

FIGHTING POVERTY IN DEPRIVED NEIGHBORHOODS BY DEVELOPING THE POTENTIAL OF NATURAL ELEMENTS WITH THE HELP OF HANDS-ON INTERVENTIONS; CASE STUDY: „COLONIE” NEIGHBORHOOD AND THE JIUL DE EST RIVER IN PETROSANI TOWN, ROMANIA

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Abstract:

In the period of transition that followed the communist regime and adaptation to capitalist political system, the whole Jiu Valley in Hunedoara county had to suffer major economic, social, ecologic and political changes. The fallout that intervened in every branch first affected the bottom social category, as the entire region was based on unprofitable coal mining. Due to a series of catalyst factors this category of urban citizens fell to trust the ability to improve their own status. This study takes an analysis on the economic, social and ecologic issues and, taking into account the international experience of hands-on interventions, proposes to fight the local poverty by small contextualized projects based on the possibilities of every resident that desires to take part. Starting from small scale interventions based on the use of the main natural feature (rivers Jiul de Est, Maleia and a small ditch) the project rises to encompass an always widening area.

Keywords: shrinking city, post-mining, deprived neighborhood, hands-on urbanism, river greening

1. INTRODUCTION

Petrosani is a linear city developed along the main route that connects Oltenia to Western Transylvanian counties. It is developed on a gentle hill slope in the Eastern side of the Petroșani basin. It is the main city in the Jiu Valley region of Hunedoara county. As in every monoindustrial region, the collapse of the communist regime meant the beginning of a crisis. The number of mining branch employees shrank from over 55.000 in 1990 to 7.692 today [1], whilst the total population number decreased from the 161461 peak in 1992 down to 114639 citizens in 2011 (29,0% decrease) (Census:

1992, 2011 – preliminary results). The case of this region is well known in our country, but the solutions that every government proposed failed to improve the situation. Even though The Ministry of Development framed a strategy that tried to highlight the Valley as one of Romania’s greatest winter tourist attractions, the high amount of funds needed and the political instability turned it into an unfeasible dream. Because of these aspirations, the municipal administration neglected the neighborhoods that weren’t directly implied in this strategy. One of these is the settlement “Colonie”, strictly separated of the rest of the city by the main circulation network passing through.

This article analyses the problems which this neighborhood is facing and presents a large system of small projects that are to be implemented in three conceptual phases.

1.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although featuring paleolithic living evidence, its recent history dates back to de XVth century, when a small group of herdsmen coming from Hatzeg county settled in the Jiu plain [2].

Three centuries after this in the flat area of the basin coal mining started, as well as building of the first working camps. In Petroșani, the first mining settlement was the neighborhood that citizens now call “Colonie” [3].

Nowadays, an extended part of the buildings in this neighborhood is still standing, being included in a listed urban development zone, but the local authorities are taking attempts to discard this status because of the slow red tape system of receiving building permissions [4].

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1.2 ECOLOGIC CONTEXT

Unlike the rest of the basin, the patch of land where the neighborhood lays is fairly flat. Its Western and Northern limits are the Jiul de Est river, and the Southern is the Maleia stream. Because of the low altitude compared to the water level, the plain was sometimes, during the history, flooded in such a way that it even created new branches. This risk is no more present because of a well-conceived water barrier.

1.3 SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT

What is somehow interesting in statistics is the vast majority of middle-age people in Petroșani: 27141 (61,9%), compared to 6640 (15.1%) people over 60 years.

As a total number of inhabitants there are currently 34331 (Census 2011 – preliminary results), compared to the 52.90 inhabitants of 1992 (Census 1992), which means a 34,5% decrease in the years that followed the communist regime. This happened mainly because of the lack of job opportunities, but a good reason is also the usual habit of miners who return to their homelands after retiring, or the emigration to better paid jobs in foreign countries (Mitrache, 2011).

