

## EMPOWERING RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURE BY COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND WIDER INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

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**Abstract.** The paper focuses on the actual state of architecture and planning practices in Lithuania and Latvia stating the common features and differences as well as identifying a number of challenges and possible solutions and their impacts on academic research carried out by junior fellows of the universities. The transition from a planned socialist economy to a free market and the following change in the structure of social order has objectively caused radical changes in the need and the offer of professional services where the largest market share is held by relatively small or very small architectural companies. Limited resources lead to dominance of the fulfillment of primary functional and aesthetical needs of the customer while the broader dialogue with public is usually delayed or missing. This often leads to public dissatisfaction of the results of implementation of development projects. The authors of the paper stress that the enhanced dialogue between architect and urban community supported by local governments and citizens could radically improve the situation and simultaneously contribute to the quality of architectural solutions. The share of responsibility for the future quality of built environmental goes to an academic education and especially to research systems. Multi-professional collaboration and integrated cross-border research practices should be encouraged as more beneficial for accumulating the experience of different cultures and to achieving optimal qualities in the future urban environment.

**Keywords:** urban communities, architecture, research, international cooperation.

### Specifics of architectural practice and research in Lithuania and Latvia in European context

Regional tradition and socio-economical reality of the last few decades has set so that architect's profession in the North Baltic Sea region of Europe namely in countries ranging from Poland to Estonia have some specifics that makes a difference in comparison with the other countries in the wider context of the European Union. The article analyses these specifics and their impacts on research in architecture promoting the principles of community involvement and international collaboration networks with applications in research.

Although the complicated economical reality after the period of commanding economy – extra rapid growth of building market in the first decade of the XXI-st century with the following collapse and stigmatisation of world economy at the end of the period – has the general impact on the profession of architect still the details in the neighbouring countries differ. In Lithuania it means relatively small and average-scale orders for many small projects. To ensure economic viability of their practices architects have been developing their activities in the neighbouring areas of public administration, practical design and planning work as well as academic teaching and research. In Latvia close contacts between architects working in neighbouring areas

due to the fact that up to now there is only one school of architecture in the country has been a historical tradition for longer period of time and recent economical swing has not left significant changes in it. The combination of teaching and research is quite usual for academics in all countries; still combinations of the other fields may differ from country to country. Administrator involved in design or practicing researcher and teacher is rather a standard but no exception in Lithuania, Latvia and beyond. Such a specific extension of skills means firstly more professional universalism on one hand and more flat level of special professional knowledge and experience for some specific professional activities, on the other. By putting a careful glance on a professional architect's practice one will notice another specialty of our profession. With few exceptions architects in our countries extend their professional practice across several quite different practice fields ranging from urban design (even urban planning) to volumetric architecture, to landscape architecture and till interior and furniture design. In its essence this model meets the very basic concept of internal coherence between the different spatial levels in architecture in a wide understanding of our profession where the "smaller" element is derived from the "bigger" and *vice versa*: interior is bound to the volume, the latter depends on urban design and it follows the basic

concepts of planning. In fact this specific is mainly determined by an economical reality of the past and often the present time. Small market and the lack of orders on one hand are standing along with relatively small number of educated architects in Lithuania and in Latvia. According to the number of architects per 1000 residents Lithuania has 0,6 and Latvia has 0,3 and are in the end positions among 32 European countries where the average indicator is 0,8 (The Architectural 2008). This reality brings us to the situation where architects often have to fulfil very different tasks and therefore develop very wide range of professional expertise. Due to the specifics of local market where the dominating demand is for small to medium scale development projects and this does not make necessity for regular involvement of larger professional capacities the contracts for architectural services are relatively small. The result is dominance of small and very small architect's offices. If or when bigger contract appears on the market the number of potential designers (companies) is low, also questionable are their abilities and skills for that kind of work. In its essence this is the reality which means that architectural education and research should focus on these points and provide certain responses.

### **Territorial communities – a strong actor in transforming the urban environment**

As a conclusion from the above presented situation it is evident that the wider field of professional practice of architects in Baltic countries increases their level of general competence in diverse areas of architectural activity starting with traditional technical design to small planning projects and extends to the more extensive urban planning as well as interior design. But potential abilities to perform deeper complex (sustainable) architectural design based on the needed social, environmental and economical investigations stay limited in time, experience and resource. The pre-project investigations are usually limited in time and because of small budget performed by the project team members themselves. Not always this allows for doing all the necessary investigations at an appropriate professional level. It is well known that environmental assessment requires specific blend of skills and experiences from natural and technical sciences and research practices. The same complex issue is evaluating the present social problems and the needs of local residents as well as forecasting the consequences of development interventions. Public involvement of the groups of local representatives for the same reasons at the planning or design stage is very formal and the project owner has the only goal: to pass

rapidly the compulsory legal requirements and lengthy procedures and gain a building permit. Generally, this imposes the responsibility for the process and result mainly on the author of the development project and it makes the risk of dissatisfaction with the result *post factum*. Usually poor social involvement causes the opposition in the most different forms at the project implementation phase. It is worth mentioning that because of a lack of communication practice the public traditionally is very passive as well.

