing Ljubljana’s urban squats: inclusive and participatory practices”, which is funded by the BA/Leverhulme Small Research Grants (SRG1819\1904000) and supported by the UK Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

The project investigates the way Ljubljana’s squatted areas are used and managed by both official institutions and their communities of users, aiming to understand the power dynamics that emerge in their everyday running and plans for their future. It does this through the conceptual lens of place making and place management, which, as emerging areas of academic interest, seek to bridge the gap between various and often opposing voices with respect to the use of place.

We examine how regulatory uncertainty can be replaced by inclusive and participatory forms of management that do not jeopardise the place’s autonomous characteristics. We wish to highlight the place’s status within the city and consider communicative attempts between the institutional channels and the squatters’ communities with respect to the place’s use and management.

Short Bios

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Supporting Institutions

www.placemanagement.org
The Institute of Place Management is the professional body for people involved in making, maintaining and marketing places. As part of Manchester Metropolitan University, IPM is dedicated to supporting people who serve places, providing them with unbiased research, continuing professional development, qualifications, conferences, events and networking opportunities.

www.ipop.si
IPoP – Institute for Spatial Policies is an advocacy, consulting and research organisation in the field of sustainable spatial and urban development. Their mission is to support communities towards sustainable urban development. IPoP is registered as an NGO acting in the public interest in the field of environment as well as spatial planning.

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Executive Summary

Often considered as an alternative to established norms within the urban context, autonomous places – and squats in particular - have long been hubs of opposition against the mainstream economic, political, cultural and social manifestations of urban life.

For almost fifteen years, Autonomous Rog was an important alternative hub in the city of Ljubljana, an urban experiment with a wealth of grassroots activity ranging from activism to artistic expression, to music and parties, as well as athletic events. Throughout its existence, debates regarding the value and significance of Autonomous Rog for the city of Ljubljana emerged, attracting widespread public and media attention. However, such discussions mostly emphasise what was wrong with Autonomous Rog, or how defective and troublesome its occupation of the former bicycle factory was.

Thus, the purpose of this report is to present an objective evaluation and insight of the content, activities, and the communities involved in the occupation of Autonomous Rog from its inception in 2006 until its demise earlier in 2021 The aim of this report is to illustrate that Autonomous Rog produced alternative types of value within the context of the creative city narrative that: 1) were not on offer by either institutional or private actors; 2) contributed to the recognition of the city of Ljubljana as an important creative and cultural hub; and 3) benefited the citizens of Ljubljana and marginalised groups unable to find comparable activities elsewhere.

The report focuses on research conducted between 2016 and 2021 and documents the latest stages of Rog's occupation, the governance and management structures of Autonomous Rog, the internal/ external conflicts and the legal battle of Rog users with the municipality of Ljubljana, and the development of social and spatial value from the communities of Rog within the context of the creative and cultural boom

of Ljubljana. Through our analysis, we demonstrate that Autonomous Rog was one of the last providers of accessible space within the centre that was both open and affordable, and supported the cultural and creative revitalisation of Ljubljana. We posit that Autonomous Rog was a pioneer of social, cultural, leisure, and creative activities that did not fit into the entrepreneurial, for-profit narrative that resulted from the gentrification of the city. The failure to recognise the non-monetary and intangible value produced in Autonomous Rog has resulted in the current dismissal of the knowledge and social value produced there by the City of Ljubljana. The report concludes with suggestions for immediate actions regarding the future of Rog and for the continuation of progressive and inclusive programmes with a bottom-up ethos, as well as systemic actions for the preservation of remaining autonomous places in Ljubljana and elsewhere.

"Red Gun " by Blu
Photo: Goran Jakovac
2021

Prologue by Lev Kreft: From Kočevski Rog to self-management bicycle factory Rog, from self-management factory Rog to Autonomous Rog

Autonomous Rog was annihilated in a public event, which media enjoyed presenting, some of them supporting the Autonomous Rog to persist and other, more numerous this time, to show what kind of unacceptable activities of uninvited members in a central urban space were active there. The plot and message of representation oscillated between "another case of neoliberal violence" and "another case of criminal activities under cultural and human rights cover and excuse". The first image from the spot told the whole story: the police and demolition group were inside the Rog premises, and Autonomous Rog activists and their supporters were on the street outside. The eviction and taking over by municipality of Ljubljana, (ab)using special state of exception for epidemic reasons, was a success. But authorities felt that pure success was not enough to get public support for their luxurious project of a renovated riverbank, from Three Bridges to Centre Rog and from Centre Rog to the Sugar Factory (Cukrarna) as the outburst of creativity, a jewel of public-private partnership, and an attraction for natives and tourists alike. This uneasiness reflected the problem of political liberality: one cannot get support from radical and extreme right without losing the support of socially conscious centre-left supporters as a consequence, and one cannot destroy marginal activities in the city without sending negative signals to the whole community of youngsters, students and precarious cultural workers at least. So, something should be added to the successful occupation of Rog. That was done with the help of an image showing a spacious room at Rog, where, in the middle of general decay and waste, substantial number of syringes (one cannot say used or unused) lay scattered on the ground. This image, many times repeated whenever media touched the topic of eviction, was presented as a final and undeniable argument against Autonomous Rog, as it touched the primary fear of city middle class/petit

bourgeoisie when confronted with social presence of drugs in their noble vicinity.

This image and its context, however, tell something more general about the misunderstanding between this urban autonomous zone with its alternative approach to social and cultural life in the city, when compared with the increasingly gentrified surroundings. Dealing with this image, namely, one should put in common context two strategies of social dealing with addiction. They both touch its social consequences, not personal, but aim at different social goals. One, formally most supported by authorities and institutions, is based on methadone treatment. Its achievement is that addiction becomes less unhealthy for addicted persons, but they remain addicted and institutionally marginalized, while it reduces negative effects on "normal population", which expects from social intervention that they do not see and do not have to deal with addicted persons and their intimidating, perhaps even criminal behaviour. It keeps "these people" away. They may, for instance, get their treatment only by using special entrances into the health centre, and are discouraged to appear in a group at places where they can irritate other people. Methadone treatment takes care of marginalization of addiction from the viewpoint of middle class, which does not want to see "people with deficiency" around, but needs to have a feeling that something proper and "good for them" has been done for them. On the other side is the effort to make addiction a less dangerous way of life for those who are addicted, giving at their disposal a place where they can meet each other, get support with safer syringes, sanitary advice, and social support, which includes their empowerment as a marginal group, and conscious deviation from patronizing, which accepts to help only those who accept patronising as a proper social attitude. It is not an approach which would be concentrated on getting rid of addiction, but it is focused on supporting a marginalized social group. From an average middle class point of view, it may seem that these two approaches are in opposition and exclude each other, while they both do not target the main moral goal of political campaign against use of drugs to eradicate addiction with "zero tolerance" and "war on drugs". Zero tolerance is, of course, extreme intolerance, and war on drugs is not just a metaphor because its aim is to turn addiction into the highest crime and treat it with no mercy. Results of such strategy are visible: complete failure, which, because of expressed rigor and sharpness, cooperates with other campaigns of similar kind to build a society of total institutional control but cannot get marginalized groups to cooperate. Faced with such extreme right doctrine, social movements and social profession approach, as well as municipal and medicinal profession approach should be able to cooperate between themselves, consequently avoiding the third doctrine, which wants to put an end to them both.

To go back to a more generalized issue on the other side of any metaphor, why didn't it happen in the case of

Autonomous Rog and municipality's Centre Rog conflict? The report which is given to your attention and examination, is thoroughly done, and in its final part enumerates reasons for such extreme results together with recommendations for behaviour in possible future similar events. However, everybody knows that Autonomous Rog narrative would be different had it happened two or three kilometres away from the city centre where municipal and private interest in thousands of available square meters is much lower, if any. To extend drug users comparison, in such situation the whole Autonomous Rog was treated not with middle class conditional tolerance, based on invisibility. The attitude of municipality was of the extreme right kind, with zero tolerance and war on Autonomous Rog (and one must understand this literally after having seen police and security echelons and violence used, and undisguised hatred expressed during conflict). On the other side was not the Creative Rog project, which would allow for a kind of agreement and inclusion of Autonomous Rog into perspective. It was capital, pure and simple, in its horrific private-public image, sweeping the streets and destroying and destructing places of anything common one after another.

