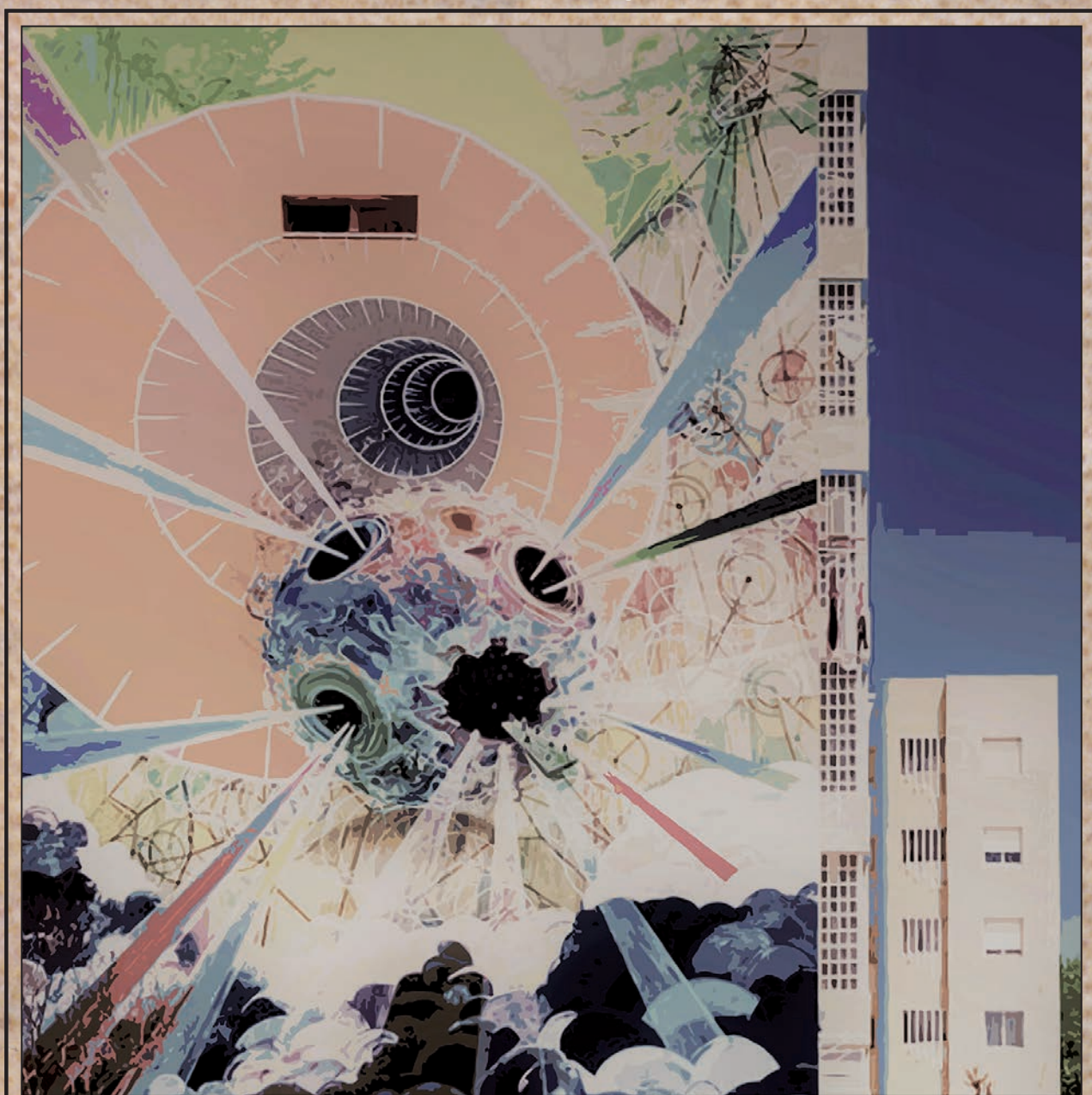


# ANNALES

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## VSEBINA / INDICE GENERALE / CONTENTS

**Matej Nikšič & Branka Cvjetičanin:**

Urban Design and Artistic Perspectives in  
Placemaking: The Cases of Polhograjski  
Dolomiti and Krapan ..... 395  
*Progettazione urbana e prospettive artistiche  
nel placemaking: i casi di Polhograjski dolomiti  
e Krapan*  
*Urbanistično oblikovalski in umetniški pristop  
k ustvarjanju prostora: primera  
Polhograjskih dolomitov in Krapna*

**Sofia Ana Elise Steinvorth:** About Dinosaurs  
and Chameleons, or The Representational  
Role of Museums: Place-Holders For What,  
For Whom and Under Which Circumstances? ..... 413  
*Dinosauri e camaleonti, ovvero il ruolo  
rappresentativo dei musei: cosa, per chi  
e in quali circostanze?*  
*O dinosavrih in kameleonih ali o  
reprezentativni vlogi muzejev:  
kaj, za koga in v kakšnih okoliščinah?*

**Özgür Ilter & Špela Verovšek:** Defining  
Places: The Role of Creative Practices  
in Urban Placemaking ..... 427  
*Definire i luoghi: il ruolo delle pratiche creative  
nella progettazione di luoghi urbani*  
*O prostoru: vloga kreativnih praks pri  
ustvarjanju urbanih prostorov*

**Gregor Čok:** Formal and Informal Natural  
Bathing Sites and Beaches in the Slovenian  
Coastal Zone – Challenges in the Field of  
Spatial Inventory and Planning ..... 445  
*Siti balneari naturali formali/informali  
e spiagge nella zona costiera slovena –  
sfide nel campo dell'inventario  
e della pianificazione spaziale*  
*Formalna in neformalna naravna kopališča  
in plaže v slovenskem obalnem pasu –  
izzivi na področju evidentiranja  
in načrtovanja*

**Jasna Potočnik Topler, Charlie Mansfield,  
Hugues Séraphin & Phillip Wassler:**

Travel Writing as an Instrument  
of Cultural Heritage Promotion ..... 465  
*La scrittura di viaggio come strumento  
di promozione del patrimonio culturale*  
*Pisanje o potovanjih kot sredstvo  
za promocijo kulturne dediščine*

**Rok Smrdelj:** Who Sets the Agenda  
in the Hybrid Media Sphere? The Role  
of Mass Media in the Slovenian Twitter (X)  
Migration Debate ..... 483  
*Chi stabilisce l'agenda nell'ambito  
dei media ibridi? Il ruolo dei mass  
media nel dibattito su Twitter (X) riguardante  
l'immigrazione  
in slovenia*  
*Kdo določa agendo v hibridni medijski sferi?*  
*Vloga množičnih medijev v slovenski migracijski  
razpravi na Twitterju (X)*

**Igor Jurekovič:** Global Christianity  
*Ante Portas*: Reverse Mission  
and the Clashing Conceptualisations  
of Religion ..... 499  
*Cristianesimo globale ante portas:  
missione inversa e lo scontro tra  
concezioni di religione*  
*Globalno krščanstvo ante portas:  
povratni misijon in trk  
konceptualizacij religije*

