

## Role of Civil Society Organizations in Repurposing of Unused Property

MÁRIA MURRAY SVIDROŇOVÁ

**Abstract** We often divide economics into two camps: the public economics based on government organization and the profit-motivated private sector. Not every solution in a community can be found through profit motivation nor the local government. Local citizens often become the only logical choices for finding remedies to unused or abandoned property. In this paper we explore the potential of civil society organizations in finding innovative solutions when dealing with abandoned properties. The main findings point out that civil society organizations can play an important role in urban management.

**Keywords:** • unused property • civil society organizations • NGOs • urban management

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CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS: Mária Murray Svidroňová PhD., dr. habil., Associate Professor, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Faculty of Economics, Department of Public Economics and Regional Development, Tajovského 10, 97590 Banská Bystrica, Slovak Republic, email: maria.murrayvidronova@umb.sk.

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## 1 Introduction

Civil society organizations create the so-called third sector of the economy. We follow the latest definition of Salamon & Sokolowski (2016a, b) which builds on many years of research by Salamon & Aneheir (e.g. 1997 and 1998). The “new” definition broadens up the scope of traditionally used term third sector as set of organizational and individual activities that meet the following three underlying philosophical notions frequently evoked in Europe (and very likely beyond it):

- Privateness—i.e. forms of individual or collective action that are outside the sphere and control of government;
- Public purpose—i.e., serving the broader community and not primarily to generating profit or otherwise creating something of value primarily to the persons undertaking the activities or those persons’ family members; and
- Free choice—i.e., pursued without compulsion Salamon & Sokolowski (2016a).

More specifically, this conceptualization includes organizations characterized by the five operational features:

- a. It is an organization, that is, institutionalized to some extent, though not necessarily legally registered or constituted;
- b. It totally or significantly limits through some binding provision distributing any surplus generated from their activities to its directors, employees, investors, or others;
- c. It is self-governing, that is, it is institutionally separate from government, is able to control its own general policies and transactions and has the capacity to own assets, incur liabilities, or engage in transactions in its own right;
- d. It is non-compulsory, that is, involving some meaningful degree of uncoerced free choice on the part of individuals working for, or participating in, its activities; and
- e. Private, i.e., not controlled by government Salamon & Sokolowski (2016b).

In a nutshell, this conceptual framework for third sector includes registered and non-registered non-profit and non-governmental organisations, civic initiatives and social movements, except political parties, religious communities, educational and scientific institutions, trade unions, and employers’ organisations (EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, 2019). In further text we will use term civil society organizations (CSOs).

## 2 Literature overview

Civil society organizations are now widely acknowledged to “play a variety of social, economic, and political roles in society. They provide services as well as educate, advocate, and engage people in civic and social life” (Boris & Steuerle, 2006, p. 66; Kuhlmann, 2010). These innovative CSOs initiatives are of particular importance at the present stage of civil society formation in CEE countries. A new role of CSOs is emerging - through their activity and social innovation, CSOs have taken the initiative of the public

sector to regenerate unused property. These are dilapidated properties in the municipalities that originally belonged to the state. With the fall of the Communist regime, this property was transferred to municipalities free of charge. However, the newly born municipalities at the municipal level were not able to effectively manage these assets and return them to the citizens for use, which greatly affected the urban development of the municipalities. The problem started to be solved through the initiative of CSOs and their social innovation in the form of co-creation.

Social innovations as innovative activities and services that are stimulated to meet social needs and which are predominantly developed and dispersed through organizations whose objectives are primarily social (Mulgan, 2007). Social innovations represent new solutions to social problems that are more effective, more efficient, and more sustainable than other current solutions offered. The generated value affects, in particular, society as a whole, not just individuals. Social innovations focus on ideas and solutions that create higher social value, as well as the processes through which they are generated (Phills, Deiglmeier and Miller, 2008). Social innovation as a concept and a set of tools includes a broad spectrum of activities. The widest possible definition specifies social innovations as all the new strategies, concepts, ideas, and organizations that expand and support the improvement of the working conditions of civil society functioning. Generally speaking, it embraces any activities that result in qualitative changes in the basic social structures of society or innovations that have a targeted social impact (Murillo & Buckland, 2015).

