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A POST-SOCIALIST TRANSFORMATION – FROM A FACTORY TO A CREATIVE QUARTER

RIGA, LATVIA

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Evolved from an artist commune to a creative quarter, the recent development of the former VEF\(^1\) territory illustrates what bottom-up initiatives can do for regenerating post-industrial areas in countries where such initiatives are neither common, nor planned. Its emergence has been and still is largely dependent on the enthusiasm and initiative of the ‘creatives’ inhabiting this space. Consequently, the evolution of VEF can be approached in two ways. On the one hand, it is a creative quarter in development, which enables monitoring how artistic acts can induce the clustering of other activities around them. On the other hand, its appearance can be further interpreted as an anticipated advance following the shift from the Soviet system to a democracy in Latvia.

VEF was the biggest manufacturer of electrical and electronic products in the former USSR. Established in April 1919 VEF entered the world market with the development of the world’s smallest camera at this time – Minox. In the 1960s and 1970s two out of three phones in the USSR were produced by VEF. By that time the factory had grown to occupy a sizeable territory. After the re-establishment of Latvia’s independence in 1991 and the opening of Western markets VEF could not compete anymore due to the declining quality of its goods and services (Rikards, 2009). These developments left a massive abandoned territory in Riga’s urban space, which is now in the course of transformation into a rather classic post-industrial creative district in a less conventional geopolitical setting.

The occupancy of this industrial heritage by local artists can be considered as a consecutive process in the development of the post-Soviet cultural environment. The

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\(^1\) Latvian acronym for Valsts Elektrotehniskā Fabrika (State Electrotechnical Factory)

VEF cultural quarter grew from an initiative of few artistically minded people aimed at creating a place for alternative art forms to develop and at connecting Riga’s art scene with that of the rest of the world. The first artistic performance in the abandoned factory was organised in May 2008 by a group of artists who desired to provide the Latvian contemporary artistic scene with a more global outreach by inviting some foreign experts. After a few performances organised in this abandoned territory, there was only one enthusiast left - Kaspars Lielgalvis. He founded the contemporary art centre Totaldobže, which is now the core of this quarter’s art life. Within the context of the economic crisis, which struck the country exactly in 2008, this territory offered a cheap and big rental space for his ideas to be realised. While the creation of an alternative art centre was the primary goal of Kaspars Lielgalvis, very soon he realised that it is impossible without the development of the whole quarter (Lielgalvis, 2013; Ozola et al., 2011).

Today Totaldobže, created in 2010, is a private multifunctional cultural centre with a main focus to create an ongoing platform for interdisciplinary art and educational projects. It currently organises interdisciplinary artistic workshops, performances and improvisations events for both local and foreign artists. The centre also has two concert halls and it holds for a development objective the expansion of its residency programmes as well as a transformation into a larger artistic and creative laboratory and working station. The centre is continuously participating in many local and European projects both for the sake of its main artistic activities and for the quarter development. In addition, it has received the annual cultural award White Sparrow for fostering the popularity of contemporary art (Lielglavis, 2013; Totaldobże, 2010).

The creation of Totaldobże further triggered the settlement of other activities in this abandoned district. Even though the district is still in its infancy, its evolutionary progress since 2010 makes it a very interesting case. While the creative and related activities do not occupy the whole territory, it is becoming a more and more vibrant centre of both artistic creation and alternative leisure activities, particularly during the warm months of the year. At the moment VEF encompasses artistic residences, fashion, photography and silkscreen studios, art gallery, extreme sports centre, café, an entertaining horror leisure track, a dance school and some enterprise offices.
Furthermore, there are ongoing informal discussions between the inhabitants of the quarter and the potential investors about the creation of an IT cluster in the district (Lielglavis, 2013; Totaldobže, 2010; Ozola et al., 2011; Rīgas Radošie Kvartāļi, 2013).

Notwithstanding the discussions of the potential development scenarios the future of the VEF quarter and likewise the other creative quarters of Riga is not at all clear. In 2014 Riga is European Capital of Culture. The city’s creative quarters are presented under the RIGA2014 programme Survival Kit – a contemporary art festival that gives them a space for creation. The organising agency of RIGA2014 is currently the only governmental institution that recognises the creative quarters as an important cultural player of the city. While the development process of this quarter shows the importance of such creative spaces in the improvement of the quality of the city's cultural life and its overall livability, it is not yet recognised as such by any of the important local governing institutions and other stakeholders. Thereby, led by the arts centre with the support of the rest of its ‘inhabitants’, the creative district is currently very actively engaged in positioning itself as a prime case of urban regeneration and artistic development. Additional lobby activities will have to be done during the year of ECoC (Lielagalvis, 2013).
Apart from the issues related to the political agenda, the representatives of the district have to deal with several other problems. Firstly, as a result of privatisation the territory is divided between many owners. It is therefore very difficult to create a common development plan and to negotiate long-term contracts and strategies. Moreover, they face a number of difficulties related to the general development of the city such as very poor road infrastructure, transport links, access to heating and other physical components of the systems needed for the operation of the quarter. Thirdly, while enthusiastic, the district representatives engaged in positioning the clustered activities as a creative quarter often lack qualified personnel, legal expertise and political know-how, e.g with respect to lobbying at a municipal level (Lielgalvis, 2013). In order to solve these problems, the VEF quarter as an entity has joined an umbrella organisation uniting similar territories located in Riga - Association of Creative Quarters and Territories. Its mission is to create a general development strategy for all the creative quarters, offering the city new prospects of sustainable and socially responsible urban development through culture-led regeneration.

Notwithstanding the difficulties mentioned, the situation is constantly improving somewhat. These improvements manifesting in the district have also changed the mindsets of the real estate owners and other stakeholders a great deal with regard to the necessity of such processes. There is a growing overall willingness to cooperate and support the cause. To conclude, we believe that this story of the evolution of VEF’s quarter illustrates a greater trend and also the necessity of bottom-up creation of creative districts in parts of the world where culture has not yet been, as we showed, put on the political agenda as a tool for developing livable urban environments.
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