Students' soft urban planning skills and local development are the benefits from the *Fair of Good Practice. Small cities - big challenges* programme

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ABSTRACT: The urban planner in practice needs soft skills when dealing with public consultations connected to local development plans. To improve the abilities of architecture and urban planning students to discuss solutions and to support the development of local public spaces of small towns in the Pomeranian voivodeship (province) in Poland, the *Fair of Good Practice. Small cities - big challenges* programme was developed. It was organised as a series of four projects, each in the form of an urban design studio, and was implemented in the Faculty of Architecture at Gdańsk University of Technology (FA-GUT), between 2016 and 2018. The programme covered urban design topics in two towns of the Pomeranian voivodeship (Rumia and Reda). It was an example of involvement in teaching of different stakeholders connected with urban planning, with an intergenerational exchange of knowledge and support for public participation.

INTRODUCTION

The programme, *Fair of Good Practice. Small cities - big challenges,* carried out in the Faculty of Architecture at Gdańsk University of Technology (FA-GUT) between 2016 and 2018, was an answer to the needs of different stakeholders in urban planning, and the contemporary demands of spatial planning, where the planner/designer in Poland is also a mediator between local authorities, different social groups and public stakeholders [1][2].

An urban planner, as the author of a local development plan, is obliged to present to the public the draft of the planning document, where their role is to defend and justify the plan but also to correct the plan taking into account arguments from society. Therefore, the ability to discuss is essential for the contemporary urban planner. Training for these soft skills should be carried out simultaneously with design skills, and they should be a part of the university curriculum.

The *Fair of Good Practice* programme was organised as a series of four urban design studio classes, implemented at the FA-GUT in the years 2016 to 2018. It covered urban design topics in two towns in Poland: the Pomeranian voivodeship (Rumia and Reda). The author presents an optimal format for an urban design studio that supports the development of students' soft urban planning skills, while satisfying the needs of local communities and NGOs.

Programme Aims and Concepts

Different types of design studio exist, see for example Legény et al [3]. As city inhabitants are directly affected by local development plans they should actively co-create the plans. Therefore, the urban design studio has a slightly different character from architectural ones.

The *Fair of Good Practice* comprised four urban design studios (two in each of the towns during two years), which was intended as a means of completing the standard curriculum of students of the FA-GUT, with additional practical soft skills, among which are the following:

- social communication skills, necessary within urban planning;
- urban design skills in relation to development proposals within existing urban areas;
- understanding the responsibilities of urban planners and other participants in spatial planning, as well as limitations resulting from their roles;
- abilities to build a design compromise between municipal authorities, inhabitants and different stakeholders.

Urban plans and designs usually are long-lasting projects, the realisation of which takes tens of years. Not many planners have a chance to evaluate the results of the projects and plans over the long term. In this programme,

an additional idea was to incorporate the experience of an older generation of urban designers/planners, who had a chance to compare their plans with its physical realisation. So, there were three generations of planners involved, i.e. retired, professionally active and students. All three generations brought to the process different experiences and both strengths and weaknesses:

- Students were full of innovative ideas of shaping active and inclusive public spaces, but did not have sufficient knowledge of the legal and socioeconomic limitations of urban planning.
- Active planners were very experienced, but felt limited by the planning procedures.
- Retired planners went through different planning systems and understood long-term planning.

The *inter-age* character of the programme was to help students better understand the long-term perspective of the urban planning process.

The technical goal of the programme was to prepare several variants of city centre development projects for the needs of city authorities of Reda (54.6054° N, 18.3472° E) and Rumia (54.5626° N, 18.3935° E). These projects, delivered in a form of masterplan, were conceived as a basis for further discussions between city authorities and residents on the possibilities of transforming the downtown.

