

Strategies for creating village identity symbols using street art tactics: Staro Zhelezare, Bulgaria

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Abstract

Over the last few years, various projects in the village of Staro Zhelezare have been undertaken aiming to involve and collaborate with the residents in order to directly improve the quality of social life and the image of the depressed neighbourhood. The purpose of the paper is to examine how different strategies of specific bottom-up activities in a public space address various problems in such a small community. Following the Fourth Street Art Festival in Staro Zhelezare, it is clear that the project has proved to be a considerable success in developing a strong visual identity that has helped to shape the image of the village and introduced resilience features. This paper addresses the problem of how to increase awareness of the inexpensive yet relatively accessible possibilities and potential of public spaces in small, economically depressed localities.

Keywords: village Street Art, village resilience, Staro Zhelezare, community engagement, identity, village avant-garde.

1. Introduction

The experience of Staro Zhelezare, Village of Art, illustrates how public art can enhance the character and identity of a village, which is very important for the improvement of its quality of life. The analysis sheds light on the significance of the quality of spatial and visual environments within the public sphere. Public artworks should be treated as landmarks for social interaction and cultural awareness which reflect liveability and identity. Consequently, public art can add value to places in Staro Zhelezare that attract social interaction and tourism. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the elements of the creative city, first conceived of by Australian David Yencken, in the village realm, and thus urban creativity in a small community. It also examines annual strategies of the Staro Zhelezare Street Art Festival. According to human geography and urbanism, any dynamic city is a balance of density, diversity and complexity. However, it is less clear how this reflects in a village. Due to Staro Zhelezare's smaller size and community, the village is a more specific environment with limited possibilities. Due to its depressed historical and economic background, resilience features seem quite remote and therefore an abstract achievement.

2. Historical and geographical context

In order to understand why street art finds a place in Staro Zhelezare and how it changes the image of the village, it is necessary to consider the historical, geographical and economic background to see the transformation of the village identity. Staro Zhelezare lies in the upper part of the Thracian Plain where the first Neolithic settlements were created at the turn of the 4th and 5th millennium BC. Since then, these areas have been continuously inhabited resulting in a multitude of cultural layers, each of which has left its mark on the local heritage. From the sixth to the first century BC these were areas inhabited by Thracians.

One of the main village symbols is at the entrance to the village, a Thracian cromlech - a stone circle which served as an astronomical observatory. Despite its importance, it is poorly preserved and in a tragic state due to a lack of finances for its maintenance and conservation. Notwithstanding, the primary and most visible trace left by Thracian culture is the specific type of architecture present until today. Due to the lack of stone building material, from the earliest times houses were built here from adobe - mud bricks dried in the sun - and a material still used today for most of the village buildings.

The specific residential layout also comes from Thracian times in which the houses are built with windows facing the gardens which creates a kind of patio, but without windows on the street side. All plots are fenced off with high, long walls, which are especially important to increase the safety of the residents. The effect of this approach and the continuation of this tradition helps maintain the specific, unique atmosphere of the village, which features long street corridors, with walls extending along all the streets. A few years ago, the artists noticed that they were perfect, huge surfaces waiting to be covered with paintings.

Between the first century BC and the fourth century AD, the village thrived under Roman citizens. Ten kilometres from Staro Zhelezare lies the village of Hissarya, which was the favourite city and balneological centre of Romans due to the abundance of healing springs and extremely sunny weather with a moderate climate throughout the year. There is not much data from the Byzantine and Bulgarian period. From the fourteenth century, Bulgaria fell under Turkish rule for five centuries. Staro Zhelezare was inhabited by Bulgarians at that time while just next to it there was a village where the Mohammedan Bulgarians lived for a few centuries.

Following the Russian-aided liberation in 1878, the residents of Staro Zhelezare took an active part in the Balkan War as well as the First and Second World Wars. The current identity of the village is strongly connected with the revolutionary movement of partisans against the fascist regime during WWII. Eight of them were killed, and became the village heroes known throughout the country, among them the youngest, Ivanka Pashkulova. Since that time the village has been known as the village of revolutionaries, and these activists' genes are still strong today.

