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VODNIKOVA ROAD – LJUBLJANA

More Than a Road to the City

Introduction

This story tells of a ground-breaking local initiative and proposals for a pedestrian and cyclist-friendly renovation of Vodnikova Road in Ljubljana in Slovenia.¹ This is particularly interesting as it is usually difficult or impossible to influence any changes in roads or highways. In 2016, a local lobbying group was assembled called the “Renovate Vodnikova Road Initiative” (Iniciativa Uredimo Vodnikovo), the group described the existing car-oriented character and construction of the road as contrary to city government plans for transforming Ljubljana into a modern and sustainable European city.² They contacted the Municipality of Ljubljana together with the Šiška District Authority (Četrtna skupnost Šiška), who then co-operated in events and activities to help transform Vodnikova Road into a modern city road. Over the next two years, the Šiška District Authority collaborated with various professional organisations and other local stakeholders including the “Vodnikova domačija” *cultural house*, who hosted and organised several events. Vodnikova Road was originally designed and built in the 1960s and then enlarged in the 1990s prioritising the car – a wide profiled street with tarmac lanes and either a narrow

FIGURE III.7.1 Reimagined Vodnikova Road. Illustration by Manca Krošelj.

or no pavement. The street edge or kerb was not at all well-defined. The Vodnikova road area, now a suburb of Ljubljana, was a small centuries old village facing in the direction of Austria. Before WW2 it was a separate municipality and afterwards it was integrated into the city as a suburb with an interesting diverse character and historic development visible from various periods. Ljubljana has been transforming over the past decade; today it is an increasingly sustainable, world city. However, as in many cities it is aware that thinking and action is concentrated on the city centre with the wider city boundary and suburban neighbourhoods now needing to be prioritised; so this initiative is timely, acknowledging that the transformation of Ljubljana has not yet reached the outskirts. The Vodnikova Road Initiative aims to raise awareness of the urban planning issues in the area too and ultimately to come up with robust solutions through public debate and participation, involving the local community, residents and other actors along the road. So far, visible results of the initiative's collaborative activities include four *Jane's Walk* urban walks,³ two street festivals, a garage sale, public debates, a workshop with residents and a collaboration with the Faculty of Architecture In Ljubljana.

The following conversation between Marko Peterlin, a key member of the initiative, and Matej Nikšič expands on the project, the processes and outcomes:

Matej: *Who are the main players involved in the project, one can imagine there are many, with different agendas and roles?*

Marko: Yes, definitely, there are many players with different priorities and roles, in fact, overlapping roles. For example, I am both a resident and director of IPoP and we are involved in urban regeneration and development. By working in a transdisciplinary way that connects the initiatives with the local residents, supported by different professional organizations with formal local and city government on the one hand and by open action and strengthening the local community on the other. The residents of Ljubljana mainly live outside the centre, so it is critically important to do something to show more care and interest about where we live. One of the starting points was to make Vodnikova Road more walkable. Also, services should be nearby, as the city is transforming it should not be only transforming the famous tourist centre of the historic city.

The idea for the Vodnikova road project actually came from a neighbour of mine Matevž Frančič who had also just moved to the area. He is perhaps one of the most important characters in the project. He said *"we have to do something with this street. To make it a proper street, to make the character of the road, less traffic and more street."* This neighbour particularly thought more trees would create this boundary and would ameliorate the noise making the street more friendly and helping with the micro-climate. Simply to remodel the street to make it more friendly for the residents and for the passers-by. I was also a new resident to the area – but grew up close by like my neighbour. Knowing the area and understanding its village culture is important. We were newcomers even though locals and both from the Šiška area. It is like a village. We knew we had to "go public" to involve the residents to make this work. The neighbourhood and residents include many different people with skills and knowledge in different jobs and roles. For example, one of the neighbours is part of the fire brigade – these people took part in all of the events and really helped.

Early on the Municipality were very supportive and the Vice Mayor responsible for local matters came to events, in fact one of Jane's walks. It was important to have this connection, so we were never acting on our own. We had good moral support when organising public events. I don't think we could have done street festivals alone and the municipality helping with events made us feel we had credible solutions. The Jane's walks were particularly good as a tool to talk about the area with the municipality and the community. The walks aimed to raise awareness about the importance of walking on daily errands and the role of the citizen in spatial planning as well as to promote local community building. The discussions during the walks resulted in tangible recommendations for spatial improvements.

FIGURE III.7.2 Vodnikova Road before transformation. Photo by IPoP.

FIGURE III.7.3 Vodnikova Road reimagined. Illustration by Manca Krošelj.