Rog factory was given a name with a history. During the Second World War, the leadership of Slovene anti-fascist liberation movement was in the primeval forest of Kočevski Rog, using now well preserved but less visited barracks. They were not just pushing representative symbols of their armed powers on the map of Slovenia as regular army generals do. They were discussing what kind of state and what kind of society they preferred to establish after war would be over, and what kind of culture to develop instead of elite national art and bourgeois beauty. Rog itself, and the whole partisan movement, were also an experiment looking for future common cultural, social, economic, and political values, for establishment of rebuilt and new institutions, and was inventing them during the fight already. Rog bicycle factory was a self-management factory, which progressed well enough in private ownership, but lost its perspectives for absence of engineers, who could develop new technologies and programs, and without necessary funds to support their effort. Workers were fighting to keep their jobs and their factory, but their times were gone, and private capital took over social ownership. As in many other cases, such transition meant that city plot was worth more than a troubled and insecure investment into bicycle production. Autonomous Rog, despite all its weaknesses and failures, was an heir of the self-managed bicycle factory and of the Kočevski Rog partisan cultural experiment. It is a pity that it was evicted, and it is a pity that Ljubljana municipality neither recognizes nor understands this kind of experiment in spite of its insistence that Ljubljana is a town – hero for its fight against occupation during the Second World War. An armed attack on the Autonomous Rog was not a heroic act.

Demolition and protest
Photo: Goran Jakovac
2021

Introduction

"Why on earth would one go and destroy the heart of urban solidarity? A space where solidarity is genuinely practiced by way of work, learning, creativity, cooking and caring for each other?"

Nevenka Koprivšek, 30.01.2021[1]

Autonomous Rog was an established squat in the centre of Ljubljana, Slovenia demolished in January 2021. It occupied the vast, empty premises of the former Rog bicycle factory and provided individual groups and communities with space and opportunity to experiment and produce varied artistic, cultural, and social content. Throughout its fifteen years of existence it had been the subject of conflict between its users and the city of Ljubljana, attracting public and media attention. Even though the initial era of Rog's occupation has been documented quite extensively (spanning from the initial occupation in 2006 until the first eviction attempts in 2016), the latest stages of its journey have not been as well-researched, not least due to the unexpected eviction of January 2021, the ongoing global pandemic, and the legal disputes between some users of Rog and the City of Ljubljana that took place between 2016 and 2019.

Addressing the above, the present report stems out of research conducted between 2016 and 2021 and builds upon relevant literature on urban squats in general and Autonomous Rog in particular, press/media articles and online content, digital archives, and interviews with various actors including former users of Rog, experts, and representatives of the City of Ljubljana.

It aims to supply the general public and the city administration of Ljubljana with data on the use of space at Autonomous Rog, with insight on the content produced by individuals, groups and communities of users, as well as with an evaluation of the values represented at Autonomous Rog for the ultimate benefit of the city and the wider public. An additional aim of this report is to provide current or future squats with insight on what helped Autonomous Rog succeed and survive over fifteen years and to highlight risks associated with the management and organisation of autonomous places.

More broadly, the report mirrors the inclusive city narrative[2,3], which recognises the multiple social, spatial, and economic factors that form the web of the modern city landscape and set the conditions for a thriving and resilient urban environment. As these factors can either contribute to the marginalisation of people and communities within a city or alternatively, enable widened urban participation, we illustrate how squats have the potential to act as a catalyst for enhanced citizen representation and value production, building on the example of Autonomous Rog. In consequence, city administrations need not fear or ostracise such bottom-up, grassroots participation attempts, but find ways to recognise and appreciate their value instead.

The report starts with an overview of the history of Autonomous Rog from the initial occupation of the factory premises until the events of January 2021. It then proceeds by examining the broader urban framework where Autonomous Rog operated and asks what the role of Autonomous Rog had been in a city aiming to position itself within the *creative city*[4–9] narrative. In this vein, the report discusses other creative and co-working projects within the city, highlighting the gap between available and affordable production space and the policies and priorities advocated by the city administration. The aim is to illustrate that Autonomous Rog produced value for the ultimate benefit of the city of Ljubljana and the general public, and that the types of value produced at Rog were not on offer by other institutional or private actors. Building on that, the next part of the report is dedicated to the examination of the factors that contributed to the survival or led to the ultimate collapse of Autonomous Rog. The report concludes by offering relevant recommendations for the preservation of autonomous culture within the urban landscape.

This report can act as a roadmap for dealing with urban squats in Slovenia and beyond. We aim to demonstrate how the value of squats and their contribution to the creative city fabric is currently underestimated, hoping that the lessons learnt from the history of Autonomous Rog will assist city administrations now and in the future.

Main building rooftop
Photo: Goran Jakovac
2016

Rog Factory and Autonomous Rog

Brief overview

The first industrial building on the land where the Rog Factory stands was built in the second half of the 19th century. The factory was rebuilt and extended in the 20th century, initially focusing to the production of leather goods. Following the Second World War, the Rog Factory started producing bicycles that became famous across Slovenia and continued to do so until the beginning of the 1990s.

However, the building had fallen into material decay by the time it was bought by the City of Ljubljana in 2002. It was taken over by squatters in 2006[10].

The first two groups of squatters who occupied the premises shared similar principles and priorities and co-operated successfully. The first group was a transnational collective called TEMP, consisting mainly of Architecture students. The second was a group of activists promoting civil rights, whose aim was the constitution of a *"new common"* place. To that end, they established a Social Centre inside Rog's premises, dedicated to the assistance of migrant workers and immigrants, following on the tradition of the Italian *Centro Sociale*[11].

From that point, content at Rog developed gradually, as an ever-increasing number of communities started occupying the various parts of the former factory. Supply of space at Rog was in abundance, as the premises expanded over six thousand square meters of more or less decayed indoor space[12]. This vast space attracted a variety of communities, individuals and activities dedicated to art, physical activity, communal life and civil advocacy.

ROG graffiti
Photo: Goran Jakovac
2016

The Rog Assembly[I] was established as the squat's representative instrument, operating on direct democratic principles. As former users of Rog explained during our interviews, groups and content at Rog were never static; over the years communities and groups of users would alternate, move elsewhere, dissolve or simply cease to exist, making it impossible to pin down the exact number of users, groups and visitors at a single time. Moreover, participation at the Assembly was voluntary and some groups were more present than others, contributing to the uneven distribution of space and power among the more and less active users of Rog. Finally, as each individual space at Rog could become completely independent or cut off from the whole, and change of occupiers was possible by a simple transfer of keys between the former user of a dedicated space and the next, not even the most active users of Rog were ever able to ascertain which group, collective or individual was located where at all times. Arguably, all of the above factors contributed to a fast-declining numbers of users present during the latest years of Rog (post-2016), even though there had been attempts to revive the factory and experiment with new ideas and projects.

At its peak, Autonomous Rog hosted a great number of diverse communities, representing heterogeneous identities, sets of values and attitudes towards management issues, in terms of how the space was organised and used. The management of space at group/ community level as well as the overall management of such an impressively big squat (both in terms of number of users and in terms of available area) became a contentious issue. Hence, the Rog Assembly never reached its full potential as a representative and executive instrument, even though certain individual users and communities continued to take part regularly throughout Rog's history as an autonomous zone[13].

Throughout the history of Autonomous Rog some individual users and groups were dedicated to a variety of pro bono activities and charity work, whilst others to the promotion of art and events, sports and recreation or other social activity. Profits made from events and clubs would get re-invested in the communal or group activities and the maintenance of each individual space, most of the time. After 2016, any profits and remaining funds were dedicated to the legal expenses of the individual Rog users, who were sued by the City of Ljubljana in the legal battle that followed the unilateral demolition attempts (*see below*).

