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LEARNING FROM THE EXPERTS: LIBERTY TECHNOLOGY
PARK – INVESTMENT, INNOVATION, DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The results of direct observation during a field trip and of a questionnaire investigating the participants' opinions on their learning process during a study visit to Liberty Technology Park are considered during this research. Participants were, in their majority, university students at the Faculty of Geography (Babeş-Bolyai University, in Cluj-Napoca, Romania), at the Bachelor's level (in Territorial Planning, first year of study), at the M.Sc. level (Regional Planning and Development, 1st and 2nd year of study) and at the Ph.D. level, as well as teaching staff and researchers. They represented the target group of the project developed within the fellowship of Associate Professor Oana-Ramona Ilovan, Ph.D. The participants had the opportunity to give feedback. They presented their observations, where they stated what they enjoyed and appreciated, such as: the planning of the building and its futuristic spaces, the presentation held by the CEO of the Park, the ways of using alternative/renewable energy sources throughout the Park, the session of questions and answers at the end, and what they appreciated and what they missed or would improve. We concluded that the visit had a positive impact on the participants' professional development and future professional involvement in society relevant projects, and we listed the main requirements for an efficient learning activity in urban regeneration.

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Keywords: Field trip, development, sustainability, efficient university education.



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1. Introduction

Since cities and towns are urban spaces stressed by multiple shifts of political and social-economic changes, the processes of urban regeneration are ubiquitous both in the urban dynamics and in their ongoing adjustments to the contemporary demands of local communities. Therefore, as Carbon (2008) pointed out, urban regeneration is a very complex process involving “the public, private and community and voluntary sectors working together towards a clear single aim – to improve the quality of life for all” (p. 14). This global vision often leads the present urban management and strategies on local development opening multiple avenues for a large variety of actions with countless outcomes mirroring in the present urban landscapes. These wide spectrums of multiple and various interventions of different stakeholders in urban restructuring and regeneration that often encounter different paces of completion argue the huge complexity of this process, as well as its multiple features involved in urban ongoing development.

Investigating urban regeneration is not a simple approach. Since it “is by its very nature a dynamic rather than static phenomenon, it is almost impossible to capture all the features of current practices or to predict the future with any degree of certainty” (Roberts & Sykes, 2008, p. 4). Of the mentioned features, several could be highlighted: economic regeneration, physical and environmental aspects of urban restructuring, social backgrounds, housing, education, and training towards a sustainable city through urban renewal interventions (Roberts & Sykes, 2008).

These issues always attracted various backgrounds scholars’ attention, and research were largely conducted and published in the specialised literature, with not sufficient room in this context to name them all. However, works of various authors on urban regeneration as Atkinson (1999), Cameron (2003), Colantonio and Dixon (2011), Couch, Fraser, and Percy (2008), García (2004), González (2011), Hall and Barrett (2018), Jones and Evans (2008), Hall and Robertson (2001), Miles and Paddison (2005), Paddison (1993), Paddison and Hutton (2014), Pratt (2009), Smith (2012), Tallon (2013), Voiculescu, Crețan, Ianăș, and Satmari (2009), etc. could be selectively named. They provide both a critical fertile background and a useful methodological framework to investigate the recent issues in the current trends in urban regeneration.

The process of urban regeneration acts differently in line with the major political and economic contexts. Of these, the most important changes and significant in our context occurred due to the political systems shifts, as for instance the post-socialist countries with a new oriented market economy replacing the old centralised economic production. Central and Eastern European countries remain in this regard a fertile laboratory in investigating the complex process of urban regeneration (see Stanilov, 2007). Among others, processes as de-industrialisation, reindustrialization and tertiarisation remain outstanding simultaneous phenomena (Graham & Spence, 1995; Lever, 1991; Montresor & Vittucci-Marzetti, 2010; Nickell, Redding, & Swaffield, 2008; Pieper, 2000; Rowthorn & Coutts, 2004), shifting with divergent outcomes the urban places, regardless of the cities and towns rank and size.