Stakeholders in the Programme

As in the case described by Olszewski and Pudlowski, the design studios combined the needs of different stakeholders and were …*especially tailored for specific professional needs of personnel of councils, government units and industry* [4]. The following entities took part in the programme, each with different goals:

- Students of the FA-GUT wanted to increase the attractiveness of their university studies.
- The FA-GUT aim was to develop students' urban design and soft planning skills, and to give students a chance to stay in touch with urban planning practice, as well as adapting theoretical solutions to the local situation.
- The city authorities' objective was to gather new ideas for development of city centres and to obtain a tool for discussion with inhabitants, presenting possible spatial solutions in an attractive graphical form.
- Gdańsk branch of the Society of Polish Town Planners (SPTP), as a professional non-profit organisation, was targeted to create a co-operative platform supporting urban planning (especially in small towns) using experienced experts (both active and retired ones).
- The aim of the Pomeranian Regional Planning Office (PRPO) was to promote good planning practices and urban innovations in the cities of the region, and to improve the quality of public spaces.
- The local community goal was to determine the demands for project proposals and to ensure the adequacy of proposed solutions.

Despite such a large variety of goals, the benefits were supposed to be mutual. Participating stakeholders, as a result of contact and discussion with students, were expected to influence significantly the students' work and their thinking, reflecting local limitations. On the other hand, students should inspire municipal authorities with new ideas and approaches to old problems, and deliver masterplans which, later, could be a basis for public discussion, while the Local Development Plan is prepared by the city planning office.

As described by Olszewski and Pudlowski, the process of realisation of an urban design studio consisted of three phases: pre-studio, in-studio and post-studio [4]. All the bodies had various tasks and were engaged differently at particular stages of the project (see Table 1). However, not all the tasks shown in Table 1 were realised during the urban studios. Most tasks were carried out by the urban studio Rumia I (only two tasks from the list were not covered) and Reda II (only three tasks in Table 1 not covered).

Table 1: Tasks of urban design studio participants at different phases of the project.

Phase Stakeholders	Pre-studio	In-studio	Post-studio
City authorities	- agreement with the FA-GUT - choosing a site according to local needs and identifying basic problems - defining the goal of an urban studio and boundaries of the study - gathering necessary information of a site and preparation of maps	- sending information and invitation for a final presentation to city council and local inhabitants - organisation of the room and equipment for the final public debate (usually in a city hall or public library) - taking part in a public debate (city mayor, representatives of a city planning office)	- using the projects in discussion with local inhabitants assuming the Local Development Plans [1] or Commune Revitalisation Programme [2]

Phase / Stakeholders	Pre-studio	In-studio	Post-studio
GUT	- agreement with the city authorities and other stakeholders - with city planning office defining the goal of the urban studio and boundaries of the study - announcing the subject of urban studio and recruitment of students	- formation of students' groups - distribution of materials received from the municipality - organisation of study visit - tutoring while working on analysis, visions and concepts - invitation of external experts to present and to take part in a mid-term review and debate - organisation of insurance for students outside the university - delivering a presentation at the final public debate on a specific topic - moderating the final debate	- delivering the posters/ presentations/ report to the municipality
Students	- choosing an urban design studio and tutors within a particular course	- broad, interdisciplinary analysis of a selected site with diagnosis - elaboration of a strategic site's development vision and the development concept of a chosen area within the site - active participation in mid-term public review - graphical elaboration of the development concept of an area using tools understood by residents - oral and poster presentation associated with a computer presentation explaining and arguing the elaborated concept - defending the results of the project in public discussion	- delivering the posters and presentations with corrections resulting from the final public debate - preparation of the report - taking part in a local TV interview
SPTP, PRPO	- agreement with the FA-GUT	- delegation of experts for a mid-term review of the urban design studio to comment on the students' work - delegation of experts for a final presentation to comment and to evaluate students' work - delivering a presentation at the final public debate	- promotion of the event within their own communication channels
Representatives of a city council and inhabitants	- initiation of the urban design studio (might be also a task of the city authorities or city planning office)	- active discussion, delivering opinions and evaluation of urban projects presented at the mid-term review and final debate	- discussion on the results within social media and a local society

