

Building Agency in *Corso pro nás*: A Project of Feminist Planning Culture

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Abstract: This article presents a case study of a participatory project in Czechia and analyzes its contribution to the shifting of local planning culture toward a feminist one. The project aimed to be a grassroots precedent for participatory planning in the city. It intended to create a future vision for the underused modernist object *Corso*, while building agency: this means support of the capabilities of local actors to realize the vision beyond the project's framework and undertake similar initiatives elsewhere. Through the lenses of planning culture, agency, and assemblage, this article reflects on the spaces created by the project: The envisioned futures of *Corso* and the lived spaces of the project itself. It highlights aspects of these spaces intended to build agency, while also analyzing them as manifestations of feminist planning culture. The project did not visibly succeed in building local agency or shifting planning culture, with obstacles including its duration, funding, local capacities, and public interest – all symptomatic of/conditioned by the current planning culture. However, its potential becomes evident when viewed within the context of the larger ecology of the spatial practices of the actors involved. Its model of shifting planning culture through agency-building could therefore apply to other contexts as well.

Keywords: Agency; Architecture; CEE; Czechia; Feminism; Participation; Planning Culture.

Introduction

After three decades of transitioning from a socialist regime, the urban reality of Czechia, along with other countries in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region, exemplifies neoliberal values. These are evident in both the built environment and the planning culture that shapes it (Hirt 2012; Kiss 2018; Stanilov 2007; Sýkora/Bouzarovski 2012). Both territories have been transitioning from a centralist socialist modernist planning toward a more democratic and neoliberal one. The first transition has however been more successful than the second: Deregulation, decentralization, and a general distrust of authorities weakened the position of strategic planning. Many cities have consequently been left with no city head architect, as is the case in Ústí nad Labem, the city addressed in this article. The built environment is thus predominantly controlled by changing politicians and private investors who typically promote short-sighted, profit-oriented development, such as the construction of shopping malls at the expense of the city's historical fabric. This is the case in Ústí and elsewhere. This market-oriented planning, which dismisses anything social under the guise of »zombie socialism« (Chelcea/Druță 2016), contributes to urban realities that are precarious for many and advantageous for only a few.

Feminist architecture and planning have long offered other ways of making space as a response to the shortcomings of neoliberalism. Central to feminist spatial practices is the inclusion of voices of marginalized groups – women and other humans and non-humans oppressed by industrial capitalism – with the aim of empowering them and improving their living conditions. Importantly, these efforts are not solely led by women, but by those who create space for various marginalized groups while materializing feminist values and approaches such as diversity, multiplicity, collectivity, subjectivity, empathy, intersectionality, and ethics of care. While the compendia of feminist spatial practices (Coleman et al. 1996; Petrescu 2007; Rendell/Penner/Borden 2007; Brown 2011; Schalk/Kristiansson/Mazé 2017; Frichot/Gabrielsson/Runting 2018) do not include many practitioners from the CEE region, our previous research (Tabáčková 2022) has identified a handful of practitioners in Czechia and Slovakia. The authors of this article, along with others in the core group of the project described here, are affiliated with organizations that practice feminist values. While our prior research focused on the overall practices of these organizations, this article delves into one specific case in which the authors directly participated as

architects: *Corso pro nás* [*Corso for us*], a co-creation project centered on envisioning and enacting futures for an underused modernist complex called *Corso*. By describing the envisioned and lived spaces of the project, the paper presents a case of materializing feminist values in Czechia and explores whether feminist spatial practices can offer solutions where the status quo falls short.¹

Furthermore, the article introduces the concept of feminist planning culture, a term not yet widely used in feminist spatial discourse. This concept provides a framework for examining the necessary changes needed to create the conditions required for the project *Corso pro nás* to continue and for similar projects to take place. For, as Lokšová (2023) demonstrates in her research on participation in Czechia, while there are numerous precedents and manuals, planning culture remains largely resistant to participation, particularly participation that empowers marginalized groups. The experiences of the Spolka collective, gained from working in this field for nearly a decade, align with these findings. As such, this article analyzes the project not only as an element of feminist planning culture but also as a means of shifting the current planning culture toward a feminist one. The project sought to achieve this by building agency. Drawing on Giddens, we define agency as the capability to »act otherwise« (1987), which in this context entails the capability to (continue to) create space in a feminist way rather than adhering to the standard practices. The article presents our findings: Whose and what capabilities we found necessary for the continuation of the project, as well as the elements of the project intended to nurture them.