For Romanian cities and towns, the most relevant transformations as features of urban regeneration actions were the continuous translation of the former industrial areas to tertiary post-socialist activities. These are omnipresent scenes framing new landscapes and functionalities, thus improving the quality of life for most urban communities, even though they encountered different paces of evolution – from rapid transformations specific to the largest urban habitats to slow-go interventions in small and medium-sized municipalities (Jucu, 2015). The above-mentioned ideas lead us to critical reflections and argue both the

importance of urban regeneration processes and their complexity. However, urban regeneration involves not only the research background in order to accomplish these objectives of urban development, but also training and education in urban regeneration study in order to ensure solid knowledge for present and further investigation (Hart & Johnston, 2008; Henderson & Mayo, 1998; Roberts, Sykes, & Granger, 2016).

Thorough knowledge and real competences in urban regeneration approaches are to be produced since students' training in academic environments connects them to various practitioners, decision-makers, representatives of local authorities, investors and other actors directly involved in the urban regeneration process. Against such a background, this paper aims to provide an example on how urban regeneration is perceived, taking a specific case study in Cluj-Napoca, Romania (i.e. Liberty Technology Park). This case study is based on the recent shifts in urban patterns from the old state-socialist industrial functionality to the new oriented-market tertiarisation.

From a pedagogical perspective, our research started from the results of previous studies on educational strategies to promote excellence and academic success (Cuc, 2012, 2019), as well as on innovation (Manea, 2015) and on adult education (Răduț-Taciu, Stan, & Bocoș, 2018) in the Romanian context. The development of the geographical education system in Romania before and after 1989 (Dulamă, Ilovan, Bagoly-Simó, & Magdaș, 2019; Ilovan, Dulamă, Boțan, Magdaș, & Vana, 2016; Ursu, Dulamă, & Chiș, 2019) proved the need for more students' involvement in solving societal issues.

2. Problem Statement

Low involvement of academia (teaching staff and students) in urban regeneration activities resulted from our observation process in the recent years, in the Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

3. Research Questions

Our research focused on answering two interrelated questions: How efficient for the learning process are field visits to urban regeneration initiatives? What is the impact of this learning process on the involvement of academia in urban regeneration activities?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study is part of a fellowship entitled Didactic Excellence for the Sustainability and Civic Awareness of the Academic Community, belonging to Associate Professor Oana-Ramona Ilovan, Ph.D. (the first author), and the fellowship project had the aim to improve the university learning process using on-field study visits in order to raise academia members' awareness about and to get them involved in actions regarding urban regeneration initiatives, thus becoming more community minded.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Data collecting and processing

The on-field visit, where the observation method was used, took place in November 2018, at Liberty Technology Park. This is a dynamic system for national/local and international companies, an innovative

environment designed to encapsulate specialists from a large variety of fields, such as IT and Research and Development, the first of its kind in Romania. The Technology Park is on the site of a former furniture factory, closed down in 2010, and is the result of a major private investment. After the visit, the participants filled out an online questionnaire, developed using Google Drive. We collected data on the participants and got their opinions and proposals regarding their field research at Liberty Technology Park.

5.2. Participants

The total number of participants to the field trip was 26 and, out of these, 15 answered the questionnaire. The main target group of the project was the university students and the academic staff. Eventually, most of the respondents were students, with one exception, being in different stages of their university studies: 33.3% Bachelor students, 53.3% Master students, and 6.66% Ph.D. students. Concerning the age of the respondents, the majority (93.33%) were under 30 years of age. 60% of the respondents come from urban areas.

5.3. Research material

The bulk of the research is comprised of students' and professors' observations made during the activity, their questions and answers, information provided by the hosts at the Liberty Technology Park, opinions and proposals of the participants who filled out the form.

6. Findings

Regarding the motivation for participating at the visit to the Liberty Technology Park, most of the respondents choose to name several reasons (like getting to know a successful regeneration story of a former industrial site, receiving first-hand information from persons involved in the regeneration process, or getting acquainted with a former industrial area transformed into a space dedicated to services), demonstrating the manifold opportunities this kind of on-site activities offer. There is quite a balance among the chosen answers, named by around 60% of the respondents, with a slight higher value of 80% for the opportunity to become acquainted with a model of urban regeneration of an industrial site, and a value below the average (33.3%) for the possibility to find out what a technology park is (Table 1).