**Barbara Riman & Sonja Novak Lukanović:**  
Dvajset let delovanja Svetov in predstavnikov  
slovenske narodne manjšine na Hrvaškem ..... 513  
*Venti anni di attività dei rappresentanti  
e dei Consigli della minoranza nazionale  
slovena in Croazia*  
*Twenty Years of Activity of the  
Councils and Representatives of the  
Slovene National Minority in Croatia*

**David Hazemali, Mateja Matjašič Friš & Andrej Naterer:** Thematic Exploration of Slovenia's Path to Independence in Slovenian Scopus-Indexed History Journals: A Bibliometric and Sociometric Analysis ..... 531  
*Esplorazione tematica del percorso della Slovenia verso l'indipendenza nelle riviste storiche slovene indexate su Scopus: un'analisi bibliometrica e sociometrica*  
*Tematsko proučevanje slovenske osamosvojitvene poti v slovenskih zgodovinskih revijah, uvrščenih v bazo podatkov Scopus: bibliometrična in sociometrična analiza*

**Mojca Tancer Verboten:** Pravni vidik ureditve delovnega časa visokošolskih učiteljev in pravica do odklopa ..... 553  
*Aspetti giuridici della regolamentazione dell'orario di lavoro degli insegnanti universitari e il diritto alla disconnessione*  
*Legal Aspect of Regulating Working Hours of Higher Education Teachers and the Right to Disconnect*

## IN MEMORIAM

Lučka Ažman Momirski (1961–2024)  
**(Tomaž Berčič)** ..... 565

## POROČILA/RELAZIONI/REPORTS

**Brigitta Mader:** International conference Miroslav Bertoša i njegovi inovativni doprinosi u historiografiji povodom izlaska knjige *Trošenje života* ..... 567

**Marjan Horvat & Jure Koražija:**

International workshop  
*Political Narratives in Public Discourse: Theory, Detection, and Impact* ..... 569

*Kazalo k slikam na ovitku* ..... 571  
*Indice delle foto di copertina* ..... 571  
*Index to images on the cover* ..... 571

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## URBAN DESIGN AND ARTISTIC PERSPECTIVES IN PLACEMAKING: THE CASES OF POLHOGRAJSKI DOLOMITI AND KRAPAN

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper compares early-stage placemaking activities in Polhograjski Dolomiti Landscape Park, Slovenia, and Krapan, Croatian Istria. Placemaking is defined as a transformative process that fosters belonging, identity, and community engagement. The study focuses on the analytical stage, using surveys, interviews, observations, and artistic research-based practices such as mapping historical contexts and community interactions to understand existing conditions, historical significance, cultural context, and community needs. It contrasts the urban design-based approach in Slovenia with engaged artistic practices in Croatia, revealing how different methods influence placemaking outcomes. The research highlights the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and local context understanding to create inclusive, vibrant and sustainable communities.*

**Keywords:** *placemaking, community bonds, urban design, engaged artistic practice, comparative analyses*

## PROGETTAZIONE URBANA E PROSPETTIVE ARTISTICHE NEL PLACEMAKING: I CASI DI POLHOGRAJSKI DOLOMITI E KRAPAN

SINTESI

*Questo articolo confronta le attività di placemaking nelle prime fasi nel Parco Paesaggistico dei Dolomiti di Polhograjski, Slovenia, e a Krapan, Istria croata. Il placemaking è definito come un processo trasformativo che favorisce il senso di appartenenza, identità e coinvolgimento della comunità. Lo studio si concentra sulla fase analitica, utilizzando sondaggi, interviste, osservazioni e pratiche di ricerca artistica come la mappatura dei contesti storici e delle interazioni comunitarie per comprendere le condizioni esistenti, il significato storico, il contesto culturale e le esigenze della comunità. Confronta l'approccio basato sulla progettazione urbana in Slovenia con le pratiche artistiche partecipative in Croazia, rivelando come i diversi metodi influenzino i risultati del placemaking. La ricerca evidenzia l'importanza della collaborazione interdisciplinare e della comprensione del contesto locale per creare comunità inclusive, vivaci e sostenibili.*

**Parole chiave:** *placemaking, legami comunitari, progettazione urbana, pratica artistica partecipativa, analisi comparative*

INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Placemaking, viewed as a dynamic approach within urban planning and design, has gained global recognition for its transformative impact on places and its role in strengthening community bonds. This study delves into the multifaceted dimensions of placemaking, examining collaborative processes involving residents, artists and urban planners, as well as the resulting social impacts on community cohesion and well-being. Our exploration extends to the architectural, artistic and social components that characterize placemaking endeavours, with a focus on understanding how they contribute to the development of more vibrant, inviting and sustainable places.

The primary objective of the study is a comprehensive analysis of the initial phase of the placemaking process – the analytical stage, recognized as the foundational starting point for successful placemaking initiatives. This phase is widely acknowledged as the critical base point upon which successful placemaking endeavours are constructed, or not (Low, 2016). Montgomery's work (2013), particularly his book "Happy City", emphasizes the importance of early-stage analysis in placemaking. He argues that by understanding the historical, cultural, and social context of a place, we can create public spaces that are more meaningful and responsive to the needs of the community.

By concentrating on this crucial stage, our research aims to dissect two distinct approaches ingrained in two disciplines – urban design in the Slovenian case and engaged artistic practice in the Croatian case. While urban design and engaged artistic practice both aim to shape and enhance public spaces, they employ distinct methodologies. Urban design often focuses on the physical planning and design of urban environments while addressing the needs of the users, it involves a systematic and often technical approach, incorporating elements such as functional planning, stakeholders' involvement and aesthetic considerations (Sternberg, 2000). Surveys and statistical analysis are often used to assess the needs and preferences of communities. On the other hand, engaged artistic practice is a more interdisciplinary approach that involves artists working collaboratively with communities to create meaningful and transformative places. It emphasizes community participation, social and cultural engagement, and experiential and participatory design (Berman, 2018). Engaged artists often employ qualitative research methods, such as interviews, focus groups and ethnographic observation, to understand the

lived experiences and perspectives of communities. Their work is often characterized by its site-specific nature, incorporating local history, culture and materials.

Within this framework, we seek to uncover the underlying forces and motivations driving the initiation of placemaking efforts, providing insights into the cultural and historical factors that shape these endeavours. Additionally, our study aims to scrutinize collaborative dynamics among diverse stakeholders, such as residents, artists, designers and government bodies, and to examine the establishment of goals and objectives during these early stages. Last but not least, the two case studies used in the paper illustrate the state of the art in the non-urban environments, which we call remote places and define as the places of communities with a relatively small population size and limited infrastructure. There have been increasing calls in recent placemaking discourse highlighting that urban-centric approaches receive significant attention, while places outside urban areas are much less addressed (Balassiano & Maldonado, 2015; Hill et al., 2021). While there is no precise numerical definition, these places often have populations ranging from a few dozen to a few thousand inhabitants. Additionally, places are considered remote when they are geographically isolated or situated away from major urban centers or transportation hubs (Nikšič & Goršič, 2024). In both, Slovenia and Croatia, which serve as case studies, remote places may include mountainous and hilly regions, rural villages or communities located far from major roads or public services, while residents of remote locations often face challenges such as limited access to amenities, services and economic opportunities.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: PLACEMAKING FOR FOSTERING COMMUNITY BONDS AND TRANSFORMING SPACES TO PLACES

Placemaking in general is a multifaceted approach to urban planning and design that has gained increasing recognition for its profound impact on community bonds and the transformation of urban spaces (Ellery & Ellery, 2019; Rapanta et al., 2021; Fingerhut & Alfasi, 2023). This practice, which prioritizes the active involvement of residents and other stakeholders in shaping their environments, serves as a powerful catalyst for creating vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable communities. At its core, placemaking is about turning ordinary spaces into extraordinary places, nurturing a deep sense of attachment to the environment (Pancholi et al., 2015).