The project came to a halt when the funding ran out, which may be perceived as a failure to establish agency. The article's final section reflects on this outcome while discussing aspects of the existing planning culture that hindered the materialization of feminist values through the chosen architectural format. This sheds some light on aspects of planning culture that need to change. Despite the »failure«, the article discusses how this, and

1 We would like to thank Gallery Hraničář and all participants of the *Corso pro nás* project, including our colleagues at Spolka for making the project possible, as well as the curators of the exhibition »Common Groundings« for providing space for reflection on the project. We are also very grateful to Meike Schalk, Angela Million, Hannah Klug, Christian Kloss, Nils Grube, and members of the Integrated Research Training Group (MGK) at the Collaborative Research Centre 1265 »Re-Figuration of Spaces« for their comments on the text. Finally, we are very thankful for the valuable feedback from the two anonymous reviewers and the editors of this issue who helped us to strengthen the original text.

similar architectural interventions, contribute toward a feminist planning culture when seen in the context of the larger ecology of local spatial practices.

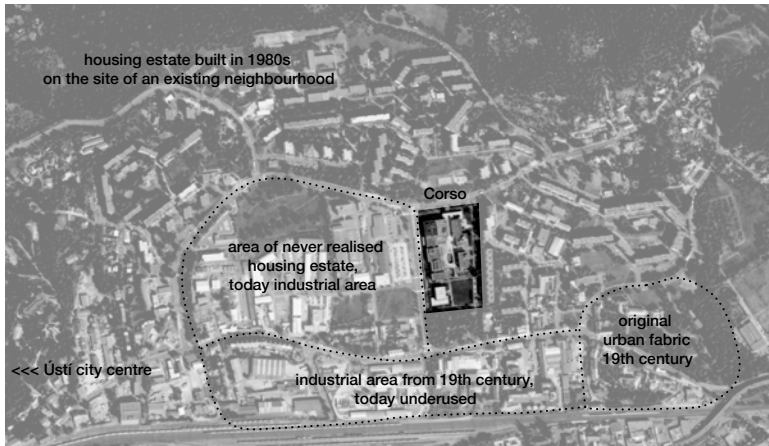
Materials and Methods

Corso was created as a multi-functional object at the heart of the unfinished modernist housing estate Krásné Březno in Ústí (see fig. 1) to provide services for the neighborhood and beyond. Since the regime change in the 1990s and the subsequent privatization, the original social functions have been gradually leaving *Corso*, with the building now owned by three private parties and the city (see fig. 2). Informal interviews with locals revealed fond memories of spending time in *Corso* shopping or for children's activities. Today, however, much of the space remains empty, as the same neighbors admit they haven't visited *Corso* in years. The combination of underuse and fragmented ownership has led to the slow deterioration of the built infrastructure. According to one of the janitors, many spaces remain empty due to their inconvenient size and the challenges associated with renovating the interconnected modernist structure.

