

Draw the Coast. Action for the Mass Design of the Future of the Coastal Road

Introduction

Numerous European and some domestic examples show that involving the public in the planning of public spaces from the development and planning stages is extremely beneficial and a good long-term investment. It enhances solution quality, changes public perception of the solutions, and positively affects trust in local administrations (Ostanel, 2017; Micelli *et al.*, 2024; Tanrikul *et al.*, 2023). For this, in Izola (SLO), a partnership made of a local NGO, two Ministries, and a Municipality decided to promote community-based public space planning under the financial aegis of a EU fund. In the area of the former coastal road, this partnership gathered various organizations, institutions, and other interested parties in order to enhance an alternative way to use the coastal area.

On a 2.24 km long roll of paper spread across this area, citizens drew, wrote, or otherwise designed the future of the coastal road. All drawings and writings were documented, the event was recorded, and a short introductory video was prepared. After the event, we collected the outputs and conveyed the people's wishes, suggestions, and visions to the coastal municipalities.

This action was deliberately executed as part of the Mediterranean Coast and Macro-regional Strategies Week 2018, which for years has successfully bridged strategic planning at the European Commission level with on-the-ground happenings. This week, where experts, practitioners, and stakeholders at the governmental and local levels meet and discuss the significance of the sea and the coastal region, its natural resources and economic potentials, the risks it faces – both natural and human-induced – and strengthen awareness of the sea and coast's importance for quality living, takes community planning experiences to the highest decision-making level.

Through active participation, the event aimed to encourage local stakeholders and the public to collaborate in organizing public spaces, raise awareness of co-decision opportunities, gather proposals for spatial organization, and promote active citizenship.

The Context and the Participation Enhancer

In Slovenia, which is the context where the present work focuses on, NGOs, think tanks, and grassroots initiatives often face public resistance when introducing innovative measures or altering public spaces and traffic arrangements with unfamiliar approaches. Such resistance usually stems from ineffective public involvement in decision-making processes (Plostajner *et al.*, 2019). Most local communities are not adept at using modern/western public engagement tools (Berisha *et al.*, 2024). There is a concern that public involvement might delay or even hinder the implementation of measures, leading us to avoid exceeding legally mandated involvement processes. Moreover, solutions developed without public involvement can be flawed, as public space planners perceive and experience these spaces differently from the residents who use them daily.

PiNA, a cultural and educational association, supported by the Municipality of Izola – Support point for the European Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR), the Ministry of Public Administration, the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning, and the European Social Fund, organized on September 21, 2018, as part of the Mediterranean Coast and Macro-regional Strategies Week 2018, the region's first massive community spatial planning initiative. Together, we focused on the area of the former coastal road. The event was called *Draw the Coast* and this article analyses it.

Methodological Approach and Materials

All event participants received a brochure titled *Revitalizing Public Spaces - Coastal Road between Koper and Izola - Analysis*. The event aimed to explore possibilities and necessary measures for plans and decisions regarding the new use of the coastal area between Koper and Izola (including the coastal road replaced by the Markovec tunnel) with the involvement of all stakeholders and the public, considering their needs and interests to achieve the greatest legitimacy of decisions. The analysis presented to the participants in detail all the cultural and natural heritage that is covered, as well as all the existing plans and constraints. The event was intended to convey to the participants the complexity of planning the use of public space and the trade-offs between what we want to achieve and what is actually possible.

The event happened in the area of the former coastal road (between the roundabout connection in Koper and the Ruda junction in Izola) to encourage public participation in the management of public space and raise awareness of the possibility of co-decision making. Some numbers:

- 20 rolls of paper (each 100 meters long);
- weighted down with 532 granite blocks and labeled with 200 numbers;
- Over 1000 people from all over Slovenia, neighboring Italy and various European countries attended the event;
- 618 individuals and groups, united in 75 groups, participated in drawing;
- 3,288 felt-tip pens and 1750 crayons were used in the action;
- 1000 guides were provided for the participants;
- 750 meters of the paper roll were filled with ideas;
- 78 written proposals were received in the boxes at the stalls.

All proposals were diverse and innovative. The majority of the participants had prepared for the event in advance, recognizing the importance of community planning for this space. At the end, all ideas were recorded. By the end of 2018, we had thoroughly examined and synthesized them into a written analysis. We presented it to the public and forwarded it to the City Municipality of Koper, the Municipality of Izola, the

Municipality of Piran, the Municipality of Ankaran, the Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning, all relevant state institutions, and the European Commission.

Analysis of the Results

The participation of civil society and local actors represents the core of European democratic values and good governance. The principle of public participation in spatial planning is presented in numerous directives and political documents (such as the European Spatial Development Strategy, the Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020, the Aarhus Convention, the Bristol Agreement, the Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities). The New Urban Agenda states that a balanced, sustainable, and integrated approach to urban challenges should focus on all major aspects of urban development. It particularly mentions the participation of citizens as one of its key goals. The *Agenda2030 for Sustainable Development* explicitly mentions participatory, integrated, and sustainable planning and management of settlements. *Natura 2000* strategies encourage spatial management as a multi-stakeholder scenario, where community problems related to the quality of life cannot be solved by public local authorities alone, but require the cooperation of other actors.

