

Abstract

The paper explores an urban squat in Ljubljana, Slovenia, following a chronotopic narrative approach. Urban squats often represent a manifestation of alternative notions of who belongs where, when, and why, questions that matter when issues pertaining to their legal status are raised. We examine the case of Autonomous Rog, a formerly squatted bike factory area in the city centre of Ljubljana that the Supreme Court of Slovenia described as ‘quasi-public’. The paper welcomes the Slovenian Supreme Court’s ability to appreciate the social, spatiotemporal, and material elements that make up this idiosyncratic type of urban space, moving beyond the confines of human-centred legal analysis. We present the journey of Autonomous Rog through three distinctive chronotopic viewpoints, in order to accentuate the subversive human and material properties that found their way into the Slovenian legal system, as we reflect on the law’s ability to embrace spatiotemporal representations in an urban context.

Keywords: urban squats; chronotope; law and place; temporality; Slovenia; subversive property; unlimited law

A chronotopic evaluation of Autonomous Rog: the spatiotemporalities of a “quasi-public” urban squat

This article takes the reader on a journey through time, space, and law, as it discusses the spatiotemporal configurations of an urban squat in Ljubljana, Slovenia; a place that challenged the confines of Slovenian law through its human and material qualities and allowed the Supreme Court of Slovenia to broaden the normative legal confines with respect to the nature and the functions of urban space.

In the heart of Ljubljana stands the former bicycle factory Rog, overlooking the Ljubljanica river and the city’s historic castle. The massive, decayed space, once a site of socialist industrial production, comes to stark contrast with the extensive regeneration attempts of its immediate surroundings: Rog factory is accessed by the ever-expanding Trubarjeva street, oozing with bars, restaurants, and tourists. It was not so long ago however, that Rog was also a site of vibrant social and cultural activities, having been taken over by activists, artists, and other groups of squatters in 2006. For fifteen years Autonomous Rog had operated as a site of solidarity, activism, artistic production, and as an experimental place (Vasudevan, 2020) for the citizens of Ljubljana, who sought to experience alternative provisions of entertainment and cultural participation. Autonomous Rog was a polymorphous social experiment before getting forcefully (and arguably

illegally) demolished by the City of Ljubljana - the rightful owner of the factory area - in January 2021.

For the urban centre of Ljubljana, Autonomous Rog constituted a place of alternative, heterotopic (Foucault, 1986) reality, a place balancing between social and institutional acceptance and hostility (Ntounis and Kanellopoulou, 2017). The derelict buildings in the former factory area were not simply obstacles to acute gentrification and top-down urban policies, they also offered opportunities for personal and social development and civil organisation outside any institutional and formal confines. Thanks to its massive size of 75,000 square feet, Autonomous Rog was able to provide what the city outside could not: free space for all.

Despite the site's popularity, the City of Ljubljana had also attempted to demolish the factory's buildings and evict the squat's users during the summer of 2016. The civil court disputes that ensued between certain individual members of the public/users of Autonomous Rog claiming disturbance of possession and the City of Ljubljana, culminated in the Supreme Court of Slovenia, which delivered its judgement in September 2019. According to the Supreme Court, the squatted area of Rog factory was public by function; Autonomous Rog constituted a *quasi-public* place, comprising an anonymous, amorphous, and un-hierarchical formation, and was as diverse and open as the city outside. The judgement provides the opportunity to examine alternative notions of property and belonging and challenge hegemonic perceptions of space and time, revealing the division between the legal prescription of place and the urban policies *in* place, as enforced by the city.

As such, the aim of this paper is to explore this piece of subversive urban property by adopting a retrospective approach. We reflect on the social, legal, spatiotemporal, and material qualities that afforded Autonomous Rog its quasi-public status, by employing the notion of the Bakhtinian chronotope (Valverde, 2015). The chronotopic framework will help us accentuate the multiple temporalities and actors (Citroni and Kärholm, 2019; Massey, 2005) that constituted Autonomous Rog throughout its journey of 15 years, as it enables the evaluation of conflicting spatiotemporal narratives, highlighting divergent lived experiences.

At first the paper introduces its methodological approaches to researching the journey of Autonomous Rog, and then continues with exploring the theoretical implications of evaluating an urban squat via the chronotopic lens. Then, we elaborate on Rog's distinctive chronotopes and focus on the Supreme Court's ability to evaluate the nature and the properties of a *quasi-public* place leading to an unlimited (Davies, 2017) and materialist interpretation of the law. Ultimately, the paper will summarise how the chronotopic viewing enables the accommodation of the quasi-public place in law, moving beyond human-centred analysis (Graham et al., 2017), where social, spatial, and temporal elements interact to create 'in between' urban interstices (Brighenti, 2013).

Researching Autonomous Rog

In this article, the research design is based on the methodological tenets of the Extended Case Method (ECM). The ECM allows for a deep exploration of unique and surprising enactments that could lead to an insight-provoking anomaly between theory and what happens on the ground (Burawoy, 1991). ECM allows for the development of multiple temporal and spatial narratives that unfold within the broader cultural, historical and social processes and meanings of the place under examination (Abbott, 1997; Burawoy, 1998; Ó Riain, 2009). In the case of Autonomous Rog, an understanding of the notions of property and belonging through spatial and temporal practices during its occupation can demonstrate how its uniqueness has manifested in its social and legal status. This uniqueness, read in tandem with the Supreme Court's judgement, allows us to challenge the hegemonic/centralist perceptions of the legal space (Griffiths, 1986, Davies, 2017), and reflect on the Supreme Court's ability to bypass the "*law in books versus law in action*" dichotomy.

