

Old traditions in new solutions

Constant developing and improving is a part of human nature. We find ourselves consistently trying to expand technology, innovation, new structures and social habits. The main goal is to improve our way of life, to make it even easier and uncomplicated. Some of people's establishments have achieved this goal, others have not only failed, but in fact made things even more difficult and generated almost inevitable negative changes. We often justify our actions and decisions with the human progress. But how long can we accept the wastefulness of land and resources "as an inevitable by-product of progress" (Pruetz, 2012)? Amongst the most challenging topics for professionals is the way of managing and fixing our mistakes and still keep the same standard of living.

The environmental, economical and social changes in the last century made it very clear that conventional planning strategies are no longer productive and efficient. There is a need of radical shift in planning. New approaches have already appeared and we can now see very good examples in lots of cities. Still, the common goal of reducing CO₂ is more comprehensive and time consuming. It needs more innovative and creative capital, intellectual and cultural resources and equally shared responsibilities.

It is the lack of balance that causes most of the challenges today: the balance between urban and nature, between different social systems, between power and restrictions, rights and responsibilities, between the speed of development in the different parts of the world. It is the way of living and perceiving the world that we have to change in order to accomplish harmony and preserve the most valuable resources and qualities from the environment.

[new*] social activities

Cities are places full of differences, cultures, colors and various activities. Their image is not only result of plan or a program. We perceive them in a specific way because of the inhabitants and their behavior in the urban environment. They are the creators who define the final appearance

of the city (despite the project and ideas of architects and planners). To create or develop a place where so many differences and cultures have to find their own space and interact successfully with each another, is a challenging task. "Cities have the capability of providing something for everyone, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody" (Jacobs, 1961). It needs shared actions, visions and responsibilities to create a shared space. Our level of involvement in the city development is connected to our right to the city, the right to space. David Harvey considers this right as something "more than the individual liberty to access urban resources". He refers not only to the individual potential but to the collective power that could change the processes of urbanization.

There is a strong wave of social movements in recent years that is mostly a consequence of the desire for healthier and greener environment. Among the strongest are the environmental ones, but also those which seek for shift in planning and governance.

In recent years urban gardening has appeared in almost every city under various forms – community and vertical gardens, urban farming and edible gardens. Different reasons and conditions explain the need and the aim of this spreading phenomenon. Some are related to the growing environmental issues - the forecasts of growing shortage of food supply as a consequence of the population growth, its concentration in cities and the more intensive limitation of resources.

As former predominantly rural land Bulgaria has big tradition in gardening and farming. Not only in villages, but also in small and medium sized cities, where not so long ago there were (and still are) mainly family houses with yards where people grew almost everything. Now you can still find them in some neighborhoods even in bigger towns, but it is not so typical anymore. This tradition gives great opportunity for creating solidarity communities with shared economical advantages and further developing stronger local markets and educational events for spreading and keeping knowledge of gardening and farming traditions among the younger generations. We can already observe strong attempt from different organizations and communities who also try to involve these old traditions in bigger cities within small temporary or more permanent projects [for example in school yards or free open spaces where various participant groups could be involved]. The goal is on the one hand to increase the amount of green areas and on the other to revive forgotten values in the society.

The spread of urban gardening and farming's ideas and aims all over the world has different scale and level of influence. In some cities it is already more extended and developed in many forms and approaches. In other places we can observe only little attempts in this direction and smaller projects but still with potential for future expansion. Urban Gardening is not only an environmental movement. It has proved itself as an approach for organizing the society and building community attitude. It focuses on the formation of new social behavior and culture to

our environment and the development of our cities. Urban gardening has the ability to transform the urban space. It can change functions and the vision of a place and the city landscape itself.

[new] political realities

All social activities have not the same power and effect in the different parts of the world. Nevertheless they are expanding very rapidly and have become an inevitable part of the political reality in almost every country. Respectively the changes in the governance systems inspire new solutions and designs for the cities of the future (Steffan A., 2012).

