

# Alter-Places

4.-6.12.2024.

meeting in Zagreb, Croatia

Klub Močvara, host: CDA

## From Sustainability to Resilience & Renewal



with the community, drawing an overwhelming crowd on the first night. This success highlighted the demand for an independent cultural space. Through perseverance and collective effort, Močvara has now existed for over 25 years and CDA for almost 30, significantly shaping Croatia's independent cultural landscape. Their journey from grassroots activism to becoming one of Croatia's longest-running cultural NGOs showcases the impact of community-driven initiatives in sustaining alternative arts and music scenes. Next, Mirela Travar, a long-time advocate for independent cultural spaces and sustainable cultural policies, reflected on her journey from grassroots activism to working with institutional actors.

The third Alter-Places workshop explored critical elements of strategic renewal, sustainability, and knowledge transfer specifically within Alternative Cultural Places (ACPs). It was held in Zagreb, Croatia and hosted by the partner organisation Culture Development Association CDA in their venue - Klub Močvara, from Dec 4th to 6th 2024.

Kornel Šeper's keynote discussed the history and evolution of cultural organization URK (CDA) and Klub Močvara. He described how nationalism in the 1990s severely impacted youth culture, shutting down clubs and eliminating support for independent music and arts. Despite this, young people across Croatia sought to rebuild the underground music scene, forming bands, independent labels, and

fanzines, which became a crucial alternative media platform for music, activism, and social issues like avoiding military service. In 1995, a group of like-minded individuals, including Šeper, attempted to establish a venue for concerts and events but faced challenges due to the lack of available spaces. They resorted to using abandoned cinemas and cultural halls, sometimes even organizing shows outside Zagreb. Realizing that formalizing their activities as an NGO would help with permissions and organization, they established Udruženje za razvoj kulture "URK" (CDA) and gradually built a network of supporters. By 1999, they opened their first club in a rented private venue. Despite minimal resources, their DIY approach resonated



## From Initiatives to a Framework

Mirela Travar highlighted the challenges of cultural policy in Croatia and Southeast Europe, emphasizing the lack of a solid framework for supporting independent cultural initiatives. The independent cultural scene in Zagreb emerged in the 1990s, during Croatia's post-war transition to capitalism. The government prioritized privatization, ignoring grassroots cultural needs.

More recently, the movement has made structural policy gains. The city of Zagreb, now led by former activists, introduced institutional support for cultural organizations and established a new public institution, New Spaces for Culture, aimed at decentralizing cultural development. Additionally, plans are in motion for an Intercultural Social Center supporting migrants, asylum seekers, and displaced people through arts and culture. Travar reflected on the challenges of resisting privatization in urban spaces, acknowledging that such movements require the right timing and public sentiment.

While conditions today are different, systemic policy changes—like stricter urban planning laws—have made it harder for private investors to seize public land without accountability. For activists facing similar struggles in cities like Vancouver, sustained advocacy, coalition-building, and leveraging moments of public dissatisfaction are key strategies. While these fights are exhausting, transformative change is possible, as demonstrated by Zagreb's journey from resistance to governance.

In response, youth and cultural groups self-organized, seeking alternative spaces for art, music, and activism. A key moment was Operation City, a bold experiment where cultural organizations, artists, and activists took over an abandoned factory in Zagreb, transforming it into a temporary cultural hub. Over two years, they held over 300 events and gathered tens of thousands of participants, proving the demand for independent cultural spaces. Despite setbacks, Operation City laid the foundation for future victories by demonstrating public demand for independent culture and exposing the city's failure to support it. This set the stage for establishing a new form of institution (Pogon Jedinstvo), where the movement institutionalized its demands and expanded into urban and political activism.



