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## **YOUNG CITIZENS' ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS AND PARTICIPATION IN URBAN DESIGN**

### **Urban space – professional ethics and social art**

**It is predicted, that by the year 2025 the world population living in urbanised areas will reach 75 percent. The model of urbanisation should be therefore discussed intensively.**

**In the past, living in a city meant participation in community - one of its tasks was to keep the enemy away. Today, living in cities seems to give freedom, but at the same time, community feeling and safety are often lost. Many inhabitants feel forced to live in a city. In the past, environmental problems in a city were not perceived as human deeds. Today, it is obvious, that intensive urban development causes specific health problems and environmental damage. Ecological circles do not close properly. From the point of view of the natural environment cities are not self-sustainable. Ideally, in a balanced – renewable model, compensation for ecological damage should be as “local” as possible.**

**There is a paradox: contemporary cities seem to be “made by their nature” to serve mainly those, who are most productive (people in general, come to live in cities because of jobs). It would be logical**

48 (economical and ecological), if urban structure served them most effectively, but cities are not only "theirs".

Imagine: urban grid with fast traffic and infrastructure efficient for those, who "have to" be most productive at work, while open urban environment serving especially those, who are off-work or non-productive in a sense (children and youngsters, those who have to care for small children, elderly people and ... people who are homeless and the jobless - "rejected" or "excluded"). All of them need a kind of special approach in urban design. The nature of a contemporary "efficient" urban grid is technical and rigid, while public spaces oriented to slow traffic, walking, waiting or just "being", "hanging around" is more organic and free, it may also be more artistic.

Technical grids and infrastructure should be designed by specialists - ethical, conscious professionals, while the design of public spaces may involve wide participation of citizens - users. Both groups should find a common forum for city planning. Community feeling, democratic approach and interdisciplinary dialogue are needed and the involvement of young people in the process would be very promising.

## **Sustainability – idealism and obligation**

Does it sound strange that educational institutions themselves should serve as educational objects? Unfortunately, many new designed schools are only manifestations of architectural form, missing the requirements of sustainable building.

Today, while making architectural changes for the better, it may happen to be more necessary to remove objects from the landscape than to build new ones. Architects should admit this and the profession should concentrate more on creating good environment rather than only designing new buildings. To refurbish, regenerate or demolish (in general: "to change") means to require more knowledge on reducing, recycling and renewing. Architecture is transformation.

What keeps all new architecture from being sustainable? Lack of demand? Lack of knowledge? Lack of political will? Lack of economical motivations? It seems to be too obvious to say that every citizen should be responsible for the environment and architects should be visible examples of this. Architects and urban planners should take a

clear position against waste, urban sprawl and other negative phenomena. 49  
 Positive criteria for new development should be built and perceived by designers more as inspiration than something stealing their creative freedom. Is this all too idealistic?

The only chance to build and realise new criteria is to rely on the young generation. It is much more possible to get young people interested than to involve the older ("lost") generation.

## **Architecture in schools – an interesting option**

There are gaps between "architects of buildings", city planners and landscape architects. Here, as well, interdisciplinary and democratic dialogue is necessary. It serves the dialogue between architecture, the city structure and nature (built and natural environment).

Schools are in most cases the only places where citizen participation may be practised starting from early age. Architectural education may be introduced along with environmental education and citizenship training. It would be a great loss if these opportunities were lost. Even if architectural education is admitted to be necessary, some schools and local authorities may say they "cannot afford it". There is then the need to introduce "spatial subjects" as deep in the curriculum as possible – similarly to and in connection with ecological education.

Architecture of buildings and their surrounding landscape may be designed (or redesigned) and realised in a process, in which young users are involved. Professionals may withdraw to "listen". School environment, intermediate between a home and a city may be shaped as a redevelopment project (schoolground, interiors) resulting from common work. This may serve as best practice: school knowledge and citizen awareness changed into practice. It will happen, if participation and negotiation arts are learned. Working on the redevelopment project is a model for the urban planning and architecture themes of today – making changes in a complex existing state.

Experience from educational institutions may be (and this seems natural) transferred into wider settings (city parks, cultural institutions, streets, neighbourhoods).



*Pilawa 2005, schoolyard project presented at the town fair.*



*Suprasl 2003, realisation work.*

## Dialogue with the surroundings

In Poland, there is now growing interest in public realm – after some years. It was rather forgotten (or even consciously wiped out) as a “remnant” of communism. The interest in public spaces has come as the second concern after efforts to build consciousness of the natural environment.