Format and Education Tools of the Urban Design Studio

The final format of urban design studios within *Fair of Good Practice. Small cities - big challenges* was developed as a result of testing different solutions. The first urban studio was treated as experimental. Its format was reviewed and corrected to fit better into the number of teaching hours available within the standard curriculum (see Reda I). The next three urban design studios (Rumia I, Reda II, Rumia II) followed almost the same format described below. They may be recommended as an effective educational tool that increases the soft urban planning skills of students (see Table 2).

The teaching followed the standard procedure defined in the curriculum (one semester course consisting of 15 weeks of lectures, seminars and the urban design class at the university), as well as new tools tailored especially for the programme (for example, additional presentations delivered by external experts, public forums and debates, and media interviews taking place outside the university).

The lectures featured urban planning and design and topics raised in the urban design class. During the seminars held in parallel with the urban design class, students and tutors defined the values on which the students developed their urban design. The discussion was based on students' presentations, being a critical analysis of different aspects of urban public spaces. The values extracted by students taking part in the programme were:

- human well-being, human health and human scale;

- effective public transport and accessibility;
- pedestrian-oriented solutions - walkability;
- multifunctional and intensive use of space;
- inclusive and vibrant space designed for a wide range of users;
- supporting the local economy.

Within the urban design class, students were working in groups of four or five to share the work, and to learn the rules of teamwork, thus simulating the organisation of a typical planning office. Unlike a case described by Smatanová and Vitková, all students in a group were co-authors of the common design [5]. However, they did share tasks. The urban design class was divided into stages: the analysis ended with diagnosis (lasting almost half of the available time), and the vision was developed progressively and iteratively. The site visit was undertaken by the students, with their tutors, as a part of the analysis phase.

The most important new elements of the urban design studio, which trained students in soft urban skills were: the mid-term review with participation of the stakeholders (members of the city authorities and city council, representatives of local community, professional organisations and enterprises); experts' consultations and speeches; open public debate finalising the semester work, as well as media interviews (by local TV).

Table 2: The time needed to complete particular activities within the urban design studios in the programme, *Fair of Good Practice. Small cities - big challenges,* and the optimal time schedule recommended for other urban design studios.

Name of the course	Level of study/ semester	No. of students	Name of urban studio	Number of hours within standard 15 week course			Estimated number of hours for developing soft urban planning skills in urban design studios		
				Lecture	Seminar	Urban design class	Mid-term review with external experts	Final public debate	Experts' speeches/ consultations
Spatial and Regional Planning Studies [6]	Master/ semester 2	21	Reda I	15	30	30	0	2 (see Reda I)	1 (at final debate)
Urban Design I. Problem Areas. Group project [6]	Master/ semester 1	35	Rumia I	15	30	30	4	3	1 (at final debate)
Urban Design IV. Group project [7]	Bachelor/ semester 6	27	Reda II	15	30	30	3	4	1 (while mid-term review)
Urban Design I. Problem Areas. Group project [6]	Master/ semester 1	28	Rumia II	15	30	30	4	4	0
Optimal organisation of design studio	x	25	x	15 (in first half of semester)	45 (15 in first half and 30 in a second half of semester)		4	4	2 (in a second half of semester)

After each design studio a discussion session was organised with students to evaluate the urban design studio. Almost in all the cases students made remarks concerning the time schedule, proposing limitations of seminar hours (especially at the final stage of the studio) and increasing the number of hours of design classes, when they were elaborating the final concept. These comments, with the opinions gathered from municipalities, representatives of citizens (city council members) and members of the Society of Polish Town Planners allowed improvements of the structure of the urban studio (see Table 2).