Social innovation of public or collective services is possible in the environment of a new concept of government that is defined as the sum of interactions between cooperating actors from the public and private sectors solving social problems (Osborne & Brown, 2005). The emphasis is on the citizens and on building a civil society (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). This type of social innovation is called a co-creation. Co-creation seeks a solution of production and financing of public services through collaboration with different stakeholders. The innovation in the production process is considered as:

- 1) an open process, with the involvement of end-users in the design and development of goods and services and
- 2) a change of the relationships between involved stakeholders (Voorberg et al., 2015).

One of the central elements in the concept of social innovation is the active participation of citizens and grassroots organizations (i.e. CSOs) to produce social outcomes that really matter (Bason, 2010). Participation of citizens in the development and subsequent implementation of an innovation (co-creation) is of great importance in terms of the success of the public service innovation process because they are final consumers of the public service (Borins, 2008; Fuglsang, 2008; Von Hippel, 2007). The role of local self-government in co-creation based innovations in the fields of welfare and the environment in Slovakia is rather limited; service delivery innovations are predominantly initiated by non-profit organizations or citizens themselves (Nemec et al., 2015).

Literature increasingly acknowledges stakeholders' voluntary involvement in formerly internal processes and structures of civil society organizations, i.e. stakeholders get involved in and co-create brand strategy, a core intangible asset for CSOs (Vallaster & Wallpach, 2018).

Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers (2015) conducted a systematic review about 1) the different types and definitions of public co-creation, 2) the influential factors to the co-creation process and 3) the outcomes of co-creation processes. They concluded that authors use a variance of definitions to address the concept of co-creation. This may refer to citizens as value creators (Briscoe, Keränen, & Parry, 2012; Díaz-Méndez & Gummesson, 2012), citizens as collaborative partners (Baumer, Sueyoshi, & Tomlinson, 2011), or to a role of citizens as active agents in public service delivery (Cairns, 2013; Gebauer, Johnson, & Enquist, 2010). Furthermore, it seems that related concepts, such as co-production, community participation and social community enterprise, are often defined in a way that makes them very similar to the concept of co-creation. From this variety in definitions and the conceptual confusion with related concepts, the most typical is the type of relation between citizens/CSOs on the one side and public organizations on the other. Different ideal-types of citizens/CSOs involvement can be distinguished:

1. *Citizens/CSOs as co-implementer*: citizen involvement in which citizens carry out public service tasks which are in the past carried out by public organizations.
2. *Citizens/CSOs as co-designer*: citizens determine to a large extent how services are being designed and implemented
3. *Citizens/CSOs as initiator*: citizens take the initiative for public service delivery and public institutions are invited to join (Voorberg et al., 2015).

### 3 Research

In this study, we rely on the above mentioned type of social innovation called co-creation. We are inspired by the idea of "repurposing" by Scharoun & Hoyos (2012), Satola (2015) and Nemeč et al. (2015).

Rossi (2004) described how citizens took the initiative to renovate the city centre of Naples, after the local government decided to close it for the public. The city council recognized the priority given by the local citizenry and they decided to support the initiative. As a result, the historic centre of Naples was restored and reopened for the public. Here, the municipality participated in the initiative of citizens, instead of the other way round.

Nemeč et al. (2015) investigated co-creation initiative called PrieStory. This program aimed to involve people in improvement of the public spaces, increase the public participation and to strengthen the communities. This program allows realization of low cost investment projects executed by volunteers living in the area. The examples of products might be parks, sport places, green places, etc. The PrieStory program involves

the provider of the public service, in this case public spaces (municipalities/local governments), the co-designers of the public service (citizens), the public service innovation initiators (Ekopolis Foundation and Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia PDCS – both CSOs), and the public service innovation co-financer (CSO Bank – private corporation). There were 33 redesigned public spaces between years 2005 – 2011 but none of them dealt with an unused property.

The way public space is used is changing: there is a push to make optimal use of the space already available in cities in creative ways. Indeed, cities are confronted with limited urban spaces, and ensure a sustainable urban development. In this sense, urban abandoned spaces are becoming key strategic places for sustainable urban development, -combining a potential functional, ecological, cultural and aesthetic role in the urban landscape (<https://urbact.eu/abandoned-spaces>).

