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Cover it roughly, BETA 2022

Since its first edition in 2016, BETA—Timișoara Architecture Biennial—has become Romania’s most forward-looking biennial as it addresses contemporary discourses related to the designed environment through a coherent and multifaceted program. Compared to other national architecture Biennials, BETA’s philosophy shows a change in focus: it evolved from the usual display and judgment of architecture as ‘matters of fact’, to tackling ‘matters of concern’, an approach more suitable for contemporary needs and aspirations.¹ BETA also had, until this year, a clear focus on the public space of Timișoara, the 2022 edition marking the peak of this pursuit. Curated by Daniel Tudor Munteanu and Davide Tommaso Ferrando, the 4th edition of BETA talked about the ‘The City as a Common Good’ through a main exhibition, titled *Another Breach in The Wall*, and an *Urban Trail*—a 23 km long route that linked around 100 temporary interventions, from posters to three-dimensional objects and landscaping.

This article will critically examine BETA22’s **replicas of temporary interventions** initially created in various parts of the globe, and **re-produced in various public spaces of Timișoara, which will be further referred to as covers**. It does not discuss the main exhibition, which had a coherent narrative and itinerary, nor the interventions designed by commissioned Romanian architects. In fact, I wish to endorse the latter and acknowledge the contextualized relevance of those 10 temporary interventions.² Among other compelling efforts, it’s worth mentioning the buoyant *social space* created by *F.I.D. Football as Infrastructure of Democracy*, the ingenious and participatory re-production of local urban furniture by studioBASAR, the subtle yet powerful message about public responsibility by VitaminArchitects, or the rich symbolism of FAUT’s Bedonia.

BETA22’s curatorial statement caught my attention from its first announcement as it proposed a discourse familiar to my research.³ Still, I am drafting this article only in

¹ I am using Latour’s dichotomy between the modernist way of referring to *things* as solid and undisputable ‘matters of facts’, versus the current need for discussing them as *assemblages* or as ‘matters of concern’ which implies analysing their ‘highly complex, historically situated, richly diverse’ facets. By defining matters of concern, the French philosopher is framing ‘a powerful descriptive tool’ for a ‘new realism’. Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–48.

² In total, there were 11 site-specific interventions made by Romanian architects, but I purposely left out one named *Roadside Republic* by a-works studio, as its implications were anything but positive. Its irresponsible use of concrete triggered public consternation and together with contributing to a growing mistrust in the local branch of the Romanian Order of Architects (the main organizer of BETA). News titles like the following spurred a wave of negative reactions: ‘Illegal “works of art” during the Architecture Biennale, in Timișoara: concrete slabs poured on the green space without permits’. Claudiu Dobre, “„Lucrări de Artă” Ilegale,” Banatulmeu, 2022, <https://www.banatulmeu.ro/lucrari-de-arta-ilegale-in-cadrul-bienalei-de-arhitectura-la-timisoara-placi-de-beton-turnate-pe-spatiul-verde-fara-avize/>.

³ I test and research temporary interventions as part of cultural and participatory initiatives that aim to provoke citizen reflection and engagement while ameliorating the built environment. Understood as *matters of concern*, temporary interventions encapsulate micronarratives about local specificities and the initiators’ aims. As such, they can represent anything from the desire to improve urban furniture to deceptive processes (based on ideology, personal hubris, profit maximization, etc.).

2024 for two main reasons. Firstly, I am too fond of BETA as a long-term cultural program and a team (even if shifting) to use another platform other than its own for criticizing one of its editions. Secondly, I did not want to provide ammunition to the flood of irony, frustration, and even repulsion seen in local newspapers and on social media, reactions that surrounded the 2022 edition. In that mixture of motives derived from ideology, local politics, or cultural background, my thoughts would have contributed (even if marginally) to an atmosphere of distrust and negativity. Now, after BETA24's successful opening, we can hopefully discuss 'history' with more reason and fewer emotions.

The discourse

The curatorial statement⁴ of BETA22 was quite straightforward. Reading between the metaphors of breaches, niches, and walls, one can easily understand its ethos of liberation, bottom-up power, and alternative societies. Framed on the familiar May 68's French philosophy, the discourse was built upon traceable concepts such as Michel de Certeau's 'everyday practices', Henri Lefebvre's 'social spaces' and 'the right to the city' or Guy Debord's 'situations' (exceptional moments in time and space that provoke the *status quo*, which the curators interpreted as 'breaches'). Even if these origins were not mentioned, those familiarized with Lefebvre's view can recognize the plea for understanding cities as collective *oeuvres* that should be (re)produced through the *everyday practices* of citizens and not through top-down processes.⁵ True to its postmodern philosophy, the curatorial statement also emphasized the need for social interactions (such as 'perpetual negotiation', debates, collaboration and care between citizens) for 'making new and unexpected paths of behavior' that can improve the city in unexpected ways.⁶