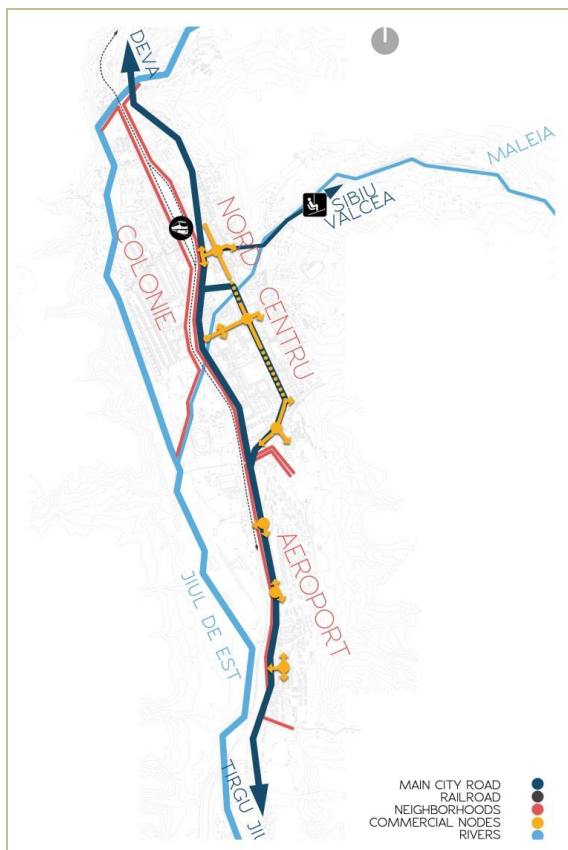


Figure 1 Sketch of the Petroșani city plan. It highlights the main three neighborhoods, main transport corridors, rivers and commercial activity

Today, in “Colonie” there are approximate 5000 citizens (2008 – local elections statistics obtained from specialized City Hall employees) of diverse ethnic groups and social status in this neighborhood. Some part of citizens once living here either moved to some other marginal city neighborhoods, either moved back to the native regions of Oltenia and Moldova. Instead, new ethnic and non-ethnic groups settled, bringing their own poverty along with them, attracted by the possibility of stealing from the derelict Dîlja mine and other industrial leftovers.

2 ANALYSIS

The study was undertaken on several aspects of the urban structure in this neighborhood, starting from an objective historic analysis up to complex layers overlapping in critical points of the network. Results are presented in the outcome:

2.1 HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

The lack of information that the public institutions could provide means that they are not interested in studying the past. Even so, the maps and urban plans that show different spatial layouts of the plain in 1770 (Josephin map), 1980 (Military plan) and 2012 (Holmed consultancy, “Extindere rețele de canalizare în zona Colonie, Municipiul Petroșani”, general plan) give enough evidence to say that the site along the Jiul de Est river was the center of the rural settlement, mainly because the plain field has an agricultural potential.

Since 1980 we can observe that the new buildings are chaotically placed in space, and even more, some of the dwellings were demolished and new industrial halls were built instead. Now, in these spaces run private industrial activities.

2.2 NEIGHBORHOOD LIMITS

“Colonia” is situated between Petroșani city’s main water streams: Jiul de Est and Maleia and the main transport infrastructure. These features help the neighborhood to clearly define its boundaries and area of influence but also have a crucial role in social exclusion.

2.3 CONNECTION TO THE REST OF THE CITY. ACCESSIBILITY

Because of the main transport corridor, which has a depth that extends from 50 to 180 meters, the neighborhood is completely separated from the main city body. This fact is encouraged by the different level measure between districts (10,0 m in average) and, adding that there are only two motorist connections between them (a level crossing that is mainly used and a viaduct over the railroad which is at 1,5 km from the neighborhood center) and a legal

pedestrian one that links the main railroad station area to the city center.

