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Ljubljana – young and creative

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1. Introduction

Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia with a little less than 300.000 inhabitants could be described as a young city. The number of inhabitants has been slowly but steadily rising in the last 10 years. Around a quarter of its inhabitants are young, belonging to the group of 18 – 35 years of age. Additionally the city is also the home of the Slovenia's largest University with over 40.000 students thus attracting new students every year. If not international, Ljubljana is at least a national melting pot, bringing together creative energies of young people all over across the country.

Youth faces the same constraints as elsewhere: in theory being young having the freedom to pursue one's own creative ideas but in reality this means the lack of security. The youth are subject to the lack of stable jobs and thus less economic autonomy. This manifests for example in youth leaving their parent's homes at gradually later age – now the average is at 27 (for women) or even 30 (for men) years of age. The reason is pragmatic: it is cheaper and more convenient to live with one's parents. The perception of who is young is consequently extending from 25 to 30 to 35 to even 40 in some fields (notably architecture).

I asked some of my younger colleagues how they perceive the city. They are a group of people working in creative fields, such as architecture, music, design and science. On average they are 26 years old, finishing school or looking for first jobs. They commented that the city changed a lot in recent years for the better in terms of the quality of public transport, pedestrianized areas and the overall quality of life. Many observed the importance of sports, especially running, they pointed out the quality of the green public spaces. They also remarked the quality of new public spaces along the Ljubljana River that bring to life several outdoor cultural activities. The interviewed group of youth also noticed a lot of happening in the city: "There's sometimes so many different events going on at the same time, that I cannot attend everything that I would have liked". On the other hand, they commented extensively on the lack of opportunities to find work, especially when one is lacking experience. They even observed that the only way to find work is to create the job themselves. The other pitfall they mentioned were the difficulties in finding affordable housing. They also observed that more and more young people leave the city. Their main concerns were quite serious: employment opportunities (or the lack of thereof), and the scarcity of affordable housing.

The youth brings new ideas to the city, but one often wonders how well does the city respond to the needs of its young citizens in terms of housing, business opportunities and other needs. In previous paragraphs, I identified some issues felt by young people with the help of my colleagues. Among many interesting projects and initiatives, I have chosen a few that embody the approach of inhabitants of Ljubljana to those issues.

2. Affordable housing - project A Start-up Home – Housing for young people

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In the vein of housing, Faculty of architecture of Ljubljana last year devised a project for students. Students participated in *A Start-up Home – Housing for young people*, where they were working on developing innovative typologies of housing for the youth after they finishing university. There is a lack of suitable housing, it is impossible to buy apartments due to their exorbitant costs, the rental market is underdeveloped and the banks are reluctant to grant credits to young people. 60 students from several studios participated in the project together with their mentors and several experts from different fields. Students proposed solutions, such as new typologies, modular and open building, living in communities with large proportions of communal spaces, mobile and temporary housing as well as alternative models of financing the housing. The project amounted to a publication and a travelling exhibition. It also aroused the interest of national media about the topic. This project is the first one in the series of yearly projects where students of Faculty of architecture try to tackle imminent social and professional issues.

3. First real job - Barje Park

Faculty of architecture is quite active in the field of nurturing activation of students in real life projects and smoother entry of its students into the professional world. A nice example is a collaboration between the Faculty of Architecture, The Association of Architects and the City of Ljubljana: the project and realisation of the Barje Park.

Ljubljansko Barje – Moor is a large area south of Ljubljana, featuring exceptional natural and historical qualities. The area is a Natural park since 2008 and represents Slovenia's largest complex of wet- and grasslands. Biodiversity, interesting geological phenomena and exceptional archaeological characterize the 135 km² park. Despite being less than 5 km from the city centre, the area is relatively difficult to access due to the highway cutting the park from the city and the absence of organised entry points.