In all European countries we can observe stronger involvement and interest from citizens to take part in planning activities. The intensity and effectiveness of participation processes and the establishment of new governance forms depends generally on the social and political structures and the planning cultures in one country.

“Food cooperations”, urban gardening movements and building communities (German: Baugruppen) are small part of all different social self-organisations. People are becoming even more aware of the abilities they have and want to take part in, and in some cases to guide the changes. It is at the same time attempt to reduce human impact on earth, but also to add new values to the way of living.

Participation processes in Bulgaria are challenging and still hardly reach all social groups. Nevertheless there are strong attempts in this direction, mostly from non-governmental actors. In last years there is a higher participation interest from society in the planning processes that was also notices during the development of the recent integrated urban plans for the biggest cities in Bulgaria.

However the implementation and development of new governance forms and participation processes have their limits and challenges. It is very significant to have strong civil activity and motivation, but moreover it is crucial to have such government and political climate that welcomes different initiatives and organizations. Greater variety of political and social realities will generate wider area of solutions and new designs.

[new] special strategies

New solutions and political realities raise the need for developing new planning instruments. The “tools we need to change the world” have to be creative and are in fact often well known and still used in some cultures and traditions (Steffen A., 2012). Sometimes we can just look at the surrounding environment and find easier and better solutions to the everyday challenges.

Good example is the usage of traditional materials in architecture. In many countries, among them Bulgaria, clay, straw and wood are old traditional materials in architecture and construction. There are plenty of amazing examples of houses still in very good condition built hundred years ago. Recently there is very intensive revival of these old techniques in contemporary architecture. As part of a youth project for building a straw-bale house in a village in central part of Bulgaria I was able to learn more about this technique and its qualities. There is already not so small community that tries to develop more constructions with natural materials and to make more people aware of their advantages. It is not only the good quality of the materials that make this kind of resources so important, but also their positive impact on the environment and human health. Beside new architecture constructions they can be further used as refurbishment of current buildings. In the Zero Carbon Britain 2030 strategy the benefits of the method are underlined: “it saves carbon; it reduces the cost; and it locks carbon in buildings.” (p.14)

Despite all advantages of these traditional techniques, current regulations in some countries constrain their wider implementation. Difficulties with building permits and other requirements are often big obstacles for the owners and architects. There is a need of better understanding and higher acceptance of the advantages of this design.

On a bigger scale there is a certain change in planning strategies. They are focusing not only on the cities and their physical improvement, but also a lot on nature and free land. Land is highly vulnerable as most of it has been converted for development every year (Pruetz, 2012). Resilient and preventive planning strategies aim to preserve and protect natural and land resources. An important integrated instrument is the landscape ecological plan. It offers further ways of preserving natural protected areas, forests, rural land and all other kinds of open spaces. Implementing these strategies in current plans and policies could help reaching better balance between urban and natural environment.

These strategies are very important for areas with zone planning conflicts. A lot of rapidly development cities in Bulgaria are surrounded by natural and protected areas with high amount of resources and biodiversity rate. I find landscape ecological approaches significant for the future development of areas like the city of Burgas at the Black Sea coast. It a place with very important location – at big transport corridors and between the sea and three big lakes – protected natural zones. The city develops further as industrial and touristic centre which sometimes generates conflicts within the area. The structure and characteristics of the city create good opportunity for implementing agro-ecological and forestry measures. A stronger focus on landscape instruments and methods could help build better connections between the variety of landscapes.

Environmental and economical challenges concern not only one society. They need united efforts and common solutions. The reduction of CO2 emissions is a task that requires international and national frameworks and regulations, actual objectives and shared actions and responsibilities. Nevertheless, activities on personal level are not less significant for the success of this goal.

Permaculture Design combines the necessary requirements for the needed planning instruments. It offers permanent solutions and includes participatory and interdisciplinary approaches. It is one of the possible ways to deal with the environmental, economical and social challenges. Some examples include a lot of familiar “well forgotten old” approaches, that have their roots in old traditions and cultures. After all every city has its particular characteristics and requires specific approach. We need to look close in each one and to find the solutions and designs that fit it the most.

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