<sup>1</sup> The authors acknowledge the financial support from the Slovenian Research Agency (research core funding No. P5-0100) and co-financing from the Creative Europe programme, Human Cities – Smoties project (2020–2024).

Placemaking emphasizes the need to transform spaces into welcoming, engaging, and functional places. This transformation process involves a collaborative effort between urban planners, architects, artists, and, most importantly, the local community.

According to Lew (2017), placemaking can be classified into three main types: mixed, planned, and organic. Mixed placemaking combines elements of planned and organic approaches, while planned placemaking is more top-down and involves deliberate interventions by authorities or developers. Organic placemaking, on the other hand, emerges naturally from the grassroots efforts of communities. Lew's notion importantly points out the significance of understanding the cultural and social dimensions of placemaking, emphasizing that successful placemaking efforts must consider the unique identities and needs of the communities involved.

One of the primary ways placemaking enhances the quality of urban life is by creating spaces that encourage social interaction (Toolis, 2017). Public venues such as squares, community gardens and other forms of places for socialisation are examples of areas where people can come together, exchange ideas and build relationships. By providing these communal spaces, placemaking cultivates a stronger sense of belonging and a shared identity among residents (Cilliers & Timmermans, 2014). When people engage with their surroundings, they become more invested in their community, which fosters a sense of pride and unity (Dash & Thilagam, 2023). Additionally, placemaking enhances the overall well-being of residents. Access to aesthetically pleasing, well-maintained public spaces has been linked to improved mental health, reduced stress and increased physical activity (Couper et al., 2023). When spaces are transformed into inviting and safe environments, people are more likely to engage in common activities, thereby promoting physical and mental health. This, in turn, can lead to a stronger sense of community, as residents come together to enjoy these shared amenities (Gallou, 2022; Ellery et al., 2021).

Placemaking is instrumental in bridging social and generational gaps and fostering inclusivity too (Sutton & Kemp, 2002). When communities actively participate in the design and development of their public spaces, they can cater to the needs and preferences of various social and age groups. This creates a harmonious environment where people from different walks of life can interact, learn from one another, and develop a shared sense of identity.

Economically, placemaking also offers considerable benefits. Attractive and vibrant public spaces can attract business activities, tourism flow and keep property values (Kelly et al., 2017; Vodanović Lukić, 2021). Local businesses often benefit from

the increased number of visitors, and communities may see long-term economic growth as a result. In the context of the renewal of the built environments, placemaking can also be a catalyst for revitalizing neglected or declining neighbourhoods. When people are engaged in the process of reshaping their surroundings, they become more invested in their community's future (Toolis, 2021). This involvement can lead to greater social cohesion, increased pride in the neighbourhood, and the motivation to tackle various issues that the local community is facing.

Placemaking, extending beyond conventional design paradigms, emerges as a transformative force shaping the essence of community bonds and lived spaces. This multifaceted approach, integrating perspectives from architecture, urban design, urban planning and the arts, actively contributes to the development of resilient, inclusive and vibrant communities (Aelbrecht & Arefi, 2024). Architects and urban designers lend expertise in shaping physical structures and integrating aesthetics, while urban planners align initiatives with broader development goals (Ellery et al., 2021).

Artistic approaches, introducing a unique dimension, foster creativity and cultural expression in the transformation of spaces (Bentz & O'Brien, 2019). Research-based art practices, a subset of artistic approaches, offer a particularly powerful tool for fostering creativity and cultural expression – by combining artistic inquiry with rigorous research, these practices can generate new knowledge and perspectives that inform the design and implementation of transformative urban interventions (Collier, 2001; Hannula et al., 2014). Research-based art practices propose original conceptions of art and knowledge in which cognition and aesthetics mutually converge, giving rise to emancipatory modes of knowledge production and to innovative languages of art (Leavy, 2020). They do not produce new sets of dogma but initiate dialogues rendered even more necessary by the indeterminacy thus created. This larger and more open framework leaves to the viewer the responsibility to re-appropriate and consolidate the new forms of knowledge it generates (Ha Thuc, 2022). On the other hand, engaged art practice is based on subversive, analytical and critical questioning representation of social and political conditions, institutions and values within existing circumstances. And always existing as an observation tool, especially in the case of site-specific art practice, a visual anthropological approach in which the interpretations of history are given a new fresh perspective on a state of art. An outstanding example of artistic practices is the utopian concept of Social Sculpture by Joseph Beuys from 1973 (Jordan, 2013), defining society as an area for artistic action. Its artistic thought is based on: (1) the emancipatory activism of Fluxus; (2) the theoretical analysis of society established in

European critically oriented conceptual art; (3) the social, economic and spiritual theory of the spiritual evolution of humanity, founded by anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner; (4) the critical neo-leftist practices of German neo-anarchism of the 1960s and 70s; and (5) ideas from alternative environmental green movements (Šuvaković, 2005).

Within artistic research, narratives expressed through symbolic gestures, words, or actions that hold sequence and meaning for the community play an important role in the placemaking discourse. Fisher (1987) speaks of narratives in the theory, stating that humans are primarily storytelling creatures. We depend on them – stories shape our history, culture, and character. There are stories we adopt, which then become part of our culture. Additionally, Julian Rappaport's (1998) thesis addresses narratives as the starting point for individual and collective identity, initiating social changes. Narratives create memory, meaning, and identity among individuals, as well as their expressions within the social and cultural context. In turn, the social context is constructed by individuals who create rituals, performances, activities, and symbols in language, art, and daily routines. Rappaport (1998) concludes from the proposed theory that psychologists, sociologists and other professionals understanding the reciprocity and systematic creation of cultural context and individual identity can participate as collaborators along with artists, writers, and other social activists and citizens in pursuit of a common interest in social change.

The dynamic interplay among previously mentioned approaches to placemaking becomes evident in their varied methodologies, collectively forging environments that prioritize spatial coherence, integrated functionality and cultural richness (Fokdal et al., 2021). Ultimately, placemaking empowers residents to play an active role in shaping their surroundings, cultivating stronger connections and a profound sense of belonging, emphasizing the enduring impact of people-centred design processes in an ever-evolving world (Carmona, 2021). In the upcoming chapter, we will delve into specific case studies from Slovenia and Croatia, examining the disciplinary approaches of urban design and artistic interventions in placemaking. The Slovenian case predominantly adopts an urban design perspective, leveraging spatial strategies to enhance community bonds. In contrast, the Croatian case centres around artistic approaches, showcasing how engaged art practices contribute to the transformation of spaces into meaningful and/or authentic places. Both approaches however are interdisciplinary in their core. By examining these two distinct approaches, we aim to highlight the collaborative efforts of urban design and the arts in placemaking.