The transient nature of urban squats requires a creative approach towards the analysis of the ways that squatters assemble and develop alternative urbanisms that co-exist with the mainstream city policies and the formal legal system (McFarlane, 2011; Vasudevan, 2015). The ECM is therefore an appropriate methodology for such endeavour, as it seeks to critique existing theories and identify anomalies that can reformulate pre-existing frameworks (Wadham and Warren, 2014). Moreover, the analysis of events and practices allowed us to "follow the trail" of materiality and time in law, contributing to the broader debate on legal pluralism.

From our perspective, we have been researching urban squatting in Ljubljana since 2015, both from an academic and a participant perspective, as frequent visitors to the sites under observation. This engagement enabled us to assume the dual role of observer and participant in equal measure and be in position to extract observation from participation, dipping in and out of the phenomena examined. For the purposes of this particular research, we relied on a combination of data collection techniques, including formal and informal participant observation, in-depth interviews, autoethnographical accounts, desk research and doctrinal legal analysis, preceding and following our visits in Autonomous Rog in 2016 and 2019. The initial, scoping visit of one week took place in August 2016, following one of the most turbulent periods of the squat; the City's first attempts to demolish the site. In this visit, we explored the squat as passive visitors (informal participant observation), taking pictures, visiting art studios, touring the space, and scoping the case through informal discussions with several actors, including City officials. We then embarked on a series of interviews and visits in Autonomous Rog during our main visit to the site that took place over three weeks in November 2019. Our visit during this period coincided with squatters' attempts to reinforce their social and cultural programmes, aiming to cover the site's maintenance as well as their accrued legal expenses. In the meantime, there was an impetus from the City of Ljubljana to situate the main building of Rog into future regeneration plans. We conducted 14 in-depth interviews with state officials, community representatives, academics and members of the public

that helped us to understand the historical context of the dispute between the City and the users of Rog. During this visit we engaged in a more active participatory role within the users' communities, by taking part in assemblies, whereby we led discussions on urban squatting experiences and potential future actions, and daily practices of place maintenance, including heating the squat and safeguarding the premises. Whilst on site, we were informed about the delivery of the Supreme Court judgement, and we promptly incorporated it into our extended methodology by reviewing the legal case with the help of our local research assistant/ translator. This was subsequently coupled with desk-based document analysis into the history of the squat that led to the extension of our data analysis into a wider spatial urban context.

Consequently, our approach to data analysis resembles the constant comparative method of grounded theorists (Wadham and Warren, 2014). The constant comparative method allowed us to code the data *in vivo* immediately after the observations occurred, and then use these codes to anticipate surprising and interesting developments in the field through our preferred theoretical device. In this paper, this method of analysis enabled us to focus on the instances where spatiotemporal enactments meet the letter of the law/ wording of the judgement, and thus unearth the reciprocal connectivity between law, space, and time. The ECM allowed us to gain a comprehensive, situational understanding of the multiple spatiotemporalities that constituted Autonomous Rog, ultimately leading to a holistic and *unlimited* viewing of that particular place (Davies, 2017). To highlight the role of time and space in the holistic situational analysis of Autonomous Rog, we thematised the findings following a chronotopic narrative approach. The next section will elaborate on the value of the chronotopic narrative in a legal context, before proceeding with the application of the chronotopic lens to the extended observation of the events and practices in Autonomous Rog over a period of five years (2016-2021).

The chronotopic narrative approach

The chronotope or the “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationship that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin, 1981: 84)” has long escaped the confines of literary studies to disclose ideological interpretations and reflections on spacetime (Fawzy, 2019). Rather than a strict methodology or theory (Valverde, 2015:62), it is often used as a heuristic (Ritella et al., 2021, Rajala et al., 2012) to appreciate the multiplicity of spatial and temporal connections. In the present paper we employ this chronotopic narrative to encapsulate space and time against a legal background to focus on the constituent elements of the legal space over time, including relevant human and material factors. Indeed, since the chronotope has been used in the past to foreground “material, social and semiotic aspects of space-time” (Ritella et al., 2021:6) it can also be of value to our understanding of materiality in the contextualised legal space.

According to Bakhtin's work, a chronotope prioritises the dynamic exploration of alternative world-views and power struggles, by bringing *heterochronic conflicts* under the microscope

(Falconer, 2010: 112). Thus, the chronotopic framework can be invaluable in a legal context when questions pertaining to a place's ownership and status over an extended period of time are raised. The chronotopic viewing of the relevant legal place allows us to *explore more fully the intertwined relationship between temporalisation and spatialisation in our study of governance* (Kotiswaran, 2015: 354). By exploring the multiple ways in which time and space draw meaning, we bring to the foreground "alternative relations of belonging" (Keenan, 2015) on a piece of disputed property. As such, we employ the chronotopic viewpoint within the ECM, which allows us to negotiate the meanings of Autonomous Rog at a specific time (Osman and Muliček, 2017) and to reveal the construction of narratives that uncover the intrinsic connectedness and belongingness of temporal and spatial relationships (Bakhtin, 1981: 84).

The notion of chronotopes as narrative viewpoints corresponds with Valverde's (2015) plea to re-appreciate the workings of governance processes as part of a relevant legal network, scale or jurisdiction aside. By superimposing the chronotope in our understanding of human and material interconnectivity, we move beyond conventional boundaries of scale and normativity and appreciate plurality and materiality in a legal context (Davies, 2017). Thus, our methodological approach aims to deconstruct the judgement of the Slovenian Supreme Court by reviewing its ability to "unlimit" the legal narrative and incorporate the active relations and material contexts that make up the *quasi-public* place's properties.