# Meet the Zagreb ACPs...

After visiting Močvara and Mirela Travar's keynote, we toured the local area and visited KSET, a student-run venue that's been without a space for a year due to renovations. Our guide, Mirna Ćupić, shared that KSET started in 1969 in the Faculty of Engineering basement, and by 1976, it moved to the engine room. The venue is managed by about 200 volunteers from the University of Zagreb, not just the Faculty of Engineering. Volunteers work in various sections like photography, videography, music, construction, and more, with each having a mentor. The structure is organized, and a leader is elected annually, along with other key positions. The leadership team, including section heads, meets weekly and involves all volunteers in decision-making. Mirna emphasized the importance of cohesion and motivation in running the venue. KSET also provides educational opportunities, with many volunteers moving into event management or related fields. After their freshman festival, volunteers review what worked and what didn't in a meeting called "Post-mortem" to improve future events.



After KSET, we visited Medika and the club Attack, where Andrija greeted us. Attack! is an NGO focused on non-institutional and youth culture, founded in 1997. It operates on D.I.Y. principles, creating alternatives in cultural, political, and economic spheres, offering a public space for those seeking to act beyond the mainstream. Their first venue was in the basement of the current Močvara building. Attack! supports the independent cultural scene through art festivals, alternative music, film, theater, galleries, hosting educational events locally and beyond. Since 2009, they've run AKC Medika, a community center that fosters civil society, subversive arts, and activist education. Medika's Siva Gallery often collaborates with Attack's programs, and their neighbor, the Pippilotta infoshop, hosts workshops and smaller events. Medika has other spaces used less frequently. Andrija showed us the building's maze, including the former Grey Room venue and Attack's archive. The main challenge they face is the building's state—Medika is a squatted building without a formal contract with the city, which doesn't invest in its upkeep, leaving the association to handle repairs with limited funds.

## Prototypes of sustainability

The second day started with Gabrijela Ivanov's presentation of a card game called Fierce Women developed by K-zona, a feminist NGO, whom we invited to inspire us and help the Alter-Places team develop one of the 3 prototypes – the tarot game. One advice that we must remember is: when trying to create a sustainable venture as an NGO, it's important not to start something entirely new. Instead, it should be something you're already skilled at and known for, something that aligns with what your audience or community recognizes you for.

After the presentation, we worked on our prototypes. Each team had an external mentor. The tarot team's mentor was Ivanov, the mobility prototype team worked with Nikola Mijatović (contemporary circus artist with lots of mobility experience), and the garden prototype team worked with Hannah Lu Verse from Berlin's Floating University. Each team made significant progress, which we all saw in the presentations we made after the working sessions.

## ...archives

In the afternoon, we had a round-table discussion on archiving practices, where organizations shared best practices, key participants in archiving, what to archive, and challenges faced. Archiving is a vital tool for ACPs to preserve histories, people, and institutional knowledge. It is both an organic and deliberate process, but resource constraints and vulnerabilities make it challenging. Archiving adds value not only to communities but also to surrounding spaces. ACP approaches often differ from institutional practices, offering valuable insights for existing methodologies.

Experts, including Matija Mrakovčić from the Centre for Documentation of Independent Culture (CDIC), highlighted the need for investment in ACP archival practices. Mrakovčić noted the sector's organizational memory is at risk, especially due to membership turnover and lack of resources. CDIC advocates for recognizing independent and community archives. Since 2015, CDIC has supported ACPs across Croatia, acknowledging that traditional archiving practices don't always fit the needs of grassroots cultural spaces.

There's a widespread need for support and training in archiving. ACPs struggle to fund archiving and often lack expertise in best practices. Custom approaches are necessary, as the values-driven nature of ACPs differs significantly from large-scale institutions. Participants shared case studies. La Station archives the neighborhood's history through interviews and photographs, while Unit Pitt preserves ephemera from Vancouver's cultural scene. Močvara's DIY archiving system catalogues decades of posters, and KSET documents debriefs from its collective members for knowledge transfer.



