



osTraum/Maria: I've first heard about 14th District at the book launch of „Reclaim, recode, reinvent. Urban Art and activism in Eastern Europe“ and liked the idea of project a lot. Could you tell how the project was born?

METASITU: 14th District is a collaboration we did with Teta Tsybulnyk, who at the time was program coordinator at 86 Film and Urbanism Festival in Slavutych, within the context of the Tandem Ukraine program.

Our collaboration started with a conversation about the future of Slavutych. The city was built in 1986 to rehouse the population of workers from Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant after the explosion. It had to be built fast.

It was built in the middle of the forest in Northern Ukraine, along with a commuter train line that would be able to bring the workers to the Nuclear Power Station, located 80 km away.

The Nuclear Power Plant in Chernobyl continued working as such until the year 2000, and it remained, one way or another, the city's largest employer until November 2016, when they wheeled in the sarcophagus over the fourth reactor to contain the radiation for the next century.

Slavutych might have never really been your average 'atomic city', but when we got together in the spring of 2016 with Teta, we thought of how it was leaving its skin of atomic city behind, and what would that mean for its future.

At the same time we were interested in exploring the incredible built heritage of Slavutych, and using that as a cathartic tool to look into its future.

In the midst of these elements, the 14th District was born.

osTraum: Athens was chosen as the main inspiration for 14th District. Why Athens? What do Slavutych and Athens have in common?

METASITU: Both Athens and Slavutych are cities that cannot be conceived without their ruins: the acropolis (as well as more recent ruins, such as the old airport, or the closed shops as a result of the recent crises) and Chernobyl (which is a ruin that, unlike the acropolis, lies far from the center of Slavutych, and remained as the main economic source (employer) of the city).

Both of these cities play a pivotal role in contemporary Western Culture: Athens was the birthplace of democracy and Western thought and Slavutych is the result of the largest ecological catastrophe leading to the collapse of the soviet union, but also built within a context in which different soviet republics came together and built a city from scratch in a record short time.

These are cities operating today in contexts of emergency, with uncertain futures. Cities situated in the borderlands of Europe, where crucial debates of belonging, nation building, and



transnationality are much more alive than in the traditional cores of power. They are borderlands, but not peripheries.

It is true that both cities have very different time spans, Slavutych is 30 years old and Athens has been inhabited for 3000 years, but we felt that there were certain anchors around which discursive bridges between the two cities could be established.

osTraum: Without any doubt Slavutych is a unique city, but it is indeed very similar with many other cities in Ukraine built in the Soviet time which face the same problems today. Where else in Ukraine could you imagine another „14th District“?

METASITU: No, Slavutych is absolutely unique as an urban project, not only in Ukraine, but worldwide. It was built all at once, in the middle of the forest, following a masterplan done by a Ukrainian architect. Each neighbourhood was built by a different Soviet republic who brought in their own architects, masons, engineers, and even materials to each build a district that would house a number of people. The architects used this as an opportunity to display the best examples of modernist architecture (this is the late 1980s, late late modernism), at the same time giving it a vernacular twist (the cladding on the Yerevan district with toufa stone is something very characteristic of the Armenian capital, like the arabesque designs in the Baku district or the St George's crosses patterns in the Tbilisi neighbourhood). That way, ten districts were originally erected, followed by three more in the 1990s that did not follow any sort of external influence/inspiration.

This is absolutely unique. You walk through a city that, not only was designed with bike paths, and to favor pedestrians at all times, but also where you have impeccable examples of modernist soviet architecture. Carved within existing pine forest, Slavutych gives away a feel of retreat / sanatorium, and indeed the city was not only planned with utilitarian goals in mind (often the cities built around the factory were extensions of the later), but also to provide an environment that would help to relieve the trauma for those affected and touched by the Chernobyl explosion.

It has an incredible architectural legacy, and with 14th District we wanted to honor that legacy, that heritage, that is so unique to Slavutych.

osTraum: The main part of the project, as far as I understood, was the work of a Thinking Group developing ideas about 14th District. How did the work process look like? Were there any difficulties?

METASITU: After receiving the Mayor's support, it was decided that the 14th District would take place in one of the newer districts of the city – Dobrynynskiy – in a plot of open space of over 5000m².



An initial gathering was organized at the still empty territory of the 14th District, to meet locals and introduce the project to them. Many people came. They were curious. The idea was generally well received.