The employment of the Bakhtinian chronotopic framework enables the study of a crystallised or jelled spatiotemporal continuum (Jameson, 2003) or spatiotemporal envelope (Richland, 2008: 10). A chronotopic evaluation will ultimately reveal where and when the law (in its pluralistic sense) is in existence, thanks to the chronotope's ability to prioritise conflicting spatiotemporal momenta. Here, the research of a well-established urban squat in constant conflict with the city authorities, calls for the prioritisation of spatial considerations, including investigating the place's social fabric, its intended and current uses, and its proprietary status. Moreover, the forced demolition of the squat's buildings in 2021 contrasted against the Supreme Court's judgement describing the place as *quasi-public* and open, reveals a forced "break" in the squat's timeline leading to two alternative realities: whereas the squat no longer exists as such, its recognition by the Slovenian legal system does. As such, Autonomous Rog as a relevant legal place, exists in multiple timelines created by various human and material actors, including the law itself. The Slovenian legal system can "absorb" the timelines created by various participants, users, and materialities through the years in order to reach its own legal construct and subsequently create a separate alternative timeline, where this construct exists in positive perpetuity (Grabham, 2016). Thus, legal elements are not separate from social, spatiotemporal and material factors, as they all work in tandem to highlight the properties of Autonomous Rog that make up its heterotopic and heterochronic uniqueness.

This combined study of space and time will not only lead to a better "understanding of the world we live in" as per Valverde (2015:34), but also to a better evaluation of the Supreme Court's

judgement and the concept of the *quasi-public* place. We believe this chronotopic viewing to constitute a necessary tool in broadening the law's context, enabling us to incorporate material/non-human elements into socio-legal scholarship (Davies, 2020; Graham et al., 2017). McNeilly (2021) explains how material objects and human actors co-create temporalities and emphasises that time creation is material-contingent. Referring to Grabham's (2016) comments on the 'brewing of time' by humans and objects in relationships, the author elaborates on the human/material ability to produce ideas of time and generate various temporalities in an international context.

In the present article materiality assumes a dual role; we are interested in researching and evaluating Rog as a relevant legal place, constituent of both human and non-human elements, which are subsequently reflected in the formal legal system and the Supreme Court's judgement. In other words, the human and material properties associated with Autonomous Rog over time, crept into the legal case heard in front of the Slovenian Court system, and became embedded in the concept of the quasi-public place. Similarly, as multiple temporalities are produced by the joint expression of "matter and meaning" (Grabham and Beynon-Jones, 2019:3), it is possible to evaluate the law as this particular *meaningful* articulation that creates parallel timelines. Not only did the Slovenian Supreme Court reflect on the world around us to construct, unfold and thus 'unlimit' the law beyond the established normative confines, it also succeeded in crystallising this viewing within the spatiotemporal continuum, something that becomes evident once compared with other temporal realities associated with Rog, including the City of Ljubljana's redevelopment plans and the sight of demolition and debris, and (most recently) construction.

Ultimately, the chronotopic tool allows us to examine those human and material properties of place that disrupt the linear alignment of time, lead to reshaped spatial configurations, and challenge dominant relations of belonging. Such notions of property described as *subversive* by Keenan (2015), might appear out of place according to the surrounding status-quo, yet still reveal alternative understandings of *who* and *what* belong *where* and *when*. Such interstitial places (Brighenti, 2013, Foo et al., 2013, Gandy, 2009, Phelps and Silva, 2018) can become normalised, accepted by their surroundings, or even legally recognised by stretching and shifting space and time around them more broadly. Closely associated with the concept of time and temporality, property can shift, fade and wane, or change meaning completely, depending on how it is performed and expressed each time (Blomley, 2013; Radin, 1982). The chronotopic narrative enables the close examination of these changes as they clash with official narratives and expand normative legal associations.

Here, we identify three distinct *chronotopes* (Bemong and Borghart, 2010) that facilitate our spatiotemporal analysis in a legal context and frame "the contours of a plot, as a way of understanding" (Lawson, 2011: 385). We evaluate Autonomous Rog before its encounters with the formal, Slovenian legal system (2006-2016), proceed with reflecting on the events up until the civil dispute reached the Supreme Court, and ultimately consider the spatiotemporal implications

following the judgement delivered in the autumn of 2019, until the demolition of Rog factory's buildings. These viewpoints are chosen as pointing to significant changes in Autonomous Rog's timeline or as points of chronotopic rupture, bringing the place's subversive and surprising enactments to the limelight, as the ECM prescribes, and enabling us to prioritise the legal narrative for the purposes of the socio-legal analysis.

The first stages of Autonomous Rog: the chronotope of a temporary urban intervention

Here, we examine the first era of Autonomous Rog under the chronotopic lens, to highlight the conflicting roles played by time and materiality. We examine how Autonomous Rog came into being, attracting official yet temporary recognition, and comment on those spatiotemporal elements that sow the seeds of impending rupture, focusing on both internal struggle and institutional representation. We draw attention to the initial interaction between space and time at Autonomous Rog, focusing on how the first users experienced their surrounding space, how they interpreted the element of time, and what this ultimately meant for their activities. This way, the notion of the chronotope permeates our analysis as we explore the interaction of time and place (*topos*) at Autonomous Rog, following the trail of its initial occupation.

From its abandonment following the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991, Rog factory drew the attention of numerous potential investors, including the City of Ljubljana, that ultimately purchased the area in 2002. Even though the initial plan of the City was to dedicate the factory area to public programmes and spaces for culture and the arts eventually (Avtonomna Tovarna Rog, 2021), it was nevertheless occupied in 2006 by groups of students, civil rights activists, and artists, demonstrating the immediate need for the establishment of a new urban commons. From the very first steps of its existence, the public of Ljubljana *belonged* to the bounded factory area, a relationship acknowledged by the City with the presentation of an "open contract" - an informal sublease agreement for the temporary use of the premises - to the first groups of users. Even though this type of open contract with unknown parties is not valid under Slovenian law, it still demonstrates an act of official acceptance by the part of the City, in representational terms. This informal agreement stipulated the temporary use of the premises by these first users/ occupants. Thus, the notion of temporality played an important part in the occupation and use of space at Autonomous Rog from the very beginning, as reiterated by most users during their weekly assemblies¹ and their regular negotiations with the City officials.

