

COLLECTIVE WORKSHOP

Transformational Encounters in the Trakia Economic Zone

Ina Valkanova

Abstract: The following article is a reflection on an action research project with stakeholders of a special economic zone in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. The article describes the process of engagement from the perspective of the workers and the managers of three international factories, with the aim to discover moments and entry points, for the positive social and spatial transformation of a global industrial space.

Keywords: Global Industry; Labor; Practice; Workshop; Urban Transformation.

On building an Active Engagement

I study contemporary global production in the specific case of a post-communist setting – Trakia Economic Zone (TEZ), in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. My initial interest in researching the global dynamics of production was triggered by my first encounter with TEZ in 2016. Trained as an architect, I struggled to make sense of the spatial reality of the zone. It seemed that the large factories, in the form of big boxes scattered around the periphery of Plovdiv, landed in the landscape almost accidentally. Observing the foreign trucks going in and out of the factories, I sensed that the project was a clear articulation of transnational exchange and the distribution of products and people. While TEZ is locally disembedded, it is globally connected.

In my work, I am interested in revealing how the dynamic of global production affects real places and people, and what the possible entry points are to transform those spaces from extractive projects into places with an added social and ecological value to the local community. Since I am interested in urban and social transformation, I naturally adopted a research trajectory focused on introducing change-action research. Action research can hereby be described as »a practice-changing practice« (Kemmis et al.

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1.

Visit from the municipality to Kuklen Industrial Park. Photographer: Ina Valkanova.



2.

Assembly line workers at Kuklen Industrial Park. Photographer: Ina Valkanova.

2014: 2). Action research is always linked to an existing practice, since it »primarily arises, as people try to work together to address key problems in their communities or organizations« (Reason/ Bradbury 2008: 1). In the case of TEZ I selected the following practices to engage with: International automobile companies in Kuklen Industrial Park, TEZ real-estate management, factory workers, and the local municipality of Kuklen. The selection of actor groups includes the most relevant actors and users of TEZ and is based on the level of influence over the transformation of TEZ, and on their distinct positions and (dis)connections. With the exception of TEZ management, which works closely with most of the actors, the other groups operate in their own distinct areas and rarely interact. The worker's group, for example, although crucial for the future of TEZ, is never included in decision-making processes and is therefore extremely disconnected from the spatial production of TEZ.

My research is a collaborative process that draws on collective knowledge and moves toward a collective goal and practical outcomes for the industrial zone. Such an approach comes with its own set of challenges. First, the research is conducted with various groups with different ambitions and positions. It requires a long-term commitment from each group and the building of trust among participants. Second, my role as a participant in this collective process requires a constant reflection on my own situatedness and agency (Kemmis et. al 2014: 1). Rejecting the subjective view of the researcher as a silent outsider from the beginning, I embraced my own »partial perspective«, (Haraway 1988) by recognizing my own motivation to engage with the process. From my initial observation of the zone, it became clear that the development followed a global set of codes and prescriptions, resulting in a universal architecture of the black box. What I want to find out is whether it is possible to bring in new narratives, such as ecology, landscape, local capacity and care. Therefore, I attempted to create a different configuration between practices where curiosity and experimentation can flourish, and create a space for reflection on the current societal conditions of TEZ.

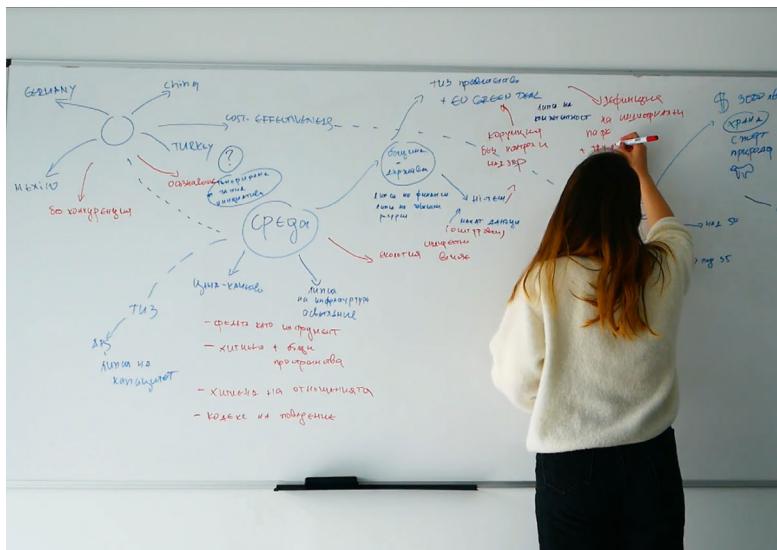
To understand how to transform the practice of TEZ, I first needed to know how the different actors operate in their everyday conditions. Therefore, I embedded myself within their organizational structure, which naturally led me to adopt various roles. For example, to understand the daily life of a factory worker, I conducted training as an assembly-line factory employee. To understand the dynamics of the local municipality, I worked as an advisor on the region's strategic plan. This role-play process allowed me to



