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**LEARNING FROM PRACTICE IN THE PAINTBRUSH FACTORY:
REVIVAL THROUGH ART**

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Abstract

The participants to a university field trip in the urban area of Cluj-Napoca, besides having a good context to use classical research methods, got into contact with specialists who were directly involved in an urban regeneration project through art. The location was the “Paintbrush Factory”, a former industrial site in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Most of the participants were M.Sc. and Bachelor students. At the question: “What motivated your participation?”, many of them considered the chance to get information about urban regeneration or chose visiting the “Paintbrush Factory” in order to know a new place/urban landscape. Most of them understood the history of the “Paintbrush Factory” and the process of urban regeneration after 1989, as well as the role that the Federation of Cultural Associations had had in the urban regeneration of an abandoned industrial site. The majority appreciated the clarity of the received information and the results of the project. When they were asked about the strengths of the activity at the “Paintbrush Factory”, participants mentioned as a major educational achievement the study of the way an industrial site had been regenerated. On the other hand, participants accused the low degree of interactivity among group members. Conclusions list a series of benefits that such a learning activity introduce in the university educational system.

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Keywords: Learning opportunities through culture, urban regeneration, art, industrial site.



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1. Introduction

A complex definition of urban regeneration is stated by Jones and Evans (2008), who define this concept in terms of transformation and adaptation of a site for the purpose of being rescued from a physical, social, economic point of view or from the perspective of its memory (Galdini, 2005). The revival of the site also determines a revival of both community and area, restoring them towards a sustainable direction (Kuo, Sullivan, Coley, & Brunson, 1998). The unfolded activity, about either culture, generally speaking, art or education, becomes the bond that gives a new touch to the space (Evans & Shaw, 2004; Jones & Evans, 2008). The urban area itself is dynamic and complex, a system undergoing permanent adaptation (Evans & Jones, 2008; Jones, Isakjee, Jam, Lorne, & Warren, 2017; Roberts, Sykes, & Granger, 2018).

The concept of urban regeneration has undergone paradigm shifts over the years, from the initial meaning of reconstruction up to the present day, when urban regeneration helps to identify and prioritise issues and goals for creating a strategy for area recovery (Evans, 2009; Evans & Jones, 2008; Garcia, 2004; Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007; Healey, 1998).

The three pillars of sustainability, in terms of strategic urban regeneration, integrate three essential components, among which the space/the place/the site plays a central role (Roberts et al., 2018). Thus, it is all about the physical component of the targeted cumulative objectives, the identity component that represents the space through its memory value and the spatial component or the environmental one, which confers special place to the objective within the regeneration strategy (Agryzkov, Oliver, Tortosa, & Vicent, 2017). The process of identifying spaces that require urban regeneration is derived from the necessity of re-establishing relationships between spatial and social components, that emerge as a result of attitudes and values (Giuliani, 2002), generating proximity directly based on the intrinsic attitudes and values of the place/site (Meegan & Mitchell, 2001).

The most efficient models of good practice in urban regeneration appear to be the collaborative ones, which harmoniously integrate social, physical and cultural or arts components (Galster, 2001; Hemphill, McGreal, Berry, & Watson, 2006), in terms of the “spatial turn” (Hess-Lüttich, 2012).

Art, as part of urban culture, has the purpose of receiving public in its aesthetic space, offering, generally speaking, new products, practices and strategies through which it has managed the integration within urban regeneration and urban rediscovery strategies (Pinder, 2008).

Applicative and integrative urban regeneration supports repositioning and rethinking the concept of community through the access of the arts in public spaces, becoming available for a greater number of people, thus, forming a new community, and bringing together art lovers within sites that are being used through urban regeneration. The role of didactics and of the case study method becomes a primary one in approaching space as a meeting place for artists, educators and students, cultivating new forms of education: non-formal education, formal education, and adults’ education. It also appears the need of “not only working in, but also working with this context”, of stimulating collective learning processes using the social and spatial context and opening urban spaces even more to the public (Caris & Cowell, 2016; Evans & Shaw, 2004; Mutibwa, 2017; Verschelden, Eeghem, Steel, Visscher, & Dekeyrel, 2012).