Table 01. Reasons for attending the Liberty Technology Park visit

Reasons	Nr. of part.	%
Opportunity to know an urban regeneration model of an industrial space	12	80
Opportunity to know the process of implementing a private investment initiative	10	66.7
Opportunity to see an industrial space that has been transformed/regenerated into services	9	60
Opportunity to obtain information about an urban industrial regeneration project from the people involved	9	60
Opportunity to obtain information about a regeneration "success story" in a market economy	9	60
Possibility to understand what a technological park means	5	33.3

The next group of questions attempts to find out the participants' opinions regarding the success factors of the urban regeneration process which transformed the former furniture factory into the Liberty Technology Park (Table 2). Liberty Technology Park is an example of urban regeneration with a large infusion of private investments. This is also perceived by the respondents, all of them considering financial resources of major importance for the project success. The idea of an ideal tech park, defined as "a park of ideas" in an attractive and efficient environment, is reckoned as essential by 73.3% of the respondents. Similar are the results (80%) regarding the vision of the tech park to intensify connections and cooperation between companies by facilitating a revolutionary space to generate innovation and progress. 60% of the respondents regard the confidence in the project success as vital, complemented by 40% that consider the confidence as important. Initiators' prior research in order to achieve a successful tech park is viewed of major importance by 2/3 of the respondents, while 1/3 denote it important.

The application of brainstorming to identify feasible solutions to meet the target of establishing a tech park is considered only by one respondent as of no significant importance, the other advocating for the great value of such tools. About 86% of the respondents endorse the choice and the concept of a tech park as industrial regeneration strategy of the former furniture factory. The importance of implementing exclusively environment friendly, innovative and energy efficient technologies in the regeneration process splits the respondents' opinions: for about 20% of the participants this aspect bears no major importance for a successful industrial regeneration, yet more than half regard this issue as of great importance. Facilitating the first and most complex business accelerator in Romania, Spherik, a platform designated for local and international business development, gains the approval of over 90% of the respondents as a vital success factor. A further aspect mentioned, the reuse of industrial heritage in the contemporary architecture of the site, is significant for over 90% of the respondents. These aspects are complemented by the incorporation of refurbished historical buildings with industrial heritage value into the urban landscape, agreed by all the respondents.

The creation of a unique conceptual and architectural ensemble as a result of several mentioned measures is denoted as of major importance by most of the respondents. The comfortable and appealing environment is very important for over 85% of the respondents.

In addition, issues regarding the employees' well-being is for most of them (80%) significant, while some voices (13%) regard this aspect as irrelevant. More or less, the same are the answers to the question that debates the services offered for the staff and employees: about 73% of the respondents regard these services as important and 6.7% as of no significance. The respondents estimate very differently the relevance of the assistance offered by local municipalities for this kind of endeavours: for 20% is a marginal factor, but for almost 50% is of great importance.

Fostering IT and R&D initiatives, local and international, and facilitating their development in a dynamic ecosystem is for 2/3 of the respondents a decisive success factor of the regeneration process. Creating the right environment, which connects innovative people and boosts innovations, is another element that, according to around 90% of the respondents, favours the success of this initiative. Marketing measures and fostering events to boost the profile of the tech park is also very important for 80% of the respondents.

Table 02. Importance of several aspects for the process of regeneration at the "Libertatea" Furniture Factory, according to respondents' perceptions