It was decided that the new district would be designed by a group of locals that would form a core team, a Thinking Group that would engage in questions directly relating to the new district.

The project was organized around two questions:

1. *What does it mean to have a district in today's Slavutych?*
2. *How to translate one urban context to another?*

The Thinking Group would spend the first half of the project in Slavutych, unpacking the implications of what a new district in Slavutych would mean, what would it look like, would it need to attend to the needs of the citizens, if so, what needs, etc.

The second half would be spent in Athens analysing the implications of the 'translation' process that emerge from taking one urban context into another. The compatibility. The extraction process. The processes. The week in Athens served to distill design elements that would build on the knowledge that had been developed throughout the previous months in Slavutych. The culmination of this process was the conceptualization and construction of the 14th District.

Besides the logistics and constraints of crossing the selective non-porous Schengen borders (at the time Ukrainians still needed visas to come to Schengen), the challenge remained of providing an encompassing representation of Athens, understanding that bias and subjectivity would be part of the experience. And that the participants of the Thinking Group would have to address that in their work.

The week was organized in six episodes – one for each of the six days. The first chapter addressed the notion of Ruin, as a common denominator for both Slavutych and Athens, but also an overruling external narrative to both cities. Subsequent days were spent looking at the city through different scales - the city, the neighborhood, the building, the object and the particle.

These six perspectives served as a range of anatomic planes operating at different scales to dissect Athens, understanding its dynamics from the largest to the most minute. Throughout the week, the Thinking Group was not only getting acquainted with the urban context of Athens but also developing strategies on how to translate their findings into the 14th District in Slavutych.

Looking beyond the doric, ottoman or modernist, the group was determined to bring back to Slavutych a sensation of the city – an element that they felt had prevailed throughout their visit. The constant flux of feelings and the unpredictability that governs the relationships between people, spaces and buildings in Athens. A form of cohabitational chaos. Coming from the more homogeneously structured Slavutych, the idea of different elements coexisting in harmony next



to each other provided a unique rhythm that the Thinking Group felt was the quintessential Athenian Element.

In terms of addressing the district, rather than seeing it as fulfilling a habitational purpose, or a finite element, they saw it as something that should be continuously evolving, a district in continuum, with change. They sought to provide a framework of change that would evolve over time, independently and slowly adapting to people, and people slowly adapting to it.

A seed for chaos. A trigger for change. A new beginning. An unexpected future.

And it indeed was a trigger for chaos, but one that we could not have really predicted: It led to an intense debate at a local scale on social media about public art interventions in the city.

osTraum: What kind of feedback about 14th District did you receive so far?

METASITU: After returning from Athens, the Thinking group had another month to materialize their vision in the territory assigned for the 14th District - the Athenian District. Besides several spatial interventions reflecting on the archeology of the future, it was decided to build a 19m long wall that would be thoroughly covered with A4 sheets of papers resembling wall advertisements often found at the building entrances and on the notice boards. Those sheets of paper were explaining the overall project and its process, touching upon the creation of Slavutych, its present and the possible futures.

Coinciding with the urban film festival “86” that has been taking place in Slavutych for the fourth consecutive year, the Thinking Group presented the 14th District to locals. Their aim was to talk about their experiences and learnings from the city of Athens and discuss the further steps for the development of Athenian District.

Not even week after being erected, the wall disappeared from the 14th District. We found out about it reading the chat conversation in the forum devoted to things happening in Slavutych

The post that started the conversation began:

“Where is the new District? The story of one wall.

Attention! Attention! Attention! The inter-dimensional portal has eaten the Athenian District!!! Who will be the next victim?”

This post unleashed a heated debate online between different people who were not happy with the initiative and suggested that the money would have been better spent on building a playground for children – and other neighbors reacting to that. It was fantastic seeing people so engaged about the future of a plot of land that otherwise has remained empty for many years.



The group was called 'Overheard in Slavutych' and it was basically a gossip platform of things that were happening in town. The post commented on the disappearance of the Wall, and on the project... suggesting that now that no trace above ground was left, all that was left was 'the memory' of the project, the 'myth' that the project had started.

And I mean, what a better start for a district based on Athens than a myth!

The rest of the original post, that triggered the reactive response, read (translated from original in Ukrainian):

An interesting international project, created during the the festival "86", has become a phantom.

