

## Tactical urbanism: a tool for community awareness in bottom-up urban regeneration projects. Case study: Petrila

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a particular situation in urban regeneration projects, the first bottom-up industrial regeneration project: the Petrila Mine in Jiu Valley, Hunedoara. This process is representative because it is a premiere in Romania, being the first example of bottom-up industrial regeneration. What is even more important is its role in shaping the new local identity, after the closure of the coal mines. The aim of the paper is to present the process as a whole, considering also specific objectives: to present the physical relation between the former industrial site and the town and the difficulties of their functional reconnection, the role of professionals in recognizing the valuable industrial heritage buildings and the impact of this project in local, regional and national scale. Also, another specific objective is to underline the major impact of informal practices regarding heritage or public space, in general.

Qualitative methods are used to describe the former and current situation of the industrial site and the town. Also, this research uses specific urban planning tools to represent and describe the impact of tactical urbanism applications. In conclusion, it sets the current stage of the process as an intermediate one and it describes the following steps that need to be undertaken in order to transform a bottom-up initiative into a large urban regeneration project.

**Keywords:** Petrila, identity, post-industrial regeneration, tactical urbanism, bottom-up.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Petrila is a remote town in Hunedoara county, the most eastern town of the Jiu Valley and the farthest urban settlements in relation to the regional center, Timisoara. Here, the oldest mine in the area, Petrila mine, closed in 2015, after 156 years of continuous extraction. The rescue efforts for the valuable industrial buildings were initiated in 2012 by a group of young architects, at the call of a nationally representative artist, Ion Barbu. After 4 years, in 2016, the ensemble was listed as heritage of national importance (group A), along with five remaining buildings and one that was already demolished.

Nowadays, the main stakeholders initiated an NGO that has the role to assist the local administration in the entire urban regeneration process. The first cultural event took place in the 1st of May, 2018: Open Mines Day. It was the largest cultural event on the former industrial site, as it as open for visits from all those interested.

## II. CONTEXT

The Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities [1] recognizes the role of every city in the development of the European Union. Cities possess unique characteristics, qualities which differentiate them from other human settlements around the globe. Big cities, in particular, are the drivers of economic development. They possess the major advantages: human resources, know-how and accessibility. In economic terms, they are much more resilient than smaller cities of towns.

Smaller urban settlements do not possess these advantages. They rely on collaboration, investments and know-how import from the larger ones, in order to implement sustainable development measures.

The former industrial towns present a particular situation. As part of the large mass of shrinking cities, they usually lack the resources and competences necessary in order to find and accept the new, post-industrial identity and meanings. Petrila is one of these shrinking cities. According to the Charter for European Planning [2], as part of a larger system of urban settlements, it must follow four basic rules:

- To resist the economic temptation for homog-

enization;

- To constrain the urban core, avoiding the tendencies to expand to the hinterland;

- To keep its infrastructure at least at an average maintenance level;

- To promote and sustain local tradition and the particularities of each component social group. Large cities have the ability to understand the complexity and value of the issues stated above because they possess the three major advantages stated above: human resources, know-how and accessibility.

Towns like Petrila need an input from outside, from the large urban areas, one that can highlight local efforts, promote trusted stakeholders and bring investments. The most efficient actions follow a strategy of gradual development, under the following rules [3]:

- “A deliberate, phased approach to instigating change;

- An offering of local ideas for local planning challenges;

- Short-term commitment and realistic expectations;

- Low-risks, with possibly a high reward;

- The development of social capital between citizens and the building of organizational capacity between public/private institutions, non-profit/NGOs, and their constituents”.

## III. PROCESS AND STAKEHOLDERS

The overview must start from the first initiatives. The main artistic figure in Petrila is Ion Barbu, a former topographer hired at the mine who, after 1990, has made a career out of criticizing the political issues of the transition between communism and capitalism. The cartoonist started the first cultural events in the years following 2000, when he organized the Bad Man, Sick Man or European Cultural Periphery [4] festivals in his hometown or the surrounding areas. In this project, Barbu is one of the main stakeholders, being the main creative resource for every contemporary cultural event in Petrila. Also, he is the main activist in the small town, so the most visible representative of the civil society.

