

New Years' card with a photo-essay about democracy and why there is still some hope

Dear Friend,

In the attached file I send you a photo-essay about 2016, the year which in my opinion has shaken democracy, and a few examples why I think there is still some hope for 2017...

I hope I raised your attention and you will read the attachment!

Please do not hesitate to send me your remarks about what you have read and/or the interpretation. I am also interested in your views from more general aspects – why do you think that something could be done in 2017...? And, of course, what should be done...?

Otherwise, of course, I wish you Happy New Year – a better year, than 2016 was!

Iván

HOW TO STOP THE MELT-DOWN OF DEMOCRACY?

New Years' photo essay by Iván Tosics

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What a year behind us! Brexit, Trump, Le Pen (oooops – this has not happened yet, lucky us...)

I have got the feeling that our normal life is melting down – like the house in the installation of Leandro Erlich, Argentine artist, exhibited in front of the Gare du Nord in Paris. As some critics wrote, with the House, a building that melts like ice, Leandro Erlich uses architecture to evoke symbol of civilizations endangering human focus, fragility and vulnerability of world heritage. To call passers, it employs simple and powerful picture of a building decaying to emphasize the immediacy of consequences for climate change, the urgency of critical choices for our future.



This art-work was inaugurated on 3 October 2015, ahead of the COP21. Although the original intentions of the artist were clearly connected to the threats caused by climate change, this installation can very well be used also as an allegory on our present feelings. Yes, many things which we believed in so far, are changing, and many of us got the feeling that in 2016 our world has been shaken and started to melt down. How and why could all this happen?

We have a lot to think about how our beloved democracy functions, how can seemingly democratic processes lead to completely nonsense results. Is it Facebook or the mass media or the high-level manipulation of the main elements of democracy...?

It is not the task of this short year-end note to answer (if there are answers at all...) these serious and difficult questions. I would rather write about a few things which in my opinion still give us some hope that we can turn the tide.

In the following I summarize three stories, based on presentations I have listened to in different conferences and on personal talks I had with the presenters in the last year or so. The cases are not described with scientific rigidity – my aim is simply to give an impression about what happened and why I think these cases deliver important messages.

1. Working with the 99%

This is the story of young Portuguese architects (presented by Tiago Mota Saraiva at the 2015 Lisbon conference of the European Network for Housing Research). Their freshly established office got into trouble in 2008 when new contracts vanished. They understood very soon that not the housing

problems have vanished but the traditional work to architects – so they started to work with the „99%”, i.e. with those who are unable to contract an architect but would need help to get out from their hopeless situation.

In one of the projects AtelierMob started to work in the Prodac area of Lisbon, which was self-constructed in 1971 by people who migrated to the city. The area was built-up within one year on the land of the city by the people themselves, working on the houses only at the weekends. Inhabitants do not like architects as the area was never legalized and earlier there were attempts to clear the land.



Sources: <http://if-marvila.pt/index.php/historia-da-freguesia/historia/marvila-e-a-nossa-historia-2/vale-fundao-e-bairro-da-prodac> and <http://ateliermob.com/anfiteatro-do-bairro-da-prodac-norte-em-494126>

AtelierMob got in contact with the Prodac North and South Neighbourhood Associations and helped them to ask for building permits of their houses. The legalization process started in 2011, the municipality decided to sell the plots for each family for 50 eur – in the first step 73 families agreed and legalized their housing situation in that way. During this process the architect discovered that these poor families need further assistance to improve and extend their houses for those family members who come back to the neighbourhood, having lost their job and house elsewhere. Also some interventions were needed in the public space. All activities were based on participatory process, and through the establishment of a Dwellers Working Unit, that put the discussed changes into practice, using the building know-how of local residents and allowing them earning an extra income. http://www.publicspace.org/files/urbanps/projects-award/J216/participatory_process_for_public_space_prodac_norte_01.pdf



Source: <http://ateliermob.com/tag/%23+170>

The work of the architects was acknowledged and reimbursed later as the area became part of the BIP/ZIP (Local Development Strategy for Neighborhoods or Areas of Priority Intervention) program of Lisbon, supporting since 2007 local projects and municipal partnerships, improving the social and territorial cohesion in the selected neighborhoods. BIP/ZIP aims for reducing the gap between decision makers and citizens, creating extended local networks. As citizens are involved in the development of their neighborhoods, they gradually regain trust in public decision making process and municipality services. In 2013 BIP/ZIP supported 49 projects and was awarded the seventh Best Practice in Citizen Participation award by the OIDP (International Observatory of Participatory Democracy). Since then over 100 applications were received.