Probably just few citizens of Slavutych had not heard about the 14th district - Athenian district. First the locals were asked what would they like to see in the territory of the 14th District. The responses ranged from restoring the nearby unfinished building, to build another playground or to install banal, but comfortable benches for sitting.

Instead a group of locals visited the capital of Greece to get acquainted with the culture of Athens and its urban fabric. By the end of their stay they came up with an interesting idea - to create an installation, that would partly recreated the urban history of both cities. All seemed good and everything was done as promised.

But ... But the installation itself stood there just for a week and a few days - a sweet moment of pleasure for the city.

Will this place now become one of the Slavutych legends? Would there be a spirit giving free tickets to Athens?

Is it worth making such projects in the city? What should have lived forever, did not last a month. The 14th District underwent "non-violent" relocation by the Slavutych employees of the communal services. It was them who decided that the geolocation of the art object was not in the place where it was needed, so they disassemble it.

And now all that is left is the legend of the 14th District that we will tell our children.

osTraum: You looked for locals for the Thinking Group via open call. How interested were Slavutych's citizens to participate and what were the criteria to be selected for the team?

METASITU: We received a large number of applications in the Open Call. But even before that, when we announced the project on the site of the future 14th District, we had a very positive response from the locals, and a large number of people showed up.

We would say that this is a trait of most Ukrainian cities today: after Maidan, we have witnessed an intense sense of civil engagement, particularly on urban matters. The Ukrainian citizenry, more than other places we know, is ready to engage with its built environment... there is a sense of responsibility, action, and excitement.



These processes make this land extremely fertile in terms of ideas, and reactions, which we think is a great framework to develop new discursive thoughts around urbanization, socially-engaged practices, and the way we relate to the territory.

Going back to the selection of participants for the Thinking Group, as with all our project, there was a transparent voting system among all the members of the jury. We sought the most engaged and daring profiles. It turned out to be a fantastic mix, and one that covered a large spectrum of ages, interests, skills and references: some worked at Chernobyl, some were teenagers, some were working at the municipality.

osTraum: How involved were you in the work of the Thinking Group in Slavutych and Athens?

METASITU: We were very involved in both processes: we curated the program of open lectures and workshops by urban experts who came to Slavutych to exchange ideas with the Thinking Group in the fall, and we designed the week-long visit for the Thinking Group to Athens in the spring, as well as with the construction of the wall, and its aftermath. Out of our own initiative with the Thinking Group, we decided to make a film about the project. Whereas we are not based in Slavutych, our engagement with that city continued, and as METASITU, we curated the Urbanism program of last year's 86 Film and Urbanism festival.

Our work with Slavutych continues as we are now organizing a large gathering of architecture students in Slavutych, hoping to shed more light to the incredible and important modernist architectural heritage that Slavutych has.

osTraum: What was the final outcome of 14th District project? What is the future of all collected ideas and thoughts and is it possible to see them somewhere?

METASITU: There was an exhibition at the end, and a book, and now we are working on a film about the project. But with these type of participatory practices, we often feel that the success is determined by some sort of tangible outcome (like an exhibition, a book or a film), but in reality, the true success of these projects are much more difficult to quantify as they involve individual transformations or other non-tangible achievements.

The project in the end was not about building a new district, about concrete and steel, plans and sections, it was about how the process of designing this district transformed those who were involved, either as part of the Thinking Group, or involved in the heated discussion on social media, or attending the events we organized such as Open lectures or the unveiling of the wall.

We understand the need to share the experience with other parties, hence the exhibitions, the books, and the films, but it is also important to be aware that the core essence of this project is absolutely immaterial, and materializing it (in order to share the ideas, but also to seek their



validation from others) is a translation exercise that exposes the risk of losing core aspects of this project.

We find that these are extremely important questions that we are often thinking about in our practice, where we continuously establish what we call 'porous tribes', which is part of what we will be exploring in the upcoming residency-project we are curating called [WE ARE NEVER ALONE](#). For this residency-project, we will invite 10 practitioners working with participatory practices to join us in Ivano Frankivsk, in Western Ukraine, and critically think of the potentials, but also pitfalls of these type of practices; as well as to establish dynamics for engaging different communities that transcend binary debates and imported discursive lines.