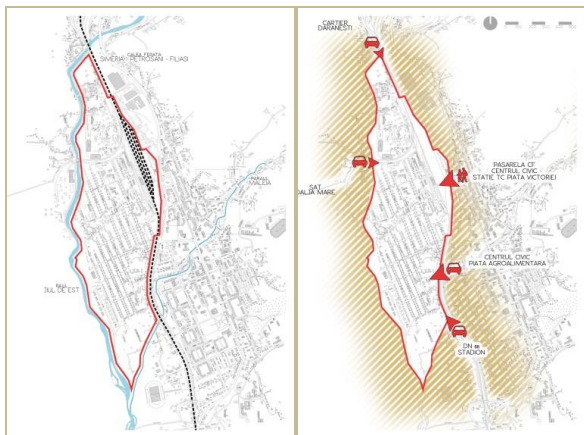


Figure 2 Neighborhood limits: river flows and transport corridor (left)

Figure 3 Pedestrian and motorist accessibility in the neighborhood (right)

2.4 ACCES TO WATERSCAPES

Generally speaking, access to water is not restrained. Most of the transversal streets end into the Jiu river dyke, which makes it feasible for recreation activities. The only exceptions meet private industrial facilities.



Figure 4 Access to waterscapes

Concerning Maleia stream, it has the advantage of passing close to the town's busiest commercial and

when meeting "Colonie" neighborhood it develops a good string of potential green spaces on public property down to the river.

One asset that needs a closer look is a small ditch that gathers the run off waters starting from GEROM industrial site, parallel to railroad tracks. It has got a relatively low discharge of water, but in raining periods it floods the adjacent allotments. This is why people see it as a burden.

2.5 PEOPLE'S NEEDS

In order to get a good feedback from the citizens, but lacking human capital necessary for a social study, we turned to visual media. During September 2011 – September 2012 we studied every news concerning this neighborhood in the local media (television and newspapers). Results are presented in the chart below [6]:

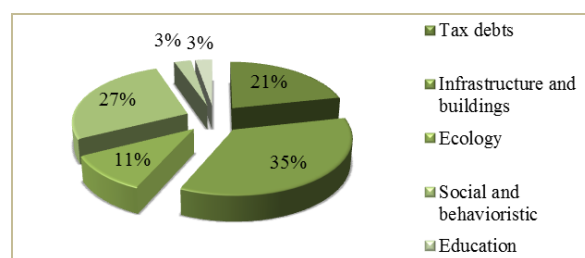


Figure 5 Local media TV Paring news concerning "Colonie" neighborhood, from July 2011 to September 2012

This tells us that the main headlines about the neighborhood concern infrastructure and building projects, social and behavioristic problems and people's inability to pay their taxes. We could mention that, regarding built environment, television presents local administration's projects of urban public works, the uncertainty regarding the railroad station and episcopacy's intentions to build a wooden church where the old public baths resided.

Also, during the local elections campaign, some candidates visited this neighborhood and managed to get good responses of people's needs and problems. All of these are presented below [7]:

- public works;
- social + cultural center;
- park setting;
- broken urban furniture and playground facilities;
- social housing;
- degraded dwellings;
- air pollution;
- periodical garbage disposal;
- jobs;
- cheap medical assistance;
- public safety;

These needs show a community that lacks social cohesion, dismantled by ethnicity and level of income. Citizens care, in the first place, about their own wellness because they didn't have access to the

same opportunities as every Petroșani citizen. Also, it shows that the people care about their own environment and would like to live in better conditions along their neighbors, but they expect local authorities to offer them these facilities if they are to encourage social cohesion. Despite this last conclusion we can say that “Colonie” citizens don’t appreciate the benefits of the rivers passing by and don’t feel that they are parts of their neighborhood, as well as the politicians who never felt the need to treat the river as an electioneering priority.

3. THEORETICAL RESEARCH

The Leipzig Charter for sustainable European cities pays special attention to deprived neighborhoods [8]. The main causes of deprivation are, according to the Charter, high unemployment and social exclusion. These could only be achieved by social integration.