3.

Factory for automobile lights in Kuklen Industrial Park. Photographer: Ina Valkanova.





4. - 5.

Workshop with factory managers. Photographer: Ina Valkanova.

gather knowledge about each actor's mode of operation. Based on this experience, I had a base on which I could challenge the common perceptions of the actors about their own position and agency, and find productive tensions in the system of TEZ.

I chose the joint workshop as a format where the actor groups could collectively rethink their own practice, conditions, and relations. In the article, I will present my reflections on two workshops – with the managers of three international companies and the workers of the same factories. It is important to note that their workshops are not isolated encounters but are formats of continuous reflections that are repeated and enriched throughout the research process.

Encounter 1 – Managers of International Automobile Supply Companies

TEZ is composed of three industrial parks – Maritza, Stryama, and Kuklen, all located on the periphery of Plovdiv. I focus on the park of Kuklen because, in my initial studies, the companies there showed the most interest in the process I aimed to start. The reason for their initiative is that they are part of the newest and smallest park and are still developing their strategy and position within the industrial landscape of Plovdiv. Since my project is goal-oriented and focused on improving the socio-spatial environment of TEZ, they saw the benefits of becoming part of it. The companies were highly interested in the insights on the desires of their employees. Bulgaria's shrinking demographic makes it extremely difficult to find and keep quality workers; therefore, any insight into the labor dynamic and workers' needs and wishes is highly valued by the management. While the managers face the same problems related to lack of roads, technical support, and labor force, they usually deal with them individually. Therefore, they saw my research process as an opportunity to engage and act as a group instead of individual firms. I took these entry points to quickly constitute a collective of four automobile factories, and started working to incorporate myself into their operation.

Within this process, I adopted the role of a consultant to find out how I can improve the general spatial and social environment of industrial park Kuklen. I spent about a week working in the administrative sector of each factory. Finally, I gathered the plant managers in a workshop, where they collectively described and reflected on their problem situation. As with any collaborative effort, this workshop exercise didn't go exactly as planned. One plant manager did not show up and did not respond to my calls; another one

also brought his human resources (HR) team, and the third one brought the director of a new factory in the zone, which I was not aware of. These situations and behaviors ultimately led to an inevitable loss of control over the process and revealed the everyday dynamic of the companies. My idea for the workshop was to use my own understanding of the plant managers situation as a basis on which we would include their perspectives and comments. This collaborative effort meant we had to draw on a whiteboard together. This did not happen, as one manager refused to draw, saying how »we will only sit and talk«. The others mimicked his attitude and the whole idea of a collaborative setting turned into a dialogue, which I was schematizing on the board. Even though most of the participants hadn't met before, interestingly, they behaved as a tight collective and acted in support of each other, which clearly showed that they understand themselves as part of the same system and social environment. The exercise consisted of an open dialogue about their most pressing problems, without any pre-given format and structure. All of the participants agreed that the quality of education and the lack of infrastructure are the biggest challenges they face, and painted a rich picture of the fragmentation of systems, activities, and responsibilities.

During the whole process the participants showed a certain attitude of »being in control« and not »taking directions«, but instead giving them. In the same way, this exercise also demonstrated the very decisive nature of the managers in the clear way that they expressed their desired changes for the future, such as the strict monitoring of law implementation, better coordination with educational facilities, and a higher quality of urban and landscape design. But while those managers demonstrated a certain degree of dominance and privilege, they also displayed elements of powerlessness that are being associated with the working class. This tension is primarily a result of the global organization of production. The factories that they operate are all part of a worldwide network and are subordinate to a global western headquarters, which means that the local managers barely influence global decisions. Often, they cannot implement their desired meaningful changes in their operation. Each headquarters has a global marketing strategy and strict rules on material use, space design, and processes that need to be implemented locally.