The biggest growth took place after WWII up to the 70s during the Communist regime. The 70s saw the beginning of the global process of mass emigrations to the cities accompanied by a falling birth-rate. During the Communist era there were around 3000 inhabitants (now only about 300), massive growth and development took place driving progress and modernisation of different spheres of social life. The model of contemporary primary schooling was built and education flourished on the highest level while a stadium, kindergarten, swimming pool, big commercial shops in the central square, a pub, a restaurant, the chitalishte Todor Pashkulov cultural centre, and clubs for youth and seniors were all built. Thanks to a modern dairy farm and modern

agricultural methods, Staro Zhelezare became a model for other villages in the country thus attracting many official visits of the communist leader of the People's Republic of Bulgaria, Todor Zhivkov, as well as other international guests. One of the crucial moments for the village's collective memories are the visits of Indira Ghandi and Fidel Castro in the 70s. Since that time, the agriculture society has been called the "Bulgarian-Cuban Friendship."

Regarding the name of the village – Staro Zhelezare means Old Iron village, but until 1934 it was called Демирджилери (Demirdzhileri), which means also Old Iron in Turkish. Before that it had the name Kovachite – Blacksmiths. The village was on the commercial route (Druma) from Pazardzhik to Sofia and was the main point for shoeing horses. Consequently, the blacksmith tradition is also important, one which was continued by the Gypsy population.

The geographical impact on the village identity is also crucial as it lies in the middle of the Thracian Valley far from the sea side. The mountains are seen on the horizon but are not close enough to offer alpine benefits. Mineral waters and attractive wineries are also within ten kilometres, but not in the village which has only one potable mineral water spring. The Thracian cromlech lies in ruins ruling out any kind of use similar to the English Stonehenge. Not even a restaurant remains today leaving only three simple grocery stores, a pub, an ethnographic house and a cultural centre which only operates as a library. Nothing remains to attract tourists or to keep the youth from leaving. So the current economic and social situation is disastrous, but prosperity is not something unknown to the villagers. Most of them remember prosperous times, remember their engagement in social activism and still cultivate it in different kinds of activities in an extremely admirable way.

3 Piriankov and the Polish element

Staro Zhelezare Street Art Village was created as the effect of an annual summer Street Art Festival. The key element in the organization of the Festival and its strategy is the international emphasis - Polish-Bulgarian. Namely, the village of murals is the brainchild of my husband, Ventsislav Piriankov, and me including Poles and students of the Ventzi Drawing School in Poznań. Ventzi was born in Bulgaria and in the early 90s he spent a year studying at the Art Academy in Sofia before moving to the Polish city of Poznan, where he continued his studies at the Poznan Art Academy. It was

there that he went on to create a private art school that trains young artists. So Staro Zhelezare project is created with significant Polish participation. The festival hosts students of Piriankovs' Ventzi School of Drawing who are also students of the University of the Arts of Poznan. They spend their time in Staro Zhelezare at the Piriankov Art Center, where Ventzi's grandparents' cottage is transformed into an art house. In fact, this is the kind of art collective of best friends, including my husband, our students, and me.

The Bulgarians, especially the inhabitants of the village Staro Zhelezare are very much aware that the project would not exist without the Polish element.

Even Ventzi Piriankov is called Polak (Bulgarian for Polish). Each summer the village is full of Polish speech thanks to the young Polish students who transform the landscape. They also leave their self-portraits on the village walls along with those of many Polish heroes as a sign of this cultural presence. The Polish influence drastically changes the collection of local memories.



Figure 1 Artists at work



Figure 2 Artists at work and having fun with the beloved granny Stephana.

4. Story collection and social engagement. Glimpses of Resilience

4.1 Village of personalities

Unexpectedly Staro Zhelezare has become one of the most attractive places in central Bulgaria. Why do visitors love it so much? Probably because in this little corner of the world, art is not just for the few. In recent years, the production of outdoor artworks has strikingly transformed the atmosphere of the place. Prior to the transformation, everything was associated with a decaying village: deserted, filled with sadness, boredom, pessimism, and greyness. It is interesting to compare the photographs of the village taken before the appearance of the street art paintings and now. The impression is unambiguous. Although the paintings are mostly black and white, the village has taken on a new colour.

