

## Socially Responsible Architect – Towards Creating Place<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The traditional system of higher education looks at architecture either as art or engineering discipline, simplifying other aspects of its discourse, like social, economic or environmental. The emphasis in architectural education should be relocated from the hypothetical into the real world, which takes into account the actual characteristics of the space, its complex and contradictory problems, as well as specific requirements of the community that uses the space. In order to promote students and the general public awareness of on the specific problems of space and society with which architect could face in the practice of architecture at the University of Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture in recent years a number of different courses is set dealing with these problems in different ways. Depending on the level and scope of the study various courses with their methods and curricula are directed to different modes of connection between architects and society. One of the important aims of these curricula is the social awareness of the architect. This paper shows methods of work and results from the previous few years within the Master's study program at the University in Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture, where Professor Vladan Djokic and Assistant Professor Ana Nikezic together with their associates through design studio curricula have been developing various strategies in architectural education with the focus on social responsibility of an architect.

### **Introduction: Socially Responsible Architecture**

The traditional system of higher education looks at architecture either as art or engineering discipline, simplifying other aspects of its discourse, like social, economic or environmental. Traditional teaching methods are predominantly based on the adoption of the hypothetical and abstract skills, as well as separated and mono-disciplinary knowledge. Existing learning methods often ignore complex components of the particular environment in which architecture exists. The process of education of architects takes place far away from the real society, time and place, market demands, even environmental problems, missing an opportunity to address and prepare students for the real problems they will encounter in practice. This approach is not conditioned and shaped by interpretation and evaluation of experiences and perceptions of either residents or any other interested party involved in the space, so there is no opportunity to develop the skills needed for the work in real situations, where conditions are limited, complex and often contradictory (Salama, 2008).

As professional competence and ability of future professionals in practice, largely determines the educational process, the education of future architects should not be only logical and aesthetic, it

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must also include an ethical dimension (Soria Lopez, 2006) with the aim to launch a social, cultural, environmental, political and economic aspects of the context in which architects practice. Given the fact that researching on and dealing with real spatial problems means cooperation with the local community and also with all other stakeholders interested in the development of concrete surroundings, a constant interweaving of academic and research approach is needed, with frequent relocation from architectural to other discourses. The architectural intervention that ignores local context and community, as well as environmental and economic aspects of sustainability, risks to produce and increase the problem rather than to solve them (Williams, 2007). Field of social science presents us a need for a much broader understanding of the world around us (Salama, 2008). Therefore, socially responsible architect should focus on the sociological discourse, involving not only studying living conditions within the community, but also consequences of these conditions on the wider environment, and vice versa.

The emphasis in architectural education should be relocated from the hypothetical into the real world, which takes into account the actual characteristics of the space, its complex and contradictory problems, as well as specific requirements of the community that uses the space. In order to promote students and the general public awareness of on the specific problems of space and society with which architect could face in the practice of architecture at the University of Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture in recent years a number of different courses is set dealing with these problems in different ways. Depending on the level and scope of the study various courses with their methods and curricula are directed to different modes of connection between architects and society. One of the important aims of these curricula is the social awareness of the architect. Following chapters present three frames through which it is possible to educate socially responsible architect and create the place. These frames under the titles a) Responsible pedagogy, b) Relating architecture and community and c) Sharing knowledge and experience, represent different ways in which educators can influence students to become socially responsible towards creating socially aware place.

### **Socially Responsible Pedagogy**

Architectural practice has dramatically changed therefore corresponding changes in education are needed. There are continuous attempts to adapt architectural curricula, to reconfigure the structure of educational process, to test new ideas and to probe future visions. Learning courses are no longer one-way, from teachers to students, but are multidimensional and dynamic in both place and time.

In the previous few years within the Master's study program at the University in Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture, Professor Vladan Djokic and Assistant Professor Ana Nikezic together with their associates through design studio curricula have been developing various strategies in architectural education with the focus on social responsibility toward natural landscape. Different topics focusing on the relation between man and nature were discussed at various places carefully selected on the territory of Serbia and Montenegro, comprising of sea (water system), mountain resort, and urban natural areas.

Through questioning ways in which architect can direct development of sustainable natural environment as an integral part of life and how both, nature and architecture can be used to their full potential without being detrimental or destructive to each other, research started from the fact that natural landscape can become a resource of contemporary life in the city where leisure demands new sanctuaries over and over again. It is a lot more than just a site for architecture. Its complex phenomena, through topography, climate and vegetation, namely through its elements and rhythms become an inspiring part of the architectural discourse. During each architectural intervention in the natural landscape, it is necessary to reconsider the position, scope, program, and its measure in the context of contemporary city life, which will inevitably be viewed from the ratio of materiality of both, architecture and landscape. Human behaviour and actions influence the structure and function of landscape thus affecting the process of urban living. In that sense, nature does not stop at the

physical, but also affects the process of urban living, through intersecting and intertwining architecture and nature, making a new "cultural landscape".