## THE ANALYTICAL APPROACHES IN PLACEMAKING PROCESS - TWO CASE STUDIES

The case studies come from two distinctive areas in central Europe – Landscape park *Polhograjski Dolomiti* in Slovenia and the area of *Krapan* in Croatia. To understand the context within which the placemaking activities took place, we first shortly describe the setting of the two areas. We then describe into details how the two places undergone a different approach in the analytical phase of the placemaking process, i.e. urban design and engaged artistic practice approach.

As it will be described later on, both cases employed mixed-methods. In Landscape Park *Polhograjski Dolomiti*, the approach was based on historical, geographical, social and economic analysis to understand the broader context within which placemaking activities occurred. Historical analysis were conducted to trace the region's evolution, geographical analysis to assess its physical characteristics, social and economic analysis to study demographic trends and economic activities, and surveys to provide the opinions of residents. Also, interviews of selected local residents, community leaders and experts to gather their perspectives were implemented. In *Krapan*, a more engaged artistic practice approach was undertaken, emphasizing community involvement and participatory methods through art. The ethnographic observations revealed community's lived experiences, engaging in dialogue with residents and practicing collaborative art projects provided a platform to analyse the residents' lived experiences of their community. In *Krapan*, historical and spatial data were studied too to understand the town's context and challenges.

### Landscape park *Polhograjski Dolomiti*, Slovenia

#### *The setting*

Located west of Ljubljana, Slovenia, Landscape Park *Polhograjski Dolomiti* is a hilly region characterized by forested peaks, narrow valleys and dispersed villages. The area has a long history of agricultural use, with traditional farmers cultivating orchards, practicing forestry and engaging in beekeeping.

The earliest settlements in the region date back to the 12th and 13th centuries, when farmers established small villages and independent farms surrounded by agricultural lands. The cultivation of fruit trees and forests played a crucial role in the local economy, providing sustenance and supporting trade (Vičar, 2020; Perpar & Udovč, 2012).

The region's landscape has evolved significantly over time, influenced by factors such as industrialization and urbanization in the nearby lowlands – the



**Figure 1: The hilly landscapes of Landscape Park Polhograjski Dolomiti with scattered villages (Source: UIRS Smoties archive).**

growth of cities and the rise of personal motorization led to a shift towards suburban living, attracting new residents to the area (Čepič et al., 1998). Today, Landscape Park Polhograjski Dolomiti is also a popular recreational destination, offering opportunities for hiking, cycling, and nature appreciation.

#### **Mapping Polhograjski Dolomiti: An exploration of attitudes towards heritage for the contemporary reinvention**

The placemaking challenges encountered in the Landscape Park Polhograjski Dolomiti revolve around the nuanced transition from an agricultural landscape to an area that accommodates the needs of (sub)urban residents too while preserving its rich historical agricultural traditions and natural attractions. This evolution necessitates a delicate equilibrium between upholding the region's agricultural legacy and its built heritage and embracing the conveniences introduced by its proximity to neighbouring urban centres. The challenge lies in integrating historical agricultural practices with contemporary needs, striving to perpetuate the essence of its past while cultivating a dynamic present that caters to both residents and visitors seeking a fusion of traditions and natural beauty with the needs of contemporary (sub)urban life.

As the ultimate goal of placemaking endeavours in Polhograjski Dolomiti was to improve the social interaction among various user groups in the area by reinventing and promoting cultural heritage (Human Cities – Smoties, 2024), the analytical mapping of the assets followed the concept of place attachment developed by Scannell and Gifford (2010), which proposed three main subdimensions of place (attachment) – namely person, place and process. The “person” refers to the levels of attachment that individuals and groups feel towards the features constituting the place. The “place” highlights the physical, social and economic aspects of this attachment, encompassing the specific features, significance and spatial elements related to the social or physical (built and natural) reality. Lastly, the “process” delves into the mental processes involved in forming a bond with a place, encompassing cognitive aspects and emotional connections.

To comprehend the material and immaterial assets present in the landscape, data-driven urban design analytics have been instrumental. This involved using quantitative and qualitative data to understand the state of the art of the environments. By leveraging data from various sources, such as census data, geographic information systems (GIS), and citizen surveys, urban design analytics provided valuable insights into population dynamics, land use patterns,

transportation networks, infrastructure, economic activity and social equity.

Heritage mapping was an important analytical tool too. It involved the identification, documentation and analysis of historic and cultural resources of the analysed area. It began by identifying significant buildings, structures, landscapes and also cultural practices. Information about these resources, including their history, significance and physical characteristics, was assessed to identify any threats or deterioration. Analysing the relationship between the resources and their surrounding environment, including the social, cultural and economic context was seen as an important preparation for the later-on implemented contextual design to ensure that new developments or interventions respect and respond to the historical and cultural fabric.

This approach aimed for a nuanced understanding of the physical, social and cultural dimensions of the area. In concrete terms, the following activities were conducted in Polhograjski Dolomiti from 2021-2023 (Human Cities - Smoties, 2024), in two phases:

- In the first phase, a comprehensive assessment of the area's assets was conducted. This involved a thorough review of written resources, such as historical documents, professional expertise reports and fieldwork mapping. Additionally, survey was distributed among residents by email and on-site interviews were conducted with key local figures identified as significant contributors to cultural, educational or economic activities (including agriculture and hospitality). Decision-makers, such as municipal representatives, local self-management structures and representatives from local associations (e.g. the tourist board) and cultural sphere were also interviewed to gather valuable insights;
- In phase two, public events to gather insights from a broader audience regarding the assets identified in phase one were organised. Various public events, including thematic gatherings, community-led walks (so called *Sprehosad*), roundtable discussions and hands-on workshops, provided opportunities to bring together different users of the area, both residents and visitors alike. The aim was to collaboratively explore potential place-making interventions that would enhance the area's assets and reinvent rich material and immaterial heritage by preserving them rather than causing harm, while simultaneously improving the quality of local life. The focus was on creating a positive and enriching user experience for visitors too.

### *The mapped assets*

These activities have brought forth both tangible and intangible heritage and traditions, contributing significantly to the (re)invention of the contemporary identity of the place. Several assets have been revealed:

- Local meadows: The local meadows are a cherished asset of this remote place, providing a scenic beauty that enhances the overall aesthetic appeal of the region. These grasslands not only contribute to the visual charm but also serve as important ecosystems supporting diverse flora and fauna. The meadows offer a serene environment for relaxation and recreation, making them a valuable resource for both locals and visitors alike. Additionally, they play a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance, promoting biodiversity, and serving as potential spaces for sustainable agricultural practices.
- Local orchards: The presence of local orchards stands as a significant asset for this remote place, representing a rich source of agricultural diversity and economic sustenance. These orchards not only contribute to the region's visual appeal with blooming trees and fruits but historically also supported the local economy through fruit production and trade. The orchards still nowadays represent a connection to the land and its agricultural heritage, providing fresh and seasonal produce that reflects the unique flavours of the region. Moreover, they contribute to a sense of community identity, as the cultivation and harvesting of orchard fruits often involve shared traditions and practices.
- Local forests: The local forests are invaluable assets for this remote place, offering a plethora of ecological, recreational, cultural and economic benefits. These wooded areas contribute to environmental sustainability by their biodiversity. The forests also provide recreational opportunities for locals and visitors, serving as natural playgrounds for activities such as hiking, bicycling, birdwatching or simply contemplating. Moreover, they hold cultural significance as they may contain historic sites, indigenous knowledge and traditional practices that connect the community to its roots, as well as provide economic substance.
- Local built heritage and identity by architectural design: The local built heritage and architectural identity of the remote place represent a unique and irreplaceable asset. The traditional built structures such as homesteads, drywalls and other farming facilities such as hayracks

and fruit driers tell the story of the community, reflecting its history, cultural values and craftsmanship, as well as directly reflect the traditional way of living in these remote places as it once was. Preserving and celebrating the local architecture not only maintains a sense of continuity with the past but also fosters a distinct identity for the region. Historical buildings and structures can serve as landmarks, attracting visitors and contributing to the local economy. Furthermore, the architectural heritage serves as a reminder of the skills and traditions passed down through generations.