<https://citiesintransition.eu/cityreport/bipzip-activating-citizen-participation>

AtelierMob played crucial role in the process to improve the Proday area, investing time and energy in community building and linking local ideas to emerging municipal procedures. This way of work needs strong commitment, taking into account that financial reimbursement is not sure until the end of the process. Prodac and also other projects of AtelierMob became well known, together with the innovative BIP/ZIP programme of Lisbon municipality. Based on these experiences AtelierMob phrased ideas on the role of architecture in processes of social organisation, speculating on architecture's ability to initiate movements to improve the life of poor citizens (<http://www.ateliermob.com/>).

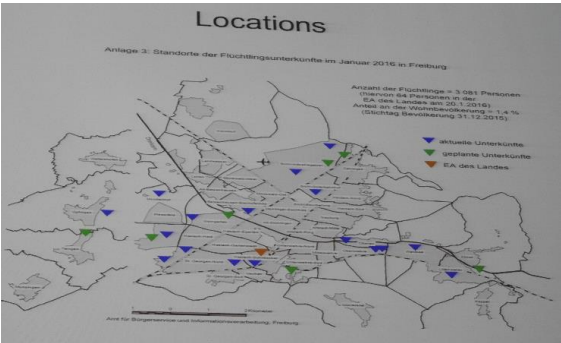
2. Dealing with the refugee problem in inclusive and sustainable way

This story has been presented at the 2016 ICLEI conference in Bilbao by Philip Bona (Coordinator, Office of Migration and Integration, City of Freiburg, Germany).

Freiburg is a medium sized city with 220.000 inhabitants (15% of whom are foreigners, 30% having a migration background). Since July 2015 approximately 4.000 refugees came to the city. In Baden-Württemberg four cities, the district centers, have been pinpointed as receiving cities. Freiburg had to accept this role, even if there are 2.000 people on the waiting list and now they recognize that refugees get accomodation earlier.

The integration of refugees is a complex challenge: accomodation, language, skills training, labour market integration have all to be handled. This challenge can only be tackled in a cooperative way, with projects supported by the city, civil society involvement and voluntary support.

Probably the hardest issue to be tackled is that of accomodation. At the beginning it is unavoidable to put refugees into bigger camps, mixing many nationalities, which provide less or no privacy at all. To create accomodation in smaller units is not easy due to the high number of refugees. Despite the challenges, this is the only way to go, because of humanitarian reasons and also the importance of the refugees for the labour market.



The refugee accomodations are dispersed around all parts of the city. Temporary shelter for arriving refugees, for the first 3 weeks.

Source: Pictures taken from the presentation of Philip Bona.

It is not easy to determine, what kind of social, political or technological infrastructure and measures are needed to support the process of community integration. A connected question is of finance: the public support from the German State and Lander only covers the costs of the temporary shelters, all other investments have to be paid from the local budget or private contributions.

Under such conditions, coordinated efforts to handle the housing situation of the refugees started from the municipality, while there was a general acceptance from the population at large (Freiburg has 176 nationalities). The aim was develop multifunctional housing projects, based on organic wooden structures, in a protected, but not segregated way.



Non-temporary solutions for refugees as future social (or student) housing

Source: <http://werkgruppe-freiburg.de/fluechtlingswohnheim-in-holzbauweise-2/>



House built of sustainable materials for refugees; Philip Bona (at the right in the picture)

Source: <http://www.makingheimat.de/en/refugee-housing-projects> and Iván Tosics

Philip Bona himself is a refugee, who came originally from Sierra Leone (spending by now larger part of his life in Germany). Having worked for the municipality for years and having achieved already good experiences in Roma integration in Freiburg, the mayor asked him in 2015 to tackle the challenges raised by the large influx of refugees.

Freiburg is considered as one of the success cases in tackling all the difficulties. Philip Bona with his vast network of personal contacts (helping him even to get job permits to some of the refugees) plays a crucial role in this success – together with his very efficient team, all of them also refugees.

3) Working with the poorest of the poor, under hostile political environment

In Hungary over 20% of the population lives under severe material deprivation (the EU average is below 10%). The worst conditions can be found in the eastern periphery of the country, especially in rural areas and among the Roma (over 7% of the population). The Pearl (Igazgyöngy) Foundation is a non-governmental organisations with the mission to develop the communities in this most underprivileged eastern part of Hungary, near Berettyóújfalu, close to the Romanian border. The foundation started its activities in 1999 under the leadership of Nóra L. Ritók founder-director, who is an artist and art teacher. The programme of the foundation, aiming for the integration and development of people living in extreme poverty, includes art education, talent development, family care and vocational training courses.