Corso's future has been a topic of discussion in Ústí for some time, but not an urgent one. A few local planners have proposed grand solutions to »fix« the problem of *Corso* and the declining neighborhood by developing the neighborhood's industrial zones and creating a more human-scale urban environment. However, due to the lack of interest from the private sector, the absence of a city head architect for decades, and subsequent deficiencies in the capacity for strategic planning, the city has made minimal plans until recently. It currently owns the public elevated platform (see fig. 2), which they are considering demolishing, and one-quarter of *Corso*, which they have recently decided to renovate to increase space for the police. Although these renovation plans were canceled for reasons unrelated to the *Corso* project, they were the catalyst for the project described here. According to Aleš, a local who gave the initial impetus for the project, the renovation did not consider the needs of the locals as there was no participation, and the proposal does not reflect the actual needs of the neighborhood.²

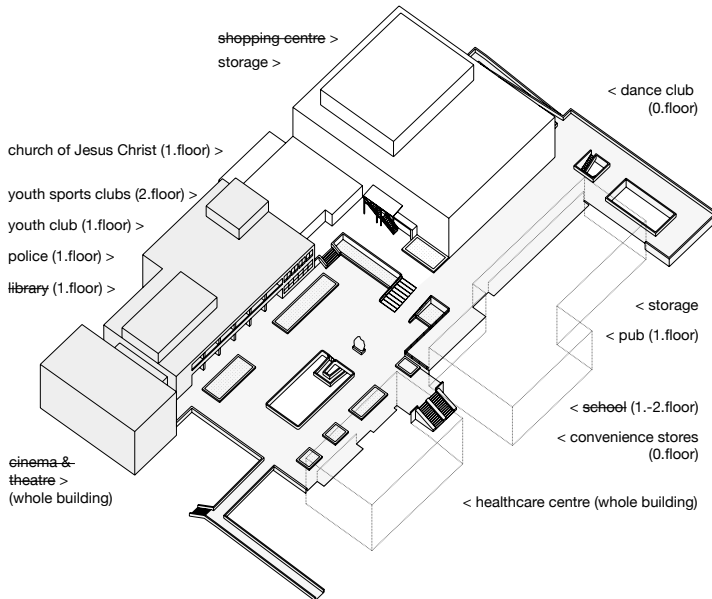
The project was set in motion by Martina Johnová, Director of the Hraničář gallery in the center of Ústí. Since Martina's arrival as the gallery

2 This is a standard procedure in Czechia: no participation until active citizens protest.



1.

Corso in its urban context. Graphics: Zuzana Tabačková, Viktória Mravčáková, 2024.



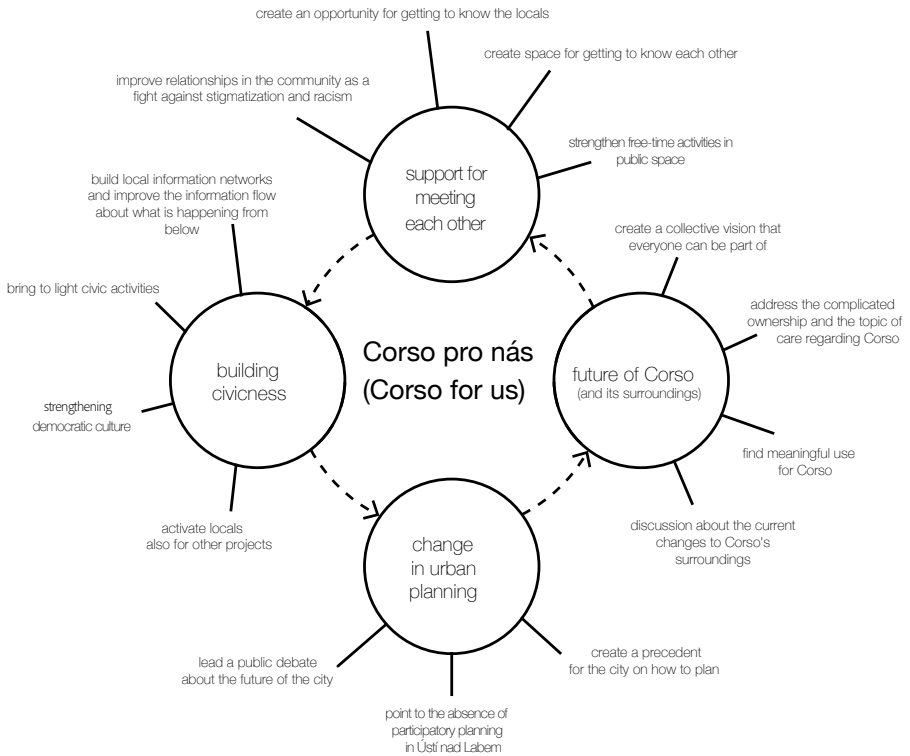
2.