Aspects from the regeneration process	Average	%
Financing source	4.93	93.3
The idea (an ideal technological park; “a park of ideas for efficient and attractive office buildings”)	4.6	73.3
Vision to intensify connections and communication/cooperation between different companies in a revolutionary space, in order to generate innovation and progress	4.6	80
Confidence in the project success	4.6	60
Stakeholder information regarding the intended result (a technology park)	4.66	66.7
Identification of possible solutions for objective attainment (a technology park)	4.4	53.33
Choice of solution / project (description of technology park characteristics / concept)	4.53	66.7
Usage of innovative, environmental friendly and energy efficient solutions only	4.26	53.33
Development of the first and most complex business accelerator in Romania – Spherik – platform for business development and implementation locally and internationally	4.46	60
The ecological reinvention of the industrial stock as new architecture forms	4.53	60
The integration of renovated historical buildings, that celebrate the industrial past of the city, in the urban landscape	4.8	80
Creation of a conceptually and architecturally novel area	4.73	73.33
Creation of a comfortable and attractive environment	4.86	86.7
Providing comfort for people working in the Liberty Technology Park	4.66	80
Provision of services/facilities for those working in the Liberty Technology Park	4.66	73.3
Support by local government	4	46.66
Providing growth and development opportunities for IT&C and R&D companies	4.53	66.66
Creating a dynamic ecosystem for local and international IT&C and R&D companies	4.53	66.66
Creating an optimal environment for companies that shape, connect, and encourage motivated people and creative ideas in a continuous flow of innovative development	4.6	66.66
Project implementation	4.46	73.33
Promotion of the technology park (conferences, books, etc.)	4.73	80

The following group of questions surveys the value and efficiency of this kind of activities for the participants’ professional development. The great majority of the respondents view the explanation and on-site illustration of some concepts (such as Technology Park) or processes (urban regeneration) as of valuable for their professional development (Table 3). The economic weight of the Liberty Technology Park is not of relevance for about 20% of the respondents, but the integration concept of the Tech Park into the urban landscape is rather significant for the professional development of over 90% of the participants.

Table 03. Relevance of learning activities for professional development

Learning activities	Average	%
Integration concept of the Liberty Technology Park into the urban landscape	4.66	73.3
Presentation of the Liberty Technology Park urban regeneration process	4.6	66.7
Presentation of the Technology Park concept	4.33	53.3
The role of Liberty Technology Park in the economy	4.13	53.3

The following questions detail the previous more general approach and depict the strengths and the weaknesses of the on-site visit to the Liberty Tech Park for the learning process. The greatest strength of the action (named by over 90% of the respondents) seems to be the opportunity to meet experts and practitioners, and to get first-hand information from persons directly involved in urban regeneration processes (Table 4). Very few (about 25%) took the opportunity to interact and to ask the experts. Over 60% of the participants consider the novelty of the gathered info a strength of the visit, but less than half of them share a positive opinion over the value of the data.

Table 04. Strengths of the Liberty Technology Park visit

Strengths	No.	%
Information on the regeneration of an industrial site from the people involved	14	93.3
Information novelty	10	66.7
Information value	7	46.7
Questions addressed to a person involved in the regeneration of an industrial site, by a private investment fund	4	26.7

The weaknesses of the event for the learning process were also assessed by the following question. The lack of interaction between the group members (and thus lack of the efficient learning through cooperation – Chiş, Magdaş, Dulamă, and Moldován (2019), and as well as between group and hosts are named by almost 50% of the participants (Table 5). The fact, that the group members did not know each other could have contributed to this situation of no communication. This leads to deliberations about a format which would promote and facilitate more interaction between the various actors involved (Cuc, 2013; Manea, 2014). Some respondents do not see any weaknesses.

Table 05. Weaknesses of the Liberty Technology Park visit

Weaknesses	No.	%
More listening than asking, proposing, debating	7	46.7
Poor interaction among group members	7	46.7
Not knowing people from the group	4	26.7
There were NO weak points	1	6.7

The respondents deliberated also about the groups of initiatives they got the chance to learn about during the field trips. Comparing Liberty Technology Park regeneration project with the La Terenuri – At the Playgrounds Mănăştur, Fabrica de Pensule – The Paintbrush Factory and Someş Delivery initiatives, the respondents point out the financing as a major difference between the two groups of initiatives, where we have the Tech Park with major financial infusion and the others with small investments, sponsorships, and grants.

