

Outcomes of the experimental assignment in Studio Project I - Urban Design

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ABSTRACT: The Studio Project I - Urban Design is mandatory for 1st year Master's students in the Faculty of Architecture at Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava. In the 2017/18 academic year, the main assignment of the course was thus to role-play a *chief town architect* to identify neurlgic points of the city focus on sensitive urban interventions in existing contexts, having in mind the main target group - daily users and inhabitants of these areas. The article analyses the experiences from its formal parts and evaluates three different perspectives of its participants: experience of students, of teachers and of the city representatives. Educational process itself also experimented *intuition* in design and creative process to a large extent. The final outcomes of the evaluation show that a *playful* assignment eventually reflected a high quality of students' proposals. It helped also to reveal the hidden, but profound deficiencies in students learning processes, which can be now better targeted in other courses. The article contributes to current practices in the education of architects, particularly to teaching of urban design studios, as well as drafts recommendations for other related courses.

INTRODUCTION

The way that urban planning is executed in Slovakia needs to be rethought. As in many post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Slovak towns lack regulation. Massive real estate development led by private families or big companies too often results in the (spontaneous) emergence of urban or suburban areas that lack basic qualities of standard urban neighbourhoods, from spaces for services or amenities, green and recreational areas up to simple things as pavements for pedestrian movements. The only professional that should have the knowledge and power to manage these processes - a *chief town architect* employed by the municipality - is overwhelmed by the massive financial incentives and the desire of the local people for fast and new buildings - or is in these processes completely missing.

Since these trends have been persisting in the everyday life of all Slovak towns for some years, at the Institute of Urban Design and Land Use Planning of the Faculty of Architecture at Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava, Slovakia, the authors decided to reflect on the situation by better preparing the future architects for such a situation. In the winter semester of the 2017/18 academic year, the authors focused on the Studio Project I - Urban Design, the main design studio in the Master's degree programme, to work on role-play of the chief town architect. As the case study city, the town of Komárno was selected, which is also an associated partner in the international DANUrB project by Interreg Transnational Programme Scheme that is focused on exploring and valorising the unexplored heritage in settlements along the Danube River.

Such a choice of topic for urban design studio builds on on-going transformation and modernisation of syllabi that has been conducted within the Faculty for the past several years [1][2]. Furthermore, the aim was also to experiment with the incorporation of intuitive designing and building students' skills in decision-making processes and communication.

ARCHITECTURAL AND URBAN DESIGN EDUCATION TODAY

As many have already pointed out, in order to overcome the crisis in mismatching current architectural education and the requirements of heterogeneous, no longer linear tasks of the practising architectural professional, one needs teaching that engages students' active participation through practiced-based learning in the design studio. Charalambous and Cristou very fittingly argue:

Students today should be encouraged not only to develop their design thinking, but to develop it responsibly towards others and the environment. They should also be encouraged to develop management and collaborative skills in order to handle all different variables and stakeholders in their process of designing. Unfortunately, in many cases, architectural education is still structured to produce the solitary genius rather than today's collaborator [3].

Therefore, it seems that training students in collaborative team work, and having assignments with real situations and real people involved, might contribute in them learning about responsibility, as well as better understanding the environment. More precisely, Solimon states that a general agreement to support realistic design problems is needed, and how these projects influence the learning situation. Dealing with design constraints can challenge learners to be more creative with their projects and helps students to apply the learning process in a real-life context [4].

STUDIO PROJECT I URBAN DESIGN: *CHIEF TOWN ARCHITECT*

Design Studio Assignment

The design studio assignment was a key part of the game of role-play of a chief town architect, an essential step in developing the decision power and learning to identify the important issues in the urban tissue.

Contrary to the more common educational practice when students are given a site and a brief with proposed functions and estimated area to be built, this time the students were asked to develop the assignment on their own, as is often part of the profession. Basically, students working in pairs were asked to identify areas crucial for city development and design their potential transformation. Consequently, the students were also supposed to learn to develop their own design methodologies and strategies, addressing the issues they had selected.

The innovative approach to the assignment was also reflected in the content. Standard semestral design studios are usually focused on designing new urban structures. However, one of the aims of this course was to focus on sensitive urban interventions in existing contexts, having in mind the main target group - daily users and inhabitants of these areas. This approach is important also due to the shift in architectural practice, which has now to focus on *leftover spaces* in the city in complex environment [5].