From a didactic perspective, the idea of urban regeneration is at its beginnings in Romania, both as a teaching method and tool used by local communities and artists in order to attract public attention, using the didactic component as a step towards the creative world. Attempts are being made to create the theoretical basis

and to establish a set of conceptualisation instruments that can provide later on a wider framework regarding the development of the didactic process, as not only learning methods, but also as raising awareness ones. For instance, geographic information systems are already using the LBSN technique – the use of location based social networks – which represents a tangential didactics technique for the identification of the most suitable places/sites for urban regeneration, by means of data processing, analysing, and interpreting data that were previously collected through the LBSN system (Marti, Garcia-Mayor, & Serrano-Estrada, 2019).

Promoting didactic and professional excellence in the academia, at Babeş-Bolyai University, has been an aim for a long time, and educational research also focused on this topic (Cuc, 2012) and others related to it such as cultural diversity (Cuc, 2013, 2014; Manea, 2014) and integrating ICT (Ilovan, Dulamă, Boţan, Magdaş, & Vana, 2016; Magdaş, Ilovan, Dulamă, & Ursu, 2018). In addition, the benefits of learning through cooperation (Chiş, Magdaş, Dulamă, & Moldován, 2019) of learning in diverse environments have also been explored and connected to geographical education (Deac, Ilovan, Chiş, & Dulamă, 2019; Dulamă, Ilovan, Bagoly-Simó, & Magdaş, 2019; Ursu, Dulamă, & Chiş, 2019).

2. Problem Statement

There is little research that examines the effect of information, in the context of field trips, on raising awareness within the academic community towards urban regeneration, starting from the local horizon.

3. Research Questions

Is it possible to stimulate collective learning processes using the social and spatial context, by opening urban spaces even more to the public?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose was to analyse the didactic process of raising understanding and involvement regarding urban regeneration as a catalyst to enhance the quality of life in the participants' community.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Data collecting and processing

Throughout the visit, data was collected using the observation method. Following-up the visit at the “Paintbrush Factory” in Cluj, an indispensable phase for our project, the participants involved in the field trip were asked to fill in a questionnaire (an instrument for measuring feedback), which aimed, through clearly established items, at a proactive learning process. Participants filled in this online questionnaire, made and managed using Google Drive. Eventually, 11 answers were centralized, dealing with 13 open-ended and close-ended questions. Data about the participants were gathered (age, occupation, residence area), as well as their opinions and proposals about urban regeneration at the “Paintbrush Factory”.

5.2. Participants

The majority of participants (81.8%) belong to the category under 30 years of age, quite an explainable fact considering that most of them are students at the Faculty of Geography (Babeş-Bolyai University). Two members of the academic staff between the ages of 31-40 (senior lecturers) and one above the age of 50 (professor) also joined. The distribution of the majority of respondents covers a wide spectrum of the university education cycle: 27.3% Bachelor, 36.4% M.Sc., and 18.2% Ph.D. students. The criterion concerning the repartition on living environments underlines a relative equilibrium between the two categories (54.55% participants living in the rural area, whereas others are urban citizens). Most of them live in Cluj County (four in Cluj-Napoca), but also in the neighbouring counties (Alba, Bistrița-Năsăud) or more remote ones (Suceava), due to the national polarisation level of this Faculty of Geography.

6. Findings

The participants regarded the visit at the “Paintbrush Factory” as an opportunity to discover a practical model of “cultural urban regeneration” (72.7%) and to understand the rehabilitation process of such a site, directly from the artisans of the idea (81.8%). Almost half of the participants were attracted to exploring new places and seeking out new ideas (Table 1).

Table 01. Motivation for participation at the visit

Reasons for participating	%
To get information about cultural urban regeneration from people involved in the process	81.8
To learn about a new place/urban landscape which has been culturally regenerated	72.7
To know a lesser known place or an unknown one within the Municipality of Cluj-Napoca	45.5
To learn new ideas	45.5

The following question regarded the clarity of presentations, enabling participants’ understanding of several aspects, by asking participants to rate them on a 5-point Likert scale.

Because a member of the “Paintbrush Factory” Federation of Cultural Associations guided the visit, we were interested in participants’ opinions/perceptions of the clarity of presentations that they had listened to and of the information, which they had obtained because of direct observation. 81.8% of the respondents were satisfied with the presentation of the “Paintbrush Factory” history and of the process of urban regeneration (destination and function of the factory building before and after 1989). Concerning the description and observation of the current organisation, design and exploitation manner, along with the cultural function of the space (organising activities for children and youth, organising visual art exhibitions, workshops for visual artists, sales of products, etc.), only 63.6% assigned maximum points for these indicators. The same score was assigned to the involvement of the “Paintbrush Factory” Federation of Cultural Associations in the cultural urban regeneration of an abandoned industrial site.