We talked about good and bad and the history of the area, this really activated the most involved members and slowly we got a regular public. Later, when we were developing project-level proposals, we also involved Traffic Engineers and Landscape Architects and many “subcontractors” and other experts crucial to knowing the tools you can use and the processes of enabling the resolution of the project. Asking for help – when you gain momentum is important. This was mostly voluntary – however, sometimes we compensated for people’s time, partly from our own pockets, partly with the help from IPoP.

Matej: *Could you talk about the next events after the walks, the street festivals and the debates*

Marko: We also organised debates, as second step, after the walks, with the aim to open the debate about the goals, about where do we want to go, before we would develop solutions and projects. A local cultural institution offered space for free and had a discussion event. We formulated goals of what we wanted to achieve publically and invited journalists all the time, to every event. Again, it was important in order to be as public as possible and we were very successful here. This formulation of goals was important for our credibility and therefore important for everyone. There were 30 people at one discussion which for Ljubljana this was a very good number. We now had a baseline to build upon.

We organised two street festivals to encourage the district to support the idea. The District Authority arranged for the street to be closed twice during a car free day in September. “Pop-up” things like this are possible but have to be taken seriously with a lot of organisation. When the street was closed for cars many people were disturbed by this and complained but many too saw that it could be used in a different way, understanding what could happen, changing people’s ideas of what the street could become. It was about changing people’s perception of their space. Most people who could visualise the preliminary proposals we had on display were then very supportive of the idea.

Matej: *What were the key issues emerging?*

Marko: One of the most difficult things was to find **time** to proceed as we were doing this in our free time. However, after a year we realised we had to come up with a concrete proposal, something very tangible for everyone including the municipality to react to and this was important. The municipality publicly supported the Vodnikova road project and set aside funds for the neighbourhood. This was an important moment for us because the Municipality did not have to be involved with us. Now we needed a more tangible and detailed proposals. In 2018, we then involved other professionals – traffic analysis experts, who helped us do the basic analysis, like counting traffic numbers, parking places. We also invited landscape architects to help us with the project and the visualisations. Basic analytical data was needed we felt of the traffic issues, although we later heard this was not always done; this was a back-up for us and important to let everyone know exactly what we were dealing with and what we wanted to achieve. Large scale prints were made and discussed at a well-attended Jane’s Walk event. Forty people made comments, particularly about the bike lane, which most thought sensible and crossings for pedestrians and other minor remarks. Journalists published the proposals and we were invited to meetings, including a regular weekly meeting the Mayor holds with various departments regarding on-going investment projects. The transparency of the communication meant that there was a very quick reaction to the project.

Matej: *Why were the visualisations important?*

Marko: We needed comments on the concrete proposals and the visualisations helped non-experts understanding them in a very immediate and real way and to respond to them.

Going back to the issues, a very important moment came when we presented the proposals at the Jane’s Walk event, where a vice-mayor was present as well and a number of journalists. After that we were invited to present the vision and plans to the Municipality. At the meeting with the Mayor they

then told us they had already commissioned a scheme for the road with their Traffic Engineers – they said they were not very far along and so they would connect us to the Engineers and ask them to include as many of your proposals as they can.

Matej: *At what point did you stop leading the project?*

Marko: Matevž and I led the project until the implementation process started, then it was taken over by the Municipality and their traffic engineers. It is two very separate processes, we triggered it but the Municipality has its own procedures, related to funding etc. We overlapped a bit, but they have their own leader, their project is their own. Our process is still going, there is a lot of work to do with the people who live in the local community, they are the most important. We want to continue and update the community and be involved in the new things coming from the municipality and their team. Greenery for example is a very local issue.

Matej: *Were there different goals between different stakeholders? How do you deal with these differences?*

Marko: Well first of all you have to acknowledge them. It was clear the Municipality has their own agenda. The local Cultural institution also has their own programme to take care of. You have to acknowledge different interests and that our project is not their core interest. It is important we are not in conflict with their legitimate interests. I forgot to say one of most important elements was the involvement of the Media. They have their own interests too, they like a story based on conflict – which we wanted to avoid; you need to tell them a good story if you want it printed. We had a journalist involved who was interested in a story of one participant who was in conflict with others and it was this story that was taken up. We then had to play this down.

Matej: *How did you lead or moderate the project and how important was communication?*

Marko: You have to be a bit of a visionary and have a “project leader personality,” but mainly you have to listen and as I said above respect different views and interests; all are legitimate – well not all! Very particular interests of individuals may not be in the interest of others. You also have to confront people sometimes too and challenge them by pointing out that this may be your interest but is it others? Communication skills are paramount – with residents, you need more informal communication – like going for a beer, offering food – neighbourhood style. You need different skills with the media. One “communicator” volunteer who joined us, she was a resident too and was very important to the communication with different stakeholders, she was a professional communicator.

