Budapest’s Teleki Square: Participatory planning for the use of public space

Public spaces play important roles in shaping and communicating community identity. A public space that buzzes with life and activity conveys feelings of purpose and belonging, while a neglected space projects an aura of communal malaise and despair.

Until very recently, Teleki Square in Budapest’s District VIII mirrored the general poverty and frustration of its surrounding inhabitants. However, a collaborative redesign effort involving several members of the community has transformed this large park area into a multi-purpose public space with great potential to transform the community as a whole.

While the benefits of investing in such efforts might appear to be obvious, there are usually plenty of obstacles to overcome, according to Kristin Faurest, a community reinvention expert involved in the Teleki Square project. “There might be lack of motivation or funding on the part of the government,” says Faurest, “or competition from developer-driven projects that result in...”
gentrification instead of spaces for everybody. There can also be opposition from residents if there are plans for something like a concert hall or other facility that could generate noise or crowds."

Architect Dominika Tihany highlights another difficulty: "Oftentimes, EU tenders don’t leave enough time to actually complete such long-lasting processes."

And even when a project gets the green light from City Hall, there’s no guarantee of active community involvement. “Municipalities often take the old-school approach”, Faurest explains. “Either one-way communication — like having an email address you can write to, or a questionnaire, or the most dreaded ‘idea box’. Or, they just bring out two-thirds finished plans and you can choose between option A or B, which is not participation — it’s manipulation.”

Regarding the Teleki Square project, "most people from the municipality didn’t have a clue that we would really be involving local people the way we did", says Tihanyi. "And the ones who did know were very sceptical. All I could suggest was to have faith in the project and the people. Later, the vice mayor attended the final presentation — and at the end, when locals presented the plan, she couldn’t wait to express her astonishment that people could be so committed to changing their environment.”

Given how detailed the Teleki project was, weekly meetings took place between plan developers and locals over the course of three months. “One of the most important results of the regular meetings was that citizens formed a ‘Friends of Teleki Square’ group that is still really active in the park’s everyday life”, says Faurest. “We found that, by giving people assignments, they could be a constructive part of the process, and they got interested because they made the mental investment.”

Source: http://jozsefvaros.hu/

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