There is a possibility to get young people interested in architecture and the environment (in both the local and global sense) by building educational programmes. At the end of 2005 the programme *Dialogue with the Surroundings – Architectural Education*<sup>1</sup> has been officially recognised as a free-choice offer for secondary schools within “regional cultural heritage” cross-curricular themes. The programme binds architecture with care for the natural environment and cultural heritage.

What follows, is a network of individuals and organisations being built, in cooperation with national chambers of architects and urban planners and the architects’ union. The educational tools are under preparation. More workshops and conferences are being organised for teachers, architects, urban planners, students and authority officials.

## Equal Chances – Young Architects of Change

The programme *Dialogue with the Surroundings* was based on many previous experiences, some of which are still continuing.<sup>2</sup> One of the recent projects was *Equal Chances – Young Architects of Change*<sup>3</sup> which was located in the *Grammar School in Pilawa*<sup>4</sup> (a small town southeast from Warsaw) and the *Training Centre for Culture Animators*<sup>5</sup> (in the nearby village of Śucznicza).

The *Akademia Śucznicza* (a non-governmental organisation), as organiser and host, applied for support to the *Polish Foundation for Children and Young People* and received funding from the *American Freedom Fund*. There were 20 participants (10 grammar school students, architect, landscape architect and students of architecture, art historian, students of *Warsaw University* – drawing student volunteers is a practice for other projects as well).

Goals of the project were:

(1) to provide young people with basic knowledge about the relationship between built and natural environments, (2) to work out and



*Suprasl 2003, primary school children working on a model of a playground for younger pupils.*

**implement the strategy of a balanced development in the school and its surroundings, (3) to develop the school students' interest in landscape architecture, drawing, modelling, design and planning (4) to enable and encourage the implementation of workshop experiences in own homes, plots, playgrounds as well as in public space and (5) to introduce the element of participation into the practice of planning (through the public debate on projects done by young people).**

**The preparatory activities were the seminar and workshop in October 2004, with participation of students of architecture and culture animation. Then, the targets of the project were identified and the participants got involved in broad analysis, discussion and eventually - design.**

**After common meetings ("illustrated inspirations" containing some basic elements of architecture, ecology, arts, crafts) participants**

**divided into three groups working on: the Park in the centre of the town, the School environment and the remodelling of the Culture Centre building with its surroundings. Thorough analyses of sites and community (users) needs were made. The final results were scale models exhibited and presented by the young participants in the Town Council to general public and authorities. The debate over town centre regeneration is now animated with these proposals taken into account. The project is going to continue being an inspiration to a theme of the international Playce workshops in Poland in 2006.**

**The achievements were: presenting of a teaching proposal based on architecture and landscape design; the proof that young citizens may become engaged through democratic processes in shaping the environment from which the community may benefit; giving a clear proof that qualities of life and "everyday" surroundings are interconnected and building a bridge between professionals and non – professionals.**

<sup>1</sup> Authors: Zofia Bisiak, Dariusz Śmiechowski, Anna Wróbel

<sup>2</sup> *Architecture, Harmony and Cultural Traditions* programme was based in a number of localities in Poland and initiated by Zofia Bisiak and led together by a group of people engaged. The project *My School Environment* in Supraśl, in the northeastern part of Poland (led by Dariusz Śmiechowski) was a part of the international Animusproject *Home – My Centre of the World* [www.animusproject.org](http://www.animusproject.org). The first *Genius Loci* workshop in Gdynia was organized by Anna Wróbel and led by Dariusz Śmiechowski and Zofia Bisiak. The part of the workshops for teachers within the *Eco-teams Programme* of the *Global Action for the Earth Foundation* [www.gappolska.org](http://www.gappolska.org) led in Olsztyn by Dariusz Śmiechowski was good experience for future schoolground design projects. The workshop project *In Dialogue with the Surroundings* in the city of Plock (led by Zofia Bisiak and Dariusz Śmiechowski) encompassed three kindergartens, three primary schools and a big playground.

<sup>3</sup> Led by Zofia Bisiak, Dariusz Śmiechowski and Anna Wróbel.

<sup>4</sup> [www.pilawa.com.pl](http://www.pilawa.com.pl)

<sup>5</sup> [www.lucznicza.org.pl](http://www.lucznicza.org.pl)