

YOUR OWN SPACE: SEIZE IT. RUN IT. SUSTAIN IT.



**Report from the working group of the same name as part of the
IETM Autumn Plenary Meeting in Sofia, Bulgaria, 16 – 19 October 2014**

**Maps: Urbanviva Architecture, Sofia
Pictures: Mihail Novakov**



Introduction

In the last decades some important developments have been taking place in Bulgaria. The independent sector (artistic and not only) is growing and many civil organizations are becoming part of the social, political and artistic life. People are keen to share, create and express new ideas and values. The arts are being taken out of the institutional system and spread everywhere in the city engaging everyone around. The vivid independent scene needs its own space to give birth to its provocative productions and to be officially part of the cultural life of the Bulgarian cities. In Sofia expanding of the independent scene is more apparent and multidisciplinary spaces are especially needed. Recognizing the increasing importance of the independent arts sector and preparing the candidature of Sofia for European Capital of Culture 2019, the Municipality of Sofia has been working with the independent artists for the past years, selecting and developing such spaces.

The working group “Your Own Space: Seize it. Run it. Sustain it” was organized as a part of the IETM Plenary Meeting entitled “Space for Change”, in Sofia, Bulgaria, 16-19 October 2014. The purposes were to explore the abandoned places in Sofia, which are potentially suitable for multidisciplinary arts activities, and to share experiences in creating and running such spaces in other countries.

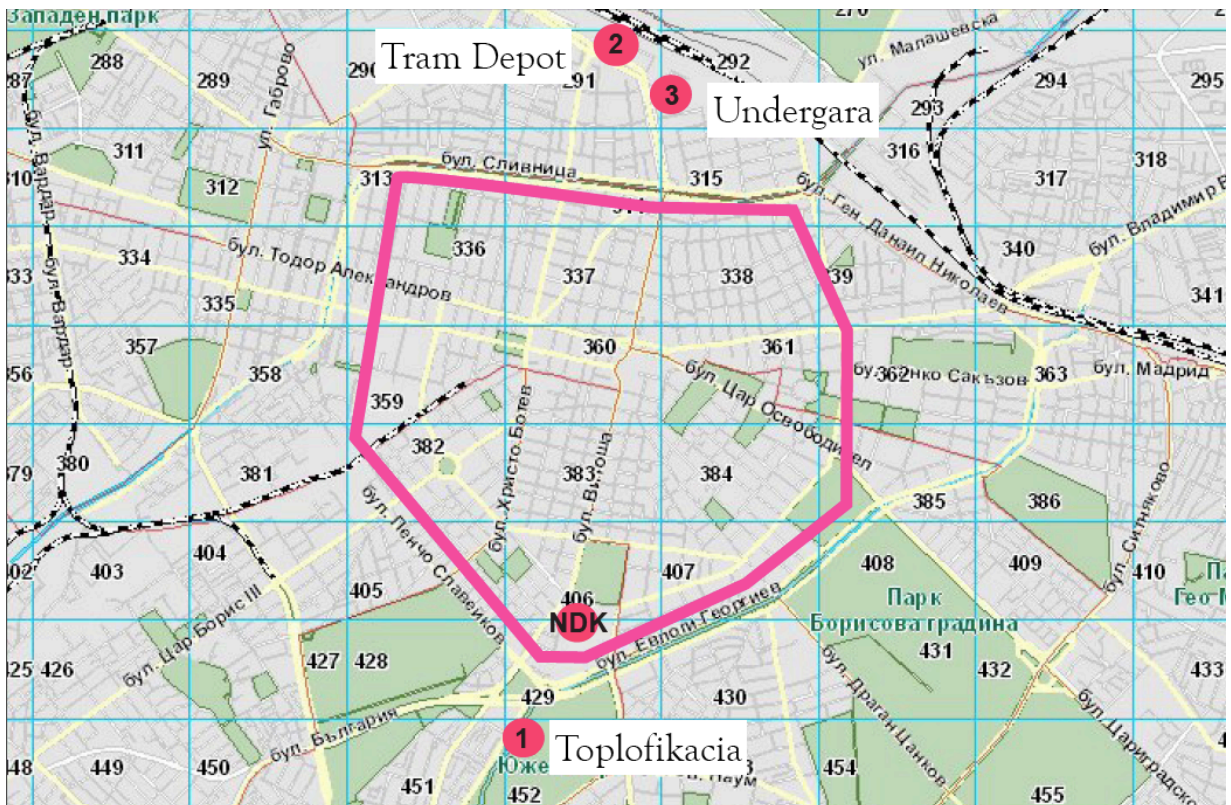
The session was moderated by Christophe Knoch, founder of MICA MOCA Project (<http://www.micamoca.com/>) and speaker of the independent art scene in Berlin, and Birgitta Persson, Secretary General of TRANS EUROPE HALLES (<http://www.teh.net/>). With the main focus on the Bulgarian situation of independent arts spaces, the discussion was nourished by the stories of the artists and cultural operators from different European countries (France, Slovenia, Romania, Albania and Bulgaria).