"The contents of the (planned) new Rog centre were more focused on, um visual art than on design, on production spaces. Then, the crisis hit in 2008 and, in fact, at that time, it was impossible to build anything. At that time, the users of Rog Factory called themselves temporary users. Because don't know if you are aware that the beginning, the people who squatted Rog factory, they said

¹ A comprehensive archive of assemblies during the first period of Autonomous Rog at: <https://tovarna.org/node/265>

that they want to be different from Metelkova squat² because they want to be temporary users and just use the place until the city decides to do something with it.”

The initial users, operating under the “We are temporary!”³ mantra, invested time and effort into the maintenance, repair and decoration of the place, including discussions over the supply of water and electricity, heating, and the arrangement of general cleaning. As objects were brought into each space (including chairs, tables, coffee-making and cooking facilities), and art was created and displayed, Autonomous Rog transcended into a sense of property and ownership, albeit a temporary one, demonstrating the territorialisation of the abundant urban space. Subsequently, occupation at Rog would progressively become territorialised through the practice of spatial division (Kärrholm, 2007) with spaces within the buildings allotted to individual groups that would ultimately be responsible for their maintenance, design, and aesthetic presentation.

To illustrate, this material intervention/ territorial production is perhaps more evident when it comes to the elaborate DIY indoors skatepark that was essentially handcrafted inside Rog’s premises and opened in 2007. The construction of the skatepark manifests the time and effort dedicated to moulding Rog’s premises, to afford a communal sense of property and belonging by rearranging its terrain and creating material interventions inalienable from the users’ sense of being, similarly to discussions on labour and urban property encountered elsewhere (Blomley, 2004; Cooper, 2007; Thorpe, 2018). This ethos permeated the skating community in Rog for the duration of the occupation, as a user highlighted:

“...they’re (skaters) a kind of community that really likes to work with their hands and to change (the space) a bit.. They always build something, you know? I think they’re addicted to building something, like the rail slides, and I have this feeling that there’s a part of this community that just wants to build skatepark and enjoy building it [inaudible] and they build every day, you know?”

Overall, there appears to be some sort of continuity in the activities of the various groups of users in terms of their involvement and investment in the place, aiming to territorialise the squat including the drafting of “Proposed guidelines to facilitate the organization and cooperation between temporary users”. The rules intended to create a collaborative, safe, and supportive environment that would reflect the openness and the diversity associated with Autonomous Rog, as well as the ultimate sustainability of the project, under the principles of self-management, communal spirit, freedom of activity, non-exclusion and non-discrimination (Tovarna Rog, 2007).

² Metelkova is Ljubljana’s most successful and celebrated squat (Ntounis and Kanellopoulou, 2017)

³ "Rog - Smo zacasni / We are temporary" is a documentary made by the temporary users of the factory Rog premises during the first months of occupation. On YouTube: <https://youtu.be/52DijOdH3N4>

Reflecting the above principles, the communities and groups of temporary users started to grow, activities and content production became more diverse and polymorphous, resulting in a hive of participation and creativity. The first years of occupation were characterised by several organised events, including regular assemblies, showcasing coherence and cooperation among the various groups of users (Kanellopoulou et al., 2021). This initial period of *pax romana* was not destined to last long however, as the new mayor of Ljubljana, Zoran Janković came to power in 2008. Determined to revitalise the city centre and attract investment, the new administration promptly declared an unofficial war against the temporary occupants of this lucrative piece of urban property, at first by attempting to sell the premises⁴ and then by denying the supply of water and electricity, a material factor closely associated with the survival of any autonomous urban movement (Díaz-Parra and Mena, 2015; Srinivas, 2015). The City's plans, however, came to a standstill because of the global financial crisis in 2008, buying additional time for the users of Autonomous Rog on the one hand, and augmenting the gap between the bottom-up grassroots initiatives and the institutional plans for redevelopment on the other.

Whereas there is scant public information regarding the nature and content of assemblies from 2009 onwards, there is evidence of a more anarchic type of self-management, representing the kaleidoscopic nature of activities and communities, and the constant change in the number of users, not all of whom shared the same ideals and priorities (Kanellopoulou et al., 2021). One of the earliest studies of the content of Autonomous Rog, Ehrlich (2012) highlights this 'disorganised' precarity and diversification of the users, as skaters, art and architecture students, social activists, and marginalised groups (such as drug users or The Erased⁵) negotiated their living and work situations on a daily basis based on the City's decision to capitalise on the influx of creativity and culture merely as an economic source. Ultimately, the more active communities at Rog started focusing on their own projects and initiatives, as other groups migrated from Rog due to the limitations of resources and possibilities to produce in the space (Tomsich, 2017).

Even though artistic production and other forms of diversified activity never ceased at Autonomous Rog, its public image became progressively associated with civil engagement and activism, culminating in the pivotal role that Autonomous Rog played during the Slovenian migrant crisis of 2015-2016 (Garb, 2018), through the two main initiatives operating from Rog's premises, Ambasada Rog and Second Home. These two spaces became mainly associated with the migrants' struggle for belonging and acceptance, offering a place for communal representation and legal assistance, housing support, language classes, and international meetings (Zorn, 2021). The presence of migrants is of particular importance for the intertwining relationship of space and time at Autonomous Rog, as they instil a sense of "lasting temporariness" (Ciobanu, 2015; Oesch,

⁴ Solidarity messages can be found at: <https://tovarna.org/node/1466>

⁵ The 'erased' are former citizens of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia who were removed from the Slovenian registry of permanent residents in 1992 after the Slovenian Independence. They became de facto foreigners or stateless persons.