- Local food production traditions: The local bread-making and other food production traditions such as fruit-growing and cheese production are vital assets of the remote place, representing a culinary heritage. These traditions encompass not only the preparation of food but also the cultivation of ingredients and the sharing of recipes that have been passed down through generations. Local bread-making traditions, for instance, contribute to a sense of community and identity, as they often involve communal efforts and shared rituals. The resulting food products, whether bread, cheese, or other specialties, become symbols of local pride and can contribute to the gastronomic diversity that defines the region.
- Local art and culture activities: The presence of local art created by community collectives is a cultural asset that adds vibrancy and creativity to the remote place. These art collectives and cultural venues (such as *Hiša na hribu*, *Pr' Lenart*) provide a platform for local artists to express themselves, fostering a sense of community and collaboration. The art produced reflects the unique perspectives and experiences of the region, contributing to a distinctive cultural identity. Additionally, these art initiatives can serve as catalysts for economic development, potentially attracting tourists interested in exploring the local arts scene. Even more importantly, the artistic endeavours of local collectives also strengthen social bonds and create a supportive environment for the flourishing of creativity within the community.

The activities unveiled two of the three primary subdimensions of place, as previously discussed in the model presented by Scannell and Gifford (2010) – encompassing both the physical spaces and the individuals with significant connections to them. Subsequently, these analytical endeavours laid the foundation for the subsequent development of a placemaking process.

### ***The placemaking activities after the mapping phase: Bringing a variety of users together***

In 2023, based on the mapping phase described above, the intensive phase of placemaking activities started. Even if the mapping phase already embedded various encounters with and among the users of the place (i.e. residents and visitors), this phase aimed to strengthen the assets that were pointed out in the mapping phase and strengthen the bonds among users.

Building upon the intensive phase of placemaking activities initiated in 2023, various initiatives have been launched to fortify the identified assets and enhance community bonds. Local orchards, serving as repositories for traditional fruit-tree varieties, were challenged as places that not only contribute to the conservation of local biodiversity but can also evolve into (semi)public spaces fostering community engagement. The incorporation of art interventions, exemplified by the construction of large nests from locally sourced materials, imbued the orchards with a unique cultural dimension blending nature and art. Similarly, recognizing local forests as potential public spaces promoted contemplation and self-reflection within the community. Paying tribute to local inhabitants, underscored by the inherent connection between people and their natural surroundings, emphasizes were put into local forests as integral components of the community's identity. Their role as public spaces for locals and visitors to meet was comprehended through the community walks. Moreover, the renovation and repurposing of built heritage in the area was tested as a means to breathe new life into historical structures – an old farm storage house, a traditional double-hayrack and drywall were transformed into inviting public spaces by simple reconstruction or embedment of new cultural purpose (e.g. art exhibitions, cultural venue). Additionally, the promotion of traditional bread-making has emerged as a catalyst for communal activity, fostering social interaction and shared experiences. Beyond the act of baking, it established a cause for community members to gather, creating a cultural bridge that brings people together around a common practice and symbolizes unity and connection in the community. Furthermore, the co-creation of distinctively designed tablecloths by the community has evolved into an artistic practice extending beyond mere aesthetics. This initiative played a crucial role in establishing social public spaces through collaborative art projects. The process of designing tablecloths became a shared experience, emphasizing the importance of community engagement and cultural expression in shaping the identity of the locale.

These initiatives not only preserved the historical and cultural elements of the region but also provided spaces for socialization and artistic expression. They pointed



**Figure 2:** *Co-design of Community Tablecloth as a means to bring various users of the area of Polhograjski Dolomiti area around the common table (Source: UIRS Smoties archive).*

out local assets and how they can collectively contribute to the reinvention of the contemporary identity of Landscape Park Polhograjski Dolomiti, blending historical traditions with modern development and fostering a vibrant, inclusive and harmonious living environment.

### **Krapan, Croatia**

#### ***The setting***

Krapan is a former mining town located in the Istrian peninsula of Croatia. Situated in a deeply carved canyon, the town's infrastructure was developed to support coal mining operations (Milevoj, 1997; Matošević, 2011).

The mining of "pegola nera" (black coal) began in Krapan during the Venetian Republic and expanded significantly under Austro-Hungarian rule. The Rothschild banking family became involved in the mine's ownership in the 19th century, leading to further development and the construction of a mining settlement (Bojić, 2018).

Krapan has a rich ethnic history, reflecting the region's diverse past. Historically, the town was home to a mix of Croats, Italians and other ethnic groups,

including ones from Yugoslav times. This diversity was shaped by the region's political and cultural influences over the centuries (Simonetti, 2007; Istarski ugljenokopi, 2023).

The town's significance as a mining center declined in the 20th century due to various factors, among others the rise of other mining centers and the closure of the local mine in the 1990s. The subsequent development of Krapan has been influenced by its historical association with mining and its proximity to larger urban centers (Cvjetičanin, 2015; NN broj 153/2009, 2023).

#### ***Mapping Krapan: Artistic research-based practice***

The point of entry into the Krapan community occurred during the implementation of the Underground City XXI project in 2010, while mapping former entrances to the mines in the Labin area of the *Istarski ugljenokopi Raša* (Vorano, 2005). An extremely dire situation could be found there – Krapan residents were living in extremely dilapidated buildings, squatting in their own homes and surrounding spaces, left to maintain and adapt the area to their own needs



**Figure 3:** The setting of Krapan in Istrian landscape as presented on a historic map (Source: State Archive Pazin).

through their own efforts and means. From the outset and throughout further interactions, research and the long-term presence in the community, a conflict crystallised between the urban historical context and the social reality, which, under the given circumstances, had acquired pathological characteristics that directly reflected the lives, health, identity and integrity of Krapan residents.

The town of Krapan faced multifaceted challenges deeply intertwined with its history and socio-economic transformations. Established during the Austro-Hungarian period around coal mining, Krapan's placemaking hurdles are notably tied to its economic decline after the industry's collapse which led to economic instability, social exclusion and environmental degradation. Community involvement was hindered due to marginalized residents and limited control over town planning.