Although all key international documents emphasize the importance of citizen participation in spatial planning processes, EU legislation regarding public participation leaves room for interpretation in its incorporation into national legislations. Moreover, the scope of public participation in spatial planning is often reduced merely to informing and not actual participation of various interested stakeholders. Participatory spatial planning is still too often treated as a difficult but mandatory phase of planning, which typically extends and complicates the planning process. The final report on the added value of the *European Structural and Investment Fund* for the period 2014–2023 on comprehensive territorial and urban strategies, for instance, notes that the extent of citizen involvement is often limited, with more participatory methods needed to improve the usability and accountability of the strategies for the public.

In Slovenia, similar to other Eastern European countries, a political disposition against participation is reflected in legislation, where formal possibilities for public participation in spatial planning have dropped below the level envisaged in internationally accepted agreements (Plostajner *et al.*, 2019). At the same time, more and more new and effective practices of participatory spatial planning or highlighting its importance are emerging (such as participatory mapping, legislative theatre of Augusto Boal, Jane's Walk urban walks, or 3D planning for reality). The cultural and educational society PiNA organized the first action of mass community spatial planning in the region on the coastal road between Izola and Koper on September 21, 2018. It spread out a 2.24 km long roll of paper, on which 618 individuals and groups, united in 65 interest groups, recorded their vision of the coast, and also submitted 30 individual written proposals.

Among the authors of the drawings were 17 civil society organizations, 10 schools, 2 municipal public institutions, 4 public professional institutions, and 18 groups of individuals. Most drawings (whose authors' ages could be determined) were filled by children (26 sections, representing 40% of all drawings), followed by active and young people, with the fewest being retirees. Of all the authors, more than a third could be placed among vulnerable groups (23 authors of sections): children (16), mobility impaired (1), sensory impaired (1), people with special needs (1), young people with fewer opportunities (4). The content of the drawings and cards was mostly intended for the general public, a third for children and youth, and some also for the active population and the vulnerable group of the mobility impaired.

The vast majority of the authors of the drawings included both graphic and textual elements in their drawings. Most of the drawings and proposals also related to the contact of land and sea (15 individual proposals were related only to land, two individual proposals, and two drawings only to the sea). Most of the drawings and cards deal with the Coastal Road as a whole, as less than a fifth of all drawings and proposals refer to a specific location, representing a

known section of the coastal road, most at the location of the ship Rex. In terms of the type of base, the Coastal Road is perceived as a mixture of asphalt/concrete, greenery, and rocks. Among the types of substrates present are also sand, paving stones, and to a lesser extent wood.

The most frequently appearing types of street furniture in the drawings are piers, followed by benches, sun loungers, and sunshades. Children's playgrounds and slides, as well as platforms, steps to the sea, and restrooms, also often appear in the drawings. On the note cards, steps to the sea, benches, as well as restrooms and showers are most commonly mentioned, along with drinking fountains and children's playgrounds. The types of street furniture common to both drawings and note cards are steps to the water, restrooms, showers, and drinking fountains. Thus, the street furniture of the Coastal Road is geared towards easier access to the sea (steps to the water, pier), supporting recreational and sporting activities, and relaxation (showers, drinking fountains, benches, restrooms, children's playgrounds).

The greatest discrepancies are observed in the frequency of piers, sun loungers, sunshades, and slides. The reason for the discrepancy in the frequency of slides can be attributed to the age group of the drawing authors, as slides are significantly more common among children, and despite the anonymity of the note cards, it can be inferred that primary school students mostly did not submit individual suggestions in the form of written notes. For the other three types, the discrepancy cannot be attributed to age differences, but rather to the visual elements of piers, sun loungers, and sunshades, which are often associated as symbols with the sea, swimming, and the beach, and therefore may appear more frequently in drawings than on note cards.

Green, sports, and traffic infrastructure make up more than half of the planned Coastal Road. The presence of cultural and educational infrastructure, hospitality and retail infrastructure, and marine infrastructure is also common. Tourism and religious/spiritual infrastructure are less present. It is important to note the inclusion of infrastructure for the mobility-impaired by vulnerable groups.

As traffic infrastructure, bicycle lanes, pedestrian paths, and piers are most commonly used. A quarter of the drawings and note cards include roads, and just under a fifth include railways (electric trains).

Event spaces are the most common type of cultural and educational infrastructure. Research stations that enable underwater observation (present in just over a fifth of the drawings and note cards) and museums (present in just under a fifth) are also more common.

Hospitality and retail infrastructure most often appear in the form of bars (two-thirds of all drawings and note cards), followed by snack bars and restaurants. Green infrastructure in more than half of the drawings and note cards is represented by lawns, the presence of trees or avenues, and almost a quarter also includes parks. General-use playgrounds most frequently appear as a type of sports infrastructure. The presence of outdoor sports facilities and special sports infrastructure is also common.