Corso, municipality-owned spaces in grey. Showing key existing and previous uses. Graphics: Zuzana Tabačková, Viktória Mravčáková, 2024.

director a few years ago, the gallery has focused on the critical perspectives of local urban issues and investigated them through artistic research, aiming to influence Ústí's urban culture. *Corso pro nás* is their first major project of urban militant artistic research. It builds on their earlier research about Ústí's brutalist architecture, through which they aimed to change the public's perspective on large socialist, modernist objects like *Corso* and find new ways of caring for them rather than demolishing them. To collectively investigate the topic of *Corso*, Martina assembled a group of like-minded individuals to form the project's core group. As most of them were local arts students or artists, and many were also members of activist groups and movements, they all had their own interests to act or learn through the project and thus participate in it *pro bono*. Martina also invited us, the Spolka collective, to join them. Having collaborated once before, when giving a workshop during Hraničář's series on the topic of who owns the city, we found that we share similar attitudes and values about city-making. In other words, the planning cultures that Spolka and Hraničář strive for are aligned, and both are formed by feminist principles.

The project was scheduled to last nine months, due to the acquired funding (see fig. 4 for project's overview). Stemming from local needs around *Corso*, Hraničář's long-term agenda, and Spolka's interests and skills, the core group set ambitious goals for the short project as seen in figure 3. In practice, the project aimed to collaboratively design a vision for *Corso* during public events in May and June. The core group also hoped to build local capabilities (referred to in the project as »civicness« or »local agency«) to take the first steps toward realizing this vision after the initial funded period. The project also aimed to inspire others by serving as a precedent for participatory planning in Ústí, something which had not been done in the city before, according to the core group members. The shifting of planning culture underpins these aims, although it was not explicitly addressed during the project.

The term »planning culture« is used in planning literature to describe spatial planning as a cultural practice. Levin-Keitel and Othengrafen offer a concise definition: »The sum of institutionalized or shared planning practices in a society« (2016: 79. Translation: authors). As architectural practice is part of this sum, it both shapes, and is shaped by planning culture. To better understand this relationship, we use Reimer's definition of planning culture to analyze the architectural practice of *Corso pro nás* and the obstacles it encountered. Reimer defines planning culture as including »material elements ... like administrative competencies, legal and planning frameworks,



3.

Aims of the project as initially decided by the core group. Graphics: Viktória Mravčáková, 2022.

strategies, and concepts ... [and] *difficult to grasp elements* ... like individual and collective values and worldviews, as well as internalized actions» (2016: 26. Translation: authors, emphasis added). This offers a lens through which to identify elements of the project that manifested or were dependent on the existence of a feminist planning culture.

To grasp the many elements of planning culture, we view space as an assemblage, a concept introduced by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) that is increasingly influential in architecture. Through this lens, space is more than a mere container. As Dovey explains: »assemblage is not a thing nor a collection of things. Buildings, rooms, trees, cars, gates, people, and signs all connect in certain ways, and it is the connections between them that make an assemblage« (2013: 134). While this theory was not explicitly thematized in the project, it reflects its spatial practice. Bringing together the concept of assemblage and Reimer's elements of planning culture, the space of the focus group can consequently be seen as an assemblage of *material elements* like casual clothes, poor acoustics, a well-lit room, tasty coffee, vegan cookies, colorful foils, as well as *difficult to grasp elements* like skepticism about participation, racism, and attentive listening. This approach was used, not to meticulously document each space, but as a lens through which to perceive it during its design and later description here.

