

## **Landscape Education for Democracy: A Proposal for Building Inclusive Processes into Spatial Planning Education**

Kristin Faurest<sup>1</sup>, Deni Ruggeri<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Szent István University, Faculty of Landscape Architecture*, <sup>2</sup>*Norwegian University of Life Sciences*

### **Introduction**

*“There is a really enormous conflict, when we are talking about developing country cities, between pedestrians and cars. Here, what you see is a picture that shows insufficient democracy.”*

Enrique Penalosa, former Bogota, Colombia Mayor

The landscape belongs to everyone. We should all participate in deciding how it is used, and landscape resources should serve all populations regardless of social or economic status. But spatial planning education rarely includes topics such as democratic processes, participatory planning, community-based planning or other topics, and does not fully prepare designers and planners to effectively work in partnership with the communities they serve.

This problem was the inspiration for LED – Landscape Education for Democracy, a new three-year educational programme created and implemented by a consortium and funded by the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Programme of the European Commission. The LED project is meant to raise awareness of inclusive processes for spatial planning by exposing students to relevant theories, methods and real-life practices that can help them be active leaders in shaping the democratic landscapes of the future.

The mission of the LED Project is to teach students how to integrate politically sensitive, humane design approaches to how the the design process of open-spaces and greenspaces (that are the components of the greenway). This design approach is relevant to many landscape contexts, but is particularly important in the context of greenways as it would add an important additional layer to the meaning of greenway systems, which are by their very nature designed to provide equitable, diverse use of the landscape for all.

### **Background/Literature Review**

The connection between landscape and democracy can be traced back more than a century. Frederick Law Olmsted perceived urban parks as democratic places of egalitarian mingling of the classes, and fresh air and green space as

an open-air sanatorium and basic human right. Now, in the 21st century, in an increasingly urbanized world with a growing rich-poor gap, the concept of democracy in the landscape is increasingly urgent. The presence of accessible, safe, quality green space offers people the opportunity for active recreation, for enjoying clean air in an oasis far from city noise and traffic, and for outdoor socialization. Property values and green space quality and quantity are inextricably linked, therefore, shortage of green space is a chronic problem of disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and landscape decisions are frequently determined by elite economic interests and not by broader community need. It then follows that the question of how to increase the quantity and quality of green space in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods becomes, by nature, an issue connected to fair and democratic processes. The project takes as its basis the European Landscape Convention as well as the ideas of authors such as Randolph Hester, Mark Francis, Peter A. Minang and other many other contemporary scholars working in the field of participatory planning, participatory action research and spatial justice. Research into the democratic dimensions of greenways has also indicated that in spite of the theoretical intention that a greenway is open for all people to use for multiple recreational activities, there are considerable gaps in perception, access and use between different socioeconomic groups. Frequently, greenways are located closer to and are used by the more affluent, who are more likely to have the time to seek out recreational opportunities, especially ones requiring relatively costly gear such as camping equipment, bicycles or other equipment. Minorities, immigrant communities and other groups sometimes have different perceptions of nature than the majority and do not feel drawn to using the greenway in the same manner, or they for reasons stemming from religious or other traditions or other causes do not feel comfortable doing so.

Participatory planning, equitable landscape planning decisions, and the facilitation of small-scale, community-supported green spaces reflect the objectives of many significant global, national and local strategy documents on urban planning and sustainable development. They have not just a social/political dimension but an ecological one as well. The United Nations Agenda 21 relates the issue to the health of civil society as well. The need for new solutions to improve urban life is a focal point in the European Union, where an estimated 80% of the population lives in urban areas. Environmental and social issues are intertwined and accentuated in urban areas, where, as a 1996 European Commission report notes, the poorest and most disadvantaged residents of cities often also live in the worst local environmental conditions, while those who can afford to will buy a better local environment elsewhere. A 2004 EU urban environmental strategy document notes that in order to achieve an acceptable quality of life and sustainable development in European cities,

changes in public attitude are essential and public participation and the active role of the citizen are key elements of sustainable urban management.



**Figure 1. The project's visual identity**

### **Goals and objectives**

LED began in fall 2015 and continues until summer 2018 in three one-year cycles each consisting of a two-month-long online seminar and a two-week-long on-site intensive design programme. The online part is free and open to students and professionals anywhere for active or passive participation. The on-site intensive programme is open to five students from each of the partner universities. LED seeks to promote empowerment, participation and active citizenship among young people through interdisciplinary, problem-based learning environments and curricular innovation that introduces landscape and democracy as a cross-disciplinary subject. Students receive a thorough grounding in theory and then work in international teams directly with local communities to address landscape challenges.

The online lectures and reading assignments, delivered via Adobe Connect online seminar platform, address such problems as how to identify and seek out solutions for problems that originate from lack of democracy in landscape in contexts of cities and rural areas around Europe and also in the global arena. Questions to be critically examined include:

How are landscape planning decisions made, and what opportunities to citizens have to influence them?

How does land use planning serve or not serve all segments of the population?

Are natural assets such as waterfront, waterways, forest and others usable and accessible by all, and if not, what are the reasons? What are the power structures that make the landscape accessible or not accessible?

What alternative communications tools and methods can be used to bring marginalized groups such as minorities, slum dwellers or others into the decisionmaking process and ensure equal access to the landscape?

According to relevant literature and the discussions held at the start-up meeting, learning objectives can be classified as subject-specific, personal and methodical. Subject-specific competences will be enhanced by online lectures, literature study, case study work and independent study of learning materials. Social/personal and methodical competences will primarily be enhanced by group work, collaborative research, design thinking, workshops, presentations and other inquiry-based / interactive learning methods.