The organisation of sessions that took place outside the university was financed by the city halls (costs of renting room and equipment; in the case of the intensive studio in Reda I, also catering). Travel costs within the Gdańsk metropolis were covered by students and other participants. The insurance of students was covered by the GUT. The cost of the working materials was the same as for standard education, therefore, it was covered by students. The external experts' presentations and consultations were at no charge.

Urban Design Studio Reda I (Autumn 2016)

Urban design studio Reda I was initiated by the vice mayor of Reda responsible for spatial planning and one of the members of Reda city council. It was organised with the participation of a group of Erasmus students of the FA-GUT as an extension of the semester course, Spatial and Regional Planning Studies. During the semester, students were given an alternative: to follow strictly the standard programme or to extend the programme and include practical issues related to public participation in urban planning in a form of an additional workshop. However, the workshop was connected to a city other than the one which was the main topic of the course. Although this was associated with an increase in the number of contact hours (by about 10), students decided on this didactic experiment.

The workshop lasted two days and took place in Reda city hall. It took altogether 15.5 hours, from which five hours were taken to hold a course over one week (1 hour of lecture, 2 hours of seminar and 2 hours of classes). As the urban design studio Reda I was very short and intensive, all the analysis concerning the project site was prepared in advance and presented by representatives of the city planning office during the first day of the workshop.

The guided study visit and short inspirational speeches delivered by external experts from SPTP, PRPO and the FA-GUT also took place during the first day. The second half of the first day and the first half of the following day were spent by students working in groups on urban design concepts for specific areas, under the supervision of six tutors from the FA-GUT. The afternoon of the second day was devoted to presentations of results, public debate and evaluations by invited experts, members of the city council, inhabitants and representatives of the city planning office.

The aim of the workshop was to gather ideas and prepare a brief strategy for activation of a bike-pedestrian path. Students delivered their proposed solutions based on:

- a mental map by Lynch/Wejchert;
- freehand drawings to present first ideas;
- own photos and photos from the Internet presenting possible spatial solutions;
- handmade collages;
- maps of the project area, with iconography, describing the functioning of the area;
- conceptual master plan;
- technical cross-sections;
- final presentation in PowerPoint.

Their works were described as most inspirational and were highly appraised by participants, although there were some remarks regarding the graphical elaboration. Directly after the event a local television reporter interviewed several students and the main project ideas were broadcast in the daily news [8]. The elaborated materials later were delivered on posters to the city authorities. These were for further discussion with local inhabitants.

After the urban studio in Reda, an evaluation meeting was held with students, to gather their suggestions on future urban design studios within the programme. Their main remarks were not fully expressed, because the time available was too short and did not allow for in-depth analysis or a proper graphical expression of ideas. The students also understood that, without full understanding of the planning context, the discussion with inhabitants would be difficult and would not give the urban planner a chance to defend their ideas. Therefore, the next urban design studios were organised within the framework of the semester course and were fully devoted to one site only.

Urban Studio Rumia I (Spring 2017)

The theme of the urban studio was the transformation of downtown Rumia, with special emphasis on creating a pedestrian-friendly public space for services, culture and social interactions in the vicinity of the railway station. The studio was carried out at the invitation of the city of Rumia within the FA-GUT semester course, Urban Design I, Problem Areas. In this case the additional educational components connected with increasing students' soft urban planning skills were embedded in the course. After three internal reviews with tutors, to define the diagnosis for the area and to elaborate visions and draft concepts of the new city centre development, the mid-term review was organised, with city representatives and external experts.

The four-hour mid-term meeting took place at the GUT. It gave the city representatives a chance to complete missing information about the development and to correct students' proposals (i.e. to redirect onto other tracks or strengthen the present direction). For students, it was the first opportunity to defend their ideas in front of city officials (mayor, chairman of the city council and the director of the city planning office) and other representatives of city authorities and the inhabitants. It also helped students to follow the thinking of city representatives. This meeting helped students to prepare arguments for a discussion during the final presentation at the library in Rumia. For the final presentation students prepared three posters (each 100 cm x 70 cm). The posters featured:

- multi-thematic analyses of the project area and the diagnosis of a present spatial situation in Rumia;
- results of the survey of city residents on the topic of walkability in the downtown;

- a vision to reshape the Rumia downtown;
- masterplan with three-dimensional proposals for the local spatial development plan.