Planning and evaluating the consequences of architectural development interventions is hardly ever done with the only exception of environmental assessment procedures that are strongly regulated by the national and the European environmental regulations. It is clear that the aspect of social involvement is currently underestimated and plays a very poor role in the whole process of sustaining urban processes on different territorial levels of regional, municipal, local and private development in modern cities.

The experience that our neighbouring countries have gained in social involvement during the last half century is worth making a brief review. Recently the new regulation "Statement of Community Involvement" (Gareth 2010) came into power in the UK describing in detail the basic and supplementary procedures of consulting local communities on the new planning and development projects where even minority and disadvantaged groups are consolidated.

In France in 1983 by dividing competences between the local governments, the departments, the regions and the state a special procedure of definition of the protection zones around architectural and urban heritage objects was introduced that has become an effective instrument of multilevel partnership between community, city and the state as well as local inhabitants and their associations (Kukaine 2010). This has succeeded in many examples of redevelopment of dwelling blocks, repairs of the buildings and equipment of territories. In Vienna (Austria) the challenging redevelopment of the former *Kabelwerk* factory area has been carried out by successful combination of responsibilities of Vienna as one of the nine federal states of Austria, Vienna as the local community and the so-called Consultative Council of Residents organized specially for development of this project (Liepa-Zemeša, Pamer 2010; Kabelwerk in Vienna... 2011). Similar examples of involvement of various levels of responsibilities in order to achieve an optimal result of development may also be noticed in the *Hafen-City* development (Hamburg, Germany) and projects in Brussels (Belgium) (Denefa Lesjē 2009; Liepa-Zemeša 2009), Copenhagen (Denmark) (Sabi 2009) or Berlin (Germany).

To assess the question of social aspect in architecture and research it is needed to figure out and agree upon the main goals of research and science practices. Identifying it as an innovative contribution to the national welfare in the most different areas of social, economical and environmental development would be the right key target. Promoting and accelerating the needed processes for the better today and tomorrow of our cities and their communities could hardly be argued as an important goal of research in a general sense. In this case few important aspects arise. Firstly we speak about the interests that community of a district, town, region or the whole country has or could have and not just about that of a single individual. Indeed these different levels of individual and common interests do not contradict on to another and even more supplement each other. Professional principles of going from the big to the small and from the small to the big are well known and practiced by architects in many areas of activity where the good quality is achieved by a balanced compromise between the interest of an individual as well as that of a local and wider community. Based on that we have to identify the general aspect of social **importance** of research that has to be outlined and elevated high on researcher's agenda. In this point the areas that are currently important for the local urban communities and where they could be involved in the planning, design and research processes to give them more up-to date framework have to be identified.

### **Involving urban communities into the different phases of research practices**

First and main initial task of any architectural intervention on a regional, urban or a local scale is identifying the problems of a present state. Having proper contact and hearing the responding voice of local territorial communities is of a great support for the researcher at that stage of the work. In the whole range of professional practices from landscape architecture to volumetric design, from residential development to infrastructure planning the consolidated opinions of local communities could be perfect advisors for an architect in figuring out the existing in-depth problems by identifying the processes that are ongoing in certain communities and neighbourhoods. Based on analysis the methodical program of planned intervention is usually built up. At that stage communities could provide for a researcher the set of needed activities, they could support or withhold on certain functional models at the very early phases of the work which makes it more rational to rethink and easy to modify. In the later phase of selecting the strategy of solutions for the existing problems communities are

