

## Participative Process in Rural Public Space Planning as a Pattern for Living and Learning

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### Introduction

**Rural planning** seems generally to be a side subject for the present world, since nowadays over half of its population lives in cities. Nevertheless, in the south-west of Poland an idea of the "Network of most interesting villages" is being developed at the level of region authorities, architects, scientists, villages' administrators, and last but not least - inhabitants. The process of live-learning is connected with participation of local communities in the planning of public spaces in villages, which is designed by experts and cooperating students at the University of Applied Sciences in Nysa (2010-2013) and the University of Natural Sciences in Wrocław (before 2010). In 2013 many meetings such as workshops, conferences, laboratories, and science symposiums have been organised in Poland, wherein all the interested groups, mentioned above, took part. The paper aims at presenting the most important contents and conclusions made during these meetings, as it is being created by all the involved groups. These findings refer mostly to traditional and new open public spaces in rural south-west Poland, based, as a method, on live instructions and comments made by both 'main' sides – users and professional planners – as well as other actors. The thesis is, among others, that new public spaces will function in an optimal way, if its future shape and use-programme is designed in collaboration with inhabitants and supported by professionals, including the planning experts. Additionally, the work of professors with students during the projects is a live learning process including spatial wishes of local users, which influences the education process as a kind of architectural experimental teaching.

### Participation is the Key to Spatial Success

The problem explored in this paper is the engagement of the local community in rural areas. With a focus on creating new public space in historic villages, the thesis is that new public spaces will function optimally if their future form and land-use is discussed with inhabitants, with support from professionals: architects and urban planners. This statement is supported by the theory [4, 5, 6, 13] and the practice (see figs. 1-8) [1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 10, 14]. During 2013 many of types of thematic science and working meetings have been organised around this topic.

Appropriate use of public space is meaningful for the process of the development in the region and has a strong influence on its inhabitants, as authorities of the Opole region state.

### *Living and Learning - participation of students*

The experimental process of live-learning includes the participation of local inhabitants in the landscape planning of public spaces in the countryside of the Opole region, which is designed by experts and cooperating students at the University of Applied Sciences in Nysa (UAS in Nysa) 2010-2013 [15, 16] (Figs. 1-3) and the Wrocław University of Environmental and Life Sciences (WUELS), Poland (before 2010, Fig. 4). The Opole Region in south-west Poland is a pioneer in the rural renewal carried out by means of the participative process in this part of Europe [11].



Fig. 1. Students' visits to the countryside – consultations with leaders of villages in 2011. Students of the UAS in Nysa are making "the list of wishes" – they will create projects about rural public spaces. The main project rule is the participation of inhabitants in the design process, Opole Region, south-west Poland. Photo: Students of the UAS in Nysa, 2010.



Fig. 2. The teaching and learning process in the UAS in Nysa: Students presenting their concepts after consultations with inhabitants of the countryside, local authorities, and experts from the Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning/UAS in Nysa. Photo: The author, 2011.



Fig. 3. Representatives of students and professors participating in the third edition of the European Programme Competition "Programme of the Rural Renewal" in 2013 in the UAS in Nysa (the author: first on the left). Photo: Bartosz Bukala, Public Relations Officer, UAS in Nysa, 2014

During the design process of the mentioned rural public spaces the social consultations with inhabitants, local authorities and participating students affected not only the future shape of the recreation areas in the daily living space but also enabled students to experience the important modern practice of the work of architect and urban planner.

*Participation in the regional scale: The Opole region, Poland*

One of study trips is for example the one from the Podlaskie region in north-east Poland to the Opole region with participants like leaders of rural communities, NGO representatives, local authorities, and institutions supporting the development of the countryside [14]. The purpose was to visit four villages, which took part and won the competition "The Beautiful Opole Countryside". It was connected with the conference in Pawłowice in Opole Region: "The



Fig. 4. The example of the finished new public space along the car-road in Stare Siolkowice in Opole Region. Authors of the project: Students and experts from the WUELS, Poland, supported by consultations with countryside inhabitants and local authorities. Photo: The author, 2013.