I The Rog 'skupščina' (assembly in Slovenian) archive from 2006-2009 is available at: https://tovarna.org/node/265. More information about the ROG assemblies can also be found at http://www.njetwork.org/, a website that ceased operations in 2013-2014.

Hop!Hop! street theatre festival Ana Xnica
Photo: Goran Jakovac
2016

Attempted eviction in 2016

The City of Ljubljana had been planning for the development of a new centre at the Rog Factory premises ever since it became its lawful owner in 2002. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the squat's history, city authorities were more tolerant of the communities at Rog and did not openly oppose them. As the city's plans for redevelopment were stalled by the global financial crisis, the users of Rog bought more time for themselves and their respective projects. In the meantime, the on towards them started becoming less friendly as a result of changes in plans and priorities from the part of the City of Ljubljana authorities. An autonomous centre at Rog constituted an obvious obstacle for the new institutional Centre Rog, which led the city to evict the users in June 2016 without prior warning or notification.

The eviction process started in the early hours of the 6th of June 2016 by a private security company, and incidents of violence were reported by the media. This external common threat stimulated the communities and users of Rog to get together in order to demonstrate and halt the demolition attempts. Barricades were formed, people were mobilised, and the users of Rog managed to send a strong message of solidarity across Ljubljana and Slovenia, calling for support and assistance (the *Defend Rog* logo was visible across Ljubljana in graffiti form). The public at large started to doubt the city's top-down construction/ renovation plans, by demonstrating their support for Autonomous Rog on social media as well as in the streets. Arguably, this is a direct result of good public relations management and mass mobilisation from the part of the squatters[14]. Ultimately, the City of Ljubljana had to step back, although that would not last for long.

From 2016 onwards, activity continued at Rog. Some groups prospered while others did not, not least due to the legal battle between the City of Ljubljana and certain individual users that followed the demolition attempts. Additionally, despite their apparent victory against the city on the streets, morale among the users dropped as legal expenses grew (most of the profits made from events and activities would be used to cover legal costs), and the differences between the groups' values and priorities led to (often violent) clashes between them.

Above all, the general feeling was that producers at Rog grew tired and progressively burned out. The fuel behind the original success of Autonomous Rog had been the voluntary labour and personal dedication from the part of individuals and communities that established, maintained, and managed the various spaces at Rog. This fuel was now burning low. Thus, faced with an uncertain future, internal conflicts, decreasing numbers, and poor conditions of production (as the buildings remained without running water or electricity), the autonomous project at Rog appeared to be standing on its last legs.

Pink Buldozer
Photo: Goran Jakovac
2016

Successful eviction in 2021

In the winter of 2021, the City of Ljubljana decided to repeat the eviction and demolition attempts of 2016, catching the users of Rog and the public at large completely off guard due to the global pandemic and the ensuing restrictions in gatherings and public life. In the early hours of the 19th of January 2021, a private security company later joined by the police (including the riot police special forces), entered Rog and evicted those present at that time. The entrance was closed immediately, and construction workers started demolishing the buildings within hours. The city would later claim that the buildings were empty of people, according to a tip received from Rog's immediate neighbours.

The eviction quickly escalated to riots and clashes between the users and the police. The police made use of tear gas to stop Rog users from entering the premises and were subsequently accused of using excessive violence. Nevertheless, the entrance remained blocked to all individual users and communities, who were not allowed to retrieve their belongings. The users were later offered the opportunity to collect their possessions from different locations, however they claimed that some more valuable items either went missing or were destroyed during the demolition. Further, it was reported that some users had been given the opportunity to access their allocated space at Rog for a limited time in order to collect their belongings by way of informal notice, before the demolition had even begun.

This violent eviction was criticized widely. Several faculties of the University of Ljubljana expressed their concerns, including the Faculty of Architecture, the Academy of Fine Arts and Design, the Faculty of Arts *inter alia*, as did a number of cultural institutions including the Kino Šiška Centre for Urban Culture, the SCCA Centre for Contemporary Arts - Ljubljana, and the Poligon Creative Centre, among others.

It is important to note that all the institutions that expressed their concerns and opposed the violent treatment of Autonomous Rog's users and the demolition of the buildings, represent the immediate, official beneficiaries of the new Rog Centre, which is purported to boost the creative economy of Ljubljana. It appears that as construction on the new Rog Centre begins, the creative communities of Ljubljana and their respective stakeholders remain critical and sceptical of the city's plans and actions.

Ljubljana: a creative city

New Rog Centre

At the creative crossroads of artists, creators, performers of community programmes and all individuals or groups interested in creative activity, the focus will be on community land use, new technologies and new forms of governance[11].

The new Rog Centre is being promoted as the new creative centre of Ljubljana[10]. The project, which is estimated to cost about €27 million, will host a public library, visual arts, architecture, design, and other creative sectors in a multidisciplinary capacity, linking the culture of creativity with industry, science and education in 11.000 m^2. Half of this space (approximately 5.500 m^2) will be allocated to cultural, educational and research institutions, aiming to foster innovative synergies between various stakeholders from inception to production and beyond[10]. As such, Rog Centre will act as a hub for creativity within the confines of the "creative industries/ creative economy" narrative, as first encountered in the late 1990s, and as implemented by many post-industrial, developed economies since[II].

The creative industries/creative cities debate has been widely discussed since Richard Florida's[6] and Charles Landry's[15] works on the creative class: creativity in terms of industry, class or economy contributes to financial prosperity and delivers employment to post-industrial economies. In this post-industrial environment, the creative industries tend to cluster in particular city districts, consequently called creative milieux[15]. Such actions are indicative of a standardized vision of creativity, aiming to promote market-oriented policies and interventions in the urban space that fit the Creative City narrative[4,16,17]. Indeed, the area surrounding Rog bears the characteristics of a *creative milieu*, leading the city of Ljubljana to envision the development of a centre dedicated to art, culture and creativity on Rog's premises, since 2007[18].

The European project Second Chance[19] (Central Europe, ERDF) enabled the city to ground the development on international practice

II See for instance Tony Blair's Labour Government's, Creative Industries Mapping Documents, April 9 2001, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/creative-industries-mapping-documents-2001

Inside main building
Photo: Goran Jakovac
2016

and to involve various stakeholders and international experts in an initial consultation. According to city representatives, the City of Ljubljana commissioned groups of almost 300 stakeholders in the consulting process, which took place in 2012. Since the design and content of the new Rog Centre is to be based on scientific research and debate, it is important to highlight some of the concerns that were expressed about its operation: Professor Klaus Kunzmann of the Bartlett School of Planning (UCL) argued that creative centres cannot be developed in a top-down manner[20], whereas creative consultant Lia Ghilardi[21] suggested downsizing the aspirations behind the new Rog Centre, allowing it to develop in a more organic and bottom-up manner instead. At that time the new Rog Centre was being planned as a public-private partnership, including a private investment of apartment buildings and a hotel.

The Creative economy in Ljubljana

According to research published in 2010, Ljubljana is the most creative city in Slovenia[22], despite the lack of relevant infrastructure. Two initiatives emerged:

→ **Slovenia Coworking days** were organised in Kino Šiška, a cultural venue owned by the City of Ljubljana. At the same time another creative hub called "Kreativna cona Šiška" (Creative zone Šiška) was established. This bottom-up initiative was mainly used as a production space by younger designers.

→ **Poligon**, another bottom-up initiative, operated out of the former Tobacco Factory (Tobačna), west of Ljubljana's town centre. The initial plan for Tobačna was the redevelopment of "a city within a city", comprising luxury housing units, venues, public services, retail, and office space. The plan came to standstill when the prospective developer declared bankruptcy, following the global financial crisis. Younger, creative communities saw an opportunity to rent affordable space at the Tobacco Factory and established a supportive place "from creatives for creatives"[23]. The City of Ljubljana provided minimal, and mainly indirect, support for the Poligon project, failing to officially recognise its value. At its peak, Poligon was the largest creative centre in Slovenia, internationally acknowledged as one of the best coworking places in Europe[24]. It was forced to shut down at the end of 2019, when the former Tobacco Factory was bought by a new developer who immediately increased rent prices, making the space unaffordable for its users[III]. Poligon, alongside a great number of other coworking places, artists' studios, and cultural production spaces within the Tobacco Factory, were either forced to shut down or seek alternative accommodation.