those strongly motivated experts and social volunteers that are willing to hear and respond to the strategic proposals of planning and design team. As the possible outputs in many ways are having direct impact on their everyday life conditions, community representatives are patient and eager to examine all the possible versions and alternatives of the proposed solutions. Hearing their voices at the early phases of conceptual design is greatly helpful, rational and has strong meaning behind it. Communities are ready to be exploited again in the following phase of verifying the versions of development. The specifics of this phase are that architects concentrate mainly on spatial and aesthetical evaluations and representatives of communities act in a different way: they super-position themselves into the proposed environment and generate their personal reactions and impressions from the inside. In most of cases this is very complicated to do for an author himself as he is anyway an outsider. When the final proposal is drafted exposing it to the judgement of communities is a good last moment quality control just before the implementation. Adding or removing some final elements might increase the overall quality and bring more satisfaction with the result. In the case that contacts with local urban communities have been close in all the described phases from identifying the problem to verifying the final solutions the new result will be more welcome by local people and not feared of. Even after the implementation of planned programme communities that have put an eye on the planning process accept the changes more willingly and take the responsibility for supervision and maintenance of the new environment instead of vandalising and destroying it. A lot of good stories are told by the members of those communities to their friends and acquaintances in support of the intervention that has been done in a nice way so people become perfect advertisers and promoters of such collaboration models instead of acting as severe critics. Is there any other outcome which could be more welcome from the point of view of a supervising authority, city politician, planner and designer or a researcher? Probably not at all.

The truth is that this type of socially responsive approach has its cost as well: it needs additional human and material resources. More time is needed for social inter-communication with the groups of local urban communities. Staff needs to develop special professional skills to facilitate communication, to present proposals, to get the responses and to aggregate the results. Communities also need to grow an adequate experience of communicating with the team of researchers or designers in order to take the proposals on a more common and not just individual

level. But the reward for all this labour is immeasurable in social, environmental and also in economical aspects. Social satisfaction of residents, coherent compromises on environment issues and reasonable economical benefits are the goals that a real professional is pursuing to build up his prestige, that authorities like to achieve to ensure their future and that the young researcher could probably aim at to gain as well.

The topics of research are derived from local, regional and wider national problems of different communities and the environment of their habitat in a way that was described above. The globalising markets create conditions that are sometimes different and sometimes similar for close-lying and more remote countries. Transport, communication and mobility issues are impacting urban life globally and also locally so these challenges are in common for many developed countries and regions. Depopulating countryside and shrinking rural towns, the suburban residential isles as a result of a recent urban sprawl that increase local daily pendulum migration is typical for many developed countries of our region. Pressure of development on cultural landscapes and the public spaces is the typical feature of densification process for many cities. Therefore generating the research topic and the subject for analysis is another sensitive issue that should be considered seriously by an institution and a researcher and which definitely has a national impact as well. The researcher is naturally tackling the topics that he would be ready to research and bring up the expected results. The institution in a sense of an academic department is promoting and developing research in the fields that it has experience in and people and technical resources are available. The academic institution in general develops certain strategic fields of expertise based on capacities of its structural units. Looking on a national level the specific fields of research that are based on strengths of its institutional capacities are developed. In the field of architecture this might be alternative mobility applications, heritage regeneration or innovative recreation models. The important issue is that often different institutions in neighbouring or more distant countries are researching on similar or even the same topics. The key questions in this situation are: does a researcher in one country knows about the progress that his colleague is about to achieve in the other country and if or how do they communicate? It is evident from many fields of life that concentration of resource including knowledge and intellect as well as cross-border cooperation brings better results and is more rational in the use of resources, avoiding mistakes and duplication and going more in depth of the analysed processes. The situation we are looking for has a "Win – win" nature when cooperation with certain

specialisation is more efficient than separated and isolated competition. The aspect of integrated introduction of research results into planning processes was disclosed by J. Jakaitis by emphasising the aspect of complex integration of social aspects into the general, special and local planning documents (Jakaitis 2009).

In this place two aspects are essential: actuality of research and its innovative nature. The hottest topics of a daily life could be brought into an agenda of a researcher by maintaining close interaction with urban communities. When it comes to an innovation aspect the question is more complicated and it is related to a good knowledge of local traditions and history on one hand, and to a well developed international collaboration cluster of local of networks of experienced and motivated partners on the other.

Attracting public aspect in research is the task for planners and architects as well as it is an interest for urban communities. It should be the interest of the whole society to raise public involvement in planning various processes development being one of them. Good results may be obtained by involving the mass media in different accessible forms for explaining the actualities from one side and encouraging the direct forms of dialogue like internet polls and social networks on the other. This is the sphere of activity that junior researchers should take a challenge of for creating a network of researchers and well-balanced urban environment that suits for the needs of individuals as well as for interests of wider communities.

### **Reflections of community involvement and cooperation principles in the papers of junior researchers**

Cooperation in research is realised by involving specialists of several universities into preparation of the recent issue of the journal. Collaboration of the leading academics of the Faculty of Urban Design of the University of Venice, Italy, Bauhaus University Weimar, Germany and Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning of Riga Technical University, Latvia in collaboration with the hosting team of the Faculty of Architecture of Vilnius Gediminas Technical University is trusted to be essentially beneficial for the starting careers of junior researchers.