Matej: *What were the key successes and failures as you see it for your part of the project?*

Marko: Yes, it was a success, in that it was a unique case of a “bottom-up” initiative connecting to the municipality and in a way the municipality then took as theirs. It also sped up the process and maybe in the end makes it a far better project, owned by the neighbourhood. Now I enjoy taking part in the street – the pavement and bike lane are wide enough to be protected against the traffic and to make you feel safe. In the places that are regenerated – activity pops up. The greenery is going to be less than we wanted and it is not there yet, but already after partial restoration it is better. It is nice there are concrete conclusions, if left to us, as a group we would have lost momentum, something it is very difficult to maintain. Lack of time was one of the main challenges – it was all in our spare time. It was also nice meeting neighbours, this was both enjoyable and satisfying. You need to enjoy it otherwise you lose momentum, so you have to have interest from the city side. It is a lot of work but satisfying – you need to enjoy it at least a little and you have to have a response. Other initiatives in the city gave up when they did not get support from the municipality. The Renovate Vodnikova Road initiative is a process that could be useful for other initiatives in the city and beyond; an exemplar we felt that could be repeated across Slovenia and Europe.

Matej: *When was interdisciplinarity most important to the process?*

Marko: Interdisciplinarity was most important in second and third stages in how to proceed with the process with expert and professional help, then formulating the process. We really needed the experts and the community together, in a transdisciplinary process.

Matej: *Finally, what were the positive and negative surprises in the process?*

Marko: A negative surprise was how critical the press were, taking one person's view only and publicising this, but also it was a positive surprise what we learnt from the press and the newspapers, including what the Municipality were up to. Even though there were two parallel processes, a process has many stages but is never finished. It may just fade out. We need time to understand how the public have responded to the Municipality taking over the project. We are waiting for it to be finished. It was not presented to us by the Municipality so we do not know the finer details of their scheme – so there may be some negative surprises, but we hope they will be positive. We do not want to critique the process too early. We need to go back to residents to get their view on the outcome. I personally cannot really comment on the project's physical successes yet, because it is on-going. This is the first time this has happened in Ljubljana. It is recorded so we have a record of how it was done, we sent this to all parties but have not a response. You have to actively promote your processes and projects and we need to set up a process and create momentum so others can be inspired to set up initiatives like this. We hope it can set a precedent for other bottom up initiatives in the city. It is hard to reach people if you don't know them, making it even more important that many different disciplines and types of activists and workers and residents of the city get involved.

Marko: As IPoP we now, building also on the experiences of the Vodnikova road project, have another project we are working on in Ljubljana, together with prostoRož association. “Zunaj” is an initiative in which the city is trying to support small local interventions by residents to improve their immediate neighbourhood and implement them quickly. Residents are installing benches and other micro-scale installations, improvised playgrounds, sometimes just painting benches, or taking up some parking spaces. We wanted to raise awareness in neighbourhoods about what we can and cannot do. We have selected 10 projects, out of 60 proposed, costing 500 Euros each. A similar project was very successful in Vienna. Year by year we can reach new audiences – the municipality has to see the benefit to give funding for small public spaces. Ljubljana is a developing city and these small projects are part of this development. We need to keep watching it.

Notes

- 1 See Institute for Spatial Policies (IPoP) “More than a Road to a City” (Vekot cesta do mesta), supported by the Municipality of Ljubljana. October 2018, and facebook: Iniciativa uredimo Vodnikovo.
- 2 Ljubljana has been involved in a number of EU funded projects and is also involved in CIVITAS ELAN for cleaner and better transport: <https://civitas.eu/city/ljubljana> accessed December 12th 2019.
- 3 Jane's Walk is a movement of free, citizen-led walking tours inspired by Jane Jacobs. The walks get people to share stories about their lives and communities, explore their cities together with their neighbours. Together with local organisers, IPoP so far managed to initiate 176 walks in different towns and cities across Slovenia, engaged at least 3,600 interested walkers and made important contribution towards acknowledgement of the benefits of everyday utility walking.
- 4 This practice story originates from an interview in October 2019 between Marko Peterlin, an architect and Urban planner, and Matej Nikšić, a member of INTREPID and contributor to this book; they are both residents in Ljubljana. It was transcribed and edited by Prue Chiles.

FIGURE III.7.4 Working with local residents and stakeholders. Photo by IPoP.

FIGURE III.7.5 Walking Vodnikova Road. Photo by IPoP.