In the studio, students were firstly asked to analyse the city with an aim to choose the most important topic. The students were deliberately asked not to follow the existing *Land Use Plan* of the city and the ideas pushed forward by representatives of local municipality, in order to develop their own views and positions onto the city of Komárno and their potential future developments. Also, since the core of the city consists of many listed monuments and designing in such an environment is based on great number of rules and restrictions, this part of the city was excluded from the assignment. The only hint the students were given was a slogan of *connections - connecting*, to imply that the role of an architect should be one of managing and connecting different perspectives and interest of various stakeholders, thus overcoming fragmentation, that what is now the common practice of *egoist individual* in many Western countries [6].

Semester Works and Complementary Activities

In order to support the playful feeling in the studio, the course comprised complementary activities that also involve informal situations. Initially there was an on-site visit to the city of Komárno, and meeting with local stakeholders from different fields: local authority representatives, the current chief town architect, and instigators of local activities. Students were thus given an opportunity to observe and process contradictory opinions on the city development, important issues to be solved and architectural taste.

Another site visit was conducted in the city of Budapest (Hungary). The aim of the trip was to study and experience good/bad examples of various city transformation (with a focus on public investments in public space or regulations). Furthermore, since the BME University is also a part of the DANURB Interreg Project, their students of urban design were also working on the site in Komárno. The approach taken by BME, was a different one, looking for a futuristic and visionary scenarios of city development with no regard to the current situation. Such a contrasting experience was fruitful for students of both universities and led to a competitive approach. In the end, this led to higher levels of elaboration of concepts being reached, as well as graphic presentations of individual students' works.

The complementary activities also involved special lectures given by professionals from practice, who shared with the students the real experiences working in the position of chief town architect in other similar-sized cities. This helped to simulate the conditions of the real chief town architect. Furthermore, the course was supported by a block of lectures on the importance and execution of collaborative planning that students tested in their individual projects. Finally, students had the opportunity, especially by the end of semester during the final presentations, to present their ideas, approaches and visions to the *real* chief town architect of the city of Komárno, who has to face the same simulated issues in his/her real professional practice.

LESSONS LEARNED: STUDIO PROJECT I - URBAN DESIGN *CHIEF TOWN ARCHITECT*

Evaluation - Experiences of Stakeholders

In order to understand the evaluation of the experience, the pros and cons of the process and the outcomes of this design studio were looked at from three perspectives: from the perspective of the students' experience, teachers experience and

the experience of the representatives of the city of Komárno, to whom the authors collaborated tightly through the whole process (Table 1).

Table 1: Evaluation of pros and cons of the studio design from the perspective of the students, teachers and city representatives.

	Pros (+)	Cons (-)
Students	Practicing the real-life situations that will help students to be better prepared on the professional life.	Because of the differences in ideas students could not <i>take inspiration</i> from each other.
	Experiences with presenting their thinking and proposals with real architect working on the same assignment in <i>real world</i> .	The time and resources that students have to execute the analysis in order to select the sites for transformation was limited, and thus at the end might bring unsatisfying results
	Topic selection according to individual preference and interests.	
Teachers	The possibility to target students' individual strengths and weaknesses, and thus help them to work on these.	Due to the variety of sites selected by students, there arose many new topics, which had to be covered and gained expertise in by teachers in short time span.
	Better understand and learn the city from different perspectives, supporting the teacher's researching activities.	More intense and time-consuming requirements on pedagogical preparation and consequently teaching time.
	More interesting (less stereotyping) diverse and challenging teaching experience.	
City representatives	Many diverse ideas elaborated by students on different parts of the city	The city representatives were not able to control the process of selection of the sites, to certain extent nor the design process.
	Inspiration for the city-architect (or a critique?)	

Evaluation of the Outcomes and their Qualities

Analysing the results - outcomes of the students' works, The authors explored the several specific features that emerged from these experimental assignments, involving site selections, topics of the works, form and the proposals themselves.

Site Selection

Despite initial worries about the quality of the students' individual selection of the areas of their work, which could have led to assignments that were too narrowed or too broad, students eventually chose very strategic areas on a right scale, supported also with a good estimation of what can be designed during a semester-long studio and what to be left in the concept ideas (see Figure 1).