2018), adding the element of (arguably) infinite duration to the timeline of the temporary material occupation of the squat's buildings. Often migrants who were precluded from finding suitable accommodation elsewhere in Ljubljana, would end up housed in one of Rog Factory's buildings, transforming the space around them into domestic quarters, including adding bedding, DIY wardrobes or kitchens, and affording the place with an even more enhanced sense of belonging.

Ultimately, the presence of migrants within Autonomous Rog furthered the climate of anonymity and polymorphy, especially as older or non-political users closed to themselves and spaces even more, or even moved out of Rog altogether. Autonomous Rog had already become a heteronomous formation with more and less active users, representing an array of interests and priorities by the time the City of Ljubljana unilaterally and without prior notification decided to bulldoze part of the factory's surrounding wall in June 2016 employing the assistance of private security.

Thus, in a chronotopic context, this era of Autonomous Rog, is marked by an element of transience in the face of individual users and participants, but also a sense of longevity and duration, with respect to repeat territorialisation attempts (including the extensive and time-consuming material intervention in the buildings), and primarily, the presence of refugees' living quarters. Autonomous Rog remains open and welcoming to various types of activism, expression, and participation, demonstrating continuity of activity. Moreover, the occupation of space at Autonomous Rog is marked by anonymity and amorphousness, intensified by the presence of marginalised and migrant groups and by the open character of the artistic productions and events. This openness, coupled with a "management" approach based on experimentation and criticism of top-down urban politics, came to the forefront when the users of Autonomous Rog directly clashed with the City.

At the same time, Autonomous Rog is marked by the absence of official legal processes and structures, manifesting an initial 'laissez-faire' approach to the governance and the running of an autonomous zone. As the first years of institutional acceptance switched to withdrawal, both internal and external struggles are brought to the limelight, evidencing how in the absence of formal state law, spatiality plays a more important role in governing behaviours and informing decisions (Bennett and Layard, 2015). Even though the existence of Autonomous Rog was not conditioned upon its acceptance by the City by way of lease or contract, this informal agreement paradoxically afforded the temporary users with uninterrupted (albeit limited) time, ultimately enabling them to fulfil the functions of the withdrawing institutions, such as welcoming migrants and allocating urban space to artists and activists, de facto performing or mimicking their role (Finchett-Maddock, 2016). Thus, the first era of Autonomous Rog is marked by the presence of multiple human and material networks, which, through planned activities and collective decision-making, paved the way for marginalised communities to occupy space and work towards the creation of an alternative and subversive "*public good*" in the heart of the city (Kanellopoulou et al., 2021). As the "*public good*" properties of Autonomous Rog are informally created by the

place's articulated *meanings*, they also demarcate a relevant, associated timeline, where the material and human networks make up for the absence of more formal/state legal structures and interventions.

Autonomous Rog and the Slovenian Legal System: an 'in between' chronotope of conflict

This second era of Autonomous Rog introduces its encounters with the Slovenian legal system. It elaborates on the Supreme Court's appreciation of the spatiotemporal and material factors that led to its definition as a 'quasi-public' place, in essence affirming what geographers would describe as an 'in-between' urban interstice, or a gap in the timeline of urban development. We further observe the institutional clash between state law and the City, as the City's petition to the Supreme Court to exercise its property rights is dismissed. This institutional clash creates further ruptures to the spatiotemporal continuum, as the timeline created by the law departs significantly from the future-facing administrative plans for the redevelopment of Rog's premises, leading to the insurmountable inability to reconcile the place's past, present, and future. Consequently, in this chronotope of 'conflict' we will demonstrate how the qualities of Autonomous Rog that developed over time became interwoven with the material structures, ultimately leading to a static representation of place by virtue of the Slovenian legal system.

Following the demolition attempts in the summer of 2016, eight individual Autonomous Rog users filed lawsuits against the City of Ljubljana claiming disturbance of possession. Each one of these individual users declared themselves an owner of the disputed property through prescription⁶. Ultimately, interim injunctions against the City's renovation plans were secured. The City countered with separate eviction proceedings (emptying and extradition) against the same claimants. An anonymous user explains:

"I mean, during this struggle with the security, there was one idea to—because also, um, neo-Nazis were inside the security, um, and then we were afraid [...] like, we had different levels of defence. So one, one defend (sic) was also that we go in court and claim that we, we are managing the space [...] they were asking for stories from different spaces- from people, what they do [...] so then municipality sued these people."

The Supreme Court decision⁷ of the 19th of September 2019 constitutes the culmination of one of these eviction proceedings against one individual defendant. No other legal route against a collective of users could have been possible, as by then, the "community" of Autonomous Rog's users performed as one by name only, as also confirmed by the lower Slovenian Courts. In essence, the lack of an organisational hierarchy at the time of the proceedings within Autonomous Rog

⁶ Article 42(2) of the Slovenian Property Code/ SPZ

⁷ VSRS Sodba II Ips 219/2018

meant that the collective of its users lacked legal standing and could neither sue nor be sued. The petition at the Supreme Court concerned the rejection of the City's claim that the defendant delivered the property vacant of all persons and belongings. The City suggested that the disturbance proceedings singled out the defendant as a prominent member of Autonomous Rog's community, and that in any event such a community did in fact exist.