The students also presented a cardboard model or alternatively a 3D model, showing spatial solutions for the project area. In the final debate, representatives of city authorities, inhabitants, SPTP and PRPO were present, asking questions and evaluating students' work. Representatives of SPTP and PRPO delivered short speeches on urban modelling using the syntax method (space syntax is a set of theories on spatial configurations) and revitalisation of public spaces.

During the evaluation, this format of an urban studio was considered to be most effective and satisfying, both for students and other stakeholders. However, there was one suggestion from students concerning the final debate: the experts' speeches were very attractive, but they took attention away from the public debate. Therefore, in the following two urban studios this element was eliminated or shifted to another time.

Urban Studio Reda II (Spring 2018)

The urban design studio called *New downtown of Reda. Reorientation and networking of the space in a small city* was carried out in co-operation with Reda city hall. It was organised within the framework of the semester course, Urban Design IV. The aim of the studio was to develop a concept for the city transformation, resulting from the possibility of building a new train station at Reda Centre. Students proposed their solutions based on:

- source materials and local documents from the municipal office;
- local vision, hand-drawn sketches from the area and photo documentation;
- interviews with local residents.

The deliverables and the format of the urban studio remained almost unchanged compared to the second edition of the *Fair of Good Practice* programme. In this case, expert presentations were abandoned in the final debate. Instead, the number of mid-term review hours was reduced slightly and consultations with a local expert were introduced (see Table 2). The expert explained technical possibilities of constructions of the new railway stop, which was a crucial issue for the project and supported students with interdisciplinary knowledge.

After the final presentations, students were interviewed by reporters from the local television station [9]. The urban studio Reda II was rated highly by students, as well as by city authorities and the city council, who were active and engaged during the final debate.

Urban Studio Rumia II (Spring 2018)

Held at the same time as the Reda II urban studio, the Rumia II studio took place. It was realised within the semester course, Urban Design I, Problem Areas and was called *City transformation. Downtown Boulevard in Rumia*. Again, the deliverables and the format were repeated. The only difference being a lack in experts' speeches during the final debate. The studio was considered highly educational for students, as well as inspiring and helpful for city authorities.

CONCLUSIONS

As Smatanová and Vitková noted, where education is concerned: *...the focus should be on gaining practical experience based on co-operation with other professions, institutions, communities, and also with other countries, as well as work in different social and geographical conditions* [5]. The programme, *Fair of Good Practice. Small cities - big challenges,* was an example, whereby new educational components were added to the standard curriculum, which allowed FA-GUT students to train and develop an:

- understanding of the role, limitations and responsibilities of the urban planner;
- ability to conduct logical reasoning in a way understandable to the recipient;
- ability to defend arguments;
- ability to adapt graphic tools to the recipient;
- immunity to public criticism.

Moreover, due to the inter-age character of the programme, students better understood the long-term perspective of the urban planning process. They also expanded the understanding of non-technical limitations of architectural and urban design (including procedural, financial, political and social conditions). At the same time, they supported city authorities with innovative, unconventional ideas. Therefore, as expected generally by Olszewski and Pudlowski, urban design studios have provided important benefits to the wider community [4].

The four urban design studios proved that the new educational elements might be embedded within the framework of the study course; they also defined the optimal format of the urban design studio. The first format (i.e. the short and intensive workshop - Reda I), although most effective in terms of gathering a set of draft ideas, did not allow students to be ready for public discussion, as they did not have sufficient knowledge of the local planning context. Therefore, the

mid-term review and evaluation of students' work by the external experts and city representatives at that stage was extremely important for the process.

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