Therefore, the desire to 'go to the citizens rather than asking them to go to the Biennale' through placing temporary interventions in various public spaces, was a decision coherent with the discourse. The interventions aimed to create 'critical and uncomfortable encounters' that would generate 'discussions and reactions'.⁷ This approach aligns with Lefebvre and Debord's theory that stimulating *difference* and conflict are essential for the authentic *social production* of the city.

and the actions

This rich and still pertinent rhetoric has become a commonplace in architectural theory over the past half-century,⁸ therefore one would expect its interpretation at the 2022 Architecture Biennale to move beyond slogans and metaphors and align with

⁴ Daniel Tudor Munteanu and Davide Tommaso Ferrando, "Curatorial Statement," 2022, <https://2022.betacity.eu/another-breach-in-the-wall/>.

⁵ Henri Lefebvre, "Right to the City," in *Writings on CITIES*, ed. Eleonore Kofman, Elizabeth Lebas, 4th ed. (Oxford & Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2000). 101-3.

⁶ Daniel Tudor Munteanu and Davide Tommaso Ferrando, "The City a Common Good," *Zeppelin #168* (București, 2022). 70.

⁷ *Ibid.* 84-5.

⁸ Starting with the early adoption of these zeitgeist ideas by the '60s and '70s avant-garde (Aldo van Eyck, Archigram or Cedric Price), and the more recent appropriation of this discourse in urban theory (beginning in 1999 with the book *Everyday Urbanism* by Margaret Crawford, John Chase and John Kaliski, and ending with the more recent theories of temporary and tactical urbanism), architects adopted minor or temporary interventions as physical instruments for the creation of a new, anti-modernist, anti-authoritative and anti-capitalist city.

contemporary theories of urban action. I am referring to principles and values that need to be addressed nowadays such as: thoroughly studying the existing conditions before intervening (social, built, historic, geographical, political, economic, etc.), conscientiously observing the lived micro-dynamic at street level, involving a wide network of actors in the process of design, carefully testing new approaches, openly addressing conflicts and patiently researching the life of the projects. Of course, the list can be extended but the main directions in addressing public space are multifaceted and continuous research and participation. Both directions have a deeply localized character and, as we know, they imply impressive amounts of effort and time.

These common-sense principles were followed by most of the Romanian architects who were commissioned to make site-specific interventions during BETA22. But while it is feasible to apply these demanding principles when dealing with one project, it is keenly unlikely for a small curatorial team to manage the *soft* integration in the local context of over 70 temporary interventions. This ambition bears a burden that a biennale simply cannot afford. In pursuit of this futile large-scale ambition, a more 'efficient' method appears to have been chosen—one that aligns perfectly with the good old architect's tradition. Not having the time, resources, or interest for anthropological research, a sensible re-signifying, and the engagement of citizens, the curators seem to have dealt with the covers in the most criticized (also by the French philosophers named earlier) way of working with the city: playing with forms while dismissing the social. Here is why:

Covering and re-signification

The covered interventions rarely have 'pure' aesthetic or mere functional qualities. Instead, they carry a complex and critical narrative toward society or the use of urban spaces, dependent on their spatial (and temporal) context. Obviously, the relocation and re-production of these interventions fundamentally change their meaning as 'the form, born in a cultural framework, becomes useless in another'.⁹ Thus, the reproduction of ethical and activist actions remains relevant as long as it reaches a sensitive point in the local culture in which they are reproduced.

Let us take the cover of *Teeter-totter Wall*. The original was built in 2019 as a *soft* protest for what is now known as the Trump Wall (a physical fence at the US – Mexico border). It aimed to highlight both the brutal and artificial division deepened by political cynicism and the importance of collaboration in fighting it. Even if it lasted for only one day, a series of images of the intervention and, even more so, its *usage*, encapsulated a powerful and localized symbolism that made it globally acclaimed.

⁹ Umberto Eco, *Opera Deschisă*, ed. trad. Cornel Mihai Ionescu (București: Editura pentru Literatură Universală, 1969). 71.