Additionally, automobile brands use general standards such as International Automotive Task Force IATF, Verband der Automobilindustrie VDA

and ASSET, which prescribe operation, spatial, and security rules.¹ Each participant was painfully aware of this precarious position – being in power locally, while being powerless in a global system. This position results in a contradictory worldview which combines the perception of privilege and power with the perception of subordination under a labor system, which is similar to the perception that is often assumed of the workers.

What I was mainly trying to understand with this initial workshop was the personal motivation of the factory managers to participate in the process, and what problems they saw as the most urgent.

As I previously stated, the fight for a qualified labor force was one of the main reasons for the willingness of the managers to create a better working space. Since the managers are also part of the community, they work and live in the region, and there was a genuine interest in improving the space, ecologically, socially, and spatially. Another crucial aspect was the requirements of the global companies' headquarters for green and sustainable local politics. Yet, while the global headquarters demand responsible local actions, they do not provide any knowledge or support to the local industrial plants. The three companies saw the process as a way to experiment with green and socially responsible initiatives. While the willingness for action is there, it is important to note that it remains to be seen to what extent this promise will materialize, or when an action is actually budgeted for and implemented.

Encounter 2 – Factory Workers

The second series of workshops I performed were with the employees of two of the automobile factories I engaged in my research. Initially, while approaching the subject of TEZ, I only had contact with the dominant figures of the zone – plant managers, developers, and mayors, etc. But, due to the nature of the research, it was crucial to include multiple perspectives – and the workers' point of view was one of the most important. I was determined to give them a voice because I assumed they did not have one. Pre-conditioned to think that factories are spaces of mysteries and secrets and that penetrating the closed doors will be difficult, I expected to struggle to gain access to the workers. However, this was not the case. Most factory manag-

¹ IATF, VDA, and ASSET are the three quality management systems for organizations in the automotive industry. They are used by automotive firms to audit current and potential suppliers.



6. – 7.

Stills from video interviews of factory workers in Kuklen Industrial Park.

Video and stills: Ina Valkanova.

ers were very interested in my research project and provided me with unlimited access to information, spaces, and people. I quickly realized the workers (as a group) were a potent fragment and driver of the zone due to the demographic dynamic of Bulgaria – the country is the fastest-shrinking nation worldwide (Vollset et al. 2020). This labor dynamic is the reason, I believe, for the strong commitment of the power players to my research project and my ability to access the usually closed doors of the factory space. Each company is trying to attract and keep workers by providing better working conditions and negotiating with headquarters for higher salaries while listening to the workers' everyday needs.

However, the workers did not perceive themselves as a dominant influential force. This perception was clearly visible in the way that workers stated their needs and desired changes. In the interviews I conducted, most of the factory employees were generally content with their working conditions. They greatly appreciated a regular salary paid on time, clean spaces such as bathrooms, and overtime pay for working extra hours. These things should be considered a standard in a European context and not services with added value. Although these things should be considered a standard in a European context and not services with added value, contemporary industrial space is still understood as a space for the bare minimum that does not need to contribute to the local community and environment. These perceptions are rooted in Bulgarian industrial history where, under the communist regime, factories were associated with pollution, dirty spaces, and challenging labor conditions. The chaotic transition to democracy gave rise to many unregulated informal and corrupted practices, which resulted in insecure payment and problematic situations.

These accounts from my workshop relate, in a surprising way, to the question Mario Tronti asks in his work on the Fiat Factory in Rome: »What happens when the workers themselves refuse to present demands to capital, in other words, when they refuse the entire trade-union level, refuse the contractual form of relation to capital?« (Tronti/ Anastasi, 2020: 211). He argues that the high point of revolutionary struggle in a classically capitalist country will emerge precisely when the capitalist side proposes improvements and not the other way around. Surprisingly, this argument means that dismantling an organizational structure, such as a labor union, actually gives more power to the workers. This is precisely what is happening in Kuklen, not however, as a conscious revolutionary act but rather as a result of a failed transition to democracy. On one side the workers lost faith in the agency of the labor union,



8. – 9.

Outdoor setting of the workshop with factory workers.