The program is open to anyone working with socially-engaged projects (architects, artists, activists, etc.), and it covers transportation, accommodation, per diems, as well as having a budget for production/experimentation and a honorarium for each of the participating residents.

osTraum: 14th District is a collaborative project between Teta Tsybulnyk and METASITU. What do you think about this collaboration? What are the benefits and challenges of working on the same project with other artists and/or curators in your opinion?

METASITU: Our practice itself is a collaboration between the two of us (Liva and Eduardo). As humans, our achievements are due to collaboration. I mean, even the emergence of the whole DIY trend is based on a form of collaboration where people share information on how to do things. Youtube tutorials are all about sharing that type of knowledge (we sort of explored that format – youtube tutorials as a means of communicating to the world/ of sharing- with a project we did some years ago looking at forms of expanded domesticity in Tokyo, [OBJECTS FOR EXPANDED LIVING](#))

Collaboration, and the sharing of information, is very core to our work. We like it if people use or corrupt our work. In all our [books](#), we invite readers to photocopy them. We always have the links to our videos on our website, and when we don't, we are happy to share our work with anyone who asks for it. In a way, radical sharing, is a form of shaking capitalism, and other abusive forms of power.

With Teta Tsybulnyk we have continued working in close proximity: she has become a project coordinator for our new initiative, [the Degrowth Institute](#), where we are looking at new ways of masterplanning for post-industrial cities in Eastern Ukraine that are losing population. We want to shift the paradigm that population growth is key for urban success, yet master planning is deeply ingrained in the capitalist rhetoric of growth and accumulation. We want to think of scenarios where population shrinkage is embraced, but also understand what would that mean. What do we preserve? What do we let go? How do we do this? Consensuated ruinification, heritage, self-worth and alternative economies we think might be part of the answer, but for now we want to ask questions, and establish the thinking frameworks rather than come up with answers.



Teta in particular will be coordinating the [AFTER <ITY](#) project, where we will bring together 12 people living and working in shrinking cities in Germany and Ukraine for a week long brainstorm/training session in Ukraine, followed by a symposium in Germany. We want to start creating a community of practice among urban activists that understand that the success to urban living is not necessarily along the growth vector, but rather on planning and addressing current issues.

osTraum: Tell me a bit more about METASITU. Who are you and what kind of projects are you working on at the moment?

METASITU: METASITU is a meta life project. We started out of necessity and curiosity – or, rather, the need to fulfill our curiosity -: we are absolutely aware that we are abusing the art system in the sense that neither of us was formally trained in the arts (we have architecture, landscape architecture and urban sociology backgrounds) and yet we use the arts (in all its roles - artists, curators, coordinators...) in order to be able to reach new audiences but also to continue our practice. Undeniably, we have privileged passports that allow us a high degree of mobility and access to certain territories, we have a good command of several global languages which allow us to interact with different people, and through our education we have been taught to strategize in this way. These are all privileges that we are aware of, and try working with – but not at the expense of others.

At this moment we are working a lot with the idea of a very contested concept: ‘community’. We are interested in building affiliations, creating tribes, bonds, and having transformative experiences that we will remember years from now. What we value the most in people and situations is their ability to change our minds on a given topic, and, thus, we are constantly testing the edges of cognitive emancipations on ourselves and others.

We have recently done a project, [FOUNDATION](#), where we selected six people through an anonymous open call, to live with us in an art gallery for a week, without connecting to the internet. The idea was to build the foundation for a new city, a new community. The experience was extremely powerful, and we are looking to repeat it again in a different context. *(The gallery is in Bonn, and we will go there this Friday 12th April to have [an artist talk](#), where you are more than welcome to join!)*

This is not dissimilar to an experience we had a few years ago, when we were living for three weeks on a boat on a failed expedition to the World’s most remote inhabited place, the island of Tristan da Cunha in the South Atlantic. The organization was, for lack of a better word, a *shitshow*, but the bonds that were developed between the people on the boat, the isolation, and the closeness of the space...and how much we all wanted it to work, meant that we created some sort of fluid entity among all of us, which we then translated into a video [TDCU 1ZZ](#).

It is this sort of experience towards where we feel our practice is moving towards. Because urbanization – the urban condition, our main interest- is nothing but a series of human practices,



practices that we share, that we use to communicate, and relate to one another. We want to understand that: how do we relate to one another and to what is around us? Can we think of these things in a different way?