Such snapshots also show that many homes have whitewashed and renovated their fences, with the purpose of having murals on them. The paintings are mostly placed on fences and are therefore much lower than those found in other street art villages or cities. This gives a completely different effect which is unique in the world.

The images are usually life-sized, which makes a natural impression, as if there were many people on the streets who are standing and chatting or simply sitting on benches. When you reach Staro Zhelezare now after passing through other emptying villages along the way, there suddenly arises the illusion that it is a village full of life as if there were at least two or three times more inhabitants than in reality. An interesting effect also occurs when walking around the village as one suddenly passes a grandma or grandpa whom we have just seen somewhere along the way on the wall, or earlier in the pictures in the media.

Ordinary people became unexpectedly known, recognizable heroes. Some faces are very characteristic such as Kolo or Ivan and are even treated as the village's lucky charms. A specific kind of village archive is being created, a record in the common memory, which is particularly important in the context of a village that is ageing and disappearing in front of our eyes. I remember how shocking it was for us to learn that one of our favourite heroes had died. Uncle Rangel who used to sit in front of his house every day in the same argyle sweater that he was painted in. We realized at that moment that this situation would inevitably be repeated, and that



Figure 3 Staro Zhelezare murals and a shepherd

after some time the paintings would become something like archival photos from the past, a testimony of what was, a history of memory. The murals depict the present only as long as the artists are working, after which time they become part of the past.

Apart from the inhabitants of the village, people anonymous to the world, there are also icons known worldwide. Regardless of whether they are liked or disliked, what is crucial is that the politicians, stars and celebrities are chosen by the householders. An interesting context arises with

questions concerning recognition, fame, whose personality is more or less important, why and for whom. For instance, many of the residents of the village are not familiar with the faces of world-famous politicians; for them a recognizable hero is a buddy from the neighbouring street.

Yet another situation is the depiction of the important and humble, known and unknown, seated side by side as equals just chatting. It looks prosaic, so close to some possible reality, but we know perfectly well that it is completely impossible, even surreal. Grandma Velika will never sit on a bench with Queen Elizabeth, or Ivan with Barack Obama.



Figure 4 Grandpa Rangel chose to be depicted alongside Lyudmila Zhivkova, daughter of Communist dictator Todor Zhivkov. She was known for her passion for promoting Bulgarian arts and culture. He himself unfortunately died in autumn 2016. Before his death you could see him exactly as he appears in this photo sitting every day in this sweater next to his portrait.



Figure 5 As Baba Velika is to be found every afternoon, sitting on the bench and having a chat with her neighbour. This time with Queen Elizabeth.



Figure 6 Sabka explaining the times during Todor Zhivkov's rule.



Figure 7 Nikolay explains that Pope Francis is the wisest person in the village



Figure 8 Bay Ivan, Barack Obama - Obama, he is actually my cousin. I would invite him for a beer.

In a symbolic and metaphoric way, the village changed from the hermetic and local into a sort of global village centre of personalities. Referring to Czech master of animation Jan Svankmajer, fiction is something that exists for sure. This kind of art aims to make the imagined real, because it is in fact so possible. Reality is turned upside down, turned to absurd, showing that it could be the other way around, that art has no boundaries.

4.2. Story collection, social engagement

Portraying known and unknown people is not just making portraits. The aim is to try and unite a fragmented village. We write stories of the place on its own walls thereby creating its history. It is important that we listen to the community around the walls before painting, asking questions about the geographic area and context, in order to make sure that the murals are organic with the village. Additionally, we are trying

to show people that it is easy to bring about change. A simple gesture, such as painting a wall, shows the impact that a single person can have on the village landscape. Hopefully this would inspire residents and help them understand that the village belongs to them and they are responsible for it. Such artistic actions improve the image of depressed neighbourhoods.