The working group started with a guided tour through the abandoned places in Sofia, encouraging the reflection on how to find and (re-) construct an independent arts space. The second part was dedicated to sharing experiences of running multidisciplinary spaces, and the final part instigated the discussion on how to sustain such a space.

Seize it

During the 2 hours tour a group of 65 participants – artists, architects, designers, urban planners, culture managers from Bulgaria and abroad – visited three potential future interdisciplinary spaces in Sofia: the **Heating plant of NDK – National Palace of Culture (Toplofikacia)**, **Undergara** (the place in front of the main railway station of Sofia) and the old **Tram Depot**.

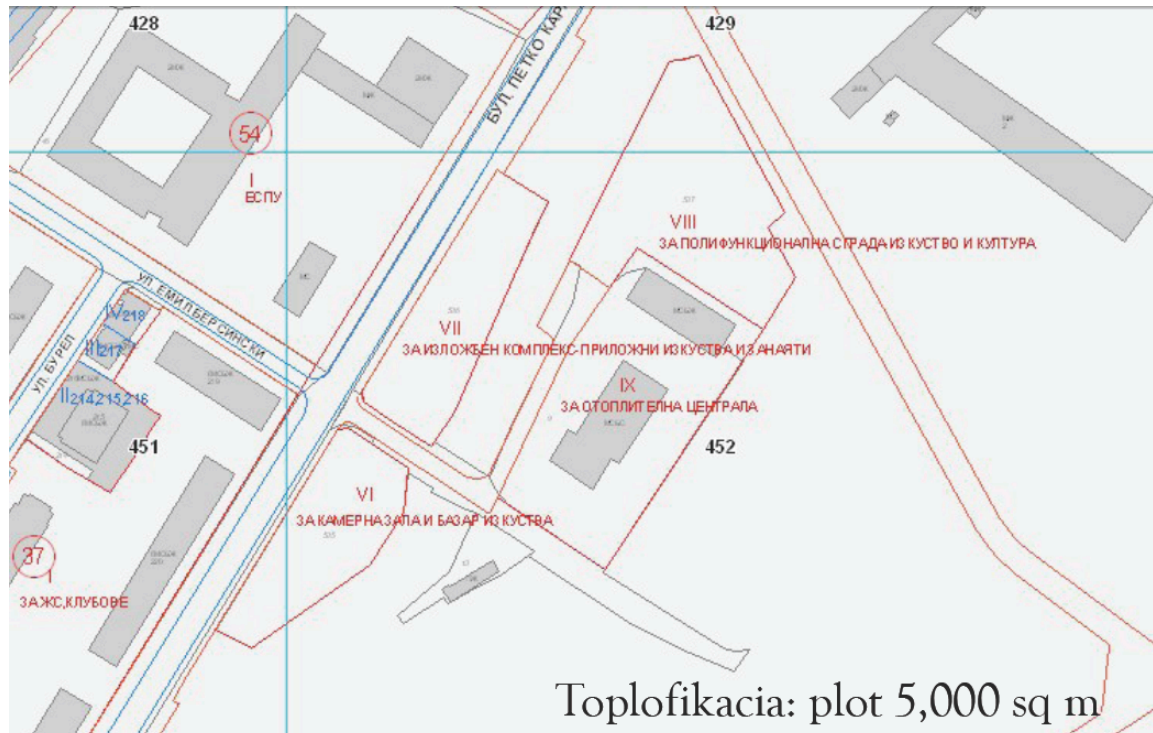
The tour made people reflect on the criteria for selecting places as well as to generate objective assessment of the potential future spaces made by international experts. Participants formulated pros and cons for each place.