The aspects of public involvement are quite innovative in research practices and require certain experience and personal skills. In the papers presented at the third issue of the research journal "Science – Future of Lithuania" the authors are demonstrating some of these principles. The article by Katharina Sucker from Bauhaus University Weimar, „Istanbul Und Das Erbe Der Europäischen Stadt“ has demonstrated a comprehensive outlook on how chang-

ing social-political systems of the past centuries have made imprints on planning and design patterns of marvelous Istanbul (Sucker 2010).

Many aspects of contemporary city life that are reflected in the articles of junior researchers have social involvement as an identified method or as a potential for the future. In this context the articles on the perspectives of community involvement in the process of urban development (M. Cirtautas) and impacts of local territorial communities on planning urban recreation areas (I. Urbonaitė) as well as trends of housing (P. Džervus) are building the research with strong community impact factor on residential and public areas and so are promising the most substantial progress as well as the outcomes.

Some articles are exploiting the idea that the national experience sets the best ground for broader international cooperation. Outlining the main development features of Latvian national parks (K. Dreija) could request some parallels from the perspective of the other countries. Development of the structure of Lithuanian parks and gardens analysed in the article by A. Mocevičius is a perfect response to that line (Mocevičius 2009) as the author has recently successfully presented his thesis on that topic at VGTU. A. Gabrėnas is going straight forward to compare Lithuanian and Finnish traditions in wooden architecture. U. Ile is aiming for the same in a perspective of landscape composition that is in common for housing areas in the Baltic Sea Region. E. Suvorovs is looking at Italy to study the case of 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin and G. Tallamini directs his Italian researchers glance as far as to the Central Asia for a study of spatial devices in transforming architecture of Kazakhstan. K. Buivydaite is promising an extremely folk-flavoured research focusing on a fireplace of an archaic dwelling. The aspect of alternative energy finds more and more reflection in architecture. R. Riekstinš and J. Abromas are aiming to turn the potentials into recommendations for professional practices. The subjects addressed by the other authors make an international interest based on the general research values and potential achievements that could be beneficial for local communities of their own countries also in a wider European context and beyond.

The collection of articles in the journal "Science – Future of Lithuania" makes a perfect platform for initiating direct cooperation and to strengthen mutual contacts of the researchers as well as of the institutions. Integration of urban communities into the research processes could bring more reliability to the achieved outcomes and make the recommendations generated in a joint effort of cooperating professionals more beneficial to the society.

## Conclusions

Research is a consequent phase of education and it should present particular responses to the specifics of architect's profession in the country with a wider focus in a regional perspective;

Community involvement could be developed in research activities dealing with it as a strong share-holder in parallel to professional practice traditions;

Actuality and social importance of research can be mainly ensured by maintaining close contacts between the researchers and the interest groups in a society, mostly focusing on local urban territorial communities;

International and regional collaboration is a key approach to develop innovative research methods and techniques applicable on a national, a regional and a wider European scales.

Better coordinated international cooperation of researchers in the field of architecture should be facilitated by collaborating institutions to encourage and empower the junior scientists to take the advantages of socially motivated partnership at the very early phases of their academic careers.

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## ARCHITEKTŪROS TYRIMŲ SUAKTYVINIMAS SKATINANT VISUOMENĖS DALYVAVIMO IR TYRĖJŲ TARPTAUTINIO BENDRADARBIAVIMO VEIKSNIUS

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjami architektūros mokslo tyrimų tobulinimo klausimai. Į pirmą planą iškeliamas jaunųjų tyrėjų pradedamų darbų tematikos aktualizavimas, kurį lemia tyrėjo, mokslo padalinio ir visos institucijos pasirengimas vykdyti tam tikrų sričių tyrimus, pasirenkamos strateginės mokslo darbų plėtotės kryptys. Teritorinių miesto bendruomenių įtraukimas į mokslo tyrimus sudaro prielaidas aktualizuoti atliekamų darbų temas, gauti tinkamą pradinę informaciją, patikrinti, kiek realiai veiksmingos yra tyrimo išvados ir rekomendacijos. Vykdomų mokslo darbų kokybę gerina ir glaudesnių bendradarbiavimo ryšių plėtotė tarp pačių tyrėjų ir tarp institucijų. Žurnale pateikiamų straipsnių pavyzdžiais iliustruojamas minėtų veiksmų naudojimas jaunųjų mokslininkų tyrimuose.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** architektūra, miesto planavimas, miesto bendruomenė, mokslo tyrimai, tarptautinis bendradarbiavimas.