The murals are usually placed in some context connected with the house owner and their individual story along with features of everyday life, something that is undoubtedly related to the resident's identity. For example, Kancho is known for breeding cows, so besides him talking with Angela Merkel and his wife Ivanka talking with Emmanuel Macron, there is also Donald Trump talking with a cow, and above all of them there are sudzhucite hanging – a special



Figure 9 Kancho, the owner of the house, takes care of his cows every day. He is famous in the village for producing milk and making extremely delicious local sausages - sudzhucite. Donald Trump is chatting with one of Kancho's cows; Kancho is explaining something to Angela Merkel; Ivanka, Kancho's wife, is talking with Emmanuel Macron.

kind of local sausages produced by Kancho and Ivanka. The preparation of the project involved talking with the couple for two days, over wine and dinner, taking photos of their lives, of their cows, all the while listening to their stories and learning about their attitude toward politics, economics and life. As it happened with the rest of the house owners, Kancho renovated the wall before painting so that the mural can last longer and is not damaged by the falling plaster.

The central place in the village is taken by the most important scene, the most symbolic for local identity, and it is placed on the wall of the church where Indira Gandhi with Fidel Castro are now painted. They visited the village in the 70s. Whenever we spoke to people, they would talk so passionately about this past, this special moment, so we decided to paint these

figures to create the sense of nostalgia and positivity the people living there feel for it. It kind of recreates the sense of culture that used to exist. It is one of the most nostalgic memories in locals' minds as some of them remember it well. There is even one granny who gave them flowers. Pride combines with nostalgia accordingly.

As Maurice Halbwachs (1992: 33) suggests, collective memories are "selective, socially constructed, contained spatiality – a society memory is reconstruction of the past." Including the aforementioned features, Staro Zhelezare's outdoor paintings turn into objects that activate shared memories. People revealed their particular stories regarding the past directly to those who were engaged in creating the painting, thus opening a space for artistic interpretation in the revival of the past. What makes this project experimental is



Figure 10 Mural on the facade of the local church shows Indira Gandhi and Fidel Castro. In 1968 the village was visited by the Indian prime minister, and in 1972 the legendary Fidel Castro also paid a visit to Staro Zhelezare.

that the stories which were initially just told to the artists did not remain as a mere passive archive. Instead we managed to expand the background memory and make existing ones visible by adding new memories, photographs and our own artistic impressions. Collecting stories and making them public is both widespread and popular nowadays and often showcased in the contemporary art world mainly through digital platforms. The project based in Staro Zhelezare could be used as a model to highlight this new approach to story collection.

4.3. Tradition transformation. A step towards resilience

“Heritage is that complex of man’s works in which a community recognizes its particular and specific values and with which it identifies. Identification and specification of heritage is therefore a process related to the choice of values” (The Charter of Krakow 2000).

The Piriankov Art House, bequeathed to Ventzi Piriankov by his grandparents, has been renovated, adapted and transformed into a summer base for artists as well as a contemporary art centre. As other properties in the village, it is surrounded by a big fence and the house opens into the enclosed yard which is filled with the artists’ works. All the surfaces are covered with different kinds of portraits as well as with plenty of aphorisms and quotes coined by the painters themselves as well as their favourite ones from other authors, mainly artists. The focal point can be found on the house, as soon as you enter the yard, where there is the inscription “Tradition is not to be copied, tradition is to be created.”

In the beginning it was really difficult to explain to the locals, that we had no intention to copy tradition. Street art uses its environment as an essential tool to create meaning. Whether



Figure 11 Grannies in front of the inscription “Tradition is not to be copied, tradition is to be created”



Figure 12 Photo of Pavel taken one afternoon, to be painted on the wall the next day.



