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Research Article

Unconventional interventions on redeveloping unused urban landscapes based on social interactions

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In urban landscape, we are increasingly encountering the phenomenon of forgotten places, open areas without function, which were created by sanitation of unpromising objects or influence of various other external factors. We mostly talk about so-called mid-blocks and inner pavilion places which are open free spaces between two elements of a building, or empty areas between two or more separate objects without mutual connection. Thus, undeveloped places in the already standing continuous development which are intended to be reconstructed. This would be the most suitable solution from the point of view of a certain urban concept of the city because the original development would be supplemented and a meaningful urban structure would be created again. However, over time, it is not always easy and possible to redevelop all these places. In this case, it is necessary to think of a new function that would partially replace the original one. As part of green infrastructure and urban planning, municipalities often integrate various green solutions into these places which encourage their residents and users to spend their free time meaningfully in them. In the long run, these solutions are probably the best possible alternative to the above-mentioned supplementation of urban structures. However, it does not always have to be an expensive and sophisticated design but sometimes only a small short-term intervention based on a deeper developed idea called "bring back function" will suffice. The paper describes unconventional interventions to the places without function and seeks their connection with users in the context of social interaction.

Keywords: research by design, urban landscape, social interactions, open space, small-scale architecture

1 Introduction

The quality of the space we create in the landscape is conditioned by a combination of strong opinions and decisive actions. We think of public space as a set of several entities that are sometimes vague, unspoken, and difficult to grasp. They can be full or empty. We are also sensitive to what is happening to the space at the city level and, consequently, to the impact of the outcome of nonconceptual decisions on the landscape, as the cultural cradle (Tóth et al., 2019) of our nation. A space that enriches our everyday life at various levels, whether conscious or unconscious for some, is rarer today than ever before. It grows in value and passes quickly. Although it persists in places, it also disappears and arises. It is becoming a scarce commodity and we are ahead of time which will grab and take a piece of it. Our task is first and foremost to perceive spaces and discover those that have been foreign to us so far. Here, the question arises as to whether we can still consider "emptiness" as one of the characteristic features of today's space. It is not primarily the main axis of interpretation of the term, but from the point of view of architecture, landscape architecture and urbanism, it regularly appears in places without the "empty" function. In landscape architecture, space is usually open (OpenSpace) and harmoniously integrates a certain work – an idea with the phenomenon of origin. So, the idea connects with the place. When we talk about spatial composition, that composition has several dimensions: technical, psychological, aesthetic, functional, social, and cultural. If we talk about the functional dimension, it is especially in connection with the function of space, which means for what function the space should serve. The term multifunctionality is normally used in contemporary landscape architecture as a positive feature – meaning a space is created to provide several functions at once. In addition to

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the functional dimension, quality space must also be aesthetically strong, well-engineered, social, where the focus is on the user and his/her social interaction and social inclusion (Čibik & Štěpánková, 2021), and cultural, where the space must achieve a certain local identity and enhance, underline the local character. Within urbanism and urban planning as creative and scientific disciplines, concepts such as: human scale, cities for people, cities for all, etc. are appearing more and more nowadays (Lukas-Sithole, 2020). There is even much, perhaps too much, talk about gender-sensitive planning (Sidorová et al., 2016), user-friendliness of urban design and planning, a fair and shared city, or an inclusive city. In all areas of urban planning, the final design depends on the needs of the people. Therefore, we should let them decide what activities they are interested in.