The Charter suggests the following strategies for action in favor of social integration:

- long term development in a public – private strategy for upgrading the physical environment;
- creating new jobs and facilitating the start-up of new businesses through exploitation of endogenous economic forces in the neighborhood;
- better quality education for children and young people, which addresses the deficiencies in provision for them;
- efficient and affordable urban transport for the opportunity of mobility and accessibility to other citizens and facilities; networks for pedestrian and cycle traffic;

All of these strategies propose a “top to the bottom” implication to manage problems of a deprived neighborhood. This means that we have these situations and following consequences:

- the political factor decides to implicate in the neighborhood problem but, because of the lack of legislation and knowledge regarding quality in urban interventions ends up solving one problem but opening up some other ones;
- the private factor decides to implicate in the neighborhood but, because of the primary interest of getting a return, puts the neighborhood issues on the second place and has an inadequate answer to them;
- the social factor seldom decides to imply in their neighborhood wellness because of the lack of cohesion and distrust in their potential as a group; also, citizens don’t usually have the expertise to respond to the issues in a professional way so they need someone to help them through this process.

To prove partial failure of public–private actions in a neighborhood like “Colonie” we turned upon the building permissions issued by local administration from 2009 until 2012, posted on Petroșani City Hall website [9]. Most of them were issued for private purposes, ineffective to the neighborhood as a whole (like house extension, roof conversion, fence redesigning, etc.) but proving that people can get over

local authorities’ lack of concern and act responsibly for their personal interests. The other building permissions were either for local administration’s interventions to rehabilitate some streets (inappropriate and causing several car accidents), either private interventions that introduce industrial and heavy transport into the neighborhood or grab public space to create private parking lots. Although it is not mentioned in the building permissions list, a private group of investors restored a listed building to reconvert it into a fine dining restaurant. This could prove to be a good investment for the neighborhood, but so far it didn’t manage to show community friendly interventions.

On the other hand, in the last few years, mostly since the beginning of the socioeconomic crisis, a lot of new theories burst in practice. Some of these mainly concern a “bottom-up” strategy to be implemented in these low socioeconomic status neighborhoods in search for social cohesion that drives the community to a better economic and ecologic status. This strategy refers totally to a hands-on approach by involving active participation from the citizens.

History of this kind of approach goes back to the nineteenth century, during the industrial revolution. In the allotment dwellings built near industrial plants gardening was a social factor [10], as well as the attention that communities paid to their children’s playgrounds. During the world wars, home allotment gardening became part of the state’s ideology [11] because of its positive effect in reducing economic costs. In the second half of the twentieth century informal house building reduced the differences between rural and urban areas because of their lack of ruling. To help this process take the best possible path, Puerto Rico was the first world country to create a legal foundation of the self-help in official government planning and development strategy [12]. Today there are numerous projects that are taking this approach to a top level of development but we will present them in the specific chapter of this study.

The architecture critic Françoise Fromont identified three steps “that [are] likely to solve physical and social problems” [13]:

- the first step analyses and describes the problems in the nonfunctional urban structure;
- the second step inspects the land by its “layers, its history and its stories”; the result shall be a list of hidden problems that turn out into detectable ones; every setting has its own natural ways of being which can easily be damaged;
- the third step confirms the second one and resets the inner impulses that can take the neighborhood to its nature way of being;

Getting into the depth of this approach we could easily observe that it blends theoretical principles along with practice. It is a cyclic process which purpose is the continuous creative improvement of the project instead of rigid forms, programs or buildings [14]. The projects’ scale is continuously growing,

from small (that concern every person in part) to larger interventions. One of the purposes is social communion for a better representation in dialogue to the local authorities.

Taking all these into account, about the process of making, we shall also consider what experts found about the design of functional public spaces, independent to its location. In accordance, we refer to urban planner Jan Gehl, who identifies the following efficient trends in the twenty first century [15]:

- preoccupations for sports and outdoor activities that have a healthy role in a person’s development;
- preoccupations for cultural events in the public space;
- preoccupations for amenities: waterfront, nature and fresh air;
- preoccupations for continual activities all year long in the public space;

The continuous change in urban settings should start from relatively small scale interventions like children’s playscapes. CABE space in England (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment – the government’s advisor on architecture, urban design and public space) conceived a manual for designing and planning for play [16] where they found through studies that “play is a very serious business for young people. It’s intrinsic to a healthy childhood.”