Table 02. Clarity of presenting information

Clarity of presenting information	Mean
Presentation of the factory history and of the urban regeneration process	4.73
Description and observation of the current organisation and design of the “Paintbrush Factory”	4.64

Description and observation of the exploitation manner, along with the cultural function of the space	4.64
Presentation of the involvement of the “Paintbrush Factory” Federation of Cultural Associations in the cultural urban regeneration of an abandoned industrial site	4.64

In order to find out the value for professional development of both obtained information and of direct observations made during this visit, the participants ranked all activities from 1 to 5. The most valuable turned out to be the description and observation of the exploitation manner, along with the cultural function of the space in the “Paintbrush Factory” (organising activities for children and youth, organising visual art exhibitions, workshops for visual artists, sales of products, etc.) (mean value – 4.45) (Table 3).

Although the presentation of the “Paintbrush Factory” history and of the process of urban regeneration was considered to be the clearest (Table 2), this information was assigned a lower score (mean – 4.36). Participants offered even lower scores to the description and observation of the current organisation and design of the space (mean – 4.18), compared to the description and observation of its exploitation, which could be explained by their specific competence in Geography, not in Visual Arts. Participants considered less important for their professional development knowing the involvement of the “Paintbrush Factory” Federation of Cultural Associations in cultural urban regeneration, even though the civil society has expressed concern towards this issue.

Table 03. Relevance of activities for professional development

Relevance of learning activities	Mean
Description and observation of the exploitation manner, along with the cultural function of the space in the “Paintbrush Factory”	4.45
Presentation of the “Paintbrush Factory” history and of the process of urban regeneration	4.36
Description and observation of the current organisation and design of the “Paintbrush Factory”	4.18
Presentation of the involvement of the “Paintbrush Factory” Federation of Cultural Associations in the cultural urban regeneration of an abandoned industrial site	4.18

This being the case of a learning activity carried out in an informal context, we were interested in what aspects were perceived most effective when it came to learning (Table 4). The first positions belonged to getting information about the cultural urban regeneration of a place/space from people involved in that process (90.9%), and directly observing and studying the organisation and design of an industrial site through the process of cultural urban regeneration and analysing the organisation challenges (72.7%). Half of the respondents (54.5%) felt the information novelty was highly important. The respondents perceived as less efficient, for their learning process, evoking knowledge about the “Paintbrush Factory”, the guide’s asking for opinions and for making decisions (for example, what picture would we bring home), and asking questions and interacting with people involved in the cultural urban regeneration of an industrial site.

Table 04. Strengths of the learning activity

Strengths of the learning activity	%
We received information about the cultural urban regeneration of a site from people involved in that process	90.9
We directly studied/observed the organisation and design of an industrial site in Cluj-Napoca undergoing a process of cultural urban regeneration	72.7
Information novelty	54.5
We observed and analysed the results of the process of cultural urban regeneration, strengths and weaknesses	45.5
Evoking our knowledge about the “Paintbrush Factory”	36.4
Provoking opinions, decisions	27.3
We asked questions someone involved in the cultural urban regeneration of an industrial site	18.2
We interacted with specialists from the cultural field, involved in the processes of organisation and design of the industrial site and of cultural urban regeneration	9.1
Information value	9.1

The most significant weaknesses of this learning activity were considered to be the expository method because of the passive role played by the participants, ordinary receivers (“We listened more than we contributed with questions, opinions, proposals”), as well as a characteristic of the environment, the low air temperature inside showrooms (lacking heating) (Table 5). Finding themselves in a less known place or in an unknown one, most of the participants regarded the role of audience member as a natural one. This is why few of them perceived as weaknesses their low involvement in taking on the guide’s challenges (36.4%), the low interaction degree among group members (36.4%), and not knowing those in the group (9.1%).