Meeting of Leaders of the Rural Renewal Programme" on 5 and 6 December 2013 within the framework of "The European Expert Programme PROW 2007-2013" (Fig. 5).

The most important conclusion in conversations between authorities from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Opole Marshall's Office and guests was, that the basic condition for the present Opole villages' success is the cooperation between local organizations and groups of inhabitants, informing the local community, engagement of inhabitants with the realization of projects, cooperation with the local authorities, as well as the capacity for cooperation with the local institutions and businesses. The word "cooperation" and "inhabitants" appears often in these comments, which refer to the participative process. Some of these conclusions are made after the author's presentation of the public space projects made by the UAS in Nysa.



Fig. 5. The national conference in Pawłowice, the Opole region, Poland, on 5 December 2013 also with guests from the Podlaskie region in north-east Poland. In the photo Ms Mariola Szachowicz is speaking, the Vice-Director of the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development in the Marshall's Office in Opole, Poland, organizing the Conference (the author: Second from the right side). Photo: Organisers of the Conference

On 5 November 2013 the crucial meeting – an example of participative action in the form of workshops with local authorities, scientists, experts, and inhabitants on "The Polish Network of Rural Renewal and Development" – took place in Jemielnica, in the Opole region. There, the governor of the province (the Voivode), Ryszard Wilczyński, presented the criteria which villages were required to meet in order to be included in the "Network of the Most Interesting Villages". These criteria (for example: the quality of rural interiors, greenery accessible to public, dominant features, landscape accents, possibility of accommodation, parking places, etc. [12]), referring to the chosen villages, were evaluated by participants during the conference, proving that consultations and cooperation among different actors are very needed. Working groups represented various regions of Poland. On 20 November 2013 in Opole city, a science conference "The Public Space of the Opole Region 2013"

was organised by the Marshalls Department in Opole and the Voivode. It was accompanied by an exhibition of the best projects (and realizations) of public space in the Opole region submitted for the competition. These projects resulted from a participative planning process, which involved cooperative work between professionals, local authorities and users. The effects of this process were also discussed during the conference of Rural Renewal Leaders "15 years of the Rural Renewal Programme" in Prószków, Opole region, on 20 March 2013 [9].

*Remarks on participative public space planning in the Opole region*

The conservator of monuments in the Opole region complains about the difficulties in achieving protection for heritage in Opole villages, which he feels is caused by the lack of financial incentive for inhabitants. In the end, the effects of participation cannot be fully realised. The theory about safe-guarding heritage and the practice of living in the countryside conflict when it comes to the economic context. *The economy exists at the scale of the particular inhabitant.* One sees, for example: tile roofs changed into shingle roofs; cheaper plastic windows fitted rather than desired wooden windows; elevations of houses appearing in various colours which are not part of the local tradition. Similarly, new alien forms of buildings appear. Many of these start to grow in height and width. With this currently uncontrolled development of the landscape, the character of the historical Polish countryside changes in negative ways. Architecturally and spatially arbitrary acts in Polish villages are happening often nowadays, which is quite different to the social consultations established and controlled by the law.

The second issue is *the economic scale of the countryside*. This means, for example, one sees the introduction of large-surface-services (supermarkets), resulting from economic forces, which appear against the wishes of heritage protection representatives and local producers. Furthermore, the Vice-Director of the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development in the Marshall's Office in Opole, states that the living style of people in the Opole countryside has changed meaningfully. They do not work only in fields all day long and rest at home. They want to spend the rest of the day after work in ways different to their ancestors. They also wish to go out during the day and in the evening to spend their free time in public open space, close to their homes. Today, these inhabitants desire to meet other people, their neighbours and to be in public space, just as the inhabitants of European cities have since the middle of the 19th century. Nevertheless, the difference is that in these small villages people know each other and they want to spend their spare time together, rather than in the anonymous markets and squares of big cities. This familiarity prevents

vandalism, so there is no fear of people destroying elements of public space. People's involvement in the design process and the fact that they often build it with own hands, also means that they take care of the space when they use it.