1.1 Theoretical background

Some questionings are very common in nowadays landscape architecture design: what role can open spaces play in reviving public life? How can public spaces effectively contribute to making social interaction possible? And even more decisive: what kind of tools can be used to achieve these goals? It seems that temporality and dynamics are prevailing over permanence, creativity is overcoming regulations. Interventions that can articulate public interactions through low cost and temporary strategies are seen as having the ability to create a positive impact on urban habitat. Highlighting the importance of promoting a vibrant public space capable of activating public life while serving as a symbol of urban quality (Hernandez & Casanova, 2014). In this sense, mutating strategies based on citizens as decision makers appear as solutions very well accepted once they commute the most evident needs with different resources available in different places and time. Seeing the city as an event place can result in some interesting situations that enrich social interaction. We humans are unique and each of us is a unity of sensations and backgrounds. The presence of Nature in cities is able to bring us back to a common base of principles where we feel somehow connected and where we are back in the mood of letting ourselves enjoy our characteristics of social beings. This idea is brought about by the Fourth Nature concept which envisions the evolution of our relation to the natural world through consciousness and the recovery of uniqueness in multiplicity. We perceive the design process through a wide range of output forms. These are in-depth analyses, text accompanying and technical reports, various strategies, graphs, diagrams, graphic outputs, and visualizations. The application of scientific methods within the artistic-creative environment is a great challenge for anyone who tries to do so. The process of research in architecture is often similar to the process experienced by an architect in practice. Every good design is preceded by a set of detailed analyses without which it is difficult for the designer to work towards a quality result. The interpretation of the final design is primarily graphical but the process that preceded the design is already research based on the processing of certain data. According to Mitchell and Jolley (2012), a conflict arises between design and research, which he considers as a problem. This claim cannot be accepted. There is a strong bond between design and research, and this interconnection is not seen as a conflict, but as a natural relationship on which it is necessary to build. It is a constantly evolving process in which texts, images and stories enter, so practically everything that affects us. Selective processing, exclusion and subsequent folding, generation, mixing brings different types of colouring (selection and processing of data can be random, subjective or, conversely, objective). We influence these parameters by ourselves with the input data and the decision on how we will process them (Greš, 2018). It is important for architects and landscape architects to be able to implement a range of effective research strategies. Now, we perceive an ever-increasing trend of tasks diversification of the landscape architect (Deming & Swaffield, 2011). The scale and scope of this discipline is constantly expanding. The logical and innovative approach, which prioritizes the legitimacy of knowledge based on collective and proven practices over strict adherence to various protocols obtained solely based on scientific models, creates a strong argument for generating a new legitimacy paradigm for new types of research processes, such as the research methods (van den Brink et al., 2017). When working with non-functional spaces, we often find ourselves in an environment where conceptual solutions and more universal working procedures – architectural and landscape-architectural design, are not entirely easy, due to the complexity of the issue, to apply reliably. Likewise, the methods mentioned below may not lead to satisfactory conclusions. Their results are often misleading and the architectural concept would have to be developed in more detail to confirm the established hypotheses. Confirmation or refutation of the design of fragments of conceptual solutions that appear in this contribution, represents the landscape-architectural design and later the realization and real space. However, this goes beyond the scope of the submitted paper (Dlesk, 2016).

2 Material and methods

The research presents the basic contours of the strategic process that can be observed in the field of the well-known concept "bring back function" at the level

of the surrounding European countries and deals with a specific example. Through case study methods of qualitative research, various case studies were studied and compared, which were included in the working database in the preparatory phase. For the needs of this research, a locality (Partizánske, Western Slovakia) with an urban character was selected, where an object – a spatial-forming element called "Rampolynå", was created in a place without a function. The space was chosen regarding to its focus, functioning, visual identity, area, location, position, and geographical location in relation to the landscape and the city, to ensure sufficient diversity while maintaining the relevance of the example to the Central European context. The wooden object was created as part of an international student workshop called (1 : 1) Workshop in the summer of 2019. The main goal of the workshop is to analyse a selected area of the city, in which the creators have never been, in ten intensive days and to build a wooden structure and thus expand practical skills and experience. The created object remains in place after the workshop and becomes an important part of it. The workshop is a moving event and unique of its kind because it brings life to forgotten places with potential or faded past (Cséfalvay et al., 2020).

The location in which the small-scale object is located is the Milan Rastislav Štefánik Park (Fig. 1), which until recently had only a transitional function and the function of a barrier between the industrial zone and the housing areas. Since the founding of the city, it has been an important part of the concept of an ideal industrial city. It formed part of the belt of regulatory greenery, which separated the production area from the rest of the city in which it lived and was supposed to regulate smog and noise from the factory (Janíčková, 2019). During the full operation of the large shoe company owned by famous Tomáš Baťa, the park played an important role with a psychosocial influence in the lives of the employees who



Figure 1 Wider relations and location of the Rampolynå. Milan Rastislav Štefánik Park, Partizánske (hatched area), where the wooden structure is located, is part of the green belt. Insulating greenery, along with a 1st class road, separates the industrial part of the city from the housing areas

passed through it on the way to/from work. In recent years, however, it did not fulfil its function and the place became forgotten. Therefore, it was necessary to revive the space with something new and somehow draw attention to its past. The research in this paper was mainly covered by the methods of Case study research and Research by design which are described below in this chapter. Observational methods were also used directly, where the observer in the designated area and time observes the behaviour of people in space (Jančovičová & Štěpánková, 2014). In addition to these methods, so-called in-depth interviews with residents and users also entered the data collection process. In-depth interviews, also called informal or semi-structured interviews, are one of the methods of qualitative research and thus complement data collection. This method is one of the simplest methods of collecting primary material and data (Adamková, 2018). Graphic outputs are considered to be the most effective analytical and interpretive method in architecture. Therefore, vector graphics tools were primarily used to analyse and process the results (Čibik & Štěpánková, 2021).