The initial human and artistic impulse was triggered by shock, disbelief, and a reflexive reaction to the encountered situation. As the idea to engage with the community developed, the collaborative conceptual focus centered on irreconcilable societal contradictions. Krapan epitomized decay and

the failure of major economic-political and energy-economic ideas based on resource exploitation. The concept of social, ecological, and other forms of justice was reduced to absurdity. Therefore, a research-based artistic approach seemed appropriate to map the state of art.

The historical maps overview was the first form of mapping spatial defaults and a display of Krapan's historic layers, after which it was easily possible to establish the main cause of the space's formation. An exceptional historical pattern of different economic-political models and philosophies embedded in the fabric of space forced the conclusion that Krapan originated and persisted over time solely due to geo-strategic and economic interests running through different states, based on the exploitation of primary energy resources. The emergence and collapse of Krapan were conditioned by the same reasons. In that sense, Krapan stands out as an example of the rise and fall of one of the most significant resource energy paradigms (Cvjetičanin, 2015).

As this was a complex situation regarding Krapan residents, that had developed over many years through the subtle, long-term establishment

of an atmosphere of intimidation and a sense of hopelessness, they gradually accepted the position of victims, becoming “prisoners” of extremely unfavourable living conditions in legal, physical, and psychological senses. Thus, understanding the context in which a space was formed and the way life developed within it, became the initial position of an artistic investigative practice and visual-anthropological diagnosis. Space exploration began by valuing industrial heritage, diagnosing the existing condition, residing in the community and engaging in conversation. The design, programme and activities spontaneously followed the development of relationships with the local community through mutual acceptance, leading to content development working in and with the community, involving participative and inclusive content creation processes in later phases.

### *The mapped assets*

Through conversations with Krapan residents about their life stories and circumstances, and by analysing the living conditions, a coherence in narratives communicating the needs, necessities, and demands of municipal authorities was observed but not recognised as such. The narrative of frustration and, ultimately, rebellion was personalised and segmented in its approach to power instances, which might not be seen as a problem of citizens as a whole or could simply be intentional or accidental segmentation of interests or ignorance on the other side of the communication channel.

However, the mapping of Krapan’s assets revealed a rich tapestry of tangible and intangible resources that can contribute to the community’s regeneration. Tangible assets include abandoned mine structures and machinery, historical mining infrastructure, abandoned buildings, and public spaces. These elements offer opportunities for creative reuse, revitalization, and community development.

Intangible assets encompass oral histories, cultural practices, community networks, and resilience. Documenting the stories and experiences of former miners and their families uncovered valuable historical knowledge. It also showed that existing community networks can be strengthened through building new connections that support residents and create opportunities for collaboration.

Despite the post-mining legacy, environmental assets were found in Krapan too, including the surrounding landscape, which offers potential for recreational activities, ecological restoration, and sustainable energy production. These opportunities were recognized as potential economic assets, including existing or potential tourism activities, small businesses, or agricultural ventures.

### *The placemaking activities after the mapping phase: Engaged artistic practice approach as a catalyst for community transformation*

The placemaking challenges were thus to highlight the town’s potentials and struggles facing institutional resistance and subsequent community disengagement. This seemed to be most appropriately addressed through cultural interventions focusing on empowering the community, sustainable revitalization, collaborative governance and preserving cultural heritage. Krapan’s challenges underscored the necessity for a community-centric approach to placemaking, emphasizing inclusive urban planning that respects its identity while addressing socio-economic, environmental and cultural issues.

As a result of living within the community of Krapan, initiating dialogues, conducting interviews, and after intensive acquaintance with all aspects of community life, the historical, geographical and economic timeline of Krapan development, taking into account the current situation as well, Krapan inhabitants were stating hopelessness referring to inadequate living conditions, and these were the important starting points for the placemaking activities that took place after the initial mapping phase in the form of the artistic engaged practice.

Artistic engaged practices took place from 2011 to 2021, leading to the establishment of the platform “Artists’ Recruitment Canters – Pozzo Franz”, implemented through the artistic organization Polygon – Centre for research and project development in culture. The resulting content was emancipatory in its nature. The references, more than models and approaches, are numerous artistic practices, perhaps most significantly the utopian concept of Social Sculpture by Beuys (Jordan, 2013), in the sense that social change is realized through social sculpture, arising from a radical extension of art into social life. The narrative was placed at the centre of attention as a method and a common starting point, creating a shared front in relation to local power instances, articulating problems in a broader societal context, and fostering a space of trust and dialogue.

By initial mapping and studying the perception aspects of wider community in relation to Krapan and its residents, including media coverage thematically related to the locality, the narrative shaped the general impression of Krapan in an even harsher way, creating an extremely negative image of a dangerous and neglected place, and above all unimportant place where undesirable “others” live. Therefore, one of the first artistic conceptions and articulated artistic actions undertaken in Krapan, entitled “To whom it might concern?” dealt with the articulation of the problems of a community which,



**Figure 4: Underground City XXI – mapping the ex-coal mine localities, 1st visit to Krapan, Polygon collective, Krapan 2011 (Source: POZZOFRANZ, 2023).**

due to the confluence of life circumstances in a micro-locational context, as well as the confluence of transitional political turmoil in the regional, national and global context, found themselves in the limb of the decline of one of the largest industries in this area. The artistic work and action included the production of postcards of Krapan.<sup>2</sup>

As part of the same action, the public “square” Pozzo Franz was stated as a place for joint gathering and public accessibility. In this way and by

simple gesture of placemaking, the social plasticity was achieved. Social plasticity refers to the ability of social systems to adapt and change in response to internal and external pressures (Levinthal & Marino, 2015). Here, the artistic intervention aimed to reshape perceptions and connections within the wider community. By changing connections (ArtHist.net, 2023), the intervention influenced thoughts, narratives, perceptions, and consequently, behaviours. Each subsequent action

<sup>2</sup> The following text was put on the postcard: “Attn: to whom it might concern? Re: People are Heritage. Krapan is the first Polygon Recruit Center for the Artists. Artists are taking part in sharing a destiny with people of Krapan by taking role of a Krapan citizen and recruiting other citizens for their art practice” (FACEBOOK, 2023).

implied the production of a space in a different way that would allow focusing on concepts related to a critical position and general engagement from different perspectives, which, articulated through artistic and cultural practices, expanded the space of understanding topics related to social inequalities and the ecology of care.

In that sense, previously mentioned social sculpturing as well as other contemporary engaged art references were influences and inspirational sources for artistic conceptualisation in all further community activities conducted within Krapan community, setting up a common ground of equalizing the roles of participants in a way that each person is an artist in his own way of bringing their thoughts, experiences, knowledge, hopes, aspirations and expectations into the open collaborative space(making). Artistic decisions upon the media (e.g. performance, exhibition, poetry, reading sessions, live act interventions) of expression and/or the final outputs, is just about navigating social mechanics and atmosphere toward, in advance established, common betterment.

In addition, and further developments, there are many exciting topics on transformative effects the commune had upon socio-spatial relations. On the other hand, artistic work, especially when it comes to engaged artistic practices and work in and with the community, does not carry evaluations based on success criteria. This type of artistic practices sensitizes society and neuralgic points, and the measurability of “success” is an inapplicable category in evaluating this type of artistic activity. What happens through this mode of action in the context of placemaking is the appropriation of space as it is embedded in our bodies and our language. In that way, inhabitants are not only historical sequence of higher powers but those who are integrated in the authenticity of space.