1. The Heating Plant of NDK (National Palace of Culture) / Toplofikacia

This first destination was the former heating plant of the National Palace of Culture, which nowadays serves as a shelter for drug addicted and homeless people. The plot is 5 000 sq. m. It consists of two buildings: the bigger one is the heating plant itself and the smaller one is a former administration. The plot is located in the city center, between a living area and the South Park of Sofia, one of the biggest green areas in the capital. Nearby are the Museum of Contemporary Art

and the Museum of Earth and Men. The place is easily accessible from any part of the city by different means of public transport. In Sofia's Detailed City Plan this plot is still assigned as a "heating plant" but the plots around are denoted as "exhibition building for crafts and arts" and "multifunctional culture and art building". This may facilitate transforming the area into multidisciplinary arts spaces.



The place is in the heart of the city, intimate, hidden and all immersed in greenery. The main building is one story building organized in two levels. In the basement level, there are the heating pipes, which carried off the hot water to recipient. There are two separate spaces on the second level – the smaller one is the control room and the bigger one is the main space. The construction of the building is metal and concrete, with a high concrete roof. There is a lot of daylight, coming from the big windows, which are either broken or missing. However, the building is strong and stable, the large room inside gives many possibilities, which makes further initiatives including major transformation foreseeable in many aspects, also financially.

The place seen through the eyes of the participants in the work group:

Pros:

- High roof suitable for technical settings: it can also serve as a terrace or as a basis for building an additional floor;
- Green space outside (forest) creates a healthier meeting and/or work space;

- Being spacious and high, the building seems to be suitable for performing arts and contemporary arts in general; large windows make it ideal for a dance studio or plastic arts;
- Different levels of the floor can bring interesting layering (stage/no stage, appearance/disappearance) for performances;
- Presence of a basement for storage and under-stage trucks;
- Many usable areas outside and inside;
- A lot of natural light;
- Adaptability and flexibility of the structure: the place can handle big transformations;
- History of the space and presence of other cultural places can inspire artistic work;
- Thanks to height and volume, you can do everything;
- As an oasis in the city center, it's suitable for a residence or/and a culture center: it seems to be outside the city, but it's central;
- Being isolated from the close neighbors, it is appropriate for noisy events.



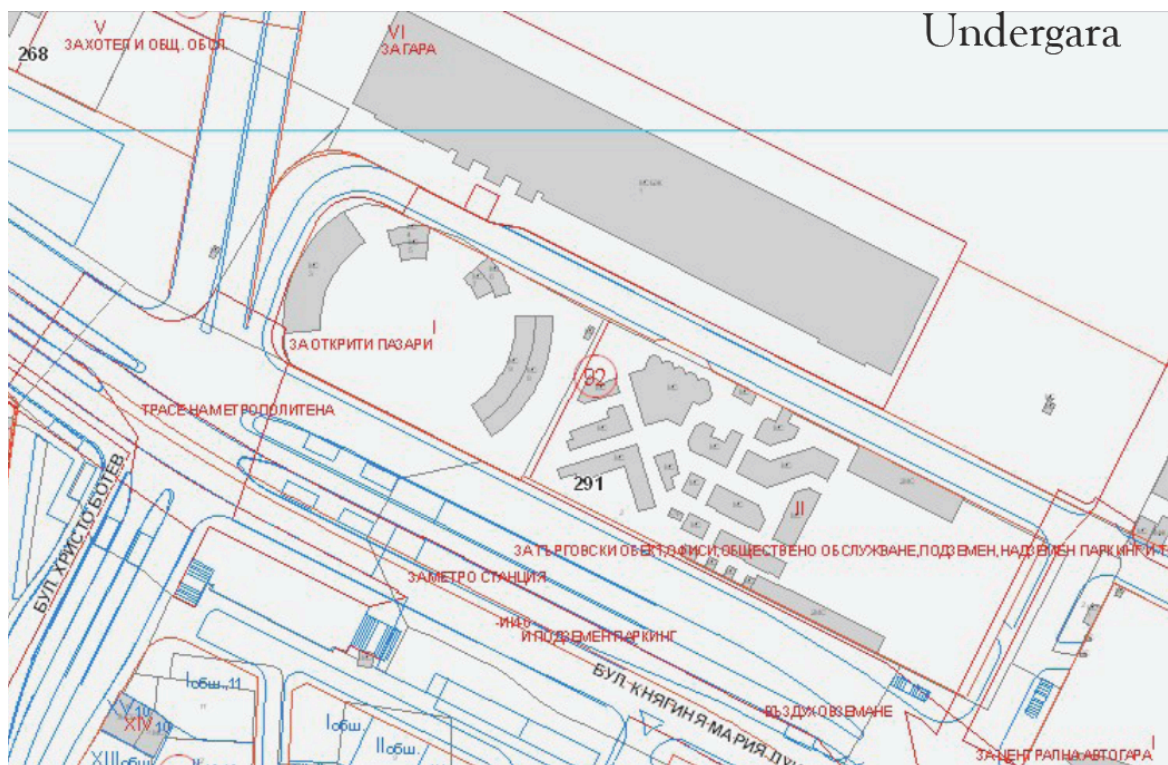
Cons:

- A lot of infrastructural work, time and money are needed to furnish, rebuild and make the space functional;
- Inappropriate name that could damage the image;
- Due to the large size, it would be expensive to heat the building in winter and cool it down in summer;

- May be used only in spring or summer;
- Where will the homeless live?
- No neighborhood nearby so may be too isolated;
- Need for a public support;
- No space for offices, service areas, dormitory;
- Lack of parking places.

2. Undergara

Undergara is the space located in front of the main railway station of Sofia. Once created to be a shopping center, it has become a home for robbers, dealers, prostitutes, alcoholics and drug addicts. It is 6 500 sq. m., which includes a circular square in the middle of the space, and many spaces with different areas – big and small organized in two levels. Although the place is not located in the city center, it is easily accessible from different directions by public transport for almost 24 hours a day. In Sofia’s Detailed City Plan, this plot is assigned as place for an “open market spaces”, what gives the opportunity to develop it in many different directions including art services.



Nowadays, this location has been delegated to a local NGO that has attempted to transform it to and manage it as an artistic center, involving different independent organizations connected with arts but not only. But so far no big success has been reached. It seems that large number of artists do not recognize this space as their own and there are still not enough organizations standing behind this initiative. The future of this place is important for the city, as it is the

first place that a new visitor from Bulgaria or abroad seizes when arriving in Sofia by train.

There is a big amount of people passing through the space every day and night. However, there is something that causes artists and ordinary people to avoid this place when possible. If anyone can transform this space, it would be the artists. It will be a big challenge, because the place has a history of failed attempts for transformation for more than 20 years. In addition, the separate rooms are not high enough, there is not enough light and a big investment is needed just to start. However, it is a big and interesting place with separate spaces and diverse outdoor possibilities.

The place seen through the eyes of the participants in the work group:

Pros:

- Many rooms and adaptable separate spaces;
- Flexible infrastructure: suitable for visual arts, offices, possible mixture of business and cultural projects; possibility to host diverse organizations;
- Connection with the Railway Station will allow artists to cooperate with it and create interesting projects;
- Close to the subway, easy to reach;
- A lot of people walking by;
- Already usable infrastructure;
- Two floors can host different activities at the same time;
- High visibility;
- Possibility to reach new audiences;
- Can be used for projects involving local communities with the focus on their traditions, regardless the strong contemporary feeling;
- Part of the area can be rented if reconstructed in a right way.



Cons:

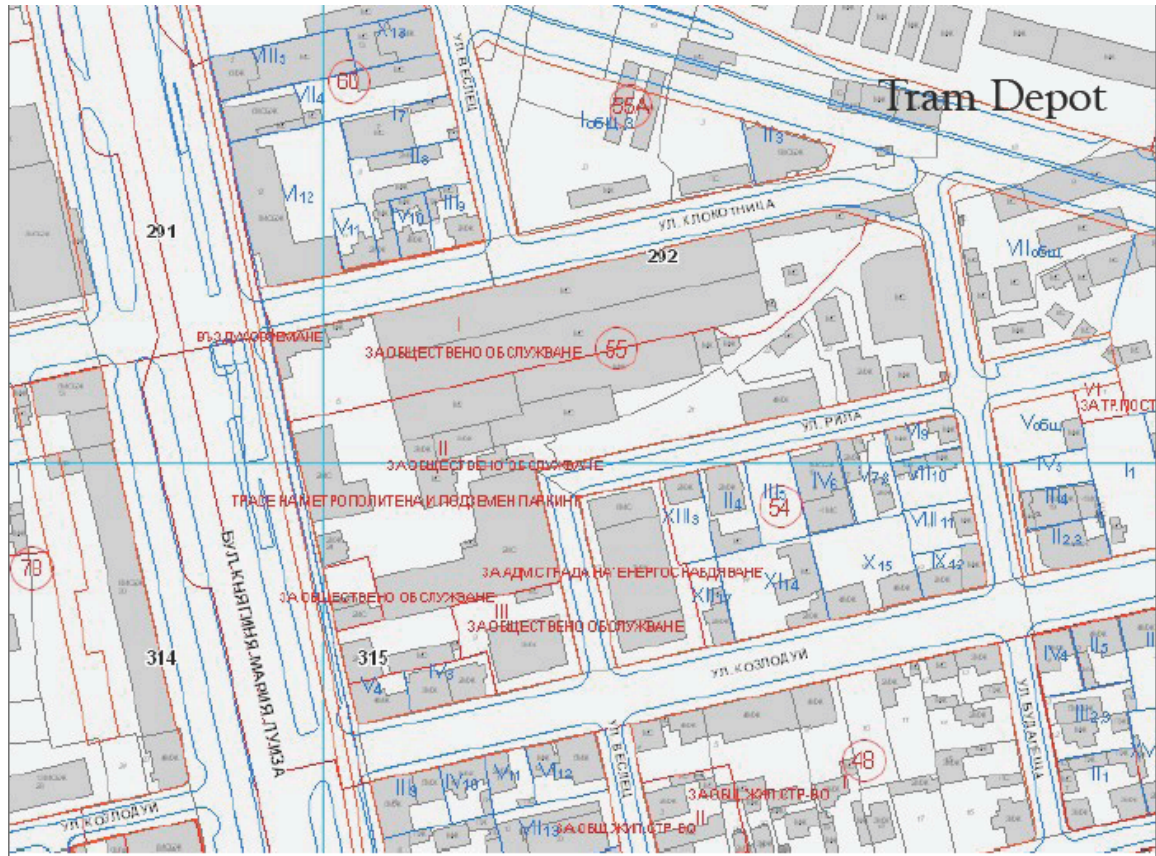
- No natural light;
- Feeling of exposure, lack of intimacy;
- Difficult to use for shows, theatre and dance;
- Spaces have their own strong character, to which you have to adapt, otherwise it is a big challenge to change it;
- Very probable to fail without a social and cultural strategy regarding the neighborhood;
- Far from the city centre: risk to be “the town of its own” isolated from the community;
- The whole structure is in a bad condition - water leaking, bad smell, bad building materials – it will take a lot of time and cost a lot of money to renovate and maintain it;
- With so many people going around to the metro station you could easily attract a lot of robbers / thieves;
- Trains vibrations may disturb the shows;
- Bad architecture in terms of proportions, lighting, use of materials, colors;
- In the pavement are used more than 5 types of materials - it is against the architectural and design rules and principles.
- No space design, low ceilings;
- The spaces are too big and many, don't start everything at once.

3. The Tram Depot

This building is a former tram depot that represents a kind of warehouse, still storing the emergency buses for tram reconstruction. It is one story building with no levels included. It has a metal construction with a wooden roof, which is beautiful, but almost ruined. The place is approximately 5000 sq. m., huge and interesting, but in a very bad physical condition.

This place is located near the main Bus Station of Sofia and the situation with the accessibility is pretty much the same as of Undergara. The difference is that this place is more intimate and has its own yard. In the Sofia's Detailed City Plan, this plot is identified as a “public service” place, which gives the opportunity to organize here a wide range of activities – from trade, to creative industry. It consists of two buildings: the main metal structure and a small administration quarters. The place has its own spirit. It is very wide, very high and well illuminated. It has a charm and romance. Nevertheless, in order to become a home for independent scene it has to be renovated from the ground up. The roof has to be removed and rebuild otherwise, it will be impossible to use the building. But the

character and the charm of the building are hidden in this beautiful wooden roof. It would cost a lot of money to adapt the building to any other activity different from its current function.



The place seen through the eyes of the participants in the work group:

Pros:

- Enormous, ancient, beautiful building, including the roof; special atmosphere;
- Natural light all over the place;
- A lot of spaces that can be divided and used for different purposes: performing arts, visual arts, parties, workshops, etc;
- Existing huge structure that can accommodate big events, exhibitions, markets;
- Many options of big/small spaces + outdoor and indoor parking;
- Convenient transportation, good connection, not very far from the center;
- It can create a hub of independent artists;
- The place can be used for big festivals, like Design Week;
- Possibility to preserve the character and charm of the space.