Figure 1 – The cover (left, @BETA) and the covered (right, @Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello)

Its Timișoara *cover* proposed a seesaw built through the Polytechnic's fence, allegedly showing the separation imposed between 'the public space of the street and the private space of the university'. But what the images cannot tell is that the fence surrounds only two sides of the university campus therefore the space has no restriction for public usage. It also does not say that if the fence were to be removed, architects would be the first to comment as it is part of a protected historical site. Nor does it say that there is no nearby activity that could ever spontaneously make people play together at this corner of the campus. It also does not show the danger it poses for cyclists. It only *covers* a form—a seesaw on a physical limit—and misses the opportunity of re-signifying the profound and contextualized aim of the original one.

Another example that questions a meaningful resignification was the *cover* after Mishka Henner's project that drew attention to Hollands' hidden spots on Google Maps—from royal palaces to military barracks. A blurred satellite image of Timisoara's penitentiary was allegedly its localized replica. While Henner's artistic endeavor highlighted the Dutch state's intent to control and restrict—a certainly intriguing *matter of concern*—the *cover* followed an inverted and irrelevant logic, obscuring a site that had always been visible on the platform. It seemed like the new intervention pleaded for more control from Romanian authorities, which, given the Biennial's rebellious ethos, would be absurd.

'A common good'

Common goods are created through the practice of *everyday life*, and they reflect citizens' needs, aspirations, rituals, etc. If cities follow, as they should, the goal to democratize urban space and to inspire the right to the city, any urban intervention should begin with an open invitation. As Paul Chatterton resumes, urban commons are 'relational' and an 'effect of practice'.¹⁰ Thus, for an intervention to be appropriated as a social and symbolic experience, its initiators should be observing the *lived* existing context and facilitating participation. If there is no interest in how people interpret and perceive an object, and no mediation between curatorial ideas and everyday language and practices, the connotative function of urban interventions cannot be read. With impenetrable symbolic or functional value, they became peculiar objects or even 'common bads'.

¹⁰ Paul Chatterton (2010, 626) as cited in Fran Tonkiss, "Austerity Urbanism and the Makeshift City," *City* 17, no. 3 (2013): 312–24. 14.

This was the case with BETA22's *covers*, where the placement of over seventy obscure objects throughout the city sparked public consternation. Especially in the context of the Romanian public space—one oscillating between neglect and control, or abandonment and forced privatization—individual action is tolerated if it is done with *care* towards others. Surely conflict can also have an emancipatory potential, but only if actors with opposing views get together and consume it. A silent conflict, one in which *the other* is absent, cannot lead to the consolidation of urbanity but only to the accumulation of frustration.

We can look at the example of the famous yellow line. The curators *covered* the intervention of a graffiti artist in New York and painted an unauthorized yellow line along the 23 km of the *Urban trail*. The apparition of the line caused the biggest public controversy and indignation. The curators dismissed the implications of their action and said it was only a teaser for the Biennial.¹¹ But what were the gains of this action? What sort of reflection about the urban environment did it trigger? Intended as a teaser, the line turned into an act of forced attention. It generated a significant moment of awareness that could have been followed by a meaningful statement, potentially sparking a breakthrough in urban thinking or behavioral change. But there was no consistent comeback, as it was only a map for following the temporary interventions, an advertising campaign no different than the ordinary billboards that invade public spaces. On top of that, the supposedly temporary paint turned out to be permanent. As a result, the BETA organizing team—the one that puts in all the administrative, financial, and physical effort—was left with the burden of cleaning all up after the fun ended and the curators left. Sure, the line was a joke, but who laughed?

Another *covered* intervention was the Red Swing Project, an unauthorized action for hanging swings in various public spaces to 'inspire playfulness around the world'.¹² Encouraging play, sociability, and creativity in the use of public spaces is again a postmodern response to the abstract, impersonal and dull modernist urban design. As its denotative and connotative functions merge, its 'covering' would have been quite straightforward. But its replica probably didn't find this signification worthy enough. Therefore, in Timișoara, the intervention was a deceptive invitation to play as the swings were hung under high-voltage towers. The curators justified their bold decision by wanting to ask 'a question to the neighbours' and to 'bring into the public debate'¹³ the paradoxical situation of allowing high-voltage towers in the urban tissue of the city. But they did not facilitate any process of mediation for engaging neighbours and asking their opinion. I wonder if architects should joke about public safety issues and if such a situation should not have required the responsible initiation of a public debate. The red swings quickly disappeared but no one interviewed anyone to find out why. The only results are some images that can further promote this 'smart' resignification which can only be understood in an art catalogue.

¹¹ <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/timisoara/bienala-de-arhitectura-virala-pe-internet-dupa-2211846.html>
https://debanat.ro/2022/10/cei-care-au-creat-linia-galbena-de-pe-trotuarele-timisoarei-au-lamurit-enigma-acesteia-e-o-harta-care-se-va-sterge-de-la-ploi-si-pasi_379137.html

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/RedSwingProject/>.

