

3. CHANGES IN THE ENTERPRENEURIAL ENVIRONMENT

SHOULD WE GO ONLINE? DECISIONS MADE IN THE MIDST OF PANDEMIC

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Abstract:

The research carried out as a set of interviews at the end of 2020 aimed to disclose decision making processes that occurred in several public institutions during the pandemic. All institutions are involved in studying or promoting architecture and heritage. Every one of them was planning an event and organizers had to decide if they should organize the event online. Their answers to the interviews helped identify the main benefits of online events, but also to name some of their disadvantages. The online presentation can completely replace neither the real-life experience of architecture nor human conversation. The still overlooked but important issue related to online events represents the problem of data storage and the use of material under copyright or protected by intellectual property laws.

Introduction: Research question

When the covid-19 pandemic broke out in spring 2020, millions of people in Europe stayed home motivated by fear or concern for the well-being of their neighbor, or simply forced by the restrictions implemented by state authorities. Public life was completely frozen. Meetings, gatherings, conferences, rallies, and other such events were postponed, rescheduled, skipped, or simply prohibited and canceled. Those whose lines of work include bringing people together were left with a difficult question to answer. *Should we go online?*

Looking backward we may not understand why this was a hard choice to make at the time. After all, modern information and communication technologies were around for a while in 2020. Business companies had used videoconferencing long before pandemic, and communication platforms like ICQ or Skype were generally common. There was also a wide range of presentation technologies available, including 360° video, virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed reality or volumetric video, to name a few. *So what was the problem?*

At the time of ongoing pandemic, planning an event became almost impossible, because the situation was constantly changing, and so were the rules. During the first pandemic hit in March 2020, promoters and organizers were quite optimistic about the duration of lockdowns and restrictions. For example, Art Basel June edition was postponed to September. So was the famous Salone Internazionale del Mobile. Needless to say that the international audience had to go without these and many other events completely in the end (Art Basel, 2020; UFI, 2021).

But the mere fact that the first choice was postponing an event rather than organizing it as a digital or virtual one shows that there were some problems to solve and decision to make before an event could be successfully transformed into online event.

The research project aimed to reflect the decision making process related to the organizing of online events was carried out between December 2020 and January 2021. It consists of interviews led with representatives of five institutions, who were preparing an event in 2020 year, and who were all forced to change their plans abruptly. While answering a set of open-ended questions, they summed up their gained knowledge and named some of the problems they had to face when asking their audience to follow them into virtual world. Unintentionally, this research also captures the unpredictability of time, because when carried on, it was supposed to reflect the situation once everything is going back to normal. Instead came the next wave of pandemic with lockdowns and restrictions, which lasted from early spring to summer 2021.

Participants: Events and their organisers

Event organizers questioned within the survey are all from public institutions operating in the Czech Republic. What all the events discussed here have in common is the fact that they focus on architectural theory and heritage, or promoting the latter. On the other hand, they address different audiences ranging from experts to laymen. The questions covered the decision making process within the institutional setting and given circumstances like financing and staffing. Participants were also asked to name the consequences of decision to either organise the event online or not organize it at all.

9th Annual Conference on Architecture and Urbanism: Contemporary Research Despite the Crisis

Organizer: Faculty of Architecture, Brno University of Technology

Interviewee: Kateřina Pazderková-Dokoupilová

The conference is organized annually (FA BUT, 2020); some former editions were organized in cooperation with the Faculty of Architecture, Czech Technical University in Prague, and the Faculty of Architecture, Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava. The number of participants is usually small, only about 20 people. From 2019 the number of foreign participants was growing and the keynote speaker lecture became part of the event. The team behind the conference is also small, consisting of only two people handling paperwork and a scientific committee of 20 academics. Before 2020, the conference took place regularly at the assembly hall of the Faculty of Architecture. Financing was repeatedly secured by grant from Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, with the background provided by the university. In 2020 organizers called for papers in spring, and influenced by then prevailing conditions, they decided to actively transform the event to an online conference. That did not make any difference in the initial stage, that is, collecting the abstracts and sending them for revision, because documents were sent through the Internet in previous years already. For the final presentation in November 2020 the lectures were pre-recorded and shared via Zoom platform. Lecturers were available for Q&A sessions after presentation blocks. Organizers utilize the university's existing software and hardware equipment and could also profit from the experience gained during online courses running that same year. Smooth transition to online event encouraged organizers to keep on taking the path, and the next edition of conference in 2021 was organized exactly the same way.