Cons:

- The soul of this space is the wooden roof, but it seems to be in a bad condition: there is a risk that, when it is replaced, the space may lose its atmosphere;
- Wood and brick building that needs restoration and constant maintenance;
- Compliance with the fire regulations needs to be verified;
- It needs a huge investment to renovate, run and sustain it;
- Too big space to maintain;
- Charming space, but will charm support the innovation?
- Very long corridors are needed;
- Is it smart to divide this big space into smaller spaces?
- Not very convenient for theatre;
- Very high costs for electricity, water, heating for ordinary activities;
- Would be very expensive to rent;
- Close to houses: a risk to disturb people staying outside in the evening;
- Must be substantially transformed from scratch;

Run it

The second part of the workshop was dedicated to sharing and discussing different approaches to running an independent multidisciplinary place. There were around 60 people attending the workshop. Among them were the Chairwoman of The Constant Committee for Culture of Sofia Municipality Malina Edreva, two representatives from the Ministry of Culture of Bulgaria, some managers of art organizations working in Sofia, in the countryside and coming from abroad, cultural operators, artists, architects, urban planners, designers, etc. - all representing the independent sector. Five speakers presented different models of running independent venues for arts and culture in Europe. On stage were Corina Bucea from Fabrica de Pensule, Cluj Romania (<http://www.fabricadepensule.ro/en/>); Pierre Gonzales from Abi Abo, Lion France (<http://abi.abo.free.fr/>); Josephine Heide, from Tirana Express, Albania (<http://www.tiranaekspres.com/web/>); Samo Selimovic from Bunker, Ljubljana, Slovenia (<http://www.bunker.si/slo/>) and Bahija Kibou, Art Factories, Paris, France (<http://www.artfactories.net>).

Different situations in different countries caused various approaches in creating and running artistic independent interdisciplinary spaces. The urge for a space for artistic work encouraged creativity in different organizations. The case with Fabrica de Pensule, Cluj – Romania, illustrates a story of a group of artistic NGOs and young artists, who have succeeded in creating an independent art space by negotiating with a private owner of an old factory without any help from the local administration. Corina Bucea, one of the managers of Fabrica de Pensule, told about their strategy which in the beginning was not very successful due of the owner's requirements. However, in 2009, they have managed to negotiate having the whole building for 0.50 EUR per sq. m. From that moment on the organization grew and its impact on the Romanian cultural scene considerably increased.

Similar approach, but with a different outcome, was presented by Pierre Gonzales from Abi Abo, Lion, France. They have started by negotiating an old factory. To receive it they were obliged to repair it. It appeared to be possible thanks to the help of many volunteers and donated materials. The place worked for 7 years, but in 2009, they were forced to leave it. There was no other option than to negotiate with the public administration for another space. The impact they have made and the name that they have created over the years helped them to gain support from the local administration.

The awareness of the local administrations that culture can improve the social, ecological, economical and political life of cities is an important factor of developing a sustainable independent scene. The case with Bunker, Ljubljana, Slovenia, shows how local administration supports the development of the independent sector by renovating the old factory Stara Electrarna and giving it to the artists. A public call for artists has been organized by the local administration of Ljubljana in partnership with Electric Company. Bunker won the competition by presenting a long-term program for contemporary performing arts. They were

elected to run the space and got a solid annual subsidy from the Municipality of Ljubljana.

An opposite approach to creating an independent space for arts and culture was presented by Josephine Heide, from Tirana Express, Albania. Operating without any help from the local administration, they had challenging experience in finding a place for their activities. Consequently, they had to change 3 places in 3 years. However, the organization had a big impact on their audiences, which followed them to the new spaces. They feel like "nomads" and they have started to like it. The lack of help from the local administration induced them to find their own way to create and survive.

Due to the increasing number of challenges facing the independent art organizations, it is necessary that special organizations promote the importance of the sector. Bahija Kibou spoke of an old network Art Factories from Paris, France that helps art organizations by providing them trainings, publishing and promoting their activities. Art Factories' network consists of 52 non-governmental organizations from France and 350 projects from all over the world.