In this sense, the artistic act is a reflection of authenticity, which helped that Krapan and its inhabitants, at least legally, cannot be left out of the testament in all further processes of development and production of space, and that, at least in an art expression, the theoretical primacy of history over geography, and the dominance of time over space, was limited by engaged actions.

## DISCUSSION

Exploring the distinctive trajectories of Polhograjski Dolomiti and Krapan provides various insights into the challenges and successes encountered in their respective placemaking processes. In this section, we delve into a comparative overview of these cases, shedding light on the historical, socio-economic contexts, placemaking strategies, community

involvement, implications for urban planning and design, lessons learned, and the interdisciplinary nature that underlies their successes.

## Historical and socio-economic contexts

In Polhograjski Dolomiti, the evolution from an agricultural landscape to a suburban and recreational area reflects the broader societal shifts influenced by industrialization, suburbanization and personal motorization. The transformation from traditional farming practices to a blend of suburban and rural living poses challenges in maintaining a delicate equilibrium between preserving historical agricultural traditions and embracing modern developments. This echoes Antrop's (2004) general observations on landscape changes in Europe as a whole where transformation of rural landscapes into suburban and recreational areas is omnipresent.

On the other hand Krapan's historical trajectory, rooted in organized coal exploitation, presents a unique narrative shaped by different political regimes – from the Venetian Republic to Austro-Hungarian rule, Mussolini's era, and later socialist Yugoslavia. These regimes have contributed to the subsequent challenges faced by Krapan today, including economic decline, social exclusion, and environmental issues, with the highlighted complex interplay between historical events and the place's development and decline to the day. This reminds us of Anckar & Fredriksson's (2019) comprehensive analysis of political regimes over a long historical period and the importance of understanding the political contexts when placemaking activities take stage. By examining different political regimes, it was important to gain insights into how various political influences, from the Venetian Republic to socialist Yugoslavia, shaped Krapan's development.

## Placemaking strategies

The placemaking strategies in Polhograjski Dolomiti emphasize the careful integration of historical agricultural practices with modern development. The mapping phase, guided by the concept of place attachment, allowed for a comprehensive understanding of material and immaterial assets. Subsequent placemaking activities, such as the follow-ups of Sprehosad walks focused on strengthening identified assets like local meadows, orchards, forests, built heritage, local food production traditions, as well as art and culture activities. Similarly, as Zwiers et al. (2018) observed, the community's efforts to integrate historical agricultural practices with modern development must reflect a balance between change-oriented

attachment (embracing new developments) and stability-oriented attachment (preserving historical traditions) for the success of placemaking.

In Krapan, detailed artistic research helped to establish an engaged and critical artistic discourse, which further served to develop and implement narratives directed towards instances of power and consequently resulted in the improvement of the community's living conditions. The placemaking process took space as a narrative and reshaped the framing which afterwards became an integrative part of narration for people who live in Krapan. By promoting industrial cultural heritage together with the fact that the Krapan citizens are keepers of the heritage as well, the local political instances had to take into consideration new circumstances. This aligns with Ellery et al. (2021) theoretical understanding of placemaking, which emphasizes the importance of a common understanding of place-making processes to effectively measure the impact on community development. Their work highlights how placemaking can serve as a powerful tool for community empowerment and transformation, as seen in Krapan.

Additionally, community involvement in Polhograjski Dolomiti is evident through the two-phased approach, involving local actors, decision-makers and the broader public in mapping activities and activities triggering the mapped assets. As Antrop concluded back in 2004, challenges lie in reconciling the area's agricultural legacy with the demands of (sub)urban residents, striking a balance that preserves the past while embracing contemporary living. Krapan's challenges, deeply rooted in its history and socio-economic transformations, have hindered community involvement. The shift from coal mining to a post-industrial reality, coupled with unstable socio-economic status of the residents, poses multifaceted challenges, thus the artistic engagement in Krapan becomes a response to institutional resistance, fostering a space of trust, dialogue and the creation of a new narrative.

### **Implications for urban planning and design**

While the experience in Polhograjski Dolomiti underscores the importance of contextual design, heritage mapping and collaborative placemaking to maintain a balance between past traditions and modern development, Krapan's case highlights the need for a community-centric approach in placemaking. In Polhograjski Dolomiti the positive and enriching user experience resulting from the placemaking activities reinforces the potential for integrating historical practices with contemporary challenges of the area, at the same time in Krapan the artistic interventions serve as a catalyst for

social change, emphasizing the role of artists, social activists and citizens in addressing socio-economic challenges. The platform's goals align with inclusive urban planning that respects the place's identity and addresses its unique issues while strongly rooted in the distinctive local circumstances and heritage. Both cases also clearly underline and approve the observation by Jelenski (2018) on the importance of heritage in developing successful urban planning and design strategies and interventions.

### **Lessons learnt**

The insights gleaned from the Polhograjski Dolomiti case underscore the success of a transition from traditional agricultural landscapes to a contemporary blend of agricultural and suburban living, all while preserving heritage. This success is attributed to the fundamental involvement of the community from the very start – a meticulous mapping process, and the cultivation of positive user experiences. These lessons learned propel future directions, advocating for the continued exploration of sustainable development practices and fostering ongoing collaboration with local stakeholders from early stages of the process on. Notably, Polhograjski Dolomiti's experience reveals an interdisciplinary approach where urban design serves as the foundational methodology, yet it extensively incorporates artistic practices.

Conversely, Krapan's narrative, propelled by artistic engagement, highlights the transformative potential in addressing the complex contemporary challenges faced by areas undergoing identity shifts. The lessons derived from Krapan underscore the significance of narratives, community empowerment and the role of social sculpture in reshaping the identity of a place. Looking forward, future directions for Krapan involve the potential expansion of similar programs to other regions grappling with comparable issues, advocating for broader systemic changes. In the case of Krapan, the foundational methodology was rooted in artistic practices, showcasing an interdisciplinary approach that draws from urban design principles.

Both cases illuminate the importance of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary cooperation. The successful outcomes in Polhograjski Dolomiti and Krapan demonstrate that the synergy between urban design, artistic interventions and other disciplines is instrumental in creating vibrant and culturally rich urban spaces. This collaboration not only enhances the aesthetic and functional aspects of the built environment but also fosters a holistic understanding of the diverse challenges and opportunities inherent in placemaking. The interdisciplinary