The Vice-Director advocates for social consultations with local inhabitants by architects and town planners when working on new public spaces in Opole villages. However, the inhabitants must not create these plans by themselves: also important is knowledge of local plans and strategies. For example, local authorities in the Opole region are keen on the planting of traditional Polish broadleaf trees in rural areas, whereas the inhabitants of some villages prefer conifers so as to avoid having to rake leaves. Local authorities also maintain that litter bins should not be placed right next to benches, but a few metres away to avoid unpleasant smells by seating. However this is not always adhered to. Experts also say that the thematic paths in villages should be marked by information signs and special surface materials to distinguish them from other surfaces. However, some remarks during social consultations are contradictory to this professional opinion.

*Participation at the national scale: Poland*

The idea of a "Network of Most Interesting Villages" [3, 13] is being developed in the Opole region at the level of regional authorities, architects, scientists, villages administrators, and last but not least, inhabitants. Its author, the Voivode of the Opole region, was the main organiser of the science conference in the framework of a Public Debate on "The Network of Most Interesting Villages – the way to keep the cultural heritage of rural areas in Poland" stemming from the European Expert Project "Rural Renewal Programme PROW 2007-2013" in Warsaw in October 2013 (Fig. 6). It was an occasion to discuss rural renewal in Poland, focused on the specific values of the given Polish countryside but also on methods of consultation with inhabitants when designing new public spaces. The meeting contributed to the creation of the Advisory Team for "Preservation of the Cultural Rural Heritage and Protection of the Rural Landscape", constructed by the Opole Voivode (of which the author is a member).

In Warsaw another context for discussing the participative process in rural public space planning was the "Urban Laboratory" - the International Polish-Swiss Urban Workshops, organised by the Swiss Embassy and SARP (Association of Polish Architects). One of the panels discussed public space, where the author took part describing positive experiences of projects in the Opole region. This resulted in an interview by the Warsaw magazine, since social consultations seem to be the new design way in Poland, affecting the final planning concept. This method, despite being well known in Western Europe and in the Opole region, in other

regions of Poland meets many difficulties caused by authorities, which prefer to "avoid the problems" connected with listening to various opinions and "too many" wishes of inhabitants.



Fig. 6. The author with the Voivode of the Opole region, Ryszard Wilczyński, the author of the idea "The Network of Most Interesting Villages" at the National Conference on 3 October 2013. Warsaw, Poland, in the President Palace. Photo: Organisers of the Conference.

#### *Participation at the international scale: Poland, Portugal, Germany*

The author gave a lecture about the participative process in the Opole region and the contribution of the UAS at Nysa, at the Department of Civil Engineering and Architecture in the University da Beira Interior in Covilha, Portugal on 20 Mai 2013 (Fig. 7). The title was: "Empty Spaces. Re-use Urbanism. Concepts of the Land-Use for Public Spaces in Villages in Opole Region - South-West of Poland." This was an opportunity to disseminate the work internationally. The lecture was accompanied by long and fruitful discussion among students, professors of the UBI, as well as experts from Museu de Lanifícios in Covilha. This resulted in the idea of holding an international science symposium at the UAS in Nysa on rural public space planning.

The idea was realised in October 2013, when an international group of scientists from Portugal and Germany visited Nysa in order to present, exposé and take an active part in discussions on traditional and new public spaces in the countryside (Fig. 8).

**FACULDADE DE ENGENHARIA**

**CONFERÊNCIA | EMPTY SPACES. RE-USE URBANISM. CONCEPTS OF THE LAND-USE FOR PUBLIC SPACES IN VILLAGES IN OPOLE REGION - SOUTH-WEST OF POLAND**

Realizar-se-á no dia 20 de maio 2013, às 14h00, na sala 9.7.