All speakers agreed that, once they had their own space, they increased their impact and reached much bigger audiences. For all of them, in the beginning it has been very difficult to start, but now they have many people staying behind, what gives them much more confidence. It showed how important is to have the local community on your side and to be innovative involving different artistic initiatives in your project. It is also crucially important to choose the right partners for developing ideas and projects, to define the structure of organizations and identify the main challenges in running their spaces.

Running a space, the priority should be to determine the final goal – where one wants to be and what one wants to achieve. A strategic plan before starting any action is fundamental.

Sustain it

This last session organized in the form of debate was dedicated to answering the question on how to sustain an interdisciplinary independent art and culture venue. Birgitta Persson, the Secretary General of Trans Europe Halles presented the survey about the business models of 46 TEH member centers from 27 countries. With still unofficial numbers, she explained how different centers survive and manage financially to run their activities and to sustain their spaces.

The session continued focusing on the Bulgarian situation regarding the potential future independent art spaces. Among more than 50 participants – artists and other professionals from the independent sector, there were two

representatives from Sofia Municipality (including Malina Edreva) and two representatives from the Ministry of Culture of Bulgaria. Three speakers presented different stages of the process of creating an independent cultural space and the challenges of sustaining such space in Sofia. Tzvetelina Yossifova, Manager of the Red House (<http://www.redhouse-sofia.org/>), which became a center for culture and debate as a result of many years of hard work, presented her experience in running and sustaining the center for more than ten years in the Bulgarian environment without local subsidies. She explained that the strongest decision they have made in the past years was to expand the activities of the Red House to social and ecological areas.

Vesselin Dimov, the Chairman of ACT (Association for Independent Theatre - <https://actfestivalen.wordpress.com/act-association/>) spoke of the challenges facing the growing independent arts sector in Sofia. There are more and more young and vivid organizations that have something to say and need a place to run their initiatives and projects, on the other hand, there are many empty spaces in the city that need to be brought back to life. The conclusion was that the independent sector needs one contemporary multifunctional hall, run as a multidisciplinary independent space for different types of artists, performers, designers, architects, musicians, writers, painters, social workers, etc.

Martina Stefanova from Undergara told about their collaboration with the Municipality in creating a venue for independent sector in front of the Main Train Station of Sofia (for more information see the description of UNDERGARA in the first part of the text).

Different models of sustaining such spaces were discussed during the session, from negotiating with the business (Cluj, Romania), to receiving money from the municipality to sustain a space (Ljubljana, Slovenia). Malina Edreva explained the position of the Municipality, whose policy is to support the organizations in their activities and not in building an infrastructure and sustaining places for work. In Sofia, there are examples of different approaches to sustaining cultural venues, including business models (she gave an example of Derida Dance Center) and personal negotiation with a private owner (Zona Cultura). However, she also explained that the municipality is trying to create a friendly environment for artistic and cultural activities; that is why they are ready to put an effort to apply for other programs for infrastructural development and to lobby for defining a quota for supporting the independent scene.

Immediately after the workshop, on October 21, the Mayor of Sofia, Yordanka Fandakova, invited Christophe Knoch and Michel Quéré for an hour meeting. They discussed the results of the IETM Meeting and the future of the independent scene of Sofia and possible creation of a new cultural space in Sofia (a cultural landmark in the city of a national dimension). Two more successful meetings were made with the Municipality and as a result the artists have been given “green light” to present their initiative regarding one of the three spaces – visited during the workshop, to the local administration.

However, there are still some challenges facing the independent sector (artistic and not only) in Sofia. The major one is finding a way to collaborate and unite different organizations. Obviously now it is the right moment for a quick reaction in order not to miss the attention of the local administration. To create a sustainable structure, it would be also useful to find a way to include activities that have social, economic and ecological impact. Organizations need to be creative in engaging the local communities in their initiatives in order to succeed in the area they have chosen.

We all need culture and art to be people, to be humans. Culture is an integral part of our social life so it is normal and necessary to plan and create infrastructure for developing it. During these three days' workshop, the participants learnt about different models of running and sustaining independent cultural spaces with variety of ideas and values. It was revealed that the administration is ready to react and support and the independent sector is ready to cooperate and unite, which is a very important prerequisite in order to create a long living structure. It is obvious that everything necessary for creating a sustainable independent sector and space is available. It just has to be cooked with patience and a pinch of political ingenious.

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