The attempts to save the valuable buildings from Petrila Mine began in 2011, when Barbu met a group of architects. They launched a se-

ries of workshops and cultural events to promote the idea that the buildings of the coal mine must be preserved as industrial heritage. They also started working on the project that finally, after four years, reached the positive reaction from the Ministry of Culture. The architects (originally four, now part of a team of at least 10 volunteer professionals) remain a solid group of stakeholders that promote the project, try to identify solutions and create opportunities for the post-industrial site [5].



Fig. 1. Ion Barbu in front of Ion D. Sîrbu Memorial House. Planeta Petriila (2018)



Fig. 2. Mural on a former building at the Petriila Mine. Planeta Petriila (2014)

Another stakeholder, maybe the most important, is the local authority. Petriila Mayoralty was the one that initiated the whole listing process for the site and will administrate it in three months. It lacks the know-how necessary to implement this type of project and admits the need for collaboration with professionals and local NGOs.



Fig. 3. Meeting between the main stakeholders at the Petriila mine, January 2016. Planeta Petriila (2016)

One of the most important steps is the emergence of the Planeta Petriila concept. Another example of bottom-up creativity, it is the result of Andrei Dăscălescu's documentary regarding the whole mine saving process. Along with national and international tours, through exclusive promotion in cinemas, the documentary has managed to raise awareness of the area's problems and to present the story of some characters with remarkable stories from Petriila [6]. This documentary created a city brand with far more impact than the town would have recorded through any conventional or customary policies proposed by usual sustainable development documents and plans. The film actually featured the entire process of listing the industrial ensemble as architectural and historical heritage.



Fig. 4. The Poeziduri project, 2005. thebarbu.ro (2005)

#### IV. TACTICAL URBANISM IN PETRILA

Tactical urban interventions are a well-known type of urban actions, characterized by a short span in time, a limited amount of resources involved and a temporary physical footprint. Their aim is to improve the urban environment by demonstrating the potential of underused spaces.

In Petrila, this type of interventions was introduced by Ion Barbu in 2005, mainly through the means of guerilla actions. The first interventions were lyrical texts written on some building walls, as part of the Poeziduri project (an anthology of Romanian poetry written on the wall).

In 2006, Barbu impressed through the initiative to revitalize a former miners colony: Bratianu neighborhood in Lonea, Petrila. Through the Colonia Rasa Plansa project, he managed to present the grey neighborhood as a lively ensemble of homes, lived by people with a high sense of humor and culture.



Fig. 5. Colonia Rasa Plansa project presented in Timisoara, at the Baroque Palace. thebarbu.ro (2006)

The next tactical intervention regards the Ion D. Sîrbu Memorial House, a ruin before 2009. Through his association, Barbu managed to repair the historical monument through an unconventional style, without permits or any architectural project. Through another example of guerilla tactics, he managed to force the local authorities (the actual owners) to open the monument to the public and leave it under the supervision of Barbu's Association.



Fig. 6. The Ion D. Sîrbu Memorial House. thebarbu.ro (2017)

After a few years, Barbu started a complex project of tactical intentions regarding the representative or neglected public spaces in Petrila. They were only presented virtually, through a social network.



Fig. 7. The Pompadou Center. Planeta Petrila (2014)

In 2014, the first tactical urbanism interventions emerged in Petrila as part of the Startup Petrila project. Coordinated through Plusminus Association, the group of young professionals involved in the Planeta Petrila project transformed the former Pump center in the Petrila Mine in Pompadou, a center created to promote the local culture. It was the only building from the mining site that was administrated by the local authorities and it is now the center of contemporary artistic representations in Petrila.

In 2015, the demolitions were stopped at Petrila Mine and Plusminus celebrated the success organizing the Industrial Heritage Days. The intervention regarded the bridge between the coal mine and the town, as it was temporary pedestrianized and painted.



Fig. 8. The Industrial Heritage Days. Planeta Petrița (2015)

### V. THE OPEN MINES DAY

In 2018, the local NGOs, the professionals and the local authorities understood the necessity to cooperate in a single entity, the Planeta Petrița Association. Until now, the main impact of this entity, in urban planning terms, was the organization of the Open Mines Day in the 1st of May, the same year. This event was thought as being the one celebrating the opening of the mine for culture after it was shut down for industry.