A special project “TUTUR” (Temporary Use as a Tool for Urban Regeneration 2013 - 2015) aimed at introducing the method of temporary use in urban regeneration to cities participating in the network. Temporary use is a planning tool effectively bringing together various stakeholders: it engages an important number of municipal and private economic development agencies and property owners, as well as cultural organisations, to elaborate potential uses of existing infrastructure and resources. In a time when cities are not growing but transforming themselves, especially when in crises, we need to find new and agile ways to respond to local needs. Temporary uses can be a source of life for neighbourhoods in order to promote a sustainable urban regeneration promoted by public administration and citizens (<https://urbact.eu/tutur>).

Within the TUTUR project, Patti and Polyak (2017a) analysed the urban regeneration in Bremen, Rome and Budapest. They pointed out the lack of financial resources across Europe which leads municipalities to reinterpret their existing infrastructure and to reactivate it by involving new functions and new actors. The responses given to the problem of empty properties appear at various levels of urban planning and governance. The inflexible planning system characteristic of the modernist era has been gradually replaced by “soft urbanism”, allowing for experimentation and for trying possible functions at test-sites, before fixing them by large investments. This open-ended planning system also gives more emphasis to the temporal dimension of developments, enabling temporary uses and successive phases in the development process. However, conditions for temporary use vary significantly in different cities. What all cities have in common, is to establish cooperation between municipalities and CSOs. Creating appropriate frameworks is crucial in establishing temporary use practices. They can function as structures of a more inclusive planning system, where civic initiatives are invited to take part in the regeneration process without being instrumentalised or exploited. They can be platforms where spatial needs and resources are matched, where bottom-up initiatives meet public development strategies of administrations, forced by the decline of urban economies to rethink their development processes. (Patti & Polyak, 2017a).

In Bremen, the *ZwischenZeitZentrale* (ZZZ) is one of the first temporary use programs established by a municipality in cooperation with an CSO, born from the recognition of the need for new tools to revitalize its vacant sites and building stock and to keep young professionals and creatives in town. In the 1980s and '90s, Bremen went through a similar post-industrial transformation as many other cities in Europe: with the closure of shipyards and the old port, empty industrial areas occupied all the riverfront of the River Weser. A high rate of unemployment and the change of shopping behaviour led to empty shops in various parts of Bremen. In the late 2000s, the city of Bremen came up with the idea of a temporary use agency for the whole city as a pilot project of the *Nationale Stadtentwicklungspolitik*, a program of the Federal Ministry of Building. The impulse for a temporary use of agency in Bremen came from the Department of Economics, Labour and Ports in 2007. Between 2009 and 2012, ZZZ supported around 50 projects in different scales, from 30m<sup>2</sup> to 4500m<sup>2</sup>. Within these three years, over 500 initiatives turned to ZZZ to request for empty offices, ateliers, workspaces, event locations, cultural hot spots, and for-profit economic activities which are granted the temporary use of the spaces on the grounds of covering all operational costs. The supported projects included initiatives from a diversity of target groups: neighbourhood-oriented social projects, activities supporting children or the elderly, local organizations working on education, history, art, gardening, unemployment, migration, schools. (Patti & Polyak, 2017a, b).

Vacant properties in Rome are the result of factors common to many other cities, such as the economic crisis and demographic changes, but also of the mismanagement of publicly owned real estate portfolios and excessive construction without corresponding demand (Caudo, 2014). In 2013, the Rome Municipality set itself to enumerate its own properties by creating an unprecedented database of public properties. The creation of the database was complemented by additional mapping initiatives. As part of the TUTUR project, the already existing architects-run online platform "City-Hound" helped the identification of vacant properties within Rome's 3rd district: within the pilot area, the platform hosts information of over 70 abandoned properties including schools, industrial premises, shops, infrastructure and green spaces, some of which have become test-sites of the municipality's temporary use program. (Patti & Polyak, 2017a)