The Supreme Court dismissed the City's petition primarily on the premise that the defendant (or any single user of Autonomous Rog) could not possibly be ordered to deliver an empty property: notwithstanding that Autonomous Rog was a squat, it was nevertheless owned by the City of Ljubljana and remained relatively open in nature; pragmatically, everyone could become its user. In other words, since the number of users that were active at Autonomous Rog or at least participated in events and social activities therein remained open and undetermined, and since diverse and unrelated persons frequented or occupied the factory's buildings, the Supreme Court acknowledged that the squatting of Autonomous Rog performed a *quasi-public* function. Ultimately, there appeared to be no hierarchy among even the most active users, who were neither organised nor connected in any way. Rather, Autonomous Rog's users constituted an "*amorphous, anonymous, and ever-changing social formation*"⁸, which escaped the application of Slovenian law as such. The Supreme Court acknowledged that such areas of extensive and vibrant social life tend to be owned by municipalities or other public entities, reinforcing their public nature, essentially bypassing any proprietary dichotomies. For as far as the Supreme Court was concerned, Autonomous Rog was a place of public nature, owned by a public entity, performing a public social function, since it was dedicated to the getting together of the public for the purposes of activism and recreation; the place was as diverse as the surrounding city.

According to Article 19(1) of the SPZ:

(1) A public good is a thing which may be used in accordance with its purpose and under the same conditions by anyone (general use).

Even though a building cannot qualify for public good status without the decision of the competent authority⁹, the Supreme Court did acknowledge the similarities between the wording of the Act and the very nature of the squat: Autonomous Rog was used and frequented by people who were not connected or even known to each other, who were by no means considered a community, and who represented the people of the city to the extent that this was a *de facto quasi-public place*. For as long as it remained this way, there was only so much protection civil law could afford the City of Ljubljana, something that the remaining users of Autonomous Rog recognised:

"[...] like now the fear is that if they go in and try to kick us out again, they won't get the police to do this for them, which they wanted, and if they do it again with private security, then again we

⁸ VSRS Sodba II Ips 219/2018, §15

⁹ Article 245 of the SPZ

can claim residents' (sic) rights, you know? So, um, there, like- we have like this kind of strange legal like loophole that's kind of preventing them from, from moving in, uh, in this direct way"

Overall, the Slovenian Supreme Court made certain intriguing remarks with respect to the protection of property and the use of a place owned by a public entity, unlimiting the legal concept of the public good, to accommodate spatial and temporal particularities associated with a place of *de facto rather than de jure* public nature. The Supreme Court reiterated that for as long as the people of Ljubljana through their use of Autonomous Rog performed this public function, they also fulfilled the place's public purpose: Autonomous Rog was owned by a public entity and was being enjoyed by the public at the same time. A *quasi-public place* is therefore a place of public activity. Ownership rights were relevant insofar as they included rather than excluded the public.

This judgement, therefore, accomplished something that neither the users of Autonomous Rog nor the City of Ljubljana had been able to achieve; it crystallised a depiction of Autonomous Rog arguably belonging to the past, even by the time that the judgement was delivered, signalling a clear break in the place's spatiotemporal continuum. The particular image of Autonomous Rog as amorphous, anonymous, and lacking any hierarchical representation gets delineated in space and time and constitutes a perpetuate legal construct, as far as this specific court case is concerned. Pursuant to this decision, Autonomous Rog represents a space officially recognised by law to possess certain characteristics. The extent to which these characteristics might change over time is of no importance to this legal representation, which henceforth creates its own parallel (and static) reality. This will always be the outcome of the particular civil dispute: Autonomous Rog in this case is forever vibrant, active, creative, filled with people, graffiti, art installations, communal kitchens and migrant living spaces, and encompasses all those human and material factors that afford it its unique *quasi-public* elements.

In this context, materiality is pronounced in the Supreme Court's judgement by reference to the public good (a thing) provisions, by way of the Court's appreciation of Rog Factory's anarchic, disorganised, or squatted buildings, and by reference to the users' possessions and belongings that are not able to be delivered as such, exactly thanks to the place's variegated characteristics. Autonomous Rog's material space is as public as the people occupying it, and contributes to this extended public, or *quasi-public* status. By appreciating Autonomous Rog's material characteristics and by *unlimiting* the legal concept of the public good, the Supreme Court essentially normalised the holding up of time and relations that were previously described as subversive, leading Autonomous Rog to this kind of legal acceptance.

Nevertheless, this official representation was not the only "truth" present at Autonomous Rog, as a relevant legal place incorporates various narratives, past and present, many of which did not find their way into the Slovenian Court System in order to become evidential. These narratives continued to co-exist, developing in a parallel manner, changing, or even vanishing altogether. Here lies a further paradoxical element: the timeline crystallised by the courts is neither the one advocated by the institution that owns Autonomous Rog nor the one that corresponds to its current material reality, or even the reality corresponding to its situation up to September 2019. Indeed, as numerous users acknowledged, activity had been progressively waning:

“I had, my feeling was that last year (2018) there were more activities going on than this year. If I compare my, my feeling, when I go out of skatepark at, at 10 o'clock in the evening, I had a feeling that last year there wa—or even two years ago, there were more things going on upstairs than there are now, but I might be wrong”

During the period between late 2016 - autumn 2019, it became evident that the ongoing legal battle took its toll, as morale dropped among users due to the high cost of legal expenses and the threat of litigation. Additionally, differences between the most active groups started to emerge, which even led to violent disputes at times. Whereas ‘ebbs and flows’ in activity within Rog were the norm, the compounding effects of litigation and the increasing conflict between groups drastically diminished the image of Autonomous Rog as a cultural and political *quasi-public* space. Most importantly, even most of the main groups associated with the migrant movement eventually vacated their spaces:

“Rog was always like this. It had its spikes, when it was, uh, this outside pressure, outside events like, like the Uprising migrant movement, stuff like that. But there was always a core team inside of it that organised daily things, like events, screenings of films, uh, lectures and stuff like that...while now, after 2016 even, there is no more this core team working on these issues. [...] One small group stayed, but most of people who started Rog, were active there, left it in 2017-2018, uh, and never came back and, just like, ‘I’m finished with it.’”