III There was some support for Poligon from the institutions established or owned by the City of Ljubljana, but were minimal when compared to all means invested in Poligon.

From Rog Centre to Poligon: a policy paradox

The theoretical framework underpinning the decisions made about the new Rog Centre is derived from research conducted before the success of the Poligon; research that reiterated the importance of bottom-up approaches behind any prospective creative centre. Such approaches allow the needs of the creative industries to be voiced and met without intermediaries. At a time when the City of Ljubljana was openly advocating the desire to establish a new centre for the promotion of the creative economy, concerns about the creative producers' needs and the dangers faced by the increased rents at Poligon fell on deaf ears. Instead, the city was ready to engage in open battle against Autonomous Rog and push through with the plans for the new Rog Centre, which will be developed and managed top-down, contrary to the expressed opinions solicited in 2012.

It seems unfortunate that the opportunity to support and invest in the creative industries at Poligon was lost, considering that the development of the creative economy constitutes a priority for the City of Ljubljana.

Not only did the City of Ljubljana miss out on getting behind the Poligon project resulting in loss of creative output, it also missed out on the opportunity to acknowledge and appreciate that cultural, social and spatial value was being produced at Autonomous Rog at the same time.

The present report documents some of the value produced at Autonomous Rog, aiming to demonstrate another lost opportunity for the city and to raise awareness about creative efforts that might remain underestimated as they cannot be directly monetised or generate profit in a market economy It is, however, this type of value that promotes participation and experimentation in an urban setting, adds to the social fabric of the city, and eventually leads to the establishment of the next successful creative idea.

Indeed, Autonomous Rog was full of such examples. To produce the comprehensive report of activities and groups at Rog a wealth of material has been consulted including document analysis and doctrinal research, ethnographic and autoethnographic observation up to November 2019, as well as in-depth interviews with former users and city representatives that took place in 2016 and 2019.

Signs
Photo: Goran Jakovac
2016

The value of Autonomous Rog

"When reading the latest brochure on the vision of the Rog Center, well, there may be nothing wrong with it, but I do find it hard to get excited about it. Centres of this kind are in large supply all over Europe. Rog, however, was really special and had a vast and much more interesting, possibly, incredible potential – as a lab, as a testing ground of some kind of cultural and existential universal basic income".

Nevenka Koprivšek, 30.01.2021[1]

Autonomous Rog represented multiplicity and diversity in activity and content production. Thanks to its size, the former factory area was able to accommodate more than one type of squatting, unlike what is traditionally seen in other European cities. Urban squatting in Europe can fall under such broad categories as being 'deprivation based', as an alternative housing strategy, and as entrepreneurial, conservational or political[25]. Many of these squatting classifications are evident at Rog throughout its history - often, at the same time.

Apart from the main known spaces listed below, Rog had also been used as a live-in squat by refugees and the most deprived members of society and as an experimental housing strategy (as some of the interviewees explained with respect to certain sealed-off areas in the main building). Nevertheless, the main aims represented at Rog were those of political activism, civil and cultural experimentation as well as the aim of preserving and filling a derelict building with life *per se*.

Skatepark
Photo: Jenny Kanellopoulou
2019

The main known spaces

Autonomous Rog was occupied by various groups who were not always related to each other, representing a vast and ever-changing number of individuals. The spaces below represent some, but not all of the activity that took place at Rog and demonstrate diversity and variety in ideas. The spaces fall broadly under three categories:

→ **Art and Culture,**
→ **Political, Social and Civil Life,**
→ **Physical Activity and Well-being.**

These categories correspond to the values produced at Rog by the respective users and collectives:

Art and Culture:
Atelje X (international artists' atelier), RGB Embassy, 1107 Graffiti,

Pri Anđi (cabaret and drag show), Delavnica Ghetto Life (atelier, exhibition, workshop art), Zelenica (gallery), Cirkulacija (contemporary art space), Boris Plac (art exhibition place and bar), Gallerija Kljub Vsemu, various other independent ateliers, Concert Hall.

Political, Social and Civil Life:
Ambasada Rog (refugee aid, advocacy and meeting place), Social Center (centre for human rights and political organisation and discussion), Modri Kot (cultural and political centre with space for entertainment), Second home (centre for humanitarian aid and migrant issues), Živko Skvotec (political theorising and discussion space), Kooperativa Rog, Afkors (feminist collective), Društvo AREAL (supervised injection and syringe exchange space), Bicycle repair shop.

Physical Activity and Well-being:
Skatepark (the largest DIY indoors skatepark in Europe, an elaborate woodwork construction, frequented by people of all ages from across Slovenia), GOR Breakdance, Sista'z Plac Breakdance collective, Cirkusarna (aerial and circus skills training and performances), Holistic Yoga and Massage, Telovadnica (boxing and physical activity), Indoors Football, Zen garden.

Communities at Rog

Internal Communities

As a grassroots initiative, Autonomous Rog was never organised in terms of community representation or general activity oversight in terms of allocation of space or hierarchy. No one was ultimately in charge or responsible for life at Rog. The various groups of users would often even find themselves at odds with each other or would choose to abstain from general meetings and other initiatives.

This does not mean however that Rog as an autonomous, heterogeneous place, had always lacked vision and purpose. The first groups and collectives involved in the initial occupation and success of the place consisted mainly of artists, activists, students and academics, as stated above. The initial users wished to experiment with new ideas for urban life and self-expression and implement a new type of social programme different to the one offered by the institutions of Slovenia and Ljubljana and different to the one taking place at Metelkova.

The success of Autonomous Rog attracted the interest of marginalised groups and communities who found the vast empty space of the factory to be particularly welcoming. Such groups included immigrants, asylum seekers, the Erased[IV], and other ethnic or gender minorities. As stated above, these people would either set up their own initiatives or join in one or more of the already established groups.

IV The 'erased' are former citizens of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia who are removed from the Slovenian registry of permanent residents in 1992 after the Slovenian Independence. Their erasure meant that they became *de facto* foreigners or stateless persons illegally residing in Slovenia, with lack of access to full reparation for the violation of their human rights to which the "erasure" led (from Amnesty.org https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/84000/eur680022005en.pdf).

The first years of Rog (2006-2007) demonstrated a particular vision for what the place would be and how it would operate, with regular weekly assemblies, common approaches, regular engagement with the city and negotiations. For instance, the initial groups at Rog petitioned the city for the supply of water and electricity, seeking to establish a workable arrangement with the local government. Many proposals were raised concerning the daily running and the maintenance of the place, the allocation and use of spaces, the relationship with the neighbours and the broader public.

Progressively after 2008, the regular weekly assemblies became less frequent. A more anarchic type of self-management emerged, with meetings taking place in order to address pressing or exceptional matters. This era of Autonomous Rog mirrors the amalgamation and temporality of the ongoing activity as well as the constant change in the number of users, not all of whom shared the same ideals and priorities.

Communication between groups of users would take place rather haphazardly: through a dedicated mailing list accounting for some, but not all of the active users, through websites (e.g. https://tovarna.org/ & https://atrog.org), social media, and predominantly through word of mouth and personal phones.

Throughout the existence of Rog, various conflicts endured due to the lack of collective agreement regarding present and future activities. As groups and users dedicated to arts, culture and sport began focusing on their own specific activities and becoming dissociated with communal life and collective decision-making, conflicts between the more active political and social groups came to the forefront. Moreover, the older and more successful groups of artists had already migrated from Rog and into the mainstream Slovenian cultural life.