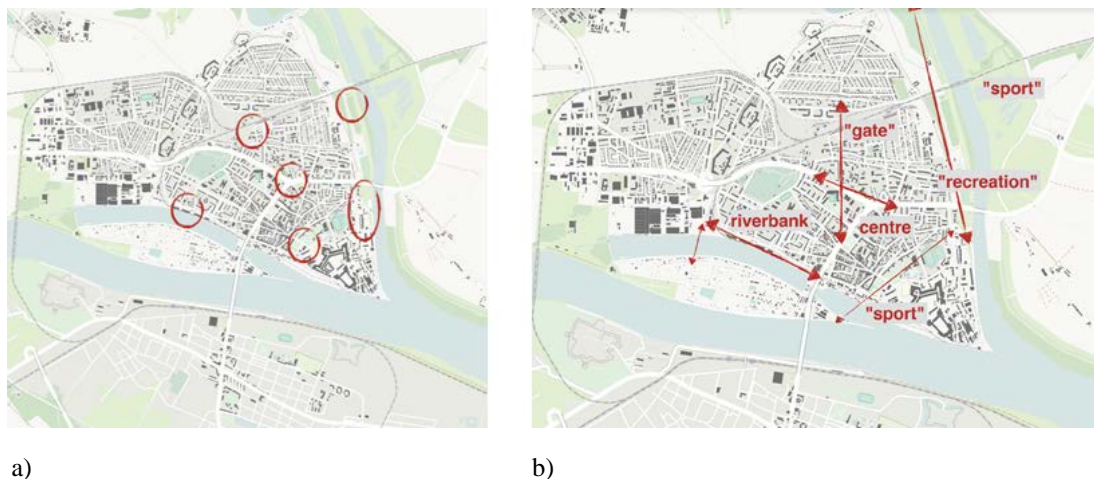


Figure 1: Sites and routes selected by the students (by the authors).

Topics and Forms

The topics that students identified to be the most crucial for the development of the city of Komárno, and thus those to be addressed first (see Figure 1) included the *gates* and the main entrances, such as the railways station, redevelopment of the main traffic route through the city, improving the connections between main focal points: the railway station and historic city centre, the city centre and important fortress monument; connection of the city and the river; and revitalisation of riverbanks and industrial sites and existing facilities. Finally, there were attempts to regulate spontaneous housing developments.

Since no information about the choice of the design strategy was given, students were expected to learn to develop their own design methodologies and strategies, addressing the issues they had selected, the interesting part of the outcomes was the form that students chose for their ideas.

Generally, applying a *design manual* for specific urban element (main streets, riverbanks, etc) was identified as a better way to regulate the city development, as is currently used in *Land Use Plans*. Thus, as can be seen in Figure 2, most of the student teams attempted to elaborate a design manual, which was then *tested* on a selected specific area.