Table 05. Weaknesses of the learning activity

Weaknesses of the learning activity	%
We listened more than we contributed with questions, opinions, proposals	63.6
The air temperature inside showrooms	63.6
Our low involvement in taking on guide’s challenges	36.4
Low interaction degree among group members	36.4
Limited time resources	18.2
Not knowing those in the group	9.1

During the visit, the participants observed workers arranging the building and, from the following conversation with the guide, they found out that the “Paintbrush Factory” Federation of Cultural Associations had rented the space for activities at a reasonable price. To the question: “What do you think will happen in the future, after the completion of the building by the owner?”, most participants (63.63%) considered that the site would become attractive to more people and companies, considering this a premise for “having more success”, “more valences”, growing interest “for creating new partnerships”, and “future investments”. Only 31.81% of the participants became aware of the risk/danger of a raising rent (even “exponential”). One participant underlined the risk that the Federation “will be forced to leave because of rising costs”, while another one expressed optimism that “the project would survive”.

Although the space in the “Paintbrush Factory” offers opportunities, it is exploited especially by organised groups of students for cultural and recreational/entertainment activities and too little by other people. The site location, far from the central area, is another restrictive factor in its becoming an attractive

pole for citizens and tourists. Noticing problems of poor valorisation of cultural potential, we asked the participants – potential beneficiaries – to make proposals for solutions to engage more inhabitants of Cluj-Napoca in the process of cultural urban regeneration within the “Paintbrush Factory”. We received some proposals such as “unfolding more recreational activities”, “organising more cultural, artistic and scientific events”, “organising painting, sculpture, etc., exhibitions and sale (various artists in Cluj)”, organising “a series of small events (painting workshops, dance, etc.) involving people of all ages”. Participants emphasized the need for promotion through advertising “in the virtual space and media”, “more advertising both online and offline, but in printed version – newspapers, letters delivered to target persons”. One of the participants pointed out the necessity of financial support, and another one accentuated that cultural events should be of interest to participants, and thus they would be actively involved.

The participants were required to think from the perspective of the owner of the “Paintbrush Factory” and to state how they would arrange and valorise it. Several respondents expressed the opinion that they would preserve the cultural profile of the building and would design it as a museum, or a “hall for parties, a conference hall” or as an “eco-friendly building”. Respondents opted either for activities from the Visual Arts field (painting workshops, sculpture), or for other activities (dance workshops, educational workshops, organising creative events). One participant expressed desire for using “more friendly and cheerful colours”, reckoning that “it was too grey” and another participant pointed out the option for green areas.

7. Conclusion

As a term with high semantic flexibility, “urban regeneration” will always have a certain degree of context dependence. In the Western countries of Europe, with deeply rooted urban traditions, highly compacted urban cores and a considerable density of protected monuments, using the term “planning” is contestable as long as the urban structure is already mature and well formed during a long time, leaving only the possibility of limited and subtle structural interventions in present. Therefore, the idea of urban regeneration of sites and buildings already planned in the past, but in the present context of functional reconversions left in decline, degradation or even abandonment, has become very popular.

In this situation, the interventions are not concentrating on structural aspects as much as on the socio-economic factors, which no longer resonate with the original functionality of the buildings and historic sites. The concerns are now the social and economic factors of urban restructuring and how places and buildings, which lost their original functionality, can be regenerated and reintroduced in use, as the best way to preserve the built heritage and other related sites. In Romania, even if planning is still required in the majority of situations, there are also many places that are subject to urban regeneration. Most commonly, these are the former communist factories and buildings, the communist civic centres, the old buildings of the small towns.

The most efficient way to prepare future specialists is through participative observation, by presenting urban regeneration examples during dedicated urban trips and even involving students in urban regeneration projects. Urban regeneration can be used as a didactic method, making students understand the importance of urban functionality and, at the same time, it is an instrument to attract public attention, which is very important in this kind of medium and long-term projects. It was observed that a part of the

students remained involved in specific urban regeneration projects even after the end of the educative actions or field trips and their involvement resulted in many cases researches and published papers.

Through this research, it was underlined, using classical research methods in an appropriate context, that it is possible to stimulate collective learning processes using the social and spatial context of urban sites and buildings in decline. Even if in Romania the urban regeneration projects are at their beginnings, through this research it was highlighted the important role of didactics and case study methods in approaching space and as a meeting place for artists, educators and students, thus, cultivating new forms of education. It was demonstrated also the high potential of urban regeneration projects in former socialist factories and how education and didactic actions and methods could enhance the results of future urban regeneration projects.

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