International Conference: 12th Architecture in Perspective

Organizer: Department of Architecture, Faculty of Civil Engineering, Technical University of Ostrava

Interviewee: Lucie Videcká

The conference is held annually (VSB-TUO, 2021) as a two-day event located on the University campus in Ostrava-Poruba. The number of participants is about 300. The organizational team has up to ten people who, for the duration of the entire event, recruit student volunteers to help them. Organizers can rely on background provided by university, e.g. software and hardware equipment or room space available. Other conference expenses, including social evening, are covered by conference fees. Because organizers consider the face-to-face meeting to be an important part of the event, they were at first reluctant to replace this gathering of professionals by its online version. Under the circumstances, they were nevertheless forced to do so and the event was held in September 2020 as an online conference. The initial stage of the conference had been prepared by email and the use of a web storage service. For the presentations organizers choose the BigBlueButton platform, because it was already implemented by university for teaching courses online in spring the same year. Worried about the smooth running of the sessions, organizers tried hard to prevent any complications. They sent to participants detailed tutorials, organized test sessions in advance, and established help desk operating during the conference. This effort paid off and in spite of event being premiere without rehearsal, everything went according to plans, and technical issues reported during conference did not exceed those that can be reasonably expected during typical offline event of this kind. Organizers intentionally avoid recording the sessions, partly for the storage capacity this would require, but also for trying to make online event equivalent to regular face-to-face meeting, where participants do not need to care much about slip of tongue and can afford to make some side comments. In the interview, Lucie Videcká recalled one touching episode, when two participants who were old friends currently locked down in different cities ran into each other during the trial session, promptly started conversation on some topic of their interest, and asked organizers to let them kindly use the platform a little longer for private chat.

International Symposium and Workshop: Adolf Loos 150

Organizer: National Heritage Institute, Modern Architecture Methodological Center in Brno (MCMA)

Interviewee: Petr Svoboda

The symposium and workshop should have been part of the programme prepared for the Year of Adolf Loos in 2020, when the 150th birth anniversary of the world-famous architect was commemorated. International symposium attended by some 150 participants including experts and lecturers from United States, Austria, France, Slovakia, and Japan should originally take place in Brno at MCMA premises, while workshop for about 30 participants should have taken place at Bauer Chateau in interior designed by Adolf Loos himself. The funding of the symposium relied on funding from several institutions including the Ministry of Culture, the city of Brno, and the exhibition company Trade Fairs Brno. The main organizer, MCMA, coordinated the preparation of the event with at least four different institutions participating in the Year of Adolf Loos programme. The event was scheduled for October 2020, then rescheduled for November 2020, and finally postponed to October 2021.

In spring 2020, it became obvious that organizing the event as it had been planned was no longer possible. The number of participants was limited by government restrictions. Financing was reduced because the exhibition company Trade Fairs Brno struggled with prohibition of

trade fairs and withdrew the promise to support the event. Foreign participants were unsure if they would be allowed to come to Czech republic. MCMA staff also had little or no experience with online conferencing and the National Heritage Institute lacked the hardware equipment and software needed for such a feat.

Despite all the obstacles given, MCMA wanted to hold the event ‘at any cost’ because they expected that if they postpone the symposium, then they will not be able to secure financing, or at least the resources will be limited. In the end, the National Heritage Institute obtained the Zoom platform license because it was required by some other project, the MCMA conference rooms were newly equipped with audio and presentation technology. So now the plan was to hold the event in November 2020 as a mixed event with limited number of participants from Czech republic and hopefully neighbouring countries like Austria or Slovakia, while other foreign lecturers should be able to connect online. The final decision to postpone the event to 2021 was based on the standpoint of some lecturers who resolutely refused to participate in an online event and named the opportunity to discuss the problems with other colleagues face-to-face directly as their main reason to attend the symposium.

The Adolf Loos 151 symposium was in the end held by MCMA in October 2021 (NPÚ, 2021). It was a one-day event attended by some 80 participants from several countries, and lectures were also available to the online connected audience. Petr Svoboda sees online presenting as an enrichment of traditional event. He says that after going through all the difficulties during pandemic, MCMA is now better prepared to implement online solutions and make them part of their standard programme. Once the technology is available, it can also be used to record and archive lectures.

Festival Open House Brno

Organizer: TIC Brno, Culture & Management Association (Spolek Kultura & Management)

Interviewee: Tereza Kalábová

Open House Brno (Open House Brno, 2021) is the local edition of a worldwide known event. In Brno it has been organized since 1918. In 2020 the event should be originally held in April. Organizers planned to open some 90 places in Brno and expected about 20 000 visitors, mostly from the local communities. Financing of the festival is based on funding by Brno city, local municipalities, grant from Ministry of Culture, and some private sponsors. The team responsible for preparing the event consists of 10-15 people. Important role also plays the team of volunteers who help during the festival weekend as guides and attendants.

Lockdown in the Czech Republic was announced in March 2020, so organizers had only a couple of weeks to make their decision about running the festival. The team discussed several possibilities, and they decided to postpone live edition to October 2020 and for the April edition to record the guided tours for online viewing. Though they had some previous experience with online streaming and equipment available, the scope of online guided tours was much bigger this time. Executing an online event was only possible due to motivated and dedicated volunteers who help to record material for online streaming. The online version of Open House Brno in April 2020 was attended by 16 000 online visitors.

The situation repeated in October 2020 when the next wave of pandemic came and the event had to go online again. This time the organizers prepared in advance and also had some material to share from previous edition. According to Tereza Kalábová, the total number of visitors in 2020 was even bigger than organizers originally expected for live event in spring. She also

appreciates the opportunity to show festival places to visitors from other cities or countries. Another advantage for a single visitor is the possibility to see more places in one day. Last but not least, the organizers are left with a lot of material for further use. On the contrary, the main disadvantage is the missing experience from the real place and the smaller participation of the local community.