# Understanding sustainability, strategic capacities and knowledge transfer in ACPs

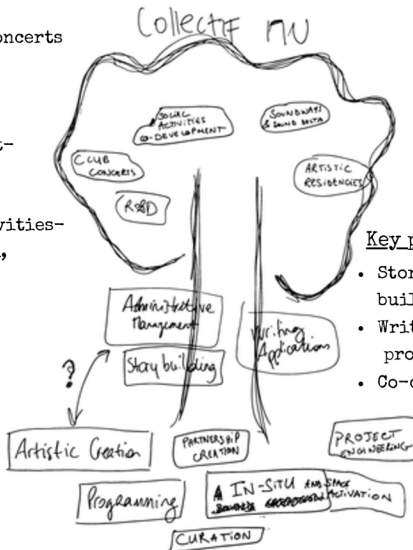
The last session on Thursday was Natalia Bobadilla's presentation and workshop on knowledge transfer. Sustainability in ACPs requires examining strategic capabilities—organizations' ability to leverage resources for long-term success. While ACPs often lack formal strategic management, they possess key resources and competencies that support their endurance.

Through our Alter Places project, we identified core competencies within ACPs that are valuable, rare, and hard to replicate. These competencies are developed through informal relationships and extend beyond the organization, involving public authorities and stakeholders. ACPs demonstrate site-specific knowledge, strong stakeholder engagement, and the ability to create meaningful connections. A key aspect of these competencies is tacit knowledge, which is subjective, experiential, and difficult to formalize. This knowledge, often held by founders or key individuals, provides a competitive advantage but can be challenging to transfer and sustain.

Core competencies evolve over time, but instability and crises can hinder development. Future reflection should focus on understanding how skill transfer impacts ACPs' performance and long-term viability. Capturing tacit knowledge is essential for fostering innovation and resilience. Identifying sources of tacit knowledge, defining critical roles, and addressing barriers to knowledge transfer, such as high staff turnover or organizational silos, are key. By addressing these challenges, ACPs can strengthen their sustainability and adaptability in an ever-changing environment.

## Key activities

- In situ sound projects
- Clubs and concerts
- Artistic residencies
- Research & development-reflective activities
- Social activities-reinsertion, migrants

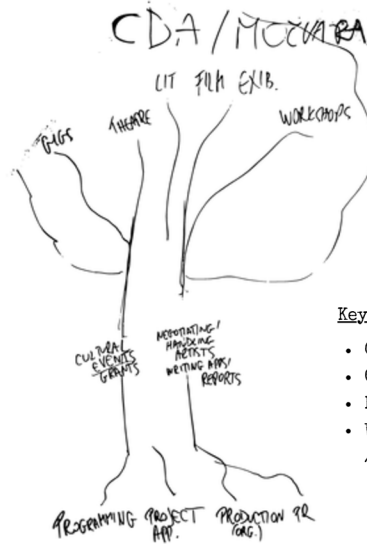


## Key processes/ practices

- Story and narrative building
- Writing applications-project engineering
- Co-development

## Core Competencies

- Artistic creation
- Music programming
- In situ - place activation- site development
- Project Engineering
- Partnership creation - Public relationships
- Curation



## Key activities

- Gigs
- Theater production
- Film screening
- Workshops

## Key processes/ practices

- Cultural events
- Grants
- Handling artists
- Writing reports /applications

## Core Competencies

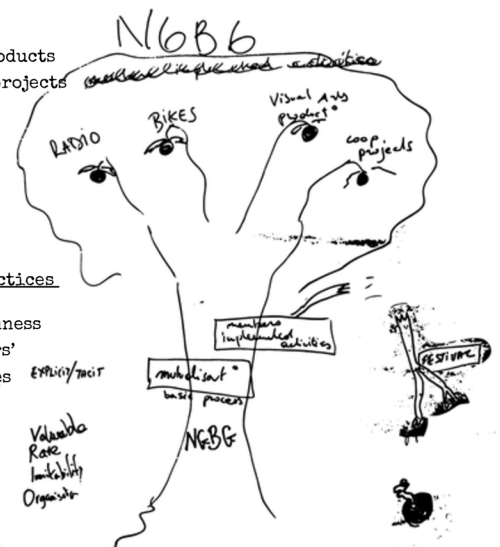
- Programming
- Project application
- Production
- Public relationship with various stakeholders

## Key activities

- Radio
- Bikes
- Visual art products
- Cooperation projects
- Festival?