Figure 13 Mike Tyson and the homeowner's friend Pavel, both of whom love pigeons. Pavel is a big fan of Mike Tyson, whose first fight was when he was ten, the same day some boy killed his beloved pigeon.

materially or contextually, it derives its meaning from the urban space it occupies. Some villagers could not understand that we would not be painting scenes taken directly from ethnographic museums such as girls in traditional folklore clothes surrounded with grapes or picking up roses in the company of Orpheus, let alone heroes' portraits from history textbooks. It was not easy for them to understand that they themselves are the actual and authentic heroes for us, and that our plan was to paint their portraits from the photos we took of them.

The next step for the residents was the realization that they are participating in the birth of a new tradition as the paintings in the village become part of their new community identity, thus transforming the village heritage. Before the appearance of the street art, the village was the place of Thracian Stonehenge, mineral water to drink, and partisans. Yet today it is mainly the street art village created by a strong community engagement which fosters village regeneration

through street art. All the murals were created through community involvement in which citizens, entrepreneurs, and artists co-created and took co-ownership of the works, thus building long-lasting and reciprocal social engagement. Furthermore, the village is now able to attract more and more visitors. We can observe in practice how this kind of community art strategy is a strong and effective tool to inject life into an abandoned space. It is only recently that resilience has been enriched with cultural understandings. Cultural resilience "has emerged to refer to this continuity of a co-constituted set of long-term relationships between the cultural identity of a people and the set of social-ecological relationships within which this identity was founded" (Rotarangi and Stephenson, 2014).

The murals clearly improve the attractiveness and image of the village, although there is so much work to guarantee murals' resilience and overcome their vulnerabilities.



Figure 14 Grannie Sabka and Todora hanging their dreams on the installation



Figure 15 Nikolay hanging his dreams on the installation

5. Street art festival editions. Tactics, strategies for creation

The first artistic experience in Staro Zhelezare happened in 2013 when we spent our first summertime there and held an exhibition of our paintings on our property. We were pleasantly surprised by how well it was attended. In summer 2014 we went bigger with the first festival, with our artist friends from Poland and Bulgaria and the subject was "LOST MEMORIES, FOUND DREAMS." We directed our activity mainly outdoors and we engaged locals by staging a variety of performances in the village through installations. These wonderful activities were filled with real emotions and nostalgia and reached deeply into people's memories and dreams. It was at this time that we started to uncover and collect their memories. The idea was not to simply observe people and our projects, but to listen, engage, and to give them a field to create something belonging to them. Local people became the artists by writing their dreams down on small pieces of paper and hanging them on strings to create an ephemeral installation fluttering in the wind.

There was also the project "I could live in London" referring to the dream of attaining a better life through emigration, in which almost everybody had a photo taken of themselves holding a sign with the name of an English person with whom their personality somehow identified.

All the buildings in the village were transformed into London equivalents, by putting new signs on their photos – the church tower became the Big Ben, the Culture House was changed to Buckingham Palace, and the House of Tradition into the National Gallery.

What is stereotypical becomes surrealistic here and what is ordinary becomes extraordinary.

Referring to my favourite filmmaker Jan Svankmajer, reality is not sacred nor profane, it is something magical. People walk and sit, just to find the sense of the world and their existence. In each banal thing something mysterious can be noticed.



Figure16.1.2.3 Iliya as John Lennon, Diana as Agatha Christie, Ali as Gordon Ramsey



Figure 17 The way to London



Figure 18 Village inhabitants at the photo exhibition showing images from the everyday life of the village and its heroes.



Figure 19 Photo exhibition showing images from the everyday life of the village and its heroes.



Figure 20 Village inhabitants at the photo exhibition showing images from the everyday life of the village and its heroes.

One of the crucial attractions was the exhibition of a photo reportage made up of shots taken in the village over two years which captured the everyday life of the local community. This caused an unexpected emotional response as the locals could not take their eyes off the photos. And it was also a powerful signal telling us the direction we should take the following summer: to focus on the locals directly by creating an outdoor gallery featuring them as the heroes.