The concept of agency served as another theoretical lens, helping us to better understand the project's aim to build the local capabilities to continue transforming *Corso* beyond the project's funding. This formulation of the project's aim already reflected Giddens's definition of agency, which we, the architects, introduced to the core group's discussion during the project. As mentioned above, according to Giddens, agency »presumes the capability of ›acting otherwise«« (1987: 216). In the case of an architectural intervention, we translate this into the capabilities to do architecture otherwise, which is what we mean when referring to agency in this project. Through the project, we explored what and whose capabilities needed strengthening to realize this vision of *Corso* and do architecture otherwise. This article describes our findings concerning the agency of humans and non-humans and clarifies the vague theoretical term through practice while analyzing aspects of the spatial practice intended to nurture this.

This leads us to the methodological aspects of the project, which can also be considered as transdisciplinary reflexive design (cf. Buchert 2021) – a collaborative research through architectural practice exploring the concept of local agency and how to build it. The participatory process was continuously

co-designed by the core group during regular meetings, resulting in ongoing changes. For example, the initial idea to establish a week-long citizen university focused on the future of *Corso* evolved into a series of spaces outlined in figure 4. While the ideas for participatory formats mainly originated from us, the architects, who played a consulting role in the project, other members of the core group, the locals, contributed their knowledge of Ústí and the diverse expertise of activist groups, such as methods of community organizing. The local members were also responsible for the production of individual formats, meaning the actual creation of the spaces, which significantly influenced the project's final shape. Therefore, the project can be seen as our collective response, embedded in diverse knowledges, to the question of how to build agency.

The project and the co-creation process behind it are documented in various formats and media, including protocols from core group meetings, materials generated during these meetings and public events, photos of them, email exchanges, grant applications, promotional materials, and personal notes. Building on these documents and informal discussions throughout the process, we, the authors of this article, reflected on the project by creating a drawing of it for the Hraničář gallery's exhibition »Common Grounding«, where parts of the project were displayed after its conclusion. Figure 4 is a simplified version of this visualization. We used it to analyze which aspects of the project contributed to the building of local agency. The drawing also shows aspects of spaces and formats that were planned but not realized, but which we believe would be crucial for building local agency. This drawing serves as the foundation for the subsequent section. Since a significant portion of the project was led by locals, the authors of this article do not have all the information about it. We addressed the subjectivity of our account, however, by reviewing the drawing with the core group and discussing the project with the director, Martina Johnová, one year after its completion.