Alina Marta Włodarczyk apresenta a conferência intitulada "Empty spaces. Re-use urbanism. Concepts of the land-use for public spaces in villages in Opole Region - south-west of Poland" no próximo dia 20 de maio, às 14h00, na sala 9.7 (Engenharia). A conferência insere-se na disciplina de Recuperação do Património e Requalificação Urbana, do 4º ano do curso de Arquitetura, e será apresentada no âmbito do protocolo entre a Universidade da Beira Interior e a University of Applied Sciences in Nysa, na Polónia, assinado em 2011.

Doutorada pela Technische Universität Berlin e pela Politechnika Wroclawska, a conferencista é docente da University of Applied Sciences in Nysa, na Polónia. É autora da obra "The adaptive reuse and re-integration of urban industrial areas - case studies in Cavité (PT), Zurich (CH) and Berlin (DE)", publicada em Berlin, em 2009. Durante dois anos, foi investigadora no ETH (Federal Institute of Technology) em Zurique e, posteriormente, em Berlin, durante cinco anos. Participou em diversas conferências e seminários internacionais e é autora de mais de 30 artigos científicos. As suas áreas de interesse são, especialmente, a reabilitação de áreas degradadas e espaços públicos.

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Fig. 7. Information about the International Conference at the Universidade da Beira Interior in Covilha, Portugal on 20 May 2013 (on the internet sites of the UBI in Covilha). The author presented there the lecture on "Empty Spaces. Re-use Urbanism. Concepts of the Land-use for Public Spaces in Villages in Opole Region, South-West of Poland." Author first from the left. Source: <https://www.ubi.pt/Noticia.aspx?id=3770> (25/05/2013)

The purpose of the symposium was to collect various observations and solutions connected with new and traditional public space projects. Another goal was to take a look at spatial processes, which appear in the present structure of villages, where the heritage is often placed in the shadow of new elements. As far as the results of the symposium are concerned, these will contribute to both wider awareness and also to improvement of the state of rural structures and public spaces; i.e. the consideration of local tradition when developing streets, marketplaces, and squares. Therefore the symposium addressed both traditional and new aspects of public space. The participants presented examples from Morocco, Portugal, Germany, England, Poland and other countries. Moreover, the students taking part in the Rural Renewal Programme PROW, 2007-2013, in the third edition at the UAS in Nysa, presented their own design projects for new rural public space in the Opole region, which was developed through consultations with local authorities, inhabitants and experts.

The International Science Symposium inspired deliberations on the local public space in the countryside, which has been destroyed and which expects revalorization. This symposium and planned future editions, are intended to present projects, realizations, as well as existing situations, which shall serve as examples of architectural and spatial revalorization and revitalization possibilities, referring to new accessibility for inhabitants in an aesthetically pleasing, comfortable and useful way. In this process the participation of future users in the design process is significant, next to local authorities and experts, who support design concepts professionally.

A forthcoming science monograph will contain the thematic papers on this subject, concerning also social consultations as design method. Repercussions after the symposium were significant in the region: interviews for radio, papers [1, 2], information on internet sites of neighbouring universities and other popular and science internet sources. This post-symposium echo, proving additionally the importance of the science meeting, was for at least two reasons. Firstly, the international scientists and regional authorities who visited the UAS in Nysa, and secondly, the range and wider relevance of the problem.

#### *Going live*

The Polish countryside, like many in Europe, does need revitalization in order to become more attractive to stay in and to live in, since the problem of emigration increases. In the spatial sense, the revival may also occur thanks to re-use of formerly neglected areas as new public spaces. This process in rural areas in the Opole region takes place through a participative method. "Going live" considers two possibilities, as far as the dynamism of rural revival and spatial behaviour is concerned: static and dynamic. To explain, during many time periods, which follow one after another, one action

may happen (i.e. "static"), or many actions may happen during only one time period (i.e. "dynamic"). Life lived during one stage, seen as one task ("static") or life lived during a few stages ("dynamic") can be seen as two possible types of spatial rural revitalization.