Exhibition Bauer Chateau: Place in Space and Time

Organizer: House of Arts Brno

Interviewee: Veronika Jičínská

The exhibition was prepared as part of the Year of Adolf Loos programme by a small team of about 5 people. The financing was secured by grants from Brno city and Faculty of Architecture, Brno University of Technology. With planned duration from July to December 2020, production team originally felt no need to consider transforming the exhibition to virtual visit and exhibition actually opened in July according to plan. The organizers expected about 1500 visitors by the end of the year.

In the first wave of pandemic, many institutions started to care much more about their online presentation and were seeking new online content. Therefore, in July a virtual tour was recorded to the exhibition and Bauer Chateau where it was installed (Czech Centre Brussels, 2020). This was an initiative of Czech Center Brussels financially supported also by Brno city Department of Culture. The virtual tour on the Czech Centre web page was crossposted by other partners and had 4 800 visitors together.

In September 2020, the number of visitors to the exhibition at Bauer Chateau reached approximately one third of assumption when the exhibition had to be closed due to the new pandemic wave and restrictions implemented. At that moment organizers started contemplating the virtual exhibition which would capture the real one and would be accessible online. In the end, it was not possible for two main reasons. No surprise that the main one was the funding. The other reason was the fact that House of Art did not at the time have any equipment or technical infrastructure necessary for the task, not even their own servers. The whole virtual exhibition project would have to be carried out as a pilot project, without previous experience or institutional background relying solely on external providers. In the interview in December 2020 was Veronika Jičínská nevertheless very enthusiastic about implementation of the technology and its potential, and she actually started the first project of the kind in 2021.

Summary and Conclusion

This survey shows that even public institutions can be surprisingly flexible under pressure. Organizers within universities got a head start with online events, because they could rely on existing infrastructure and support, while smaller institutions often were not well equipped at the beginning of pandemic. But all interviewed participants declared that they managed to introduce new solution or technology, and were also willing to implement it into their future activities. We can therefore conclude that benefits of online solutions are already broadly accepted and commonly known. Namely the chance to address distant audience or invite people who cannot physically be present for the event, the opportunity to share virtual content later or repeatedly, and the possibility to add to archives. This author would rather focus on some problems and point out what are the other questions about online events we should consequently ask.

While having many benefits, online events also lack some of the features of real-life experience. When talking about architecture, the experience of the building visited online can be compared to that of the building presented by photographs or films. Both can be great and have artistic qualities of their own, but it is never the same as visiting real architecture in the real world. Something similar can be said about online communication, which is never the same as face-to-face conversation of two people (Greenfieldová, 2016). This was repeatedly mentioned in interviews. One team of organizers avoided recording and admitted the imperfections of the process as a way to give the online event some of the real life vibe. When it comes to time frame of online event, we can see that sometimes organisers made the content accesible only for the limited period of time, in spite of the fact that once recorded, the lectures or virtual tours could be available much longer. This is the way to mimic one important feature of live event, its exclusivity. Once you missed it, it is gone forever. Of course, live events have been recorded before, from artistic performances to sport matches and political events. But everyone instinctively feels the difference between watching the record and being there. Organizers should therefore look for the way how to intentionally distinguish an online event from a mere record. Both limited availability and live, uncaptured conversation are the important ingredients of real life event to be considered and implemented.

The next line of thought is related to the very essence of digital technology and data storage. We have seen that some organizers, typically universities or big institutions, can rely on already existing IT infrastructure including also data storage, while smaller institutions often outsource IT solution completely. For traditional offline events, there is the whole system of recording and keeping the track of past events, which developed over the time. For example, museums and galleries issue catalogues of their exhibitions that are stored in libraries. Orchestras and theater bodies make records, which can be found in their archives and quite often in archives of public television or radio broadcaster. Plans and photographs of the buildings are stored in traditional archives. But for digital data, there is no such system in existence yet on national level (NACR, 2021). In short term, it does not represent a problem, because institutions care about their own data one way or the other, that is, either store them themselves or rent a cloud space. But in the long run we can miss valuable content simply because a particular web service will be no longer available or there will be no resources to properly care about the digital archive of a given institution. If online events became regular part of our social and cultural life, we should also think about the right way to keep a track of this part of our lives for future generations. Mere recording and data storing has obviously its limit here. With such attitude, quantity would surely beat quality, and handling such enormous amount of data would become impractical, if not impossible.

The very last comment is based on insight into copyright issues delivered by Veronika Jičínská. She points out, that transforming traditional exhibition (or any similar content for that matter) to its online version means placing yourself to a different playground when it comes to copyright and license fees. Looking at the recent development of intellectual property laws in European union (EU, 2019) and around the world, and taking into account other issues like the difference between copyright and authors rights, open access policy, creative commons licensing, freedom of panorama, the right to be forgotten (to name a few) we can expect this problematic to be of great importance in the future.

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