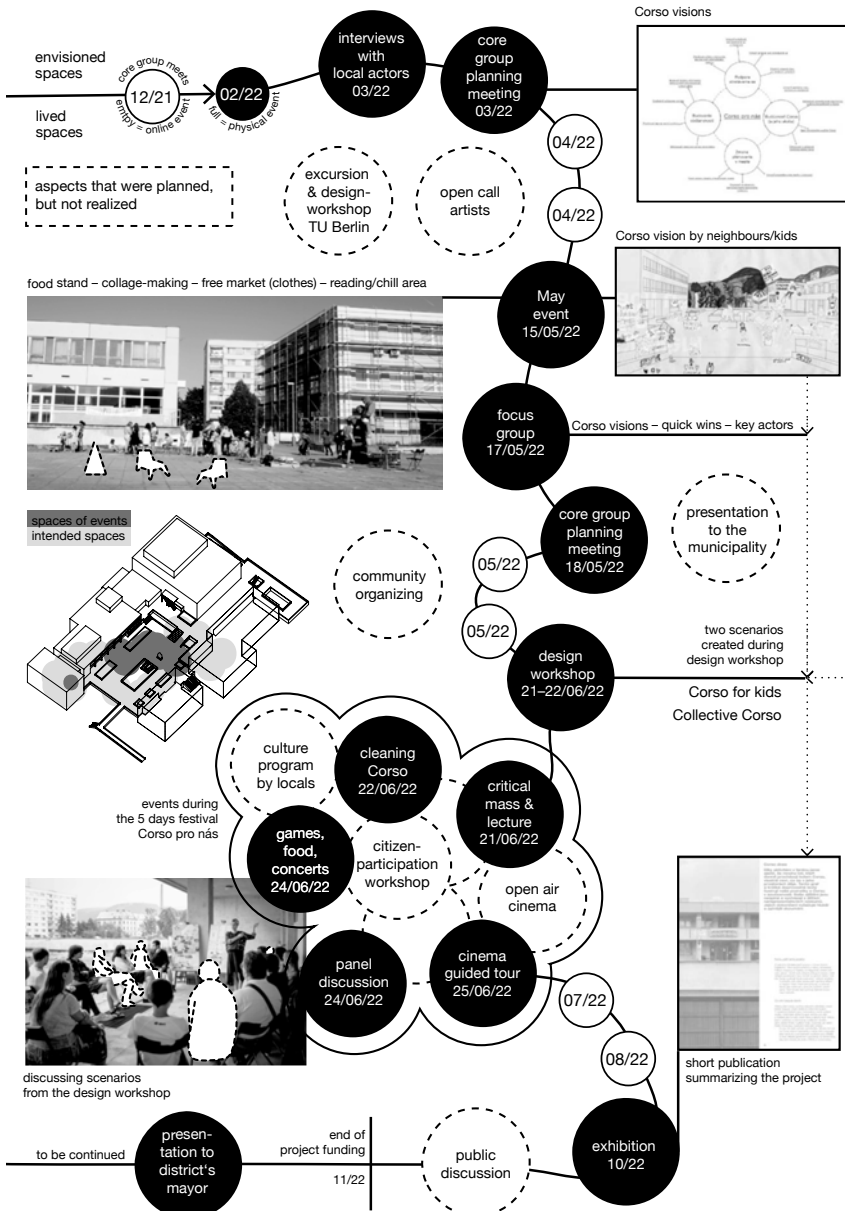
Building Agency

This section analyzes the project by merging the two lenses described above: portraying it as a materialization of feminist planning culture while highlighting aspects intended to build agency. The basis for this analysis is the project drawing in figure 4, itself an analysis of the project. The drawing is divided into two, separately showing the two types of spaces through which planning culture materialized: The *lived spaces* created through participatory

formats like focus groups, interviews, and other public events where *Corso*'s vision was shaped and capabilities to realize it were strengthened, and the *envisioned spaces* materialized in *Corso*'s created visions. Following Reimer's definition of planning culture, the text pays attention to both the project's *material elements* and those *difficult to grasp* as it describes building agency through the materialization of a feminist planning culture in these two spaces.

The final vision for *Corso* is materialized in a short publication. It summarizes our findings and suggests a process of transformation. The vision retains most of *Corso*'s existing social programs like the youth club, health care center, and music club while adding more public services and reinstating the public library and theater/cinema. This underscores the importance of existing assets and expands spatial provision for various socially disadvantaged groups while returning *Corso* to its original function and reimagining its social role today. Thus, the vision nurtures continuity with the past instead of proposing another sudden departure from it, as happened with the regime change. Similarly, while cautious about sudden changes, it suggests a gradual transition into the future using smaller steps. To enhance the space's capability to act differently, the vision proposes partly demolishing the public platform and energetically renovating the object. Maintenance utilities such as a flat for *Corso*'s janitor, a neighborhood management unit, and a consortium of *Corso*'s owners and users are also proposed to manage its operation as a common. Through this, the vision details who is needed to realize this future. As we learned through collaborative design, *Corso*'s future is only possible through close collaboration among the civic, public, and private sectors. However, all this is just an example of a future vision of *Corso* according to feminist values, as our project consisted mainly of research into what is possible and only included a few locals. Therefore, the most important part of the vision is the realization of a process similar to this project, which is led by the municipality to start the path toward a *Corso* rooted in local needs.