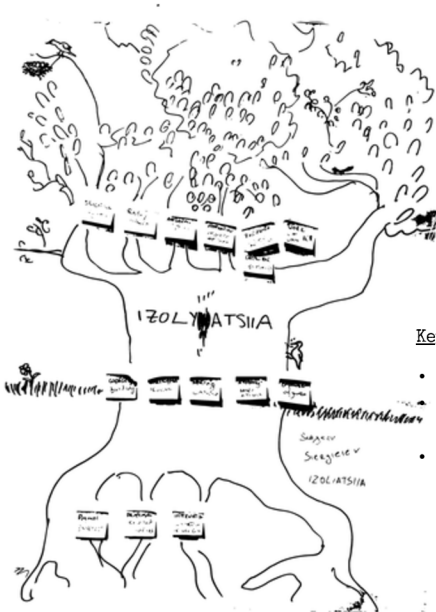
## Key processes/ practices

- Freedom and openness to members' initiatives



## Core Competencies

- Building relationships / connections
- Facilitating distributing resources
- Knowledge to produce mobile solutions
- Lack of financial model ?



## Key activities

- Educational projects
- Fund rising
- Network support
- Artistic residencies
- Cultural diplomacy

## Key processes/ practices

- Participatory processes
- Residence based approaches
- Collaboratory work with local ACPs

## Core Competencies

- Regional experience
- International connections
- Professional knowledge of local artistic context
- Capacity building



## Meeting Močvara's closest neighbours



After the degrowth activity on the third day, we visited D.B. Indoš's House of Extreme Music Theatre, located next to CDA and Močvara. CDA wanted to demonstrate how two different art practices can coexist harmoniously. The third organization in Močvara's former factory building is Pogon – Zagreb Center for Culture and Youth, a TEH associate member. The three entities collaborate closely, sharing resources, organizing joint events, and coordinating their schedules.

Indoš, a former member of the neo-avant-garde student theatre group Kugla Glumište, created influential performances from 1975 to 1982. Since 2005, in collaboration with various partners, he has produced performances with actors, musicians, and dancers. Indoš is best known for his experimental instruments, Shachtophones, made from repurposed materials like metal parts from machines. His work embodies low-tech, bricolage, DIY, and sustainable art practices.

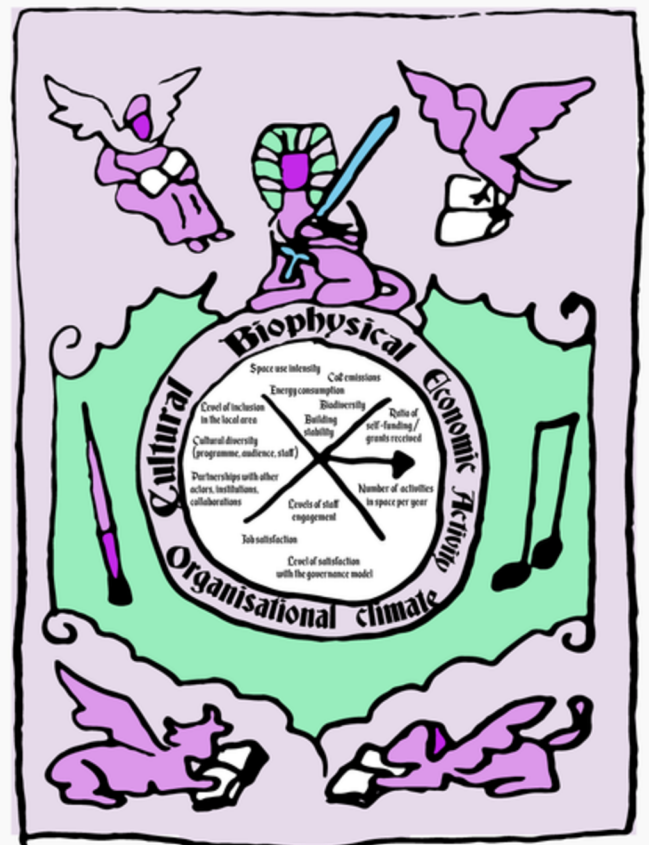
Indoš often holds workshops where the community can learn to play his Shachtophones. His performances involve collaboration with other artists, making his work deeply community-oriented. The partners met Indoš, who introduced his unique instruments, explaining their sounds and functions. Everyone had a chance to try playing them, offering a fun and inspiring experience before moving on to the next activity.