2.1 Case study research

A process in which we collect data in the form of textual and graphical documentation of selected existing spaces and areas through well-documented, systematic, and in-depth analysis of empirical research. On the basis of implemented projects, other research methods are used to identify and evaluate the aspect we have researched. The case studies interpret new findings in an effort to advance and develop landscape architecture. This is also declared by the Landscape Architecture Foundation (LAF). According to the foundation, the case study method is a suitable and valuable approach in landscape planning as well as in the scientific research process. The advantage of the case study method in landscape architecture, as well as other planning and design disciplines, where classical empirical scientific methods are difficult to apply, lies in the ability to gain holistic knowledge from practice. Based on already implemented projects, we can easily examine and observe whether the newly emerging concepts and ideas are correct and whether they meet the goal we have chosen (Čibik & Štěpánková, 2021). There may be some degree of subjectivity here but it is questionable whether objectivity plays a key role in this case (Sidorová & Feriancová, 2014).

2.2 Research by design

Research by design is one of the methods of scientific research in which design is considered as a tool of research in the planning process of a certain creative activity and also in the study of various materials, sketches, various mappings, etc. (Fig. 2). However, in practice, this method does not have clear boundaries (Dlesk, 2016). The positions of its interpretation, understanding and application are still open for discussion. The exact definition is difficult to find because everyone explains it in their own way and just as neither of these interpretations is correct, on the other hand, each of them has something in it and we must consider it relevant and accept it. To describe it simply "research by design" is a method of research through design (Hauberg, 2011). However, this is not done intuitively, but based on study (experimental design study), data, research and evaluation. It is an activity that is largely influenced by subjectivity, but at the same time it is a way of thinking in which the architect asks certain questions, to which he seeks complex answers, and this is nevertheless an essential essence

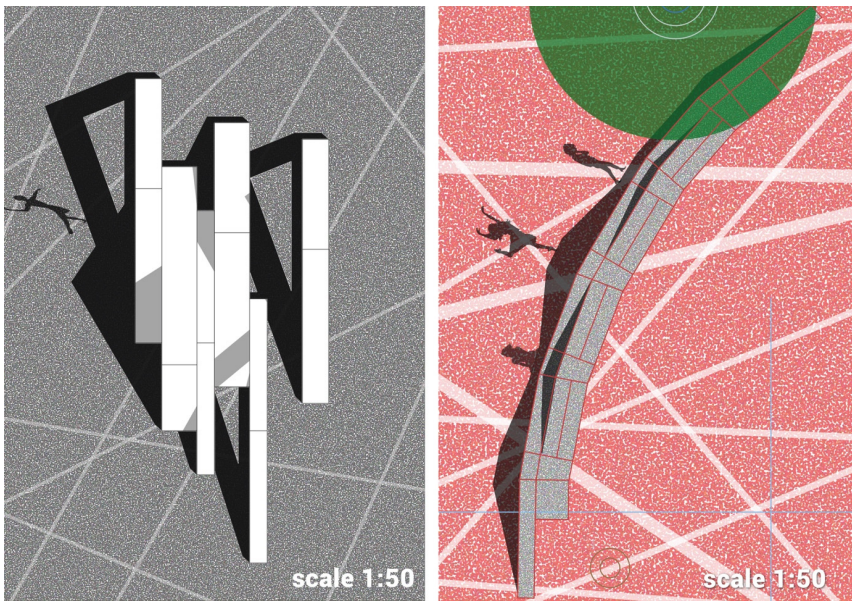


Figure 2 The workshop participants with similar individual concepts were grouped into working groups and continued like this on the three most prominent concepts which were presented during the group critics where the final form of the proposed object was determined. The principle of the final design was based on the collage method – the strong elements of the individual projects were merged and the resulting object was drawn into technical drawings and 3D models
Source: participants of the workshop, vectorised by author

of any research (Thompson, 2008). Professors Martin Tamke and Mette Ramsgaard Thomsen (Ramsgaard-Thomsen & Tamke, 2009) from the Royal Danish Academy (DKAK), Institute of Architecture and Technology, consider the design process in architecture as a reflexive activity where comparisons, assessments and evaluations are carried out through sketches, cyclical movement between design and search and continuous oscillation between the problem and its solution (Dlesk, 2016).