Photographer: Ina Valkanova.

due to the corrupted union practices of the 1990s, and on the other side, workers in post-communist countries are not dependent on a work contract, since there are always open positions in many factories in the region. Workers can easily switch to another factory in Plovdiv, or even in Western Europe, since Bulgaria is part of the EU and thus can take advantage of the free labor movement. Therefore, even without the agency of the labor union, workers are treated with care, as a highly valuable resource.

Starting from this understanding of tensions, I conducted a series of workshops with factory workers with a similar initial format to that described in the encounter with the plant managers above – to reflect upon their situation, problems, and desires. The results and environment of the workshops changed as the work progressed. In the first workshop, it became clear that the workers behaved from a position of weakness, doubting the possibility of change or that anyone would finance meaningful interventions. This did not mean that they are actually weak; it only means that they perceived themselves as powerless. Instead of starting from my own understanding of the situation, as in the workshop with the factory managers, I asked them to draw a scheme of their everyday work situation, the places they enjoy most, and the activities they would like to improve. It was the first time that the workers met someone from another factory. There was a clear division between the two groups from the beginning of the workshop, with a strong identification with, and a sense of belonging to, their respective corporations. Each group showed a strong curiosity about the conditions and the working methods of the other, whereby both groups strongly defended their respective companies' policies. Unlike the companies' managers, the workers took my direction to draw and schematize on the whiteboard, even though it was obvious they were not comfortable with this setting. It became evident that, unlike the companies' managers, the workers are used to taking directions and engaging in activities outside of their comfort zone.

I noticed that the participants were not comfortable in the space where we conducted the workshop. It was a corporate room, designed for training and did not provide inviting conditions for creativity and openness. For the second series of workshops, I changed the setting and prepared a breakfast outside in the workers' break space. The fact that we were positioned in an area that the workers related to rest and peace contributed to an informal and vibrant discussion. The initial division between factories was gone and the workers openly shared their struggle with being under pressure to perform and comply with quality standards.

Interestingly, they expressed similar problems, such as the lack of good ventilation, a low quality of machines, and lack of green spaces. Also, in the outdoor breakfast setting, they became creative and radical ideas came to light, such as including animals in the landscapes, creating leisure facilities, dance lessons, and mental health spaces. Interestingly, they made themselves responsible for most of the activities they designed, such as organizing a shared library and planting trees together. While it was initially more challenging to provoke the workers group than the group of managers, the workers engaged in a much more creative process once they opened up.

Crafting the Space for Transformation

The knowledge gathered through this process of engagement reveals on one side, the practical problems of a post-communist industrial development, and on the other, certain relations and behavioral patterns that inform the actions of both groups. This question of what motivates action is the primary concern of Pierre Bourdieu's work (Hillier/Rooksby 2005: 2). In response, he coined the term »habitus« – individual and collective predispositions shaped by past events and structures that shape current practices and systems and, that importantly, condition our very perceptions of them (Bourdieu 2019).

He recognizes social relations among actors as being structured by, and in turn contributing to the structuring of, the social relations of power among different positions. I use the term habitus as defined by Jean Hillier and Emma Rooksby – habitus as social space: as a sense of one's place and a sense of the other's place. They argue that social space is translated in physical space and that a certain world-view may change when physical surroundings are transformed (Hillier/Rooksby 2005: 399).

The presented encounters revealed the participants' specific societal predispositions. When I brought up the results of the worker's workshops to one of the managers, he said that it seemed that he should plant a forest around the factory, but that factories don't plant trees in green spaces. To my question of who determines that industry doesn't create nature, he replied – »we just don't«. Bourdieu's term habitus can be seen as much as an agent of continuity and tradition as it can be regarded as a force of change. To trigger meaningful transformation it is not enough to present specific problem solutions. We need to create a setting where not only physical transformation is possible but where mental change can also occur, and perceptions can be deconstructed to instigate change. In the case of TEZ, this would mean con-

figuring encounters that can deconstruct the perception of what modern production should and can do. As illustrated, sometimes a simple change of spatial environment, such as moving a workshop to an outside, natural environment, can create room for openness and change the perceptions and desires of the actors. The format of a workshop has been a handy tool for creating such a space for dialogue. However, such formats can only be valuable for transformation processes if they are repeated with the same actors, enriched, and adapted as a performance test ground.

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