Thus the next chapter began. Summer 2015 was the first year of the Street Art Festival under the name “Village of

Personalities / Art for social change.” For the first time we invited ten young artists from Poland who were students of our drawing school in Poznan. It was a well organised team prepared ahead of time in Poland for the project. Almost every day throughout July, the young people were present in the village streets, painting, talking with villagers about the projects, taking photos, spending long evenings chatting and listening to local stories. The reaction from the villagers was fantastic and they expressed their gratitude and helped in every possible way. The area of the village is quite big, but the result was quite visible. It was undoubtedly the beginning of Staro Zhelezare’s new era.



Figure 21 Grandpa Lazar coming back home with his sheep, accompanied by Theresa May. Grandma Velika is waiting for them.



Figure 22 All of Bay Ivan's and Baba Delia's children and grandchildren are abroad in America and Italy. They miss them a lot, but now they can feel a bit of their presence when they sit with them in front of their house. Bay Ivan is pictured driving his tractor, as he does every day, this time with Donald Trump and two Polish art students.

In 2016, we repeated the experience and invited a new Polish team to paint more murals in the village. Meanwhile Staro Zhelezare became famous in Bulgaria, but our biggest surprise was the interest from The New York Times, whose reporter personally visited the place and wrote an article.

In 2017, we decided to add something else. We already knew about the revolutionary tradition of the village and had witnessed many times the activities and initiatives of local grannies who can't sit idle for one day. Besides gathering and singing folklore songs including going a few times a year to some festivals, they gather in places such as the local pub on different holidays where they play football,

pretend to be some rock music group, dress up and do incredible performances. So we decided to use their talent and enthusiasm to promote further engagement. Following the revolutionary traditions of the Staro Zhelezare village, we focused on a utopian and avant-garde project to create a centre of modernity and openness in art. This is why the slogan of this edition was "OPEN VILLAGE / VILLAGE AVANT-GARDE." At the beginning of the 20th century there were local partisans who wanted to change the fate of the inhabitants. Over a century later, in times of peace and prosperity, but also in times when villages are gradually disappearing and dying, we artists decided to give impetus to revive life and give an impulse for a beautiful future, an impulse for an unlimited RURAL FUTURISM!!!



Figure 23 Demonstration aiming to turn the village into the forefront of the avant-garde.



Figure 24 Demonstration aiming to turn the village into the forefront of the avant-garde.

In 2017, the main idea and purpose was mural painting but we also concentrated on happenings and revolutionary DEMONSTRATIONS. When entering Staro Zhelezare, one could read the propaganda slogans displayed around our art camp. THE REAL AVANT-GARDE IS BORN IN THE VILLAGE! THE VILLAGE IS THE SOURCE OF PROGRESSIVE IDEAS! ALL ARTISTS TO THE VILLAGE! IN THE CITY MAN EXPLOITS MAN, BUT IN THE VILLAGE IT'S JUST THE OPPOSITE! It was a totally absurd and Dadaistic project, but that is why,

going beyond all logic, it was extremely engaging. We clearly went beyond the paintings themselves, and the most important moment of the festival became a huge demonstration which involved the artists and all the inhabitants of the village carrying banners and many of them driving a tractor. The village was bursting with the participants. Inside the gallery space, it would never be possible to provoke such a high level of emotion and such mass engagement.



Figure 25 Demonstration aiming to turn the village into the forefront of the avant-garde.



Figure 26 Granny Tota in the centre of a demonstrating group of artists.

It was a procession responding to nostalgia for the avant-garde times that gave an idealistic vision of a better future built on the irreplaceable energy of young people. Our reference to the avant-garde was not accidental. 2017 was a year of celebration not only marking the 100th anniversary of the October Revolution but also the 100th anniversary of the Polish avant-garde and the first avant-garde manifesto. The motif of the avant-garde perfectly synchronized with the revolutionary roots of Staro Zhelezare and its rebellious genes. Therefore, following the Dadaists, the fathers of the world avant-garde who opposed the ruthless reality through absurdities, the artists in the village expressed their artistic postulates, goals, and needs in a happening based on absurdity.