As the more active collectives started monopolising communal practices (such as weekly assemblies, events, funds), the organisational climate at Rog started to become more unstable. The peak of the conflict coincided with the decision of the city to bulldoze the premises in the summer of 2016, resulting in a series of lawsuits against individual users. These events took a toll to many users, who felt discouraged to continue in a conflict-ridden environment.

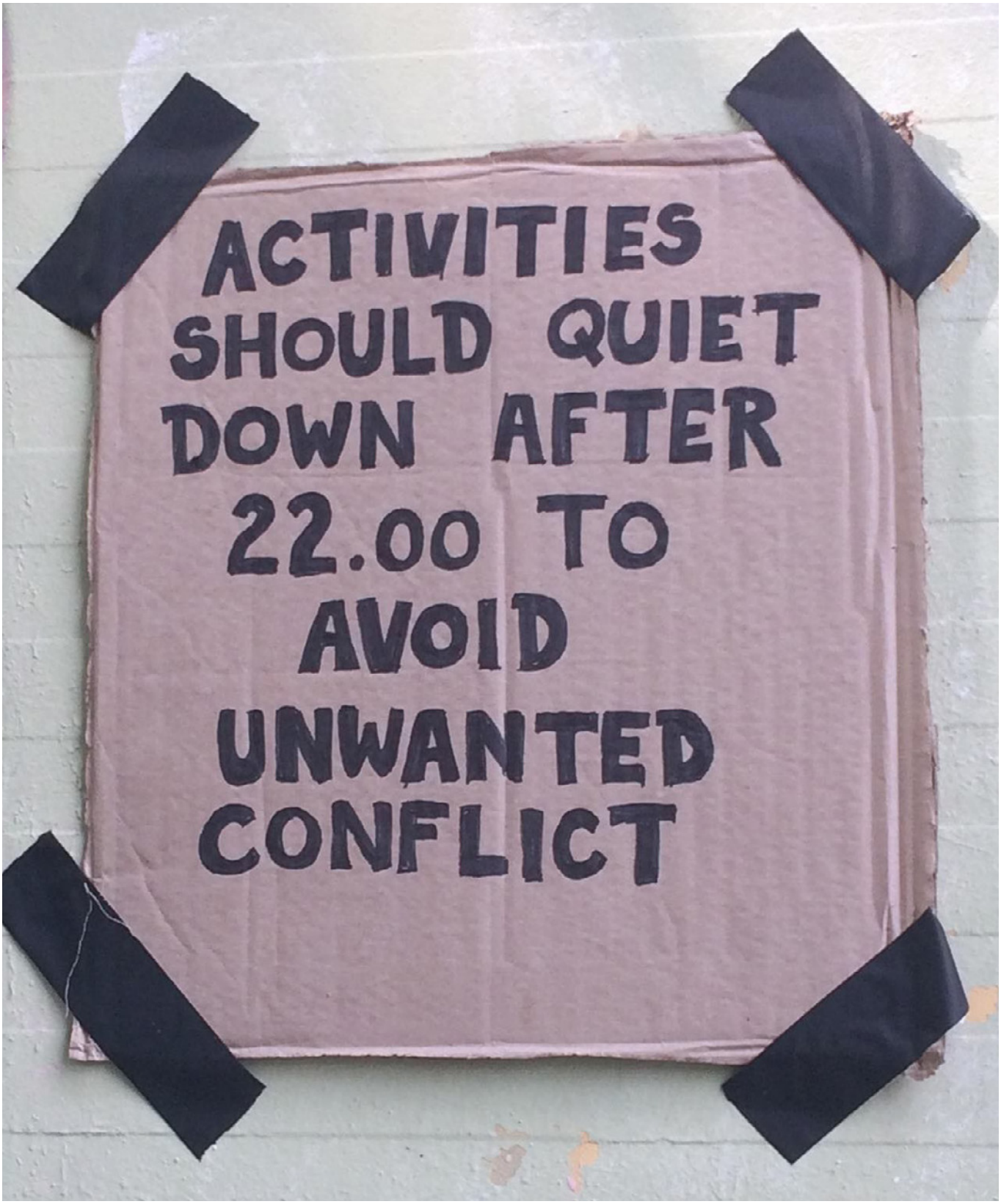
Main building rooftop
Photo: Goran Jakovac
2016

A clear schism ensued among the active users of Rog, bringing groups against each other, ultimately driving some of the remaining older users away. The rapid reaction to the demolition attempts brought forth two different strands of political and social thinking in terms of communicating with the city and designing a path for Autonomous Rog: an anarchic way of organising that seeks to directly clash with the city on the one hand, and on the other, a more moderate and inclusive approach to conflict that seeks to negotiate.

The last years of Rog were marked by a clear attempt to restructure and reconvene - despite the declining number of remaining users - and a climate of uncertainty with regard to the city's plans for demolition and renovation. It would appear that both the users and the general public had forgotten the amount of value produced at Rog through the years; Rog had become dark, unknown, and distant, as several of former Rog users and citizens of Ljubljana acknowledged during our interviews. Nevertheless, the Skatepark, Ambasada Rog, Social Centre, Cirkusarna and several other smaller places still remained active hosting activities, assisting and accommodating refugees and welcoming the citizens of Ljubljana.

External Communities: For whom did Rog produce value and how was this value acknowledged?

Autonomous Rog produced value for the citizens of Ljubljana, for Slovenia and for the public at large. For example, art, culture and entertainment produced and offered at Rog competed with similar offerings from institutional and private galleries and venues. In that sense, Rog was visited by the citizens of Ljubljana who wanted to see art exhibitions, listen to live music, see dance and other artistic performances or attend parties on a Friday night. Additionally, with a plethora of recreational and leisure activities, Rog was a famous spot for citizens of Ljubljana who wished to skate, take part in group exercise and dance or learn new skills. Moreover, Autonomous Rog produced value for marginalised groups (e.g. the Erased, refugees and asylum seekers) who would be otherwise unable to find accommodation and shelter, seek benefits and other state support, as well as for the civil society at large, hosting discussions and debates in its various dedicated spaces and offering people the opportunity to become part of groups and collectives, exchange ideas and take part in social life.



Sign
Photo: Jenny Kanellopoulou
2016

Overall, Autonomous Rog assisted in the dissemination of radical ideas, in the advocacy of human rights and the representation of gender minorities. It offered the opportunity for academics and intellectuals to engage in research projects, experiment and discuss theories and methods and hold open dialogues with the broader public. On a physical level, Autonomous Rog produced material/production values adding to the existing factory's space, through artistic interventions (e.g. graffiti, permanent sculptures) or constructions such as the elaborate DIY skatepark. It can be argued that Autonomous Rog added to the City of Ljubljana's institutional cultural and touristic offering. Even though not officially accepted it still featured on official websites as a place of interest e.g. on culture.si.

The above point to enhance the **social value** affiliated with Autonomous Rog, especially in terms of the diversity demonstrated in both content and users/ participants. Autonomous Rog was diverse (as diverse as the city outside, according to the Slovenian Supreme Court *see below*), representing an ever-changing number of people and subsequently content, ultimately embellishing Slovenian social life. Such increased diversity is a staple characteristic of the creative city[7,26,27] showcasing that Ljubljana did not need to get rid of Autonomous Rog in order to fit into the "creative city" mould, rather it needed to acknowledge its past and present value and contributions.

To illustrate, it is worth mentioning the extended **spatial value** associated with the use of the empty Rog Factory premises. Before the first communities occupied Rog, the factory had stood empty for almost a decade, slowly falling into decay. The groups and users of Autonomous Rog took advantage of the abundant urban surplus, producing content and especially artistic content, when no other venue in Ljubljana was able to accommodate these artists and creative individuals, who had to compete for the meagre amount of creative space available. In consequence, Autonomous Rog enabled the production of content, the value of which would have otherwise been lost.