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Extreme deprivation in villages in the eastern periphery of Hungary

Source: <http://igazgyongy-alapitvany.hu/>

Originally the foundation concentrated on elementary education with the hope that the children will be able to get out of the vicious circle of deep poverty. The foundation operates a basic art school in six different locations in the area, subsidised partly by the state, partly by donations, educating 670 children (70% of whom are underprivileged; 250 live in deep poverty, most coming from gipsy families). In this school artistic activities form the basis of the development of the children. Art education in very poor areas means extended pedagogical work that focuses not only on the children and the goals of art education, but also the social-educational background of the children's families, the communities they live in. The teachers constantly work on involving the families of the children in visual art activities in order to promote cohesion in the village communities and the families, as well as to provide positive models for the children.

In recent years the foundation's activities have broadened from providing education to social services, primarily to the families of the pupils. Moreover in some cases these extend also to other individuals in the region who do not have a family, but are just as much in need of help. These activities range from distributing aid (clothes, food, wood, building materials, transportation, etc) and

very importantly advice and assistance for dealing with crises (e.g. collapsed roofs, illness or court cases) and for understanding how to deal with authorities and official procedures.



Kids and adults participating in the visual art education by Pearl Foundation

Source: <http://igazgyongy-alapitvany.hu/>

The foundation does not give help in connection with criminal cases and punishment – on the contrary, in case of any of these, co-operation and help is suspended. There are huge efforts to establish workplaces, with a handicraft project giving work for women, and a carpentry for men. Also a community garden has been established to grow herbs in the summer.

The foundation became a very important institution in the extremely deprived area, reaching out to many institutions; there is a different degree of co-operation with nursery schools, schools, family-support services, guardianship offices, medical network, police, mayor's office, work centres, non-governmental organisations and churches. <http://igazgyongy-alapitvany.hu/en/foundation/approach/>

The conscious and sustained activity of the foundation led to earlier unimaginable results. As a result of the visual arts education, the students win yearly around 500 prizes at national and international student art exhibitions. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-roma-art-idUSBRE95KOPH20130621>

The activity of the Pearl foundation is in fact replacing the missing high quality state education – in most villages of the area the underprivileged, especially the Roma kids, face segregated education. The system of free school selection allows better off families to put their children into religious or for other reasons higher level schools, which practically reject students with Roma background. Nóra L. Ritók is one of the open critics of the segregating school system. Her critical attitude reached the level of the highest political decision makers – in turn the Ministry has terminated all support to the foundation. In the recent list of institutions which get state subsidies for providing extra educational support in deprived areas many unknown (and even themselves segregating) organizations turn up – except for Pearl and some other foundations which are highly successful but critical against the educational policy of Hungary. Due to the hostile political climate the survival of Pearl depends now exclusively on private and international sponsors.

So what can we learn from these cases and how does all this link to the disastrous events we had in 2016 and to the outlook towards the upcoming year of 2017?

All the three shortly described examples show individual/local efforts to handle difficult societal problems. The conditions in the three cases are different:

- Lisbon: bottom-up initiatives of architects, meeting the progressive ideas of the local municipality
- Freiburg: top-down initiative of the municipality, carried out in participatory way
- Hungary: bottom-up initiative of committed individuals, facing serious hostility from the side of the ruling power

All the three initiatives can be seen as efforts of progressive actors to improve the situation of the poor and disadvantaged population. Paradoxically many of such innovative and socially sensible actions started as a reaction on the financial crisis. (And with the softening of the crisis in many countries the return of the previous practices is observable, leaving again less room for bottom-up ideas and efforts...)

We have to learn from these – and the many other similar – actions and strengthen ourselves in our believes that the fight for a better world is possible. Such initiatives should give us hope and strength that something still can be done.

Of course, such individual approaches can only be considered as first step and are not enough to change the way how the world is developing. We have to support these actions but we also have to make additional efforts to cross-fertilize mainstream politics, strengthening the democratic political forces that think in similar way.

I am sure that we should do things differently in the next year. We can not allow another year as 2016 was. Let us stop the melt-down of democracy!

In this spirit I wish you a much better 2017 than 2016 was!