Topics and locations that were discussed are: a) prof. Vladan Djokic - Design studio 2007/08: Lake Skadar (Montenegro): Protection and Development – One Concept?; b) prof. Vladan Djokic – Design studio 2008/09: Slovenska beach: The Mediterranean Trace; c) ass.prof. Ana Nikezic – Design studio 2010/11, 2011/12: Košutnjak (Park Forest, Belgrade): Performing Landscape: Kosutnjak\_Principles of Architectural Design in the context of Climate Change (Fig. 1); d) prof. Vladan Djokic – Design studio 2012/13: The mountain resort – Durmitor National Park in Montenegro; f) ass.prof. Ana Nikezic – Design studio 2012/2013: Dreaming Factory – Contemplating on Housing in the context of Agrarian Landscape.



Figure 1: Diversity of students' projects

The results vary in a wide range from inspired associations to creative dialogues, from designs that complement to those that contrast the environment. Diverse concepts have produced a series of diametrically different solutions and show all the charm dealing with architecture by learning from the nature. Solutions vary in terms of their disposition, size, program and scope, but are united in terms of complementing material and sensual character of the place through relating new structure and natural environment. In researching spatial needs as well as possible desires, students realize that both program and space primarily relate to the character of place and are dependent of its constant change. In summarizing results of the research together with students we have come to several general conclusions which were pertaining to the possible ways of establishing the connection between society and architecture as a new architectural paradigm.

The research helped us to adopt a more comprehensive and socially responsible approach to architecture. It showed students' ability to think about architects' responsibility in a holistic way and suggest key issues in the process of redefining natural and cultural layers on the one hand and spatial and semantic framework of the landscape on the other. In short, architects should incorporate

the natural in a fundamental manner into their project in order to affect mind and body of the user as a way to improve and intensify our relationship with built environment, through architecture – an experience that might increase society’s awareness about the social responsibility of an architect.

## Relating Architecture and Community

Contemporary situation shows that environmental problems demand the consideration of all professions involved in the production of space, which includes architecture too (Williamson et al., 2003). The set of complex social realities being tackled cannot be covered solely by one theory, method and discipline, but presumes the necessity of a diversity of ideas, knowledge and engagements in order for them to become comprehensible and solvable (Salama, 2008). Sustainability is a network of ideas. There is no one, ideal way to implement and materialize the concept of sustainability, but rather different contexts and situations that initiate their own models and forms that respond to this concept.

In the previous few years within the Master's study program at the University in Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture, Assistant Professor Ana Nikezic together with their associates through elective course and workshop curricula have been developing various strategies in architectural education with the focus on responsibility toward the local community in soon to be gentrified neighbourhoods. Different topics with a focus on recycling the spirit of the place were discussed at various places carefully selected on the territory of Belgrade, Serbia, comprising of devastated and abandoned spaces in degraded areas. The focus was not on the incorporation of legacy and current space as part of the architectural creations, but on observation and translating the principles of the use and properties of the space and its importance in the mechanism of thinking about architecture. It is important to use a social approach to foster creativity with a sense of community, environmental and ethical awareness, a value framework that is in opposition to the market-driven notion of liberal individualism. One of the aims of educational process going beyond institutional framework and the usual method was precisely the awareness of the problems and potentials of the real spaces and the possibilities of their usage. The main principle which lies at the basis of this thinking is that the architecture can be driven by human experience, use of space, the space can become a tool of its transformation, and people through social interaction space builders, for what requires socially responsible architect.

Topics and locations that were discussed are:

a) Elective course 2011/12: Belgrade: RE\_Birth: New life of abandoned spaces (<http://rebirthbelgrade.blogspot.com>, <http://www.eme3.org/?p=1645>) (Fig. 2, 3, 4);

b) Workshop 2012/13: Belgrade: Garden to go, [http://ecoweekconference.org/ecoweek.rs/files/2012/files/workshops\\_ppt/W2.pdf](http://ecoweekconference.org/ecoweek.rs/files/2012/files/workshops_ppt/W2.pdf) (Fig. 5).