Also other countries have applied temporary use method, e.g. in the UK a Community Interest Company (CIC) was founded in 2009, called *Meanwhile Space*. The CIC began as the delivery arm of the Department for Communities and Local Government-funded *Meanwhile Project* which aimed to boost community uses of empty properties and sites. The project has built a 'library' of ideas and information as a resource to make it easier for both the landlord and the project sides to realise *Meanwhile* opportunities. As a result of the project, several British municipalities like Glasgow or London published standardised temporary use contract samples facilitating the agreement between owners and users, by defining terms of purpose, duration, rent and liabilities. Besides cooperating with central and local administrations to reduce barriers of the temporary use of vacant spaces, *Meanwhile Space* also works landlords, landowners, developers and local

authorities to advise and deliver projects that relieve them temporarily of liabilities (insurance, rates, security etc.) associated with holding redundant shops, offices, cleared land etc. whilst an appropriate commercial solution is being sought. By advising, training and collaborating with local communities and other stakeholders, temporary uses are deployed to reanimate the space and provide opportunities for community benefit and social enterprise. One of the flagship projects of Meanwhile Space is the Cottrell House in Wembley, where the lack of local services made it important to open spaces for new initiatives. By inviting local residents to reflect on the new services needed, and initiatives to offer functions for the spaces, Meanwhile Space engaged over 600 people in discussing, redesigning and reusing the former gas station as offices, artist studios, co-working spaces and cafeterias. The work of Meanwhile Space is helped by property taxes where prospects of exemption of business rates encourages property owners to allow charity organisations to use their properties. In its first 5 years of existence, Meanwhile Space built a network of over 10.000 people who own or are interested in using vacant properties, gave space to over 300 start-up companies and created over 100 jobs (Patti, 2015).

In the Netherlands, Stipo, a Rotterdam-based boutique urban strategy and innovation firm, specialising in co-creation city redevelopment and user-based, organic, and bottom-up urban initiatives, combines spatial planning with economic development, culture, education, welfare, sport, recreation and tourism. Stipo advises, develops, coaches and supplies training. Its operating area consists of combinations of spatial planning and strategy with economic development, culture, welfare, sport, recreation and tourism. Stipo developed its own methodology to tackle spatial and social problems, focusing on value-based regeneration models based on linking physical, social and economic components, and experimenting with networking, temporary events and differentiated rental agreements. Cooperating with housing associations and members of the creative industry, Stipo regenerated 40 buildings in the past years. In the Central-Rotterdam area of „Zoho” (the Summer Hofkwartier) Stipo works with the Havensteder housing association as a public developer to strengthen the area. Through negotiations with property owners and attracting members of the creative sector as well as local entrepreneurs and residents, Stipo approached the neighbourhood as a whole with connecting spatial, social, economic, and cultural components (Patti, 2015).

Back to Slovak civil society and their co-creation initiatives, Murray Svidroňová (2019) researched collaboration practices to map the relations between government and CSOs in Slovakia. The selection of cases presented was based on the focus group experts’ judgment, which might be biased, however, the finding helped to identify characteristics on government – CSOs relations in Slovakia. One of the cases was the case of Public Amphitheatre in the municipality of Banská Bystrica. Public Amphitheatre was once a vibrant cultural place for outdoor cinema and special events. With the arrival of a multiscreen cinema in the local shopping mall it was abandoned. After the municipality put it on the list of non-usable property, which was only a step away from being

demolished, a group of young enthusiasts formed an CSO to save the Amphitheatre. They signed a co-operation memorandum with the municipality and in cooperation with a private company they revitalised the Amphitheatre. The main activity of the CSO remains the support of the Amphitheatre in the form of organising a summer movie theatre or other events with the aim of helping the Amphitheatre to become a vibrant cultural and social place, with an emphasis on sustainability, content diversity and preservation of its genius loci.

Mazur (in Patti & Polyak, 2017b) interviewed Aliancia Stará Tržnica, an CSO managing the Old Market Hall, a historic building in the centre of Bratislava. The building closed down after years of unsuccessful attempts by the municipality to keep the market alive. Years later, the market hall reopened with a redevelopment plan proposed by the Aliancia, combining a food market every Saturday with cultural events on other days, as well as two cafés, a grocery shop, a cooking school and a soda water manufacturer. Rethinking the opportunities of the Old Market Hall allows the organisation to run the building in an economically sustainable way, while gradually renovating it and creating a new event venue and meeting space in the heart of the city.