Religious/spiritual infrastructure most often appears in the form of viewpoints, followed by meditation spaces. Vehicle and vessel rentals most frequently appear as a type of tourism infrastructure. The most common type of marine infrastructure is the pier (two-thirds of all drawings and note cards), followed by islands.

Content Analysis The Coastal Road, in terms of the content it accommodates, is perceived as a space for relaxation, recreation, and sports. Various sports and types of recreation appeared in the drawings and note cards, with cycling and swimming being the most common, followed by walking, rollerblading, scooter riding, and ball games on land. More than a third of the drawings and note cards also emphasize content related to nature and natural heritage, and just under a third to culture and cultural heritage. The Coastal Road is rarely defined as a protected area. Three specific proposals for the area are a dog beach, a beach for the mobility and sensory impaired, and Eurovelo (Mediterranean, Adriatic-Baltic).

Elements and content of drawing and writing also included negative elements or contents of the Coastal Road. Buildings and hotels most often appear as unpopular elements, followed by motorized vehicles on land and in the sea.

Conclusion

The participative spatial planning action *Draw the Coast*, facilitated by PiNA, has demonstrated a model of engagement and speculative envisioning for the future of the coastal road. The event brought together diverse target groups, including 17 civil society organizations, 10 educational institutions, 2 municipal public entities, 4 public professional institutions, and 18 groups of individuals. Moreover, it catalyzed the motivation of 30 additional individuals or groups to contribute their visions through note cards. This feedback really showed PiNA the community's interest in the future utilization of the coastal road.

One of the most significant outcomes of the initiative is the perception of the coastal road as a whole area, with less than a fifth of the proposals targeted specific locales. The only particular area was the Rex ship location, a site of historical and cultural significance, which emerged as a focal point for specific enhancements.

The envisioned infrastructure, a blend of asphalt/concrete, green spaces, and natural elements like rocks, is envisioned to facilitate a seamless and enriching interface between land and sea. Envisaged infrastructure, such as showers, drinking fountains, restrooms, and access steps to the water reflect a thoughtful consideration of user comfort and safety, ensuring an inclusive and accessible coastal experience for all.

Community interaction and the prominence of non-motorized vehicles in the proposals highlight a collective desire for a dynamic, yet sustainable and environmentally friendly coastal road. The frequent depiction of individuals and non-motorized vehicles illustrates a strong community preference for active, healthy lifestyles supported by robust green, sports, and traffic infrastructure. This includes comprehensive facilities like bicycle lanes, pedestrian paths, piers, playgrounds, outdoor sports facilities, and green spaces, which not only cater to recreational and sports activities but also enhance the ecological value of the coastal area.

The Coastal Road is imagined as an open public space, primarily dedicated to relaxation, recreation, and sports, with activities ranging from cycling and swimming to walking, rollerblading, scooter riding, and various land-based ball games. Interestingly,

Figura 1. Participatory drawings. PiNA.



the area is seldom regarded as a protected zone, yet specific proposals such as creating a dog beach, a beach for individuals with mobility and sensory impairments, and incorporating segments of the Eurovelo routes (Mediterranean, Adriatic-Baltic) indicate a nuanced approach to inclusivity and accessibility.

The comprehensive analysis of over 1500 participants' contributions has laid a solid foundation for the development of an inter-municipal spatial plan for the coastal road area. PiNA's ongoing role as a watchdog ensures that this wealth of community insight and aspiration is not only acknowledged but actively incorporated into future developmental plans.

This project exemplifies the power of participatory planning in fostering a deep sense of community ownership, enhancing the quality of urban spaces, and building trust between citizens and local governments – as already stated by other authors (e.g. Ostanel, 2017). It represents a pivotal step towards realizing a shared vision for the coastal road, one that harmonizes the needs and desires of the community with the environmental and cultural integrity of the space. This pivotal change also starts crumbling certain ideas that, “despite being exposed to pervasive European influences, the evolution of spatial planning in the Western Balkans remains intrinsically tethered to historical paths” (Berisha et Cotella, 2024).

References

- Berisha E., Cotella G. (2024), Europeanisation of spatial planning. The Western Balkans between innovation and resistance, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, pp. 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2024.2352890>.
- Micelli E., Campagnari F. Lazzarini L., Ostanel E., Pedri Stocco N. (2024), They Like to Do It in Public: A Quantitative Analysis of Culture-Led Regeneration Projects in ITALY, *Sustainability*, n. 16, p. 2409, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16062409>.
- Ostanel E. (2017), Urban regeneration and social innovation: The role of community-based organisations in the railway station area in Padua, Italy, *Journal of Urban Regeneration and Renewal*, n. 11(1), <https://doi.org/10.69554/AHNC8218>.
- Plostajner K., Simoneti M., Cerar A., Medved P. (2019), Is Ljubljana being eco-gentrified? The case of sustainable urban development of the city centre, *Sociologia urbana e rurale*, n. 119, pp. 117-133, <https://doi.org/10.3280/SUR2019-119008>.
- Tanriku A. (2023), The Role of Community Participation and Social Inclusion in Successful Historic City Center Regeneration in the Mediterranean Region, *Sustainability*, n. 15, p. 7723, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15097723>.