

Public Interventions

NAUTILUS KONSTRUKT: Sustainable Cultural Practice in Skopje

CITY CREATIVE NETWORK (CCN) Skopje

1. What is NAUTILUS KONSTRUKT?

NAUTILUS KONSTRUKT is an international, collaborative, and activist project which takes transdisciplinary approach and links physical interventions to educational actions, artistic collaborations and community building. It is an experiment for a new infrastructure in Skopje - an open stage - for independent cultural production. This self-initiated project asks for new ways of cultural production that link the individual to the institutional and it is above all an experiment in cultural sustainability. If most of the recent cultural production in Skopje is dominated by the state through the grotesque governmental project titled Skopje 2014, then NAUTILUS KONSTRUKT is an experiment that stands in stark contrast to this as a beacon for free artistic expression which embodies the active citizen. NAUTILUS KONSTRUKT echoes and builds on the zeitgeist of the post-earthquake Skopje (1963) – an open, cosmopolitan and progressive city.

NAUTILUS KONSTRUKT takes the form of an open stage which we built by the riverbank of Vardar. It is a place for culture, one to host theatre and music performances and public gatherings of any kind. The primary idea came from the local independent theatres - Wonderland and Theatra - who needed space for performance. The stage is a reaction to the lack of public space initiatives in Skopje and gives this group and others a stage where freedom of expression is imperative. NAUTILUS brought these groups in discussion with the Youth Cultural Centre (MKC), and the City of Skopje, two major institutions that became partners in the project. The stage is built in front of MKC where despite the rich infrastructure for cultural events, lacks an outdoor stage. Although MKC is located right at the riverbank of Vardar, it doesn't have any connection to it. MKC and NAUTILUS are in the centre of Skopje, but still in a very underdeveloped public area. This area was planned to become a cultural hub with the master plan of 1963 but this idea never materialized. Our aim is to activate this area and bring new possibilities for use along the river. NAUTILUS builds on that original plan and extends the possibilities of the riverbank, MKC, and the young artists in Skopje. The stage creates the needed connection between the street level and the river level below that has 5 meters height difference. The architecture of the stage is made of simple and durable steel frame with multifunctional wooden platforms and a staircase that is at the same time a stage and a connection to the different levels of the embankment. It is modular and easily adaptable structure to host gatherings on the both levels of the riverbanks of any kind.

NAUTILUS KONSTRUKT was built by a group of students, architects, citizens, craftsmen and artists from Macedonia and Switzerland in a period of three weeks in July 2015 in Skopje. The whole process, from idea to realisation, took a period of one year. It was realised partially as activist and partially as student project. Our NGO and the collective TEN from Zurich are the main partners in the building of the stage.

2. Opening Events With Independent Artists

The Opening Events which were part of the ACT4CITY project became a chance to connect the local artists to a group of international artists and also to propose a different - independent - way of cultural production. Since Skopje's *cultural production* is dominated by *the state* and the state is the greatest investor in the cultural sector, it creates a monumental and mainstream tendency both in the spatial production of cultural spaces and the content of the cultural production itself which is most of the times censored.

The opening in contrast to this became the moment brought cultural content and life based on free and independent artistic expression. It became a cultural exercise that activated the stage and invigorated this neglected site of the riverbank. The opening created links between the artists and succeeded to create a strong community with a mutual goal. Over a period of three days the public in Skopje had a chance to see the stage hosting theater plays, presentations, movie screenings, dance performances, discussions, exhibitions and

concerts. This underused area became a place for meeting and making a statement about alternative cultural production.

3. NAUTILUS KONSTRUKT for Cultural Sustainability

NAUTILUS KONSTRUKT proposes new ways for building *cultural infrastructure* that connects the *independent cultural producers* and artists to the *institutional*. A dialogue about the spatial production was opened through building of the stage that involved artists and theater groups, the city officials, the Youth Cultural Center (MKC), the Architecture Faculty from Skopje and ETH Zurich. It proposed a horizontal model for decision making and maintenance that includes many parties which are interested in expanding the possibilities of NAUTILUS. If today's culture in Skopje is in dire need for a way out of the state dominance, then NAUTILUS KONSTRUKT, both spatially and culturally makes a strong point about the power of public space initiatives of collective and international character. Facing the challenges of financing, maintenance and program are only expected when a project of this type of organisation is realized. In NAUTILUS there is no client and no executor, there is rather a group of people who are interested in going against the mainstream in a creative and sustainable way. The stage is a public infrastructure, publicly accessible and self governed. It doesn't make revenue but instead offers a space that can be used by any artist or citizen for their expression. It is a modern day agora, that brings life to the center of Skopje, in an area that will develop further.

4 Points for Sustainable City Development

1. Governance and Growth

NAUTILUS KONSTRUKT realizes a new governance model for utilizing public land by citizen initiatives. The project is self-initiated by a group of actors which are included in the project from the initial idea to its realization and maintenance. The City of Skopje, The Youth Cultural Center (MKC) and our group of initiators consisted of artists and architects from Skopje and abroad, made an agreement about the use of this public land by the river, and therefore created a situation of cooperation between the citizens and the institutions, something that is non-existent on the current context of urban development in Skopje. Our NGO City Creative Network initiated and moderated the discussion between the various stakeholders and partners where a horizontal model for governance and realization connected the independent actors to the institutional.

For the realisation of the project we proposed and realised a fundraising model that included many interconnected parties on local, national and international level. Our goal was to create a multifaceted realization model that includes educational and artistic practices to become part of it. We therefore became partners with the architecture faculties in Zurich and Skopje and the project became part of their curriculum. This enabled us to create a wider educational student collaboration between our NGO and the faculties. We also secured private donations by the independent artists and partners as well as support from cultural foundations such as Balkans Arts and Culture Fund (BAC), Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development (PCF), and a fund for creative industries by the Ministry of Culture of Macedonia.

2. Environment and Natural Resources

NAUTILUS KONSTRUKT uses existing infrastructure - the riverbank of Vardar - which was built for the purpose of regulating the river from flooding and creating a green belt through the city center. The riverbank was planned to host cultural events in front of MKC, an instance that never materialized, and idea that we build upon. The stage activates the green belt along the river with new functions which are inviting the citizens to interact with the river and at the same time the stage creates a space for cultural production along the river.

3. Urban Development and Infrastructure

NAUTILUS KONSTRUKT builds new infrastructure for independent cultural production but also connects to the existing infrastructure of the Youth Cultural Center (MKC) and extends its activities along the river. NAUTILUS proposes a new model for urban development that is self-initiated by a group of interested parties and realised independently but including the local city authorities. The project ACT4CITY became a part of the opening of NAUTILUS KONSTRUKT that connected local and international independent artists and expanded the list of stakeholders that participate in the project.

4. Society and Community

NAUTILUS KONSTRUKT is a case-study for empowering the individual cultural producers and citizens, therefore promoting a greater awareness and possibilities for participation in the processes that shape our cities. It creates a strong community of active citizens and independent artists that use creative means to challenge the mainstream cultural production and city development. The horizontal system of realization, where every participant is part of the network, created a strong sense of community. This community included artists and architects but more importantly citizens, governmental officials, institutions, students, craftsmen, NGO's both local and international.