Murray Svidroňová et al. (2020) describe more cases of CSO active in “saving” a municipal property in Banská Bystrica. One of them, a civic association Laputa was founded in order to create a literary residence house for authors and a literary café and library in Banská Bystrica by renovating the old city bastion, formerly a part of the old city fortification system. The city has leased the building to the CSO Laputa for 30 years for a symbolic 1€/year provided that by 2020 there will be created a new culture venue. OZ Laputa’s initial steps were to clean the space and obtain all the necessary technical documentation, archaeological research, approvals and fundraising to start with the reconstruction. In 2015, the founders of the Artforum bookshop joined the initiative and its main objective was reformulated as to make Literary bastion a brand and the place where the good quality literature is being created, published and presented, as the old bastion has the genius loci ideal for such literary endeavours. The initiative started to promote literary life in Banská Bystrica and the Bastion became an integral part of the project in both the symbolic and material level. In 2017 they started their publishing activity with their first publication, *The Songbook of Dezo Ursiny*. Since then, the publishing became a strong part of their activities. By using the historic building for the events and as a symbol for other activities it builds local identity and historic awareness of both the city dwellers and its visitors. Although the main aim of the initiative at the beginning was to reconstruct the object and build a residence for authors, recently the attention has been redirected more on the events and publishing activities under the logo and name of Literary bastion.

The second case described by Murray Svidroňová, et al. (2020) is an old cinema turned into object used by young people. Hviezda cinema (the star cinema) was opened in 1955 and enjoyed many years of great popularity. The fate of this and other smaller cinemas in



Slovakia have been sealed by modern multiplexes that offer efficient cinema operations. The building thus fell into disrepair until in 2012 a group of young people came to the town who needed to find suitable premises in Banská Bystrica for a large indoor concert of rap legend ONYX from the USA. As the municipality did not have a suitable venue for ONYX in the centre of town, they offered the former culture house in the city centre, which was totally unacceptable as it was in a more advance state of disrepair. They kept looking for a space and found the former cinema Hviezda building as a possible alternative. At that time, it had already been sold to a private investor after being declared a non-usable property for the municipality. Before the sale the town invited other institutions to remove anything of use from this building as the plan was for the private investor to demolish it, however, this plan did not materialize and the building in private ownership decayed further and was a frequent site for squatters and the homeless. The sponsors for ONYX had to remove 25 large trucks of waste before installing new electrical connections and water installations, among other things. The concert was a great success attracting many visitors. After two months of continuous work in extreme conditions, the first stage of new “Urban Spot” was finished in cooperation with CSO EXTREME, a volunteer organization. The success of the concert was the reason why the initiative kept on organizing concerts and other events at the place, while continuously upgrading it. Currently, the space is used as an alternative venue to the municipal House of Culture that hosts various events like concerts and art exhibitions of alternative forms and self-expression. Extra money earned by the events are re-invested into the facility.

#### **4 Conclusions**

Based on the abovementioned, it is clear that CSOs played an important role in repurposing the unused (public) property. They voluntarily generated co-creation initiatives, initiated and produced new activities: repurposing, revitalization and reconstruction of an unused property. In some areas, voluntary efforts appear to be more effective than public administration activities, which is a great service for the municipality. Needless to say, all the initiatives have been successful in providing attractive services and content so that they found their stable audience. What the initiatives have in common is their initial and continuing enthusiasm about their projects that was sufficient to generate volunteer work and support of experts and to some extent private companies. This enabled renovating and up-keep of the previously unused properties. Moreover, all the places have become unique and special places for their visitors, either due to their historic or nostalgic value. Another thing the initiative share is that the local government does not actively support or take interest in their projects even in cases where their buildings are involved and have a chance of being fully reconstructed. This is in line with research of Nemeč et al., 2015 who point out that initiators of the co-creation are mostly CSOs or citizens themselves, self-governments only partially participate. Though the initiatives that were outline in this chapter were rather urban oriented, we feel that it is possible to create active participation in smaller communities and in so doing, could even have great impact for the locality.

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