It can be said that the common feature of our activities in Staro Zhelezare is the romantic vision of art as a carrier of positive utopias and the belief that "art can change the world." This is an optimistic vision of the future that was born among residents in opposition to what was, only a few years ago, their pessimistic everyday life thinking. At the universal level, it is a dream about a world without borders, free from inequality, domination, and ethnocentrism. Regardless, even if it is not possible here, art is able to bring this feeling so close and make it so real.

6. Social movement, financing

Staro Zhelezare street art project is unique because it comes out of a social movement that has nothing to do with other forms of street art or post-graffiti. It is different from what is going on in the cities around the world where artists paint in public spaces without permission. It is also not financed nor organized by municipal authorities. Instead, the project was born out of a residents' movement with almost no funding. The Polish Culture Institute in Sofia helps each year by buying two or three plane tickets for students. For the first time this year, we got some funds for painting materials from the Plovdiv2019 Foundation. The rest of the costs up until now have been covered by the artists themselves. Another positive aspect is that the mayor of the village has always been fully engaged and ready to help with any organisational problems twenty-four hours a day. The inhabitants of the village are wonderful, and, in fact, we have been overwhelmed by their openness, commitment, and willingness to help. They are proud of how their village was transformed and have shown how much they care for the artists from Poland by bringing tomatoes, cucumbers,

honey, watermelons and more. At the end of the festival, at the official vernissage, they come in crowds dressed in their best clothes, bringing cakes, and bragging to visitors. With regards to official support, various Polish and Bulgarian institutions such as the Mayor of the City of Poznań, the Institute of Slavic Philology of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, and the Polish Cultural Institute in Sofia agreed to give their patronage and to help with media promotion. The festival is also included in the official program of the European Capital of Culture Plovdiv 2019.

7. Conclusion

Staro Zhelezare discovered the extraordinary potential that lies in this kind of street art village formula. We respect and honour diverse community knowledge and support policies and practices that are informed by the community. Ultimately, success means we step back as residents step forward. Thanks to this kind of approach and these activities, the rural community's potential has a chance to be redefined. Questions concerning tolerance, diversity, and the interaction of different cultures are put in a new context providing a new perspective on the history of the village as its myths and legends awaken the community's identity and self-esteem. As a result, new reflections about the contemporary approach to heritage and community memory appear. The visually coherent formula of "Village of Personalities" is currently the only one of its kind in the world. Every year features a different theme, such as 'Lost Memories, Found Dreams,' 'Reconstruction of Bulgarian village,' 'Village of Vanguard,' or 'Staro Zhelezare MoMA.' The latter is planned for 2018 and will feature the first outdoor branch of the Museum of Modern Art in the village. This diversity gives an opportunity to undertake a deeper analysis of certain topics, particularly contemporary problems appearing globally, and to see what reflection they have in the context of the local community. This kind of artistic endeavour builds a stronger visual identity that helps shape the image of the village. In the end, we see a community woven more tightly together with actions supported that increase the individual and collective quality of life. The community's needs and values determine the appearance of timid resilience traces in Staro Zhelezare village.

MANIFESTO OF THE VILLAGE AVANT-GARDE
 THE REAL AVANT-GARDE IS BORN IN THE VILLAGE!
 THE VILLAGE IS THE SOURCE OF PROGRESSIVE IDEAS!
 STARO ZHELEZARE IS THE SOURCE OF PROGRESSIVE IDEAS!
 ALL ARTISTS TO THE VILLAGE!
 VILLAGE FUTURISM IS COMING!
 LONG LIVE THE WORLDWIDE VILLAGE ART – THE DECISIVE FACTOR OF SOCIETAL DEVELOPMENT!
 IN THE CITY MAN EXPLOITS MAN, BUT IN THE VILLAGE IT'S JUST THE OPPOSITE!
 CITIZENS! BE READY FOR VILLAGE AVANT-GARDE!
 EACH VACCINATED VILLAGE ARTIST – THE PILLAR OF HUMANITY'S DEVELOPMENT!
 LET'S RAISE ART TO A HIGHER LEVEL!
 VILLAGE AVANT-GARDE IS INEVITABLE!
 ARTISTS TO THE BARRICADES!

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