## Degrowth and Sustainability in ACPs

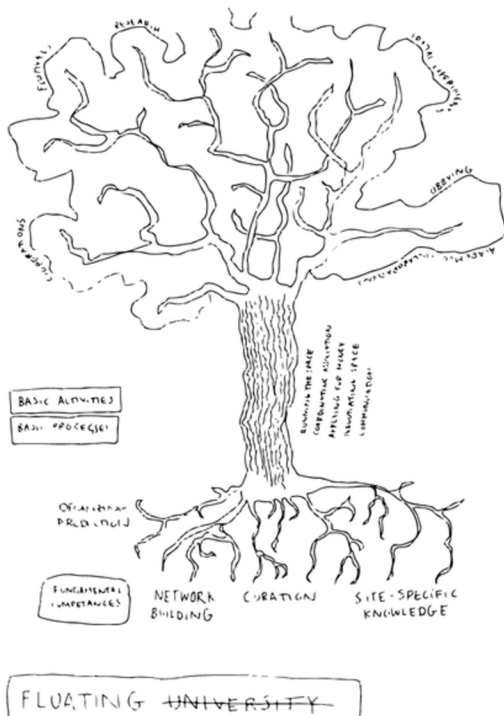
The third day began with Vedran Horvat's keynote and workshop on degrowth, a concept that has recently gained attention from political economy, ecological economics, and environmental activism. Horvat, from the Institute for Political Ecology, presented degrowth as a transition towards a society where prosperity is decoupled from economic growth, advocating for a system based on frugality, sharing, and ecological sustainability. Degrowth envisions a future of "frugal abundance," where communal care and resourcefulness replace excessive consumption.

In the Alter Places project, we explored how Alternative Cultural Places (ACPs) can support degrowth by integrating practices aligned with its principles. ACPs often face challenges related to scarcity and precarious sustainability, making it crucial to consider how degrowth can be implemented despite these conditions. Degrowth theory emphasizes the role of creative industries in societal transformation. ACPs engage in grassroots practices like bricolage, low-tech innovation, upcycling, and DIY approaches, which align with the degrowth paradigm. These practices, developed across Europe, serve not as one-size-fits-all solutions but as inspirational tools for ACP communities to create locally adapted solutions to sustainability challenges.

The Sustainability Wheel, a tool for ACPs, was introduced to address the lack of monitoring tools in ACP practices. This dynamic scoreboard helps ACPs assess their impact, resilience, and long-term sustainability, guiding them towards sustainable practices.



The ACP Sustainability Wheel



### Whispers of the trees as ACPs

Beneath the canopy, where shadows dance,  
Lies the secret of growth and sustainability- the unseen chance?  
The roots, deep-veined in the places atmosphere and ambiances  
Hold the tree steady, in time and space.  
Not in the branches, not in the height,  
But in hidden depths lies the tree's might.  
A network of informal encounters and connections, unseen, profound,  
Drawing strength from the soil, where riches abound.  
In Alternative Cultural Places roots mirror the core, the heart  
what they are capable, the unseen floor  
Foundation of vision, of purpose, with no plan,  
The grounding force behind every life span.  
Roots are resilience, anchoring well,  
Through storms of change, uncertainty, lack of engagement and market swell.  
They weave through the soil, both broad and deep,  
A system of sustenance, embedded they keep.  
They adapt to the earth, to drought, to flood,  
Seeking the essence in stone or in mud.



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