A workshop, under the name *Visions 8* was carried out. The aim of the workshop was to bring the space of the Ljubljana Moor closer to the inhabitants of Ljubljana through minimal intervention. In the first phase, students proposed a solution, based on research, and in the second phase, they realised it on the spot. A team of six students (Klara Bohinc, Andraz Keršič, Martin Kruh, Aljoša Lipolt, Duno Mujkič and Tamara Nemeth) and their mentor Rok Žnidarsič worked on the project from the first ideas to the realisation of the project for the Barje Park. The idea was to make the degraded area more accessible while respecting the sensitive natural environment. The interventions were kept to a (financial) minimum. The students worked closely with botanical and hydrological experts. They developed urban furniture, such as benches, toilets and footbridges made of sturdy and weather resistant charred timber. Onsite there were several abandoned or unbuilt huts whose concrete foundation are now handy picnic grounds. The project is ongoing: right now, the path is being extended towards the Church of the St. Michael on the Moor, built by Jože Plečnik.

4. Urban sport turned into business - The Urban Roof

The Urban Roof association addresses the topics of urban renovation, urban sports, providing employment and nurturing neighbourhood relations. A group of 5 youth from Nova Gorica, a town in the south west of Slovenia, decided to set up an urban sports centre in Ljubljana. They identified the issue of the lack of organised facilities for practicing skateboarding, rollerblades, BMX bicycles and other urban sports. They wanted to create an indoor urban sports gym for enthusiasts that would also serve as training ground for beginners.

Five years ago, they found a suitable place, a 600 sqm former production hall not too far from the city centre. The group loaned it at first for free and slowly transformed into a sports centre. The centre consists of a small bar with a skate shop, an indoor skate park, indoor climbing and a dance hall. They designed and built the interior themselves and are currently working on refurbishing the exterior as well.

The Urban Roof has become skateboarding and other urban sports and arts centre, that employs 21 people and caters to generations of young and less young skateboarders. They support their own competitive team of skateboarders, rollerblades and BMX riders. In order to nurture good relations with the neighbours, they offer free courses to children and adults living nearby. The

centre is slowly becoming an important social space for the, mostly residential neighbourhood. The group is also actively trying to establish urban sports as part of the school curriculum and official definitions of the sports.

The Urban Roof Association wanted at first to cater to their own needs for an interior urban sports facility. By setting up the school for children in a dedicated gym, they are constantly widening their range of customers and strengthening their role in the city economy. By becoming a gathering space for different generations of skateboarders, rollerbladers, interior climbers and urban dancers, they have created a real community.

5. Creating communities - *Poligon creative centre*

The idea of coworking – sharing a working space but not the employer - originated in the US and after 2012 it quickly spread throughout Europe. This new type of working community reflects the shift towards less stable jobs in the creative sector and towards more and more people working independently and thus in relative isolation.

Ljubljana is no stranger to this issues so several coworking initiatives arisen in the recent years. The most active among them being Poligon. The initiative joins several associations and is run by a couple of enthusiasts: Luka Piškorič, Eva Matjaž (Perčič), and many others. One of their main ideas is to build a community of people that can help each other and generate work for among each other by offering a more complete service. They are striving to push the collaboration among the members.

The group have settled in Tobačna, a former tobacco factory near the Ljubljana city centre. The building they are occupying is a part of a large industrial complex that has been a construction ground for several years now. During the construction boom prior to 2008 there have been ambitious plans to develop the whole area as a new residential quarter, but since the crisis, the project is on halt. Therefore, the collective has been granted the use of former industrial halls for an undefined but limited time.

They have done a nice job refurbishing the space and adapting it to coworking, despite the tight budget of only 600 EUR. Many of the future users collaborated in the renovation. The large hall retains the steel columns. Enclosed meeting room divides the space: a more social space near the entrance with a small cafe, and the coworking space with large desks behind it. Along on side of the space a row of smaller offices was set up. There is also a gallery hosting exhibitions of design, industrial design, and architecture. The design of the space is flexible and allows organisation of events – from workshops to renting out the place for conferences, parties and exhibitions.