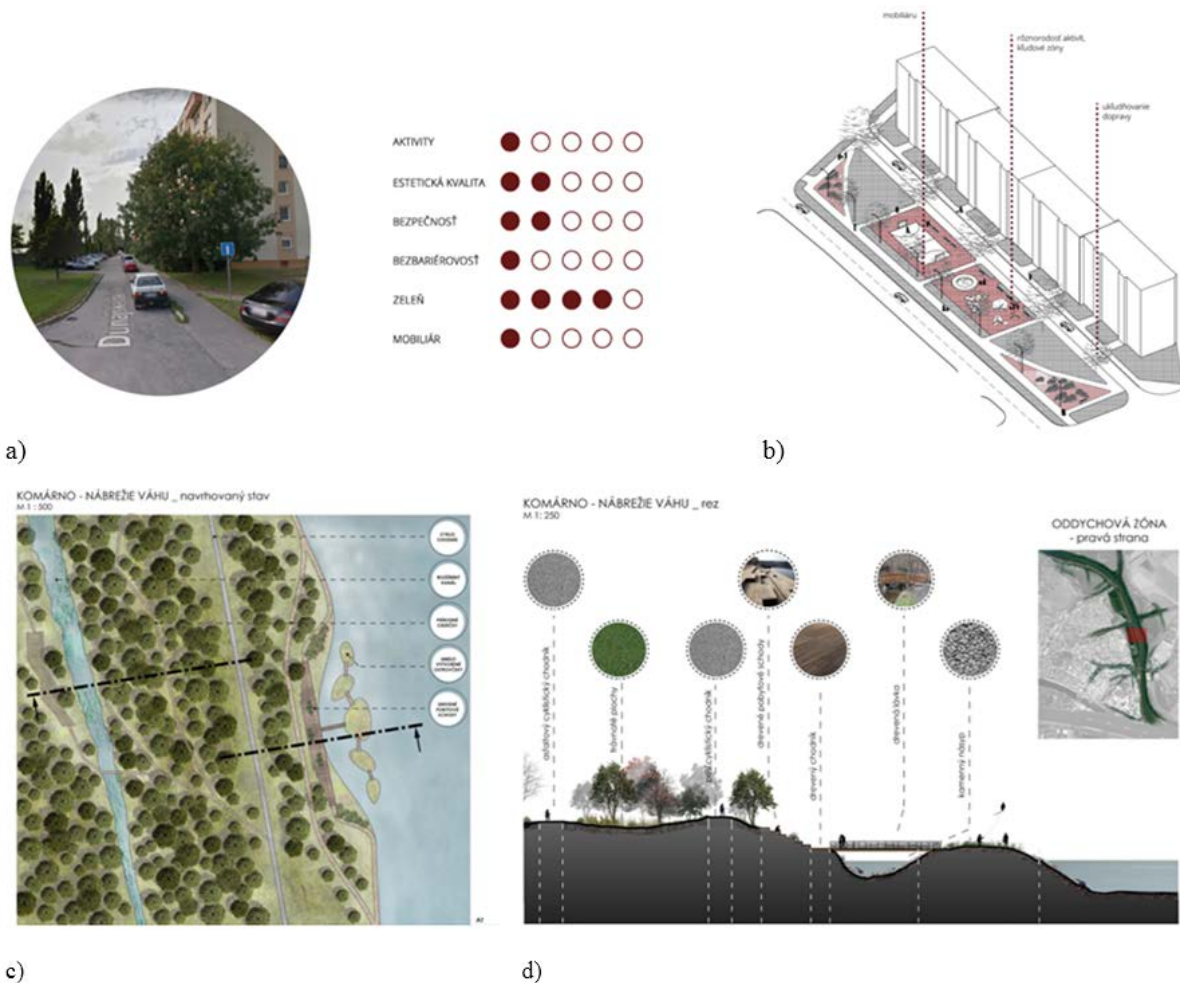
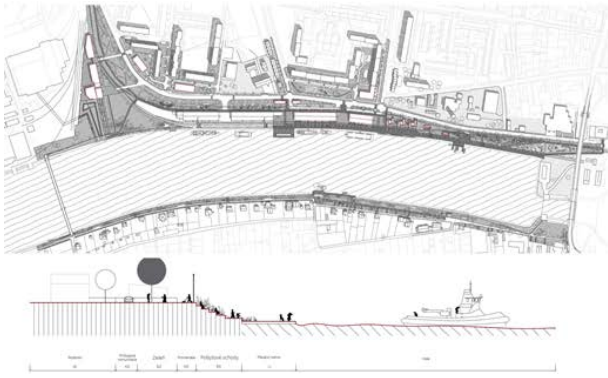


Figure 2: Idea of *design manuals* as a more effective tool in regulating and addressing the development of the city; a) and b): design manual for the main streets of everyday use in Komárno (students: Merkovská, Dulín); c) and d): for the riverbank of River Váh (students: Matkobišová, Matia).

Proposals for Transformation

The proposals for the transformation were predominantly focused on improving the functionality of operational use of these areas. Since all of these involved public spaces, students attempted to apply the general principles of good design of urban public spaces in order to make them more accessible for everyday users, working with the premise that better design supports more intensive use of public spaces. Furthermore, the essential point was to enhance the permeability of the area, and thus support the mobility shift from automobile transport into more sustainable and accessible means.

Also, the proposals involved relocations of parking (or redesign) in order to release more of the streets for pedestrians and cyclists, cycle routes enhancement in order to reduce automobile mobility, bridging two parts of the city and addressing the need of more (social) housing in the area (Figures 3 and 4).