The way children grow into competent mature citizens is as important as actions taken into the present, but their playgrounds aren’t even close to how good play environments should be designed. It should include the following features [17]:

- water ponds, streams and sand mixed with it;
- vegetation: trees, bushes and flowers;
- animals: birds, fish, etc.;
- natural and diverse colors;
- places to fit in, to sit onto, to climb onto and provide shelter and shade;
- different levels, nooks and overlook platforms;
- changeable structures, equipment and materials;

The hands-on approach can easily fail due to external interference. It cannot resist if the public and private actors have harmful incentives over the project only being in favor of their own interests.

4. INTERNATIONAL PRACTICE

Because this “bottom-up” intervention needs practice to gather some more information, if there is to learn about threats and opportunities, we turned our interest upon existing projects, and the most explicit one is taking place in New York district of South Bronx.

Sustainable South Bronx Non-profit Company in New York [18] is founded by environmental activist Majora Carter in 2001. Long before the crisis, it grew as a result of poor urban space quality for South Bronx citizens. Also, it reacted as an opposition to the fact that all the New York City is disposing the waste

in the people of color neighborhood of South Bronx. Today it works to facilitate social enterprise, green job training and community greening programs.



**Figure 6 Concrete Plant Park, South Bronx
Greenway New York.
© Christopher Payne**

Neighborhoods like Bronx present problems such as social injustice and environmental degradation. As a solution, the non-profit organization observed the neighborhood’s best asset as being the waterfront, which was once a place for people that now is used for industrial reasons (sewage treatment plants, waste transfer stations or polluted industrial lands). In partnership with other community leading actors, the organization promoted the development of the South Bronx Greenway inside the neighborhood and along the waterfront. It consists of eleven miles of bike, pedestrian paths and parks, first of which being the Hunts Point Riverside Park.



**Figure 7 Baretto Point Park, South Bronx
Greenway New York. © Sustainable South Bronx**

This project is followed by several other ones that are trying to give a rebirth to the economic, social and environmental aspects of South Bronx, the main of which being a public park were once was a concrete plant and a mixed-use waterfront development. It also develops a partnership with pluridisciplinary organizations to implement a green roof project.

This organization tells about how important is the commitment to a project that has few chances of success from the beginning.

5. PROPOSALS

Taking into account all these information presented above and some others that couldn't be included in this article (table 1), we settled that the development of a major hands-on project in the "Colonie" neighborhood of Petroșani must start from the very low impact ones in the bottom to the great impact ones in the top.

Table 1. Characteristics of hands-on projects

Existing project	Characteristics
Incredible edible Todmorden	small scale agricultural interventions in public places and informal green spaces
Evergreen Adventure Playground Hackney	children help designing their own play spaces local volunteers help building the place
Play happens everywhere Vauban-Freiburg	social housing over a former military base future owners plan and build their own dwellings streets are appropriate to children's play
Prinzessinnengarten Berlin [19]	urban farm in empty lot multiple activities related
The Cook, the Farmer, his Wife and their Neighbor Amsterdam [20]	community garden and kitchen in a multiethnic neighborhood of Amsterdam each family possesses one lot

The major project will commence by creating the non-profit association of students and professionals „*Colonia veselă*” (“**the happy neighborhood**”), its name being a target for ourselves and in the meantime a bitter contrast to the current situation. Also, along this, a web blog will be created as a presentation platform for every taken step.