The creation of this vision was also intended to strengthen capabilities to do architecture otherwise. Aspects of this vision can thus be seen as various forms of knowledge about what is possible and how to get there. These were intended to nurture participants' capabilities to imagine *Corso* according to their needs and empower them to do so. These forms of knowledge were mostly developed through collaborative designing, where we, the architects, introduced participants to new concepts for *Corso* and learned more about the



4.

Corso project through the lens of building agency. Graphics: Zuzana Tabačková, Viktória Mravčáková, 2024.

building ourselves. This occurred in spaces like meetings of the core group, a focus group, a design workshop, a panel discussion, and the project's final exhibition (see fig. 4). We offered various formats to reach different actors and created accessible spaces to encourage all kinds of people to envision *Corso* differently. To achieve this, we paid attention to spatial aspects like furniture arrangement, word choice, and accessible design tools such as collages (see these in fig. 4). It was also important to create all of the project's spaces in *Corso* or the surrounding neighborhood, which we, as the diagram in figure 4 shows, did not manage. We also moderated the process to keep the spaces open for everyone, for instance by choosing simple language and not materializing racist ideas from some participants.

Throughout the project, we didn't just discuss tools and instruments to achieve the vision but also tested parts of it in practice. During the May and June events, we implemented new facilities at *Corso*, such as a playground and a cultural space. Through this, we tested the capabilities of the physical space and learned about the limitations of *Corso*'s platform as a welcoming space due to the raised platform's low footfall and the unbearable heat in May. Furthermore, the production of these events provided an opportunity to test people's capabilities by asking them to contribute from their positions as citizens, planners, or politicians. We requested that the municipality give us access to *Corso*'s city-owned spaces, as we originally planned to organize all activities there and through that test these spaces. However, it was only on the very last day of the project that we managed to get a guided tour of the spaces and not much more. We also asked key actors how they could contribute during interviews. Despite a few offers like the local library organizing a public reading, the Scouts lending us equipment, or the primary school offering us a space for the focus group and dance performance, no actors actually got involved. In the focus group, we asked about quick wins for the June event and who could implement them to realize our visions. For instance, a local politician offered to present the project in the city, but the momentum was not sustained, and none of the promises were fulfilled. Through these experiences, we learned about the low capabilities, or perhaps *capacities*, of the actors around *Corso*. The events thus relied on the core group's resources and networks.

Shifting Planning Culture

One key obstacle to realizing the project was the lack of capacities rather than capabilities within civic society – the core group and the key actors we approached. The activist/civic scene in Ústí and Czechia is relatively small, with nearly everyone involved in multiple projects simultaneously. *Capacities* are allocated based on urgency or interest, which the *Corso* project apparently lacked. Furthermore, most members of the core group volunteered for the project, as funding for such initiatives is scarce. Considering the unrealized aspects of the project, we can conclude that it was too ambitious for the core group. Limited capacities, combined with the burden of production on locals, led the core group meetings to focus solely on project management and task-checking. This left little time for discussion, a crucial element missed by the group in order to maintain their interest in the project, as reported by Martina Johnová.

This leads us to reconsider our methodological approach and the ways in which we can create a more caring and empowering atmosphere in future projects. The environment in which design occurs is namely also an element of planning culture. One approach could involve relieving our partners of their production responsibilities while ensuring that their voices matter in decision-making rather than management. However, this strategy is contingent on acquiring additional funds to avoid transferring precarious conditions to architects. Another long-term strategy involves building the capabilities of those who should have the capacity for projects like *Corso* as part of their job, such as municipality planners and politicians – something the project aimed for but did not succeed in achieving.

Another obstacle was the apparent lack of the local authorities' interest in *Corso* and its future. According to Martina's reports from her presentations of the project to the district mayor and the new city head architect, the city has other urgent priorities, such as the planned high-speed rail route Prague–Berlin, »the hole« – a decades-old building site in the city center, or the unification of Ústí's public space after decades of neglect. The new office of the city head architect currently only employs four people, so it may take time to address *Corso*. The situation is further impacted by the ongoing brain drain in Ústí, which also impacts the city's overall culture. However, even with more municipal capacities, *Corso* might never become important enough, because the sensitive handling of modernist buildings and participatory, place-based planning are rarely urgent for the current status quo.