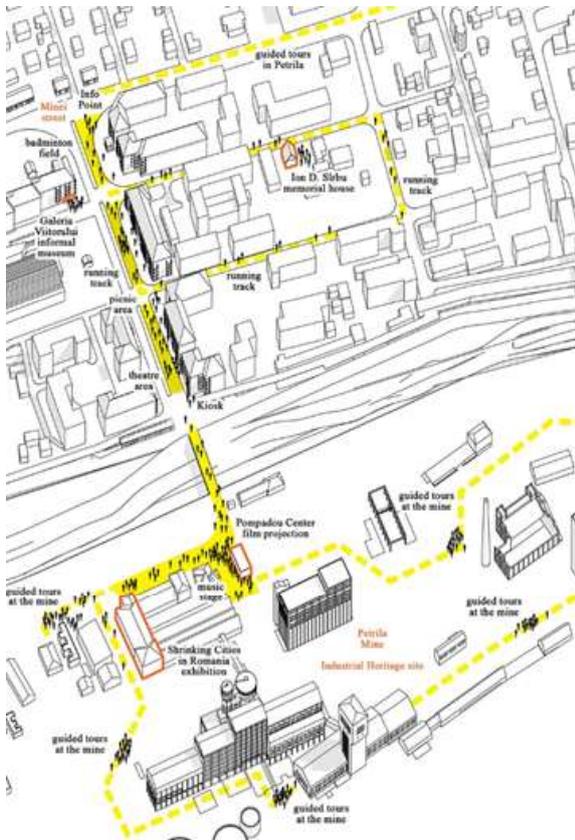


Fig. 9. Tactical interventions at the Open Mines Day (2018)

Also, another aim was to pedestrianize the Minei street in order to bring people in the town closer to the mine.

In this event, Minei street became a pedestrian area free for an artistic installation, an info point, sports competitions, a picnic, the opening of an informal underground museum and a theatre play. Also, the street was the starting point for an architectural tour on bicycles. The Ion D. Sirbu Memorial House was animated by children playing piano and reading from Ion D. Sirbu himself.



Fig. 10. Minei street, pedestrianized and waiting for visitors. Rolland Szedlacsek (2018)

Finally, the heritage site welcomed various activities: the opening ceremony, the Shrinking Cities in Romania exhibition, a concert from a local jazz singer, the Planeta Petrița projection, the meeting of the Planeta Petrița Association and last but not least, five guided tours at the mine along former workers.

This event brought together almost 1000 participants, out of which 70-80 were from outside, and the rest from Petrița.

### VI. DISCUSSION

Following the five characteristics of an efficient tactical intervention, we understand that the desired impact in the overall urban regeneration process is accomplished. This is supported by the following results:

- The approach grew with each event. Starting from the small guerilla actions of Ion Barbu (until 2014), it grew through the inauguration of Pompadou Center (2014), the artistic intervention at the bridge (2015) and the Open Mines

Day event, at the mine and on the Minei street (2017);

- All the interventions are based on the creativity of local artists or enthusiasts. They are responsible for both hard (building) and soft (artistic) components;
- Each cultural event gathers dedicated people through volunteering. Expectations do not go beyond immediate effects: image impact, maintaining hope for regeneration and providing cheap solutions for urban issues;
- Risks are limited through a step-by-step approach. Every action is implemented only after the sponsorship and the minimum number of permits are obtained. The reward is always spectacular, using enthusiasm and a large number of participants;
- The actions initiated by Ion Barbu were, at first, against the local administration. Starting with the collaboration between him and the group of professionals, all the actions included the administration as a partner. Only formal at first, their involvement grew in time. The result of a good collaboration is the founding of Planeta Petrița Association.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Through tactical urbanism interventions, both Barbu and the professionals bring the citizens and the administration in Petrița closer to the main aim: create a new post-industrial identity through the process of regenerating the industrial heritage site of Petrița Mine.



Fig. 11. Projection on a mine building. Ovidiu Zimcea (2018)

The next steps include cultural interventions in the most suitable spaces at the mine, a request to the Petrița Mayorality to pedestrianize the Minei street (after recording the Open Mines Day success) and a project focused on the Ion D. Sirbu street and Memorial House.

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