As a working method we divided people's needs in three major categories that can be progressively taken care of through appropriate scale project implementation:

- the first stage bears the goals of trust and affirmance, and people's problems and needs are: periodical disposal of the garbage near schools, playground features damage, urban furniture damage, trees damage, cheap medical assistance, degraded dwellings
- in the second stage we look to strengthen and develop the good steps made in the first one and to get in the greater public eye. We believe that in this stage we can cope with these problems and needs that the community is facing: jobs, social exclusion to the upper city citizens, air pollution through garbage burnout, social and cultural center, urban park, public safety.
- the third stage means the development of the project through a good collaboration with the local authorities and private investment. This means that in

this time we would be able to resolve these problems and needs: public urban works, street asphalt works, social dwellings.

Because it is a hands-on approach we made a motion that we will wait for the first feed-backs until we decide for further steps in the second and third stage. This doesn't mean that we haven't already foreseen some steps and they we can manage their implementation. In this moment we developed a basic framework of first stage projects. Our principles are presented in the projects' description, but our main concerns are the following:

- treating every individual as an important part of this project; citizens are our equals in this project: we decide together about the evolution of every step in project;
- being as independent as we can be regarding financial issues;
- using the most of the natural features and of materials found on-site;

A complex study is undertaken in this moment regarding the neighborhood. So far we have managed to obtain information about every aspect of the new General Urban Plan of Petroșani and the neighborhood we've focused upon. Besides this, we have managed to study the physical limits, existent and potential access points, gaps in street network, existent and potential public spaces, local transport, institutions, education units, industry, historic buildings and sites and their protection zones, waterfront access, land ownership, public works, building permissions and historic development. We set the next step as being a social survey through which we should find even more details, but it will continue as we implement the first projects.

5.1 CHILDREN'S WONDERHOOD

This is the first project regarding the neighborhood and the first step in getting to know people. In order to gain citizen's trust in our positive intentions we turn to schools and kindergartens to find out children's perception of the surrounding urban realm. Through games and workshops we want to find out how would their perfect neighborhood look like. Children are taught about the value of the natural assets in their playgrounds and encouraged to design playgrounds that make use of natural elements. Also, children are encouraged to choose their favorite playground locations in relation to their dwellings and the usable water flows.

5.2 PARENTS' WONDERHOOD

The second project follows the previous one. Children's wishes are presented to their parents and visitors in a school exhibition. The varnishing day also consists of a dialogue with the existent visitors (especially neighborhood citizens) about the ways in which their children's dreams may come true. An intervention group is formed up.

These issues being settled, the project needs the local authorities' agreement, which may even offer to help this project in an active way. The sites where we are authorized to intervene are prepared and the work should commence immediately. After the improvement the group is encouraged to periodically come back and manhandle the problems and imminent damages.

5.3 BREAKYARD

In the first project children designed their perfect playscapes, including ones in the school yard. This is the time when we pay attention to their school brakes. A plan must be settled along with school's principal and teachers, as well as the methods by which it can be implemented. Project's target is to get rid of the constant garbage and replacing it with educative experimental cultures. The project can even grow to build greenhouses as places where these cultures grow better.

5.4 KINDERGARDEN

One of people's main problems concerns the garbage built-up near the neighborhood's kindergarten. It is on a left over plot, full of residues and wild grass. The first step is to enquire the local authorities about this plot's availability. Then we should form a group of action (local citizens, students, children) that should start the clear out as soon as it can. The next step is the enquiry for local materials that can help the build-up of raised beds. If it is possible, the garbage platform could also be cleared out.

5.5 AS I SIT IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD

Because the existing urban seating furniture is unsuitable for this kind of neighborhood (friability, cost – 430 RON, infrequency in placement) and it's an important factor of social cohesion, we propose the organization of an architecture students' workshop. Along with benevolent citizens, they are to conceive low cost rigid urban seating furniture, using local materials. If this way founds no resources to develop into a good result, the projects will turn to local authorities and private investors for funding in exchange to adverts engraved in benches themselves. Their placement is decided along with proximity citizens, which would also take care of them.