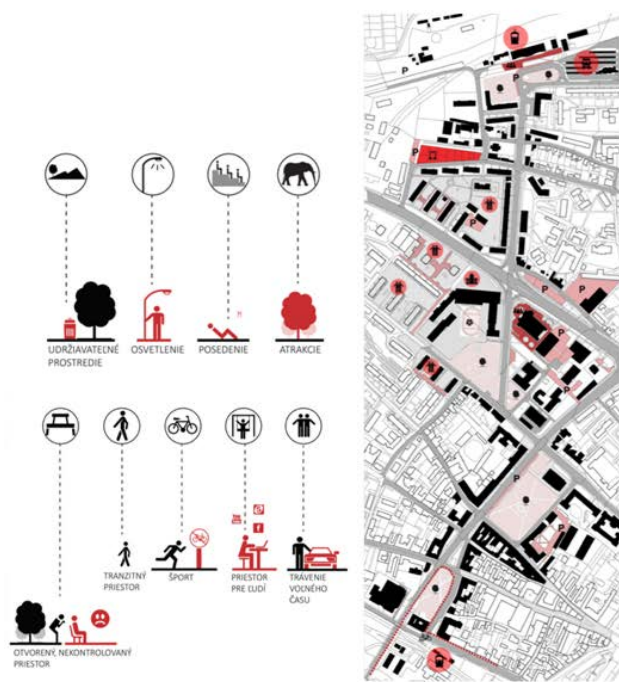


a)

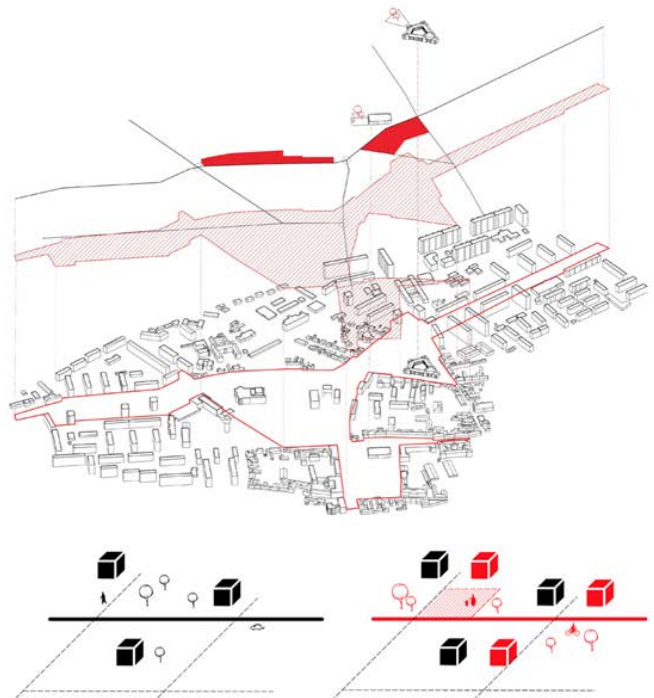


b)

Figure 3: Riverbank of River Váh; a) revitalisation of the riverbanks with an aim of connecting the city and the water using good design of public spaces (students: Merkovská, Duřín); b) new residential structures (students: Matkobiřová, Matia).



a)



b)

Figure 4: City transformation; a) a proposal of an intensification of the area in the city centre based on the presumption of the changes in traffic patterns (students: Mullerová, Novacká); b) a proposal of the public space redesign, connecting the train station, as the main entrance to the city and the city centre (students: řtrbíková, Vdolečková).

Shortcomings

Even though the experimental approach in this studio design was clearly successful, throughout the semestral work, as well as in the final students' outcomes, several shortcomings were encountered.

Firstly, students lack the general knowledge on the studying and understanding the local context, the language of regional architecture and its history. This could be observed on the *general* or *global* design solutions that students applied.

Also, despite accurate identification of the sites with potential to be transformed (the first assignment) and the interesting ideas to be applied in the proposals, given the existing site and its contexts, the students struggled to reflect on them in a particular design. Obviously, students are prepared to design the areas with no restrictions and limitations, which is a standard university *design freedom* approach (and is a general problem across the profession [6]).

Furthermore, this lack of a good understanding of the existing on-site situation and character features of the area suggested that the problems with working within an existing context, especially to use and build up local potential and local urban and architectural language, should be more emphasised in the courses that are prerequisites for the design

studios. For instance, students often neglected to address the design of the street on both of the sides or neglected looking at the other riverbanks.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, it can be concluded that this teaching *experiment* can be evaluated as a success, and can thus be developed into the standardised teaching methodology for design studios, especially those that focus on small and medium-sized cities. Letting the students analyse the city and identify their *assignment* proved to be an interestingly successful tool.

Also, the learning process was refreshed by the extra informal activities of different visits and contact with the professional outside standard the teaching staff. The playful approach kept both teachers and students interested in the course throughout the process intensively, which was eventually reflected in the high quality of students' proposals.

Furthermore, such deviations from the standards of the design studio helped to reveal the hidden, but profound deficiencies in students' learning processes, which can be now better targeted in other courses.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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