Their urgency increases when seen from other perspectives, for instance the feminist one. The project hoped to convey this perspective to these actors, but hardly any of them attended our activities, possibly due to the management issues discussed above.

This leads us to reflect on the format of the architectural intervention. To materialize feminist values, the project took the shape of a communicative planning process, one that the city would initiate and lead. However, the municipality did not participate in or openly support it, leaving us without a key partner in a process whose effectiveness relies on such collaboration. On the one hand, this format seemed appropriate considering the need to build the capabilities of the municipality and politicians, as *Corso pro nás* could serve as a direct case study for the kind of processes they would initiate. On the other, realizing this format without city support and with no clear plan to continue the project beyond the funding period could be detrimental to shifting planning culture. Participants might feel disappointed by the lack of change their efforts achieved, leading to a negative experience overall, and potential discouragement from future participation. Additionally, the low rate of public participation in the *Corso* project could signal a lack of public desire to engage in envisioning the city's future to the municipality. The project's format was significantly influenced by Spolka's skillset and previous experiences, as well as the locals' desire to gather valuable data about *Corso* and local needs. However, alternative formats, such as a more artistic approach not so closely resembling a planning process, could have been considered. Several alternative formats were actually planned within the project: The original idea of a civic university, akin to Spolka's *Never Never School*; artistic interventions around *Corso*, for which an open call was never issued; and designs by urban planning students from TU Berlin, whose curriculum changed at the last moment.

Everything above illustrates how the »success« of the architectural intervention depends on planning culture, as many of the limitations mentioned are external. This underscores the need to shift planning culture to more favorable conditions. Simultaneously, the project also shows that a single architectural intervention will not significantly alter planning culture. Yet, the practices of Hraničář and Spolka are mostly made of such short projects due to the amount of funding available. The potential of these projects becomes apparent when seen as an ecology of practice (cf. Frichot 2019), an emerging feminist planning culture of which *Corso pro nás* is just one element. Spolka already plans to join Martina in revisiting the project's

themes of modernist architecture through another format in Hraničář. The locals also plan to use the project when another modernist building in Ústí faces insensitive reconstruction or demolition, thus influencing the fate of the object and planning culture. Furthermore, actors from Hraničář are frequently invited to contribute their expertise to urban discussions at the city level or in architectural competitions, thus also disseminating feminist values and contributing to the transition of planning culture. Spolka's architectural practice relies on partners like Hraničář who create good conditions for making spaces with feminist values. The obstacles in the project suggest other avenues for shifting planning culture that are available to architects. They can pursue roles like city head architect or mayor, like the architect Matúš Vallo in Bratislava, and use education to develop the capabilities of future planners.

Conclusion

The article shows that feminist spatial practice can create spaces for those neglected by the neoliberal status quo and thus offer answers where market-oriented planning has no viable ones. Through a reflection on the shortcomings of the co-creation project *Corso pro nás*, the article uncovers the limitations of the participatory architectural format due to its reliance on municipal support, the obstacles caused by the lack of public interest in transforming the large modernist complex *Corso*, as well as the missing capacities of civic society and the municipality to undertake projects like this one. The article thematizes these obstacles through the concept of planning culture and proposes its transformation by building capabilities to do architecture otherwise, i.e., with feminist values in order to create better conditions for feminist spatial practices and thus more spaces for those currently neglected.

The project also opened many avenues for further investigation. It invites further exploration and the refinement of feminist planning culture in the context of the systemic transformation of planning culture in the CEE region and beyond. As practitioners, we also see the need for more accounts of formats and mechanisms that can shift planning culture toward a feminist one, particularly those rooted in specific localities rather than largely imported from the West, as in this project. Finally, it would be valuable to revisit Ústí in a few years to observe changes in its planning culture and the factors that contribute to it.

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