3 Results and discussion

Social interaction is one of the biggest shortcomings of modern society. The way most of our cities were developed until now shows us big issues to be worked on. Compactness and continuity for instance are characteristics to be enhanced. An important player in this goal is nature once its presence turns a formerly "empty" space into an occupied place and its different graduations along streets provide fluidity in the city structure. This brings quality, subserving greatly social interaction, which within the city is created by its own physical spaces. If its public spaces are of good virtue then socio-cultural activities will begin to prevail over the primary functions of the city. The social resource in the city plays an important role in its life and structure. It must therefore be subject to constant development and spatial change in order to persuade the city's inhabitants to stop and think. To observe and perceive, to feel connected to it. When this happens, a sense of belonging is created, changing positively the relation between user and ambience, between users themselves too. For this kind of result, it is also recommended to combine existing historical and cultural values in a homogeneous way with some modern spatial solutions. The societal value of a public space can be huge if it regularly contributes to building a place where several groups of people have a dialogue at the same time. A well-designed space is open to communities (Marques, McIntosh & Chanse, 2020) of people from different social classes, regardless of race, age, origin, or gender. Such places mediate social interaction, social mixing, social integration and support the development of links between communities. A typical example of a spatial element that has created a new meaningful space in a public space without a function is the Rampolynå. Rampolynå is a free-standing wooden structure – an element of small architecture that clearly defines its functions, but at the same time, opens to different interpretations of everyone who interacts with it. The public space thus receives an architecture that complements and transforms it at the same time. The postmodern style of work fits perfectly into its surroundings – the modernist town of Partizánske, Slovakia and its other architectural layers. Already during its design process, a wide range of people were involved in participatory planning in cooperation with the local NGO's and the residents and users of the space themselves. In the first stage of analysis, it was ascertained how the visitors of the park behave, what groups of the city's inhabitants move in it, what is in it and what is missing in it. The interests and activities of the respondents were monitored. Mainly what activities are involved and whether they perform them in a group or as individuals. The movement and operation of users within the space was also an important factor. One of the basic requirements in a human-friendly space is to allow comfortable movement of pedestrians. Quality walking movement should be safe and free. The dynamic as well as the static movement was monitored, and thus in which places within the solved area the users stayed. Larger groups of people in various places created social security. An equally important monitored attribute must be the attribute healthy environment and greenery in the planning process. The variations in way of living that are emerging nowadays will come together with changes in design. New challenges demand new operational modes. The recently studied NDD Nature Deficit Disorder by Richard Louv (2019) shows us in a forced way, the solutions we must aim for. Different physical and behavioural problems come out derived from a life disconnected from Nature (Back Prochnow, 2020). In this sense, the way our cities are planned and also if not most important, the way we intend to requalify our living environments must urgently prescribe the presence of Nature at its different scales. Our capacity of creation is immense, we need to adjust it to be used in tune with the natural world. New technologies in design must be positioned with the intention of reconnecting us and not departing us from our environment. Understanding the city itself as a form of Nature. Our knowledge transforms Nature. Our knowledge transforms Nature into a cultural landscape (Calaza-Martínez, Freire-González & Blanco-Pampín, 2019; Netsch & Gugerell, 2019) that can enhance or dismiss the connection we are looking for. Cities are frequently taken as the opposite of Nature, but no, this can be considered a false assumption, easy to understand when we observe one of nature's basic laws: polarity. It says that opposite things are in fact the same, just in different intensities. The beauty of this concept is that these polarities are always moving, changing, searching for balance. And this is exactly how our idea of cities and how our new mindset in planning must be. Just like our internal processes, physical and psychological states influence the consciousness we experience, the spaces within the city also have this capacity of bringing back balance for the basis scenario where our own balance can find support. This is where landscape architecture