¹³ Daniel Tudor Munteanu and Davide Tommaso Ferrando, *Another Breach in the Wall. Orașul ca Bun Comun*. (Timișoara: BETA Architecture Biennale, 2022). 131.



Figure 2 – The physical resemblance is telling for a will to play with forms. The cover (left, @Marius Vasile) and the original (right, @Red Swing Project)

The last temporary intervention I will address is the *cover* of Kuvas SC—a ‘self-managed play area’ created as a protest for the lack of playgrounds in the historic center of Seville, in 1997.¹⁴ The Timișoara *cover* followed the same meaning, but it was never used by locals as a playground, not even by children, instead ‘they kept throwing garbage at it... [as] they needed a container... much more than they needed a playground’.¹⁵ Clearly, if the neighbours had been asked before the intervention, their needs would have been known. Even a simple walk on that street would have given the insight that there is a low opportunity for a vivid atmosphere to evolve around the intervention. But if there was no process of observation or citizen engagement, how were the curatorial decisions taken? One might presume that the choices were made in the old modernist bird’s eye tradition, a very convenient one thanks to Google Maps.



Figure 3 – The cover (left, @Ovidiu Zimcea) and the original (right, @Recetas Urbanas)

Swings hung from a metal structure, a seesaw separated by a fence, a container on a parking lot, etc. Deserted objects that demonstrate the obvious—a mere spatial anchoring and mimicking physical form do not facilitate a localized resignification. Furthermore, by not producing meaning that is relevant to the locals, the *covers* trivialized otherwise fundamental subjects for the future of urbanity, reducing them to hilarious and incomprehensible actions that reinforced stereotypical and conservative attitudes.

¹⁴ Recetas Urbanas, “Kuvas SC,” accessed September 25, 2024, <https://recetasurbanas.net/proyecto/kuvas-s-c/>.

¹⁵ Munteanu and Tommaso Ferrando, “The City a Common Good.” 87.

The ethics

The last *matter of concern* that I want to address is the most subtle, yet one that questions a deep understanding of politics and its following ethics. The Biennial is a powerful local actor that has had the permission and freedom to operate from *top to bottom*. While the curators' discourse was encouraging everyone's right to the city, their urban interventions defied norms while enjoying an immunity that the average citizen does not have. We can say that the yellow line was a radical act only if we accept a mimed radicality. When the author is invested with the power and social influence of a professional body, mimicking grassroots tactics and aesthetics is a cynical act, to say the least. The freedom that the curators have taken to occupy the city is somehow similar to the illicit individual freedom that the most influential had in the famous Romania of the '90s: every man for himself against the collective interest.

When discourse and action do not collide

After architects got through the burns of modernist critics and constantly tried to adjust their hubris, a radical attitude towards the urban environment is far from being a desired professional approach. Opposed to futile radicalism, Latour proposed 'to be radically careful, or carefully radical' in addressing current needs and challenges, and for that, we need 'modesty, care, precautions, skills, crafts, meanings, attention to details, careful conservations, redesign, etc.'¹⁶

The ethos of BETA20 was that of responsibility, while the current BETA24 talks about *soft* intervention and re-production. We can easily see how both curatorial approaches meet the set of *modest* and responsible attitudes that reflect contemporary aspirations for the world of tomorrow. Instead, BETA22 was a strange beast that borrowed a postmodern discourse and acted in a modernist, detached, fashion. It sometimes referred to local specificities while having a bird's eye approach to the city and its complexity. It wanted to be a place for the citizens but based its actions on an enclosed symbolism. It used a bottom-up aesthetic while making top-down decisions. It praised the right to the city, but there were no participatory endeavours. It stated a desire to challenge discussions, but there was no effort in facilitating dialogues where people are, on the streets and piazzas.

The city as an *oeuvre*, where citizens take control and responsibility over the public space, cannot be created through interventions that mimic participation, subversion, or even experiment.¹⁷ In Debord's terms, the curatorial discourse backed by these *covers* only created a spectacle. If the 10 interventions commissioned to Romanian architects had been the only public space signals, the Biennial would have shown the potential of ephemerality as a process that can *add* urban vivacity, by stimulating citizen appropriation and *genuine* social practices.

¹⁶ Bruno Latour, "A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)," in *Networks of Design, Design History Society* (Cornwall, 2008). 7.

¹⁷ The easiest way to dodge the unwelcomed impact of temporary interventions is to call them experiments, but this is not the case as no rigorous after-report documented the impact of the interventions as urban and social experiments.

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