#### **Suggestions for the Education Process, which Result from Participation**

In the participative process of rural public space planning there are three stages. The first one is about a design process by professionals which is supported by future users and local authorities. The second stage is the realisation of the project. The third stage is related to the use of the space, taking care of it, protecting and maintaining it in the best local way. *On the one hand*, as far as the essential idea of the new public space is concerned: what is necessary is to build the net of public spaces, which in the future may consist of various types of rural neglected areas (former local industry or production areas, abandoned palaces, unused and neglected empty spaces with natural values, like river valleys or the unofficial public space used by inhabitants spontaneously) connected with existing markets and squares of historical character (like sacral public spaces in front of churches, rural main markets, and squares by local shops). *On the other hand*, the difficult task is to indicate "criteria for beauty" of the public space, e.g. what percentage area should it have in the land-use plan of a village? How many trees and which shapes contribute to an optimal aesthetic for an area? Beauty depends each time on the type, character, and function of the given space. Its utility is fulfilled by the process of participation, since the very inhabitants, as its future users, shape these public spaces and its individual beauty.

#### **Summary**

The participative process as a method for learning how to design public space optimally and how to live in this space, is the subject of the author's scientific papers (1. "Landscape of the Opole countryside shaped by its inhabitants" – as coauthor with W. Strabel, Science Monograph of the UAS in Nysa, 2012; 2. "Heart of Countryside. New Public Spaces of the South-West Poland", ACEE, Silesian University of Technology in Gliwice, Poland - in press; 3. "New public spaces in rural areas in the process of revitalization. Case study: Opole region in Poland", Science Monograph of the UAS in Nysa - in press). There are two aspects in this case. The first one says, this is the right place to present the didactic results as evidence of the participation of students in the process of the creation of new public spaces in villages. The second one indicates that students and other people are learning by reading these articles and this way they become actors in this process.

"Social consultations give to inhabitants the sense of belonging to a village", says one of the representatives of local authorities in one rural area of the Opole region

inhabitants may finally decide, how, where, and in which surroundings will they spend their free time. Advantages of this process are obvious. This is the sign of planning democracy, which today is the priority in European urban and rural design. Nevertheless, some negatives are to be found as well [17]. The aim of social consultations is to research if plans are well-founded.

However, some inhabitants may try to make private business using these consultations (for example to build a home in the legally forbidden place). Prefects do not allow such illegal practice, so these people may try to abolish prefects in elections. The participative process may be sometimes used by some people politically in order to destroy the existing governing power. Besides, in another rural area in this region, there are too many sports facilities, in the opinion of local authorities. The big sport hall will be soon built based on guidelines of the spatial land-use plan. Close to this hall a public space with a playground and football field is desired by local inhabitants, since they want to play and rest right next to their homes in a quiet space "right on the other side of the fence", as they say; they want the public space for themselves. Experts, architects and urban planners state that such diversity of big and small, loud and peaceful, very close and more far-away public spaces is profitable and creates a wider spatial offer. Nevertheless, local authorities claim, that such cases are not economic and cause the loss of money by building two recreation places in one area. The rural community has to manage money carefully. If they construct a building or organise space for public use it has to serve and function well and constantly be in use, state local authorities. They prefer small architecture and small squares to avoid paying too much for maintenance. Even though money is short, the wishes of people in villages in the Opole region have priority and the new closer quiet public space will be also designed in that area. The authorities of the other area say "we serve the society".

Finally, despite the previously mentioned difficulties, it should be stated that the participative process is the crucial key to solving difficult and easy spatial problems, giving legitimate arguments and reaching well-balanced decisions.

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