Finally, this era of Autonomous Rog is marked by the hypervisibility of the formal/state law as opposed to state law’s total absence or invisibility in the previous one (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2012). However, in this conflicting legal chronotope, we are led to adopt a more pluralistic and holistic sense of the law as it becomes present and pronounced *in situ*, thanks to the particular place’s spatial and material configurations; in other words, as we become aware of Autonomous Rog’s human and material consistency, and we follow their representation in the court system, we embrace spatiality and materiality also in a formal legal context. Spatial and material connections help us see those legal properties that the Supreme Court evaluated at Rog, not only at the time the judgement was delivered but ever since the place’s *de facto* occupation/creation as a quasi-public/interstitial place. Paradoxically, the case in hand further demonstrates how the vibrant, polymorphous and ever-changing properties of Autonomous Rog can become a static legal imaginary, should the remaining material and institutional associations clash in the chronotopic framework. What we are left with again, is a chronotopic rupture, which however, enables us to *see* all these articulations that make up the law as delivered through the present judgement and *experienced* by the relevant parties.

The last days of Autonomous Rog: the ‘struggle’ for the future

Ultimately, this last section dedicated to Autonomous Rog’s final days, brings the chronotopic conflicts to the limelight, revealing a contested lived reality. As the timeline created by state law fades into the background, social and material factors become once again decisive in the squat’s lifeline, affecting its fate, and ultimately depriving it of what the court recognised as a ‘quasi-public good’ status. Nevertheless, the history and the research conducted on Autonomous Rog,

seem to open an additional future-facing timeline, one that will capitalise on the place's quasi-public properties, and will attempt to by-pass the conflicts associated with its past. In a chronotopic perspective, the last days of Autonomous Rog are still open-ended as the discussion and the interest are yet to die down, and - more importantly - as the legal construct of the materially relevant *quasi-public* place has entered the status quo, one way or another.

Our visit at Autonomous Rog in November 2019, coincided with its last active period as an urban squat, political and cultural centre. The remaining users were aware that the Supreme Court's judgement had bought them some additional, albeit rather limited time as a collective eviction was no longer possible. Nevertheless, the numbers of active users had already diminished substantially, leading to a constant struggle and effort for revitalisation and survival. We had the chance to witness this in person, having had the opportunity to discuss what the judgement meant for the remaining communities of Rog during informal conversations and assemblies.

The assemblies were held at the allocated space of one of the remaining groups, Ambasadada Rog. As perhaps the last vibrant group of activists still present in the premises, Ambasadada became the de facto face of Autonomous Rog to the outside world and informal leader. This was a direct result of the group's public and media presence, having played an active part in Autonomous Rog's representation following the events of 2016. Moreover, Ambasadada's own space was warm, well-maintained, and still hosted migrant café events and parties, unlike the space of the Social Centre which had fallen into decay and required extensive structural intervention and disinfection:

“Rog assemblies (were previously held in Social Centre), but now they have problems with rats, so [Social Centre] doesn't operate, uh, for now, and—for now their assemblies are at Ambasadada. But they have, like, took [sic] out the cleaning system up, uh, that every collective pays up into a fund and then a person gets chosen and then the one person who cleans gets paid for cleaning. [...] So they have a bit of organisational structure, but still they're missing a lot of things.”

With respect to the artistic and cultural spaces, it was no longer possible to tell which space was still active and which was not, especially since the main Rog building was essentially sealed off and remained under lock and key. Keys were held by various users who would either come and go independently or had abandoned Rog altogether. Some spaces that remained active included the boxing studio, the ever-expanding in popularity skatepark, the drag cabaret, as well as Cirkusarna, the circus and aerials skills collective. Smaller spaces continued to host parties on occasion, whereas a bicycle repair workshop was inaugurated late in 2019, becoming one of the last spaces to open at Autonomous Rog. Nevertheless, the main issues that Autonomous Rog had always faced still pertained up to the very last days of its occupation. There had always been an inherent difficulty in organising and managing the vast space of Rog, which was initially masked behind the sheer volume of activity and engagement in political, social, and cultural terms. However, there were serious doubts as to how relevant the squat was after the eviction attempts of 2016, as evidenced by the diminishing practices and interventions happening in Autonomous Rog (even before the pandemic hit), as well as the users' focus on basic operations and symbolic practices of political and creative rebellion (graffiti art, installations in the entrance) that kept Autonomous Rog in the public narrative:

“It got really obvious in 2016 that Rog never existed as a community, and it needed to establish itself as a community really really rapidly, but it was not able to because there were a lot of different interests, ideas, um—and there was not really a plan what to do with the space, how to organise it, stuff like that. [...] there was no way to deal with conflicts rationally, democratically. It always came to the personal level. Uh—and obviously there was no idea what to do with it [Rog]. It was never the idea to have it permanently, even if it started to operate as a permanent space. But there was never a, never infrastructure, this organisational infrastructure, uh—and it was always, then like this stupid power play, who has the keys for something”

It is inarguably interesting to observe how state law operates as a double-edge sword on this occasion. On the one hand, those communities and users that were still active at Rog existed under the umbrella of the Supreme Court’s judgement, operating as an amorphous, diverse, and vibrant community, or as a public good to the city, a depiction which has ‘settled’ in the spatiotemporal continuum. On the other hand, however, reality paints an entirely different picture of semi-abandoned, locked, and derelict spaces of disinterested or disillusioned former users, with only the occasional sparkle of resistance. Autonomous Rog’s quasi-public properties would appear to exist only by interpretation of state law, as visitors and users were becoming less frequent over time. Amidst this climate of personal and material decay, Autonomous Rog’s future remained contested at best. Whilst Slovenian law was on the side of Autonomous Rog at least for a limited amount of time, materiality, internal, and social factors were operating against it, including the City’s increasing attempts to pressure the squatters out of the premises by any means possible. The following quote from one of the main users forewarns about the ultimate eviction and demolition (and the way it would happen) that followed in 2021, and illustrates how time is expressed through an *imminent sense of the forthcoming* as per Grabham (2010:113):