The Poligon community is collaborating with many institutions, for instance the Museum of Architecture and Design and the Kino Šiška Centre for Urban Culture. Nevertheless, the practice exists independently from public sources of funding. What might come as a surprise is the fact that the practice is not financially sustainable despite many members, numerous events, and many great projects coming from the community, and the support, at least in principle, of institutions. Even after 4 years as the initiative and 2 years of running the Poligon centre the team, maintaining the space still work on a voluntary basis. The long-term plan of the Poligon Creative centre is to empower the self-employed working in the creative industries by creating a vital coworking community..

6. Conclusion

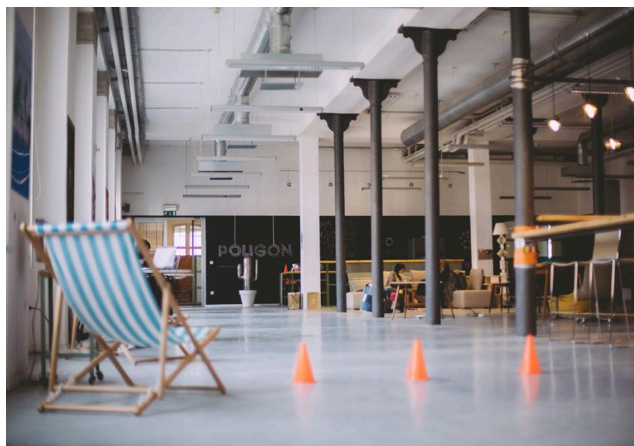
This article presents several initiatives that answer the issues identified in the introduction in a way that is specific for Ljubljana. They address the problems of housing for the young, finding jobs, gaining first experience and practicing the sports. In searching for answers, I spotted some trends. The projects are going on for the most part away from the city centre; they often use existing buildings; and focus on creating community. They rely on innovative ideas that consume little money, reflecting the lack of official financial support.

Many other interesting projects could not be extensively featured in this article. Some of them promote different uses of public space, such as the *Library under the Canopy* and *The Lightning Guerrilla*. Projects of exhibiting art semi publicly in private spaces have emerged in the last year thus challenging the art institutions. Two summer festivals of urban culture and music, *Festival*

urbane kulture, and *Urbano dejanje*, diversifying the musical offer in the city, marked the summer of 2015.

To conclude, Ljubljana is a city that is generally favourable to its young inhabitants, yet there are certain issues. Its young citizens can be trusted to find ways in which to address these issues in their own ways, tailored to the environment. Ljubljana's youth seem to be finding their way and developing interesting projects and initiatives.





PHOTOGRAPHS

Photo 1: The *A Start-up Home* is a project where professors identified the issue, the experts provided background information for the students, who were then given free hands to improvise and innovate within the provided framework. (Photo: Dessa gallery archive)

Photo 2: The project of *Barje Park* is a successful collaboration between an educational institution, professional association, and the city government. The project allowed young architects their first steps into their professional life, while considerably ameliorating the city's public space. (Photo: Andraž Keršič)

Photo 3: The *Urban Roof Association* set up a viable business model that now employs many people, giving them the jobs they thoroughly enjoy. What's more, they are creating a community for teenagers and youth and bringing social activities to otherwise almost exclusively residential area. (Photo: The Urban Roof Archive).

Photo 4: *Poligon Creative Centre* is a coworking space set in former Tobacco Factory. In the last 3 years, they have created a strong and growing community of freelance creative workers. Through events and workshops, they are promoting the entrepreneurship, crowdfunding as well as advice in setting up coworking communities elsewhere. (Photo: David Lotrič)

Photo 5: *My left Hand* - art exhibition in a private space: the exhibition of photographer Aleksandra Vajd in the Vila Pirkmajer, organized by Ada Finci Terseglav and Matic Vrabič. Such projects are challenging the official art institutions with a more personal approach. (Photo Matic Vrabič).