Ultimately, the above types of value arise from Rog's autonomous character that facilitated broad engagement and experimentation without strict forms of governance or bureaucracy. Such **autonomous initiatives** are often associated with *temporary or interim* uses of urban space as young artists and activists seek the transformation of abandoned or disused urban sites, offering the opportunity for varied expression and experimentation. Research conducted in Berlin[9] suggests that such use of space contributes rather than prohibits the characterisation of a city as "creative". Such urban places have **value in being autonomous per se,** something that can be elusive for the greater public and impossible to monetise. In the case of visual arts production in Rog, Tomsich[28] highlights the difficulty to frame and contextualise the surplus value from

such activities in a squat, partly from the ephemerality and temporality of art projects, and partly from the artists' own reluctance to engage in further political commitment, and therefore a more open approach.

Thus, in a post-socialist country that has only recently been introduced to wider circuits of capital, and continuously operating under the mantra of "urban regeneration" and "revitalisation" under neoliberalism, the production of any value that is deemed abstract, unjustified, and unrealised is a hard concept to grasp[29]. This appeared to be a contributing factor to the reluctance of the public to accept Rog as an area where alternative culture thrived, and important social and political work was undertaken.

NO ENERGY DRINKS

Miniramp
Photo: Jenny Kanellopoulou
2016

Factors affecting the survival of Autonomous Rog

The legal Status of Autonomous Rog

In 2006 the city of Ljubljana supported the initial occupation of Rog entering into a type of informal sublease agreement of temporary use with the first users.

This type of agreement, however, does not constitute a contract in Slovenian Law, as a contract cannot have unspecified parties, and the users of Rog have been numerous and diverse through the years. The Court of First Instance has described the relationship between the city of Ljubljana and the users of Rog as a precarious one. In practice, this means that use of the premises is permitted until explicitly revoked. However, this was harder to prove and establish in court.

In the summer of 2016, as the City of Ljubljana attempted the demolition of part of the factory's surrounding wall, it was faced with proceedings initiated by a few independent users of Rog claiming disturbance of possession. The city counterclaimed as the lawful owner of the property, demanding that the individual users empty and deliver Rog's premises free from all people and belongings. The case against one of these individual users reached the Slovenian Supreme Court. The judgment was delivered on the 19th of September 2019[V], ordering the one individual defendant to stop using the premises of Rog but also acknowledging that a mass eviction of all Rog users at once would be impossible and outside the Courts' jurisdiction. The City of Ljubljana could claim against every single user of Rog separately - and succeed - but not against all the users at once.

The city could not rely on any type of prior agreement between the city and the "Community of Rog users", as the latter is not an entity recognised by law, but an informal and temporary formation that cannot sue or be sued as such.

V VSRS Sodba II Ips 219/2018

The legal system is simply not able to recognise this type of legal relationship between a public body and the public itself. Aslong as the law is concerned there is no evident distinction between the two concepts in the context of property. Furthermore, the status of Rog as an "illegal squat" was not examined by the Slovenian justice system as such. The Courts abstained from examining the relationship between the City of Ljubljana and Rog's users further, as this matter was not part of the legal actions initiated in 2016.Nevertheless, the Supreme Court commented on the nature and the characteristics of autonomous zone in urban centres and made certain interesting remarks regarding their value and legal status.

The Slovenian Supreme Court indirectly acknowledged the value of autonomous squats in urban centres by recognising their particular traits and their relationship with their surrounding cities. The court referred to such autonomous zones as places where the public can socialise, create and have fun. Such places more often than not belong to public bodies (e.g. the city) and are therefore public by nature, if not by law.

In summary the points made were the following:

→ The Supreme Court described Autonomous Rog as a "quasi-public" and autonomous zone dedicated to public life.

→ The "quasi-public" nature of Rog derived from the fact that it is owned by a public entity (the City of Ljubljana) and that it is frequented and used by anonymous members of the public. Anyone could be a user of Rog and the place was as diverse as the surrounding city.

→ The City of Ljubljana could not petition the enforcement of private property rights as the Slovenian Constitution does not distinguish between private and public property; rather rights are subjected to their respective functions. Property owned by a public body cannot enjoy the same level of protection as property owned by a private individual.

→ The Supreme Court went on to describe the users of Rog as "an amorphous, anonymous and constantly changing social formation" who might have some common values and principles but are not otherwise related. They represent the totality of the citizens of Ljubljana.

→ The Supreme Court of Slovenia in essence recognised that Rog bore the characteristics of a *de facto* rather than *de jure* "public good" (Article 19 of the SPZ).

Ultimately, for the Supreme Court what the City of Ljubljana decided to do with the Rog premises was a matter of democracy and public policy rather than a matter of law on that occasion.

“If you like the squatters take them home”

According to the Slovenian legal system, the users of Rog collectively were acting as members of the public, engaging in social activity and taking part in civil life in an open, semi-public place located in the heart of the city. It could be argued that in a way, they were indeed at home, contrary to what opposing voices had expressed on social media.

Post-scriptum: a new series of legal disputes has ensued following the most recent eviction of 2021, as the users’ communities claimed use of excessive force by the police during the eviction proceedings, resulting in human rights hearings in front the Parliament. In March 2021, the County Court refused to grant an interim injunction to the users’ communities to stop the eviction and dismissed the users’ arguments for violation of their rights as proprietary possessors, full trial pending.

Pink buldozer returning
Photo: Goran Jakovac
2016

The "Management" of Autonomous Rog

Whereas the word "management" may impose negative connotations in the context of Rog, it is important to introduce here the concept of "place management" in order to describe the different organisational and operational approaches that were evident in the 15 years of the occupation.

In layman terms, place management can be understood as the process of making places better[30] by harnessing skills and competencies of the array of people involved in a particular place. Place management in the case of Rog can be understood as direct, inclusive and bottom-up, focusing on practices of prefiguration, autonomy, do-it-yourself (DIY), direct action, and mutual aid[31]. Such an approach to managing a space like Rog challenged established structures of municipal management and governance by introducing an anarchic way of developing content and value via self-governing activities and practices, based on the Rog users' daily doings. In this section, we outline the evolution of managing and maintaining practices in Rog throughout its occupation in chronological order.

The first era of Rog's occupation is characterised by modes of *"management by experimentation"* that aimed to tackle the increased privatisation of public space in Ljubljana and to offer an alternative space for the production of art, culture, political debate and social interaction[32]. When put in these terms, the initial occupation of Rog can be understood as a temporary experiment with the purpose to critique mainstream ideas of managing the city as a corporation (with focus on privatisation and efficiency). This planned experimentation was also properly organised, as shown by the documentation of weekly assemblies and collective decision-making processes that constituted Rog as a space where hope and possibility of an alternative social, cultural

and political public sphere can be imagined. In essence, and by stressing the fact that the occupation was temporary, management practices in Rog presented a shared vision that was constantly negotiated between the users and was directly opposed to the vision of City of Ljubljana. The abrupt ending of negotiations during the change in administration at that time highlighted mainly a rejection of the self-management ethos and the everyday activities that exemplified the need to liberate public space and to produce alternative urban commons, which would pave the way for the development of the future Rog[32].

After the period of initial tolerance and increased conflict between the City of Ljubljana and the users of Rog, a slightly different management ethos was introduced in the squatted area, focusing mostly on stopping the plans of the municipality at the time. This can be described as *"management by persistence"*, where the users, although deprived of basic amenities such as electricity, heating and water, managed to consistently deliver a continuous stream of alternative content and activities, albeit in a less-organised fashion (e.g. infrequent assemblies and less consensus-building regarding actions).

When plans for the new Rog Centre were established, it became quite clear that the spaces where most activities were taking place within the autonomous area were in immediate jeopardy. As all ancillary buildings would have to be destroyed to pave way for the development of the new space, Rog users mobilised against this decision and re-established their dormant decision-making platforms with the aim to resist the municipality's plans. The Mayor of Ljubljana had expressed in the past a sympathetic stance for Metelkova as a place for critical reflection, civic engagement, and as an area where ideas of all generations can freely flow[33], and thus negotiations and resolution meetings were held in order to reach to an agreeable consensus that could benefit both parties. At the same time, new collectives and publics entered Rog, coupled with a flurry of activities that aimed to seek solutions for wider-scale issues (such as the European refugee crisis that was at its peak in 2015), while also introducing Rog and its autonomous spirit to the public of Ljubljana via factory tours, parties, concerts, literary readings, and performances[34]. Even before the eviction attempts in the summer of 2016, it is evident that Rog users tried to change public perception and re-establish themselves as an active part of the urban space; this can be described as *"management by embeddedness"*, where practices and activities not only addressed the cultural and artistic gap in Ljubljana, but also filled in institutional and urban gaps (e.g. refugee crisis). It can be argued that the goal of certain Rog users here was to become a more embedded entity in the urban life of the city and establish better relationships with the majority of citizens around the area[35].