Further distinctions are identified as intrinsic to the fact that they represent two different approaches to urban regeneration. These aspects refer to (1) vision and purpose of the initiatives (Liberty Technology Park – major investment, economic efficiency; the others tackling social and environmental issues, facilitating citizens’ participation in the urban regeneration processes), (2) their durability (such as Liberty Technology Park with a long term, permanent intervention, Someş Delivery and La Terenuri – At the Playgrounds characterised by temporary actions and interventions); (3) small scale interventions of At the

Playgrounds, The Paintbrush Factory, Someș Delivery, and large scale in the case of Liberty Technology Park; (4) initiators (economic actors in the case of Liberty Technology Park and NGOs for the others).

While some of the respondents cannot see any resemblance, most of them identify significant similarities between the initiatives: all the actions are important as they aim to regenerate urban sites, to put in value and use derelict areas in various neighbourhoods of the city, and, to involve the public in this process. They also share an approach that addresses the identity and the history of the place, integrating them in a collaborative regeneration process.

Regarding the advantages of this kind of urban regeneration model in comparison with At the Playgrounds, the Paintbrush Factory, and Someș Delivery, the respondents name the available financial resources, the modernity and its appeal for the young generation, the applied innovative technologies, but at the same time the preservation of old building structures, and the trigger force it could be for the recovery of the whole neighbourhood.

The participants suggest even possible improvements or further developments of the Liberty Technology Park: some ideas refer to extend the surface of the project or to put up this kind of projects on other abandoned industrial sites. Other suggestions address the possibility to provide consultancy services for interested parties that would like to initiate similar endeavours. Further aspects refer to upgrading the available services, such as IT. Only two participants do not contribute with any ideas in this exercise.

7. Conclusion

The field visit at Liberty Technology Park exemplifies the power that such on-field study actions have over the participants' learning process (Deac, Ilovan, Chiș, & Dulamă, 2019; Precup & Chiș, 2017). This active way of learning not only helped students broaden their perspectives, but it also served as a support for their future professional development.

Being part of such a process of studying, the participants had the occasion to hear directly from the source information about urban regeneration, a topic that concerned the majority, given the fact that their field of study was centred on such theme. Moreover, the discussions held at the end of the visit had a crucial importance in the process of detailing the information regarding the enterprise and its evolution, enlightening the participants' curiosities.

The discussion at the end of the visit took place in an authentic manner and without constraints so that participants had the chance to express themselves freely. Even though only a few attendees took part actively with questions to this debate session held at the end of the hosts' presentation of the Liberty Technology Park, participants considered that their opinions mattered and were taken into consideration. In this way, both positive and negative aspects became known directly from the participants, along with their suggestions.

In addition, the main purpose of the survey was attained. The questionnaire was the appropriate tool based on the study visit, which portrayed and highlighted the most significant information regarding the participants' motivation to engage in such a meaningful experience for their further professional development.

The questionnaire enabled other findings after the field activity, consisting of the participants' reflections. The questions have been grouped in such a manner that showed some significant information

about the development of the visit. The inquiry contained questions about: the motivation that led the university students and professors to participating at the event, the participants' opinions regarding the success factors of the urban regeneration process, and the efficiency of this kind of activities for their professional growth.

Nonetheless, the survey provides valuable information about the suggestions the participants gave in the session of questions held at the end. The respondents also used the comparison method with the other on-field actions (At the Playgrounds, The Paintbrush Factory, and Someș Delivery) in order to acquire a more focused vision regarding the visit at the Liberty Technology Park. Moreover, the questionnaire reflects also the strengths and weaknesses of the activity, as identified by the participants, accompanied by their valuable suggestions.

It is highlighted the value and efficiency of this kind of activities for participants' professional development, this being an objective of the project, besides raising their awareness and civic involvement. The majority of the respondents view the explanation and the on-site illustration of the concepts as valuable for their professional training. For many of the students, it was an irreplaceable experience, given the fact that, at that time, some of them were freshmen in the faculty, in the field of Territorial Planning. As a result, it was their very first on field experience in an academic environment, and, more importantly, on a topic relevant for their field of study.

This process led to the accomplishment of the fellowship aim, raising the academia's civic awareness about and involvement into the society's most topical issues. It also led to the implementation of an active learning process in the participants' academic experience, by having them as part of such innovative projects.

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