### **Methods**

The online seminar consists of lectures, discussions, films and group assignments covering basic theories as well as a global review of case studies. This is followed by an on-site intensive programme, hosted by a different partner university each year. The intensive programme takes place at a different partner university site each year that involves teams of students working in tandem with local groups and municipalities to put the theoretical portion of the program into practice to realize democratically-generated design concepts for greenways, waterfronts, urban centers and other sites.

The intensive programme work calls not only for design solutions but also for proposals for participation, financing and governance. Both elements of the program also have the added value of facilitating knowledge exchanges among students from diverse cultural backgrounds from all over Europe and beyond. In addition to earning five ECTS credits for the online part and an additional five for the on-site intensive programme, students can also achieve an LED certificate issued by the Le:Notre Institute. The program starts with building on basic concepts of democracy and evolves into the concepts of community, participation and design – building a strong foundation of methodologies, case studies and tools for students to apply on-site at the intensive workshop in Zingonia, a new town in northern Italy.

Together the online seminar and the on-site intensive programme are based on six units. The first five are encompassed in the on-line seminar, with the sixth element being the on-site workshop in June 2016 just after the completion of the online seminar:

1. Landscape and Democracy: Mapping the Terrain. This portion of the course provides a broad framework for understanding the nexus between landscape and democracy. The pedagogy will include literature reviews,

lectures, concept mapping, discussions, role playing, case studies, team work and in-class polling. Students will investigate a foundation of theories as they relate to what landscape means, what democracy means. Students will engage in understanding conflicting or overlapping meanings of landscape and values in different cultural contexts.

2. Concepts of Participation. Students learn how public participation evolved and how it relates to planning theory. They start mapping landscape democracy challenges in their socio-cultural contexts. Students will become acquainted with the various ways in which communities and people can be engaged in shaping the future of places, and be able to distinguish among and critique them. Further, students will be able to choose participation tools appropriate to specific contexts.
3. Community and Identities. The concepts of community and identity are introduced and reflected upon. Methods for uncovering/mapping the various forms and expressions of collective and individual identity as reflected in the landscape, place-based attachment and community are introduced. Social capital theories are introduced and critiqued, including methods that can help us understand the functioning of community networks. Students will be asked to apply these methods, collect data, and reflect critically on how designers and planners can help shape stronger and more democratic identity processes in communities. They analyze the extent to which community and identity are affected in their studies.
4. The Design Process. Students learn about the rich set of methods and tools employed in the fields of community based planning and design. They learn how to use digital and traditional tools for rich data collection, utilize analysis, build a shared vision, develop strategic action-based approaches, and select methods of visual representation and communication to achieve an agreed-upon objective. They learn from cases how these methods and tools are applied in practice. They envision participation models for the landscape democracy challenges they have identified in their environment. They are able to envision and map a design process and how participation may affect/alter such process.
5. Communication. Communication methods and tools supporting community based planning are presented. Students envision how these tools could be applied in specific situations. Students learn how to effectively communicate their knowledge in rich, deeply engaging ways. Planning as storytelling is introduced as an effective form of translating design and planning decisions into stories that can help inform changes to

community and personal lifestyles. Facilitating and stimulating two-way communication, reconciling diverse sources of information, conveying knowledge that allows the community to make informed decisions, and elevating and inspiring communities to have higher standards for design are just a few of the skills addressed.

6. Intensive Programme. This on-site phase of LED presents students with the challenge of practicing landscape democracy in a real community. This will provide the opportunity to apply and test theories and methods learned during the on-line phase of the program. Students perceive the impact of their presence upon the local landscape. Starting from a set of challenges and themes defined together with the community, students will identify strategies and work in partnership with local groups and residents to craft design processes and potential solutions and represent, discuss and communicate them. Techniques such as walkabouts will be used to help dissolve the boundaries between student designers and locals and facilitate exchange of knowledge. Ideally, some tactical, short-term landscape interventions will also result as part of the process. Documentation of the process will leave the community with a lasting impression. The first intensive programme was in Zingonia, a new town built in the 1960s in northern Italy. Although it was built in the utopian spirit typical of the time, Zingonia has many social and economic challenges. It has an extremely diverse and vibrant local culture owing to the fact that its population is majority immigrant, with more than 50 nationalities represented and a significant number of Africans from Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal and other countries. However, the tall towers of flats have the problems classic to this type of development: lack of community cohesion, poor connection to the outdoor environment, a sense of 'no man's land' and in general a lack of function in the open spaces. Many of the women in the community live in near total isolation, with no real public role in their adopted home. Students will have the opportunity to work with local residents, activist groups and municipal authorities to find spatial planning solutions to these and other problems.

## **Results and discussion**

The program's newness – as of the submission of this paper the online seminar was still in the registration phase – means that meaningful results will not be available until at least after the intensive workshop. The timing is such that some of the results (student work from the online seminar, design concepts from the Zingonia on-site intensive workshop, and the tabulated results of the pre- and post-seminar surveys) can be presented at the conference.

## Conclusion

In the broadest sense, the course aims to foster students' ability to combine social/environmental awareness, interdisciplinary cooperation and entrepreneurial skills in order to envision innovative approaches to communities, participation and design. This will contribute to more active citizenship as design and planning practitioners and citizens of the larger community and their ability to promote sustainable change within communities. While LED's initial audience is made of students, the project aims at widening the dialogue begun within the online classroom to communities around Europe, through the organisation of on-site workshops where these theories and methods will be field-tested, reflected upon, and disseminated to the global community, with the support of partner institute LE:NOTRE.

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