“They, they refuse to negotiate with us now [...] because when the pressure from the municipality started again, we said, ‘Okay, we need to make a move.’ And so we had a petition ... so then we came like with 3000 signatures, also from a lot of institutions, and like public figures to, to say to the municipality, ‘Look don’t be solving this in a violent way, we need to like find the—’ So even from the people who are kind of like not supporting us fully, and who want to see a change, they still don’t want a violent resolution to this. And we said, ‘Let’s get these people on our side,’ you know? Like—and use them to pressure the city to get a deal, any kind of deal, and if we don’t get a deal, at least their violence is less legitimate and we have more time.”

Inevitably, the covid pandemic would act as a catalyst to Autonomous Rog’s fate, leading the City to argue that the buildings had been completely emptied as a result of virus prevention measures. In the early hours of the 19th of January 2021, the City started bulldozing the peripheral buildings (STA, 2021). As reported the City had: “no warrant, no eviction papers, nothing official - just brute force” (Ochoa, 2021). The users that congregated on the street were met by riot police leading to a climate of unrest, where teargas was used to attack the protestors. It was reported that people and groups’ belongings were destroyed or thrown away (Blanchard, 2021) including artwork and equipment. Presently, Rog Factory is a giant construction site, as the City has decided to proceed with its plans to create an institutional arts and design centre. Autonomous Rog will inevitably be replaced at some point by its institutional ‘negative’ image, a project already boycotted by alternative arts and social groups (STA, 2022). In other words, there is room for only one official

and institutional interpretation of the space which constitutes the public good; the one superimposed by the City's regeneration attempts. This was exemplified in an online public event¹⁰ organised by the authors and IPoP (the Slovenian Institute for Spatial Policies) regarding the value of Autonomous Rog. Various experts conceded that Autonomous Rog's nature as a public good was never appreciated by the users, the City, or the greater public, even though it constituted a formal legal representation.

The chronotopic evaluation of the last days of Rog is thus open-ended, furthering the debate on the place's past, present, and future uses, as backed up by the Supreme Court's judgement. Autonomous Rog might no longer exist as a material structure; nevertheless, it is survived by its cultural and legal representations as well as its human capital that continues the 'struggle' on present and future alternative urban values in the public space (Kanellopoulou et al, 2021). It is thus impossible to conclude on this type of spatiotemporal 'envelope' as it is still unfolding. The chronotopic evaluation of the next stages of Rog is as unfinished as the construction and debris around it. Additionally, this retrospective viewing of the quasi-public place, brought back the need to appreciate both subversive spaces of belonging and the act of urban experimentation within a city ("*we should be mindful of the qualities of these [urban] gaps*", (Phelps and Silva, 2018:1204)), as evidenced by the forceful and arguably illegal eviction. The existence of such conflictual spatiotemporal narratives within the contemporary city (Muliček et al., 2016) might have led to the material death of Autonomous Rog as we knew it, but at least invigorated the necessity of alternative spatial narratives (or similar *quasi-public* places) and the value they produce in the aesthetics of urban life (Kanellopoulou et al., 2021), bringing this third chronotope of Autonomous Rog into the future.

Conclusion

The history of Autonomous Rog comprises many conflicting and diverse narratives that remain relevant to the broader Slovenian and international publics, including aspects of civil life and participation, urban politics and activism, and the law. It is a story that can only be told via a narrative able to combine spatial and temporal elements in a socio-legal context, whilst ensuring that both human and material factors play an equal part in its evaluation. Hence, the simultaneous unfolding of space and time in a chronotopic context, allowed us to illustrate the tensions and contradictions between the users of Autonomous Rog and the City of Ljubljana, demonstrating their opposing understandings of Rog's past, present and future material and spatial conditions that ultimately framed their collective practices and perspectives (Chatzidakis, 2020).

We followed this 'in-between', subversive piece of public property through space and time, accentuating the chronotope of "everyday life" or "the world around us" (Valverde, 2015), and unfolding the spatiotemporal elements into "quite recognizable everyday settings, especially at a smaller scale" (Lawson, 2011: 389). Through the chronotopic approach we showed how Autonomous Rog permeated the Slovenian legal system, bringing its material and human qualities to the Supreme Court, at first as a temporary urban occupation that was however versed in duration

¹⁰ The event can be found at: <https://youtu.be/yQprdB3hs-U>

and longevity thanks to the territorialisation practices of activists, artists, skaters, and refugees; then as an official legal representation thanks to the civil dispute that ensued; and ultimately as a future-facing struggle for institutional acceptance as a narrative and debate on the urban activism that has been. We examined how the concept of Autonomous Rog essentially managed to ‘beat’ time thanks to the normative expansion of the concept of the *public good*, bringing time, space and the importance of materiality to new legal audiences. We witnessed the broadening of formal law and the creation of timeless spatiotemporal representations through the reading of the Supreme Court’s judgement, as the court’s ability to unlimit a civil law concept added plurality to our chronotopic viewing. Autonomous Rog’s human and material qualities justified a novel legal concept, challenged the law’s normative certainty (Kanellopoulou, 2020) and established themselves in a legal imaginary. Ultimately, what we learned by following the story of Autonomous Rog through the chronotopic narrative is how an in-between urban space continues to push and subvert institutional norms and concepts (including formal legal structures), challenging thought and provoking debate; we should indeed be ‘mindful of urban gaps’ (Phelps and Silva, 2018).

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