**Table 1: Comparative presentation of the placemaking aspects of the two case studies.**

	<b>Landscape Park Polhograjski Dolomiti (Slovenia)</b>	<b>Krapan (Croatia)</b>
<b>Historic background</b>	Evolution from agricultural landscape upgraded with suburban and recreational area features, influenced by industrialization and (sub)urbanization	Shaped by coal exploitation, transitioning through different political regimes (Venetian Republic, Austro-Hungarian, Mussolini's era, socialist Yugoslavia)
<b>Economic and social setting</b>	Balancing traditional farming practices with modern development	Economic decline, social exclusion and environmental issues post the collapse of the mining industry
<b>Approaches to placemaking</b>	Emphasis on integrating historical agricultural practices with modern development. Activities focus on bringing people together by appreciating the local heritage and assets such as meadows, orchards, forests, traditional architecture, local food production traditions, art and culture	Art research-based practice, as well as visual anthropology and engaged art practices emphasise on integration of industrial heritage, critical artistic discourse and community participative models as well as creating a new narration directed toward instances of power and advocating necessary change
<b>Community engagement and hurdles</b>	Two-phased approach involving local figures, decision-makers and the broader public in mapping and placemaking activities. Challenges in reconciling the area's agricultural legacy with (sub)urban demands	Challenges rooted in historical and socio-economic transformations hinder community involvement. Artistic engagement responds to institutional resistance, fostering trust, dialogue and a new narrative
<b>Implications for urban planning and design</b>	Importance of contextual design, heritage mapping and collaborative placemaking to balance past traditions with modern development. Positive user experience reinforces potential for integrating historical practices with contemporary (sub)urban living needs	Need for a community-centric approach in placemaking. Artistic interventions serve as a catalyst for social change, aligning with inclusive urban design that respects identity and addresses unique issues
<b>Key takeaways</b>	Insights into potentially successful co-habitation of agricultural to suburban culture while preserving heritage. Importance of engaging the community in comprehensive mapping and fostering a positive user experience	Transformative power of artistic engagement in addressing complex urban challenges. Significance of narratives, community empowerment and potential of social sculpture. Future directions involve expanding similar programs and advocating for broader systemic changes

nature of these initiatives emphasizes the need for a comprehensive and collaborative approach that goes beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries, ultimately contributing to the sustainable development and resilience of communities.

## CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis between Landscape Park Polhograjski Dolomiti and Krapan brings to light the diverse approaches in placemaking within the Central European context. Placemaking, as explored in the theoretical background, emerges as a multifaceted approach to urban planning and design, demonstrating its profound impact on community bonds and the transformation of urban spaces. Rooted in the active involvement of residents and stakeholders, in both cases placemaking serves as a catalyst for creating vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities. The essence of placemaking

lies in fostering a profound connection to the environment and transforming spaces into welcoming, engaging and functional places that hold significance for users of different walks of life.

The discussion of two case studies from Slovenia and Croatia further enriches our understanding of placemaking processes. In the Slovenian case of Polhograjski Dolomiti, a predominantly urban design perspective is adopted, leveraging spatial strategies to enhance community bonds. The case emphasizes the careful integration of historical agricultural practices with modern development, showcasing the importance of contextual design, heritage mapping and collaborative placemaking to maintain a balance between past traditions and contemporary challenges. Lessons learnt from Polhograjski Dolomiti underscore the importance of community engagement, comprehensive mapping and fostering a positive user experience, pointing towards

future directions involving sustainable development practices and continued collaboration with local stakeholders. On the other hand, the Croatian case centers around artistic approaches, showcasing how creative interventions contribute to the transformation of spaces into meaningful places. It transcends traditional artistic boundaries and aligns with the place's challenges. Krapan's experience, driven by artistic engagement, highlights the transformative potential of art in addressing complex contemporary challenges of areas in the process of changing identity. Krapan case stresses the significance of narratives, community empowerment and the role of social sculpture in reshaping a place's identity. In both cases, the historical and socio-economic contexts play a pivotal role in shaping the placemaking strategies and an initial understanding of this context is key to its final success.

Both cases demonstrate community involvement and challenges. In Polhograjski Dolomiti, active participation in mapping activities is evident, and challenges revolve around reconciling agricultural legacies with contemporary living. In Krapan, challenges are rooted in historical and socio-economic transformations, hindering community involvement. Consequently, artistic engagement serves as an intervention, responding to institutional resistance – this

fosters a space for trust, dialogue and the creation of a new narrative, while also seeking a systematic approach to address the accumulated challenges. Implications for urban planning and design emphasize the need for contextual design, heritage mapping and collaborative placemaking in maintaining a balance between past traditions and modern development, as seen in Polhograjski Dolomiti. In Krapan, the need for a community-centric approach in placemaking is evident, with artistic interventions serving as a catalyst for social change. The positive user experience resulting from placemaking activities reinforces the potential for integrating historical practices with contemporary challenges in Polhograjski Dolomiti, while in Krapan artistic interventions contribute to reshaping the place's identity.

The comparative analysis of Landscape Park Polhograjski Dolomiti and Krapan enhances our understanding of placemaking as a transformative force that shapes community bonds and lived spaces. It underscores the necessity of an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach to placemaking, placing significant importance on people-centred analytical design processes. This approach, when applied in practice, has the potential to contribute to the development of more resilient, inclusive and vibrant communities.

URBANISTIČNO OBLIKOVALSKI IN UMETNIŠKI PRISTOP K USTVARJANJU PROSTORA:  
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## POVZETEK

Članek obravnava proces ustvarjanja prostora, ki ga strokovnjaki imenujejo tudi placemaking. Avtorja analizirata, kako proces poteka na dveh konkretnih primerih: v Krajinskem parku Polhograjski Dolomiti v Sloveniji in v kraju Krapan na Hrvaškem. Ustvarjanje prostora obravnavata kot dinamičen proces, ki spodbuja pripadnost ljudi svojemu okolju, krepi njihovo identiteto in jih spodbuja k aktivnemu sodelovanju v sooblikovanju svojega življenjskega prostora. Prispevek se osredotoča na začetno fazo tega procesa, ko se zbirajo informacije o obstoječem stanju, zgodovini, kulturi in potrebah lokalne skupnosti z različnimi metodami, kot so ankete, intervjuji, opazovanja in umetniške prakse. Pri tem primerjata dva različna pristopa: urbanistični pristop, ki je bolj značilen za slovensko lokacijo, in umetniški pristop, ki je bolj izrazit na hrvaški lokaciji. Urbanistični pristop se osredotoča na načrtovanje in oblikovanje fizičnega prostora, medtem ko umetniški pristop prinaša v proces ustvarjanja prostora več kreativnosti in sodelovanja lokalne skupnosti. Primerjava pripelje do ugotovitve, da oba pristopa, čeprav se zdita na prvi pogled različna, prispevata k skupnemu cilju – ustvarjanju bolj prijetnega in živega okolja. Študija tudi poudarja, da je za uspešno ustvarjanje prostora ključno razumevanje lokalnega konteksta. To pomeni, da je treba upoštevati zgodovino kraja, njegove naravne danosti, potrebe prebivalcev in njihove vrednote. Poleg tega je pomembno tudi sodelovanje različnih akterjev, kot so urbanisti, arhitekti, umetniki, lokalni prebivalci in druga zainteresirana javnost. Primera Polhograjskih Dolomitov in Krapna prikazujeta, kako je mogoče s pomočjo ustvarjanja prostora oživiti tradicionalno dediščino, okrepiti občutek pripadnosti in izboljšati kakovost življenja v lokalnih skupnostih in s tem ponujata dragocene vpoglede za vse, ki se ukvarjajo z načrtovanjem in oblikovanjem bivalnih okolij.

**Ključne besede:** ustvarjanje prostora, skupnostne vezi, urbanistično oblikovanje, angažirana umetniška praksa, primerjalne analize

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