Gate barricades
Photo: Goran Jakovac
2016

Despite the momentum gained from the uprising of summer 2016, conflicts started to emerge within the community, which were exacerbated by the financial and mental pressures of a potentially lengthy legal battle. Within the many groups in Rog, different hierarchies and priorities existed, which rendered the process of collective organisation and self-management very contentious. Disenchantment between established groups and users ensued as it was perceived that the demolition of the area was imminent. This acceptance, coupled with the inability to establish a unified entity in order to negotiate how the space can be used as an urban alternative, led to many groups leaving Rog in 2018.

The period of 2016-2018 was one of intense dialogues that unfortunately manifested in certain groups not following the dialogical rules necessary to build consensus through reciprocal relationships of mutual exchange, agreement and constructive disagreement[36]. The possibility to enact political activism was then left to a small team of Rog users, who also had to deal with the legal costs and the increasing migrant crisis. Other groups continued to exist within Rog, albeit only focusing on their own activities and programmes.

Thus, the last years of Rog after 2016, are characterised by diminished actions and a focus on basic operations, with the ultimate hope of another insurgence of new collective activities and programmes. Such practices were scarce but meaningful for the continuation of Rog in this final stage as a token of creative rebellion. Whereas several groups were still active but aware that things may be ending soon, the last period of organising at Rog can be described as *"management by disorientation"*, highlighting the perplexity of self-organisation and collective action in a space that was diminishing materially and ideologically.

The revitalisation of the city

In order to better understand the events that led to the eviction of Autonomous Rog from a macroscopic view, it is worth highlighting the path of Ljubljana's revitalisation in the post-socialist era through a series of market-driven visions and decisions.

Contrary to most post-socialist cities, Ljubljana's socio-spatial transformation was highlighted by prosperity and increased quality of life, both in the centre and the periphery. As Svirčić Godovac and Kerbler[37] highlight, Ljubljana benefitted from a harmonisation of the initial processes of privatization and commercialization with the processes of adaptation to EU recommendations and laws much earlier than in other countries, which led to a swifter transition to a capitalistic economy.

These developments were also compounded by retail and leisure decentralisation attempts that were increasingly popular in other parts of Europe since the 1970s, where the first waves of retail decentralisation moved the bulk of shopping and leisure activities in the suburbs[38]. An example of such a strategy was the erection of shopping malls at the fringes of Ljubljana in the 1990s, which inevitably lured retail or casual visitors away from the city centre. Without a viable retail or entertainment provision and coupled with a reluctant local population, Ljubljana remained in need of revitalisation.

Another characteristic of the city centre of Ljubljana in the 1990s was the growing rent and value gap, as elements of the built environment was not delivering substantial economic and social value to the city. Rog Factory was an illustrative example, having stood empty for over a decade before the squatters took over. Through this initiative, the squatting communities decreased the value gap, by engaging in varied activities and generating social and other types of value.

The city administration that took over in 2006 was the most successful in terms of revitalisation, measured for instance, by the amount of tourist footfall. The provision of hotel beds grew by 57% between 2008 and 2017[39], the length of overnight stays in the city increased by 165 % between 2010 and 2019[40]. Moreover, Ljubljana had one of the highest growth

rates of housing prices in Europe, demonstrating an increase of 27% in the last two years[39]. It would appear that a process of gentrification was taking place in Ljubljana before the pandemic hit.

Amidst such gentrification attempts, it is important to take a closer look at the lack of production spaces. Active production facilities in proximity of the city centre have been a common characteristic of the post-socialist urban landscape up until the 1990s or even later, as opposed to most western cities where urban regeneration took place much earlier. In Ljubljana most of the former urban industrial areas located in proximity to city centre, had already been regenerated in the last twenty years, for example Mesarska and areas in Spodnja Šiška - part of Šiška, located close to the city centre (e.g. Slovenija vino), while Tobačna was auctioned for redevelopment, as seen previously.

In such an ever-changing urban landscape, Rog factory was one of the last providers of vast, decayed space. As gentrification and post-socialist regeneration engulfed the city centre of Ljubljana, resulting in raised prices and lack of production/ multi-purpose spaces, Rog remained the last easily accessible space that was both open and affordable to users who were unable to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Autonomous Rog was seen as a nuisance for the institutional plans of revitalisation and redevelopment, since its value and potential were never acknowledged, leading to the eventual eviction of its users.

Further factors contributing to the collapse of Autonomous Rog

Place leadership vs neo-liberal urban entrepreneurialism

When examining Autonomous Factory Rog from a leadership perspective, it can be argued that the collective place leadership that a plethora of group users and individuals exercised during the majority of the occupation, was directly opposed to the notion of exerting control and empowerment by the city administration for the promotion of a specific agenda.

The case of Rog highlights these oppositional styles, as the non-hierarchical place leadership structures that promoted (for the most part) collaboration and consensus came into direct conflict with the vision of the city that challenged and opposed such priorities by promoting the narrative of the gentrified city and the "good consumer/ citizen" mould in their plans for the new Centre Rog. Such governmental practices are pertinent to the classic urban entrepreneurialism idea of a city government that prioritises capital attraction and economic growth at the expense of intensifying social exclusion and social inequality[41]. In this clash of different leadership styles, the power exerted by the capacity of the city administration to bypass the alternative narrative of the Rog users proved to be a decisive factor in sustaining the dominant urban narrative of the gentrified, safe and clean city. By doing this however, the city may have lost an opportunity to shift their style of municipalism from urban entrepreneurialism based on 'speculation'[42] (speculating what the new Centre Rog can bring in terms of return of investment, number of visitors, number of programmes aimed for the local citizens, etc.) to urban entrepreneurialism based on 'experimentation' (harnessing the knowledge and social value produced for almost 15 years in Rog and translating them with the help of Rog users into progressive and inclusive programmes for a new centre).

The attitude of the general public

The attitude of the general public towards Rog had never been properly measured. The interviews conducted during our research, however, show that support was rather limited, especially during the last years of Autonomous Rog. Many would either consider Rog dangerous and avoid visiting or would simply not know what was going on in terms of content or entertainment. Additionally, since some of the groups at Rog dealt with marginalised communities like asylum seekers, migrants, and people with addiction challenges, this would occasionally trigger NIMBY (not in my back yard) reactions. On the other hand, Autonomous Rog used to attract diverse social groups and communities such as the local youth frequenting the sport facilities, which would increase its legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

It can be argued, however, that the challenges Rog faced after the unsuccessful eviction in 2016 (lack of amenities, financial troubles due to the legal disputes, general tiredness of producers at Rog living under a constant threat of eviction) decreased the amount of content produced, resulting in decreased attendance and hence, decreased awareness and acceptance. This culminated in the alleged tip-off from the neighbours of Rog that the premises were empty, which led the City of Ljubljana to begin the eviction and demolition attempts in January 2021. Difficult though it may be to substantiate these arguments without the appropriate research, it would appear that at its peak Autonomous Rog was more supported by the general public as opposed up to its last era, coinciding with reduced activity and reduced transparency about life at Autonomous Rog.