5.6 "COLONIE" ASSISTANCE

This project rises from the ambition of medical students in Bucharest, Timișoara and Cluj-Napoca. It consists in periodical free medical assistance offered to sick and old citizens. They would pay weekly visits following a free-for-all schedule posted on association's web blog. If the situation allows, the organization would acquire medical apparatuses at a

specific point in the future. Also, young citizens in schools are encouraged to follow this vocation and help their neighbors. This project's purpose is to create a self-sustained relieving network in the neighborhood.

5.7 REARTBILITATION

Many citizens don't have the financial possibility to rehabilitate their dwellings. They even have serious issues in their homes' degraded construction materials. This project consists of finding a viable source of rehabilitation financing for at least five of these dwellings. It will run as a two stages process:

- first stage consists of a workshop for the architecture and construction students; they are requested to come for a short period of time and work for these homes' minimal rehabilitation; the outcome is a naked white house that offers good living conditions;
- second stage consists of another workshop, this time for plastic arts students, too; they are invited to stay along with dwellers for a week and then paint their houses in the artistic way that characterizes them;

5.8 ACCESSIBLE WEST

In the first project in the second stage we create the infrastructure to strengthen the connections between the neighborhood and Petroșani city center, concerning the motorized, bicycle, pedestrian and local transport: three level crossings connections between the city and the neighborhood; bicycle access in the same streets as above; pedestrian access by ramps and ringing devices at railroad crossings; local authorities should also consider an efficient transport system.

5.9 "LA JIU" RECREATION SITE

A great part of the neighborhood's rebirth is also it's reconversion. Until now it has only supported industrial activity, but its' proximity to the "Jiul de Est" and Maleia rivers, the great amount of unused lots on their banks, the existence of a water barrier and the adjacency of the main city sports base means that it has a strong recreation potential. If it is accessible and there are several events organized in this place many people would break in to spend a good time. This project also proposes the refurbishment of the rivers themselves in a future moment when the local administration will afford it.

Because it is only a second stage project the way it is put into practice remains uncertain, as it is dependent to many factors.

5.10 GREEN STREETS, GREEN YARDS

This project grows out of the concern for streets safety, flood threatening and sustainable private

agriculture. It brings together two types of intervention: using the ditch as water supply for private gardening and laying out of several interlocking green isles on neighborhood's straight streets.

5.11 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CENTER

A few years ago, due to intense construction materials robberies that went on, local authorities decided to demolish what was left of the public baths, a listed building close to the casino. Now, this plot is leased to the episcopacy in order to build a wooden church for the community. This is the plot where we thought the best place for a social center would be. Our options are:

- proposing a partnership to the episcopacy to have a say in building the church, taking into consideration the building of the social center; also, this partnership should be continued as the Church has a great intervention in social assistance; the social center can be one of its place of intervention,
- leasing an unused plot from the local authorities, in the "Cărbunelui" street, in the place of a former railroad track.

As well as the last project, because it is only a second stage project the way it is put into practice remains uncertain, as it is dependent to many factors.

5.12 BUILDING MY FUTURE

This is the only foreseen third stage project because of its' high importance to the neighborhood in particular and to the city in general. It is a project that settles a group of young families which want their own dwelling. They are to build the same amount of houses as the families' number and then draw who stays where. Being a major project, the best suited place would be former military base near the rivers' banks. By this time the association should gain local authorities' and private investors' trust so financing could be brought in by an integrated project.

6. CONCLUSION

Thus far things are moving forward in the "Colonia Veselă" project. We trust that this kind of project is the only way that the citizens of the "Colonie" neighborhood could create a better environment for them and their children. Besides the social cohesion they need specialists' management to overcome their idiosyncratic and negative way of thinking about themselves. "Bottom-up" projects, despite having a relative small impact compared to the smashing force of a high-expenditure intervention, bring people together. This, and the understanding and use of natural systems in site offer a sustainable and cheap way to fight the poverty. Particular, the presence of water flows in the neighborhood's limits gives an extraordinary potential to its development, being used by neighborhood citizens, other locals and hostellers visiting the city.

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