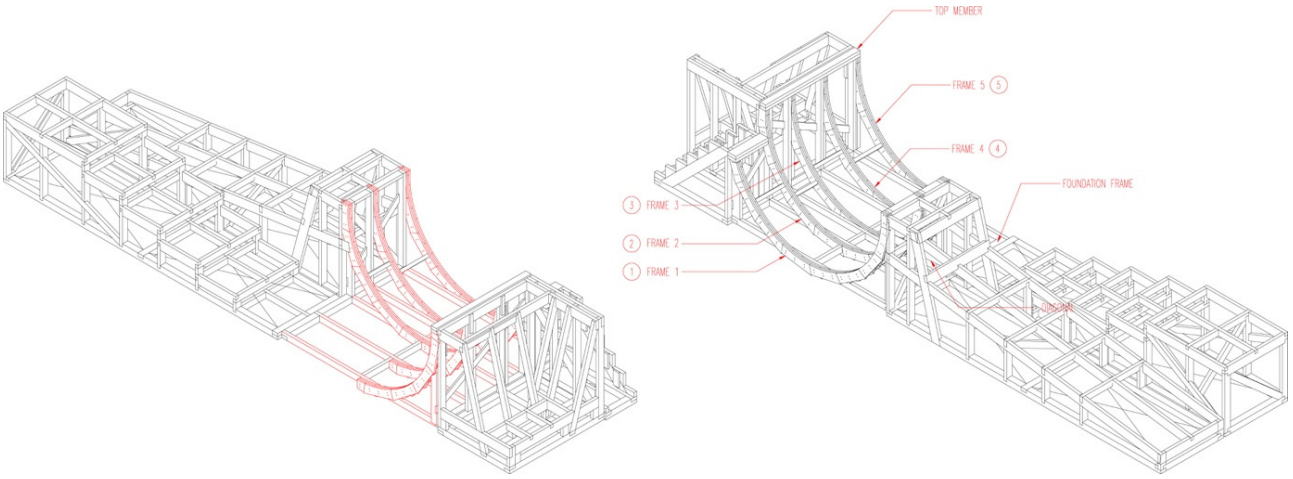


Figure 3 Construction detail of the wooden structure. The workshop (1 : 1) was also focused on expand practical skills and experience of participants, which resulted in sophisticated design process. The close connection of the design with the subsequent self-help construction of the building broadens their horizons within the unusual typologies in public space
Source: participants of the workshop, vectorised by author

comes in: the way in which external events also weigh on this human balance. We actively and humanely create our own perception and consciousness based on our experiences. So planning is supposed to bring the best experiences possible to its users, according to the evolutionary moment they are in. Milan Rastislav Štefánik Park together with the Rampolynå wooden structure offer users a set of these attributes. An element of small-scale architecture was added to the place that was "only" a non-functional green open area until summer of 2019 which forces users to stop, think, relax, debate, and socialize. Rampolynå (Fig. 3) is unique and unforgettable, it is a "One for all and All for one" kind of object. Its postmodern style fits its surroundings – modernist town of Partizánske and its other architectural layers perfectly. It was designed not only for an empty and unused green belt sort of park but also for hosting events organized by local NGO "Fabrika Umenia". Its secondary function as a stage has already been tested by diverse events.

4 Conclusions

Changing and renewing means being able to understand the moving and the liveness of our settlements. The balance between open spaces and buildings, between private and public, between individuality and sociality can change from one specific period of time to another. We are entering a new era, where us, human beings, and our health together with the planet health must be the ultimate target of planning. Architecture and urban design must be able to understand its power also in our sensitivity, in our mood, in our emotions, since one of the biggest demands of our time is mental health that can be assured also by social interaction. Our designs must be able to create conditions in which our inner essence can be mirrored, in otherness. That means in everything that surrounds us, we must be able to find meanings and truth and beauty. Our cities must enhance our experience of living, instigating our senses from new perspectives. This becomes possible when in a conscious way of design, the conceptual ideas connect with the place. It is what is called a "*Genius Loci* approach" (Castello & Back Prochnow, 2021). When we talk about spatial composition, it is intrinsic that it will have several dimensions. All these arise from the fact that we are not passive recipients of world events. We actively participate in the interactions between events and ourselves – which together will determine our perception. So, being able to perceive the place's characteristics and features can lead us to the most interesting results in planning and designing. Not every dimension must or shall be present in every place – that turns the approach even more dynamic. Some places are supposed to be "empty" for example, to let the whole urban landscape breathe. Empty of concreteness but full of nature, full of people. It's a necessary part of the organic tissue that shows nowadays even greater value. We are living sick, in sick cities, because we do not allow Nature's processes and flows. We are apart. Considering cities as liveable, however there are and there will always be parts to be renewed, it is crucial not to be afraid of these changes. Some examples are clear and obvious, others show themselves only for peculiar ways of observing. To demonstrate the way our researches and works foresee and consider landscape design adequate to our future reality, it is already possible to bring some examples from different countries and experiences, as the one presented in this paper.

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