Inside main building
Photo: Goran Jakovac
2016

Material Factors

A further factor contributing to the demise of Autonomous Rog relates to the material state of the factory area. Despite the well-intended efforts of various groups of users and individuals throughout the history of Autonomous Rog, the place itself has always been in need of structural and ecological intervention, not least due to the fact that it lacked running water and electricity (a factor that was pivotal for the initial success of Metelkova in the 1990s). As former users acknowledged when interviewed, the groups at Autonomous Rog were constantly faced with material/ physical constraints (such as heating in the winter) that necessitated a more focused decision-making approach than the one that Rog's autonomous managerial structure was able to offer. Even though the groups were ultimately responsible for cleaning, heating and maintaining each individual space, the lack of general oversight led to an uneven situation throughout the factory, with certain areas remaining dangerous for both users and the general public. It can be argued that the material collapse of Rog Factory was simply a matter of time.

Ultimately, the end of Autonomous Rog came as a result of both material and social or operational factors. Even though the ongoing conflict with the City of Ljubljana constitutes the most obvious cause, it would be important to summarise the reasons behind the collapse of Autonomous Rog, below.

The collapse of Autonomous Rog can be attributed to –

Material, social and operational factors:

#1 Reduced visitor attendance and low numbers of active users,

#2 Decreased content production,

#3 Decreased or unmeasured support from the general public,

#4 Lack of managerial structures,

#5 Low morale among active users due to increased legal expenses, internal and external conflicts,

#6 Material state of the buildings and other physical restraints such as water and electricity.

Institutional factors:

#1 Top-down revitalisation and redevelopment attempts from the part of the city,

#2 Exclusion of direct citizen participation and involvement in decision-making and planning,

#3 Institutional investment that prioritises bigger developments and projects over current city needs,

#4 Inability to engage in fruitful dialogue with citizens and the professional classes,

#5 Conflicting policy priorities, only partially based on research and relevant expertise,

#6 Rigid forms of urban governance and leadership that are fearful of experimentation.

The Future of Rog and lessons for other Autonomous urban centres

"The challenges of the society of the future are no longer in cultural industries as a driving force of the economy, but rather social and ecological. In this process, culture in the broadest sense can actually be a driving force of development, but not of development based on growth, but of a compassionate society."

Nevenka Koprivšek, 30.01.2021[1]

We dedicate this last part of the report to suggestions and recommendations for the preservation of autonomous urban centres that can be easily implamented by local authorities. We also make recommendations specific to Autonomous Rog and Metelkova, as we prompt the City of the Ljubljana to acknowledge and safeguard their value and their potential now and in the future, as both produced relevant value for the city and contributed to the diversity of urban activities Ljubljana.

Immediate actions

1. Mapping of content and activities at Autonomous Rog through the years

To this day no comprehensive efforts have been made to map and document the full extent of activities that took place at Rog through the years.

We recommend the production of a comprehensive list or interactive map detailing the activities, contents and communities who were present at Rog, as a first step towards further analysis and evaluation.

2. Revival of activities and contents that produced value

We argue that the direct beneficiaries of the value produced at Rog, as presented earlier in the present, were: (1) the city and the inhabitants of Ljubljana and (2) marginalised groups unable to find comparable content or service elsewhere. Moreover, some of the space at Rog was used (3) for legitimate or illegitimate personal benefit. These three broad categories could be used to cluster activity at Rog and estimate the production of value in a more tangible manner, following independent evaluation and ensuring that administrative costs are kept to a minimum.

We recommend that activities and content falling under the first two categories should be rehomed and supported by the City of Ljubljana. Activities of elusive value could be considered as “experimental places” - *see below.*

3. Experimental places

Cities need experimental places. Not everything a city needs has to be developed in a pre-planned, top-down capacity. Since the urban landscape as we know it is set to change following the global pandemic, climate change, and other socio-economic factors, the time is ripe for urban experimentation and citizen participation.

We recommend that diverse communities - such as the ones operating at Rog - should be provided with sufficient space immediately in order to create, experiment and design the next steps in urban life. Such experimental spaces should be accessible to all, located within reach from the city centre, and open to all forms of communal or individual expression.

4. Museum or exhibition for Autonomous Rog

Witnessing the eviction and the demolition of Rog was emotional for both the users of Rog and some parts of the general population of Ljubljana. Support was shown by way of protests, political graffiti, open letters and petitions. Individuals users and communities had invested a significant share of their energy, creativity, labour, time and means into the success of Rog.

We recommend the dedication of a museum or exhibition for Autonomous Rog (perhaps in the premises of the new Rog Centre) as a sign of respect

for the contributions the communities made to the city, in order to celebrate the intangible cultural heritage of Trubarjeva street and its surrounding district.

5. Preservation of Metelkova

As Metelkova approaches its 30th year anniversary, it is of paramount importance that political and legal actions are taken for its preservation.

We recommend the establishment of a legal framework for the protection of Metelkova, as part of Slovenia's cultural heritage, in order to safeguard its premises and programmes from future threats, as the ones witnessed in social media following the demolition of Rog.

Grafitti
Photo: Goran Jakovac
2017

Long-term actions

6. Dynamic archive for autonomous places

One of the challenges autonomous places face is the lack of outgoing information and clarity as to the types of activity that take place in their premises. This can contribute to a feeling of fear or mistrust from the part of the general public.
We recommend the creation and maintenance of a dynamic archive for autonomous places that will follow the activities taking place and the content produced in real-time.

7. Framework for the protection of autonomous places

Stemming directly from the immediate aim to preserve Metelkova, there needs to be a broader discussion on the protection of autonomous places now and in the future, since their value and contributions to the city have been noted. As these places produce value for the benefit of the city and its citizens, it is important that they are not threatened with litigation, eviction and demolition attempts that disrupt their activities. Arguments for the preservation of Autonomous Places can be based on the protection of Cultural Heritage (in the case of more established squats) or even their public good status, as recognised by the Slovenian Supreme Court in 2019.

8. Long-term provision of space for production and experimentation

The lack of production and experimental space in Ljubljana is evident. The city is in need of affordable space that can facilitate experimentation, production and participation in cultural and civil life. Support should be offered to creative individuals and communities who are unable to find suitable space, especially at the first stages of their development.

9. Management model for Autonomous Places

We recommend the creation of a broad network of interested parties including, but not limited to, past and current squatters, NGOs, academics, artists, community groups and neighbours, representatives of the city and the broader public, that would work on designing a management model for autonomous places based on the values of freedom and participation and recognising the relationship between the autonomous place and the wider community.
This endeavour should respect the dialectic process and not impose decisions top-down, ensuring that not any one point of view dominates the process. Recognising the inherent difficulty in reaching consensus - and appreciating that this is part of the very nature of autonomous places - we wish to emphasise that there is value in dialogue and the exchange of ideas *per se*.

10. Links to social programmes

Communities in autonomous places are often close to beneficiaries of welfare/ social programmes, offering help and advice when institutional channels cannot. More often than not, NGOs and other relevant officials

have turned to the groups at Rog for support with their programmes. This has been acknowledged by some of the users of Rog interviewed for the purposes of the present. The link between the institutional welfare channels and the autonomous groups of activists should be made clear in order to ensure that all cases are handled with transparency and to provide recognition for the service provided by the autonomous groups.

11. Access to small grants

It has already been established that communities of squatters produce value. We recommend the establishment of a small grants scheme to assist in the continuation of such value-producing activities, whereby eligible individuals or communities can gain access to funding following a simple administrative procedure.

12. Minimum Safety standards

As autonomous places are often found in abandoned and dilapidated buildings, they can pose safety hazards to their users and visitors. Some minimal safety standards could be achieved with the help of municipal actors, as the burden of preservation is too taxing and complex for the groups of users to undertake. Such support should be offered in consultation with the groups of users and without compromising their autonomy.

13. Dispute resolution mechanism

As disputes are expected to arise between the users of autonomous places and state or municipal actors, it is recommended that an alternative dispute resolution mechanism is designed that would bypass the court system, offering the opportunity for both sides to be heard. Such a mechanism would ensure a fair and open process and would help avoid the forced eviction and demolition attempts as witnessed in January 2021. It would be grounded on the principles of mutual respect and would recognise the value that autonomous places produce and the need to encourage citizen participation in urban life.

Cats
Photo: Jenny Kanellopoulou
2019

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Colophony

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