Figure 2, 3, 4, 5: Students' project/elective course and workshop

The main part of the curricula was communication with local community through architecture and more over through actual involvement in the process of affirming places. Through the dynamic and always productive debates (creative industries – pros and cons, the inheritance or the ruin, performing places, occupying abandoned places) with clearly defined framework and objectives, a set of questions is being placed before the students. How particular characteristics of the space and the people who use it can be placed as an initial impulse for the architectural intervention in that space and how all of this could affect the process of architectural creation? What is the role of the architect in the development of sustainable communities according to the needs of the contemporary city and the community; whether architects build, edit, organize, or simply just initiate and accentuate areas potentially suitable for future development? What lessons can be drawn from the assessment of a particular spatial framework and how they can become future leaders in the conceptualization of space? How do the people on the one hand, and specific characteristics of the space, on the other hand, can be used to its maximum?

The role of these curricula was to establish a social and spatial context as an integral part of the process of architectural creation, in contrast to the observation of context as mere physical frame. Merging the social and artistic fields of action, where both forces are equally strong and important, the results ranged from social interaction as architecture, through mutual emphasis, to highlighting of the limits of the space structure as a new infrastructure. In this way, architecture guides, highlights, initiates, activates, but does not control events in the area. The social mechanisms and mechanisms of transformation of space are not in antagonism, they now appear together in various forms of materiality - when one of them disappears, other supports it, where one is weak, other compensates it, by forming in that way new socially aware spatial structures. The potential transformation of space is multi-layered. This is an opportunity when the urban context may get its particular meaning, to improve and develop its specify, and to revive public spaces in an original way, in accordance with the history of the city. Often playing with the relationship between inherited and abandoned, present in material way and the ephemeral, permanent and temporary , between something what specified with a certain framework or identity and newly offered concepts, suggested concepts offer a wide range of interventions, from those which are disappearing, or appears only in traces, through those that provides a skeleton or infrastructure to those that offers a spectacle. Working on different issues and spatial concepts, students were aware that they with their intervention leave a mark not only in space but also in time. Either as a temporary or permanent transformation layer, any intervention in the space has potential of social engaged action and it provides the medium for the transmission of a specific message. As the focus of intervention was on that what with such intervention can be achieved, it was particularly important that the message is clearly conveyed to the public in order to further awareness of the importance of the location, as well as the potential of smaller, but socially engaged architectural and performative practices.

### **Sharing the Knowledge and Experience: Blog, Exhibition, Publications**

There is value in understanding and promoting social approaches to creativity because this enables the complexity of what stimulates and nurtures creativity to be explored and highlighted, thus allowing us to move beyond narrow, purely individualistic notions of this. Craft (2006) has argued, we need artists and designers who think about the impact of their ideas and work, not only on themselves as individuals.

In trying to solve real problems rooted in space and society, the importance of leaving the institution and sharing the knowledge and experience is of prime importance. There are different possibilities of showing results achieved during the process of architectural education, where exhibitions, publications and nowadays the more and more popular Blog are the most common ones. Exhibition is time limited spatial formation, rooted in context and a good platform for discussions and debates. Blog, unlike the exhibition, is not time nor space conditioned; the concept which is not firmly closed, prone to changes or deepening of the initial research topic, and dynamic

during operation. Different in formation both from Blog and Exhibition, the Publication is a witness, a permanent trace of a particular moment, topic and a way of thinking.

In this context, the role of the exhibitions, blogs and publications is viewed as an appropriate tool that can help the exchange between architects (wide range of information, knowledge, research results, intervention obstacles and potentials expected) and society (local community, political, economic and cultural institutions and wider public) beyond the school itself. In the previous few years within the Master's study program at the University in Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture, Professor Vlada Djokic and Assistant Professor Ana Nikezic together with their associates focuses on displacing knowledge and results to the wider public.

Publications: V. Djokic, M. Milojevic, (ed.), Mediterranean Cities and Squares. Belgrade, University of Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture, 2011. (students' projects of three generations: Design studio 2007/08: Lake Skadar (Montenegro): Protection and Development – One Concept Design studio 2008/09: Slovenska beach: The Mediterranean Trace Design studio 2012/13: The mountain resort – Durmitor National Park in Montenegro), A. Nikezic (ed), Performing Landscape: Kosutnjak\_Principles of Architectural Design in the context of Climate Change. Belgrade, University of Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture, 2013. (in preparation).

Exhibitions: Education Zone, Mixer Festival, 2012, Belgrade; Eme3 Festival of Architecture in Barcelona, 2012, Barcelona; Mediterranean Cities and Squares, Belgrade, 2011 and many others (Fig. 6, 7, 8).

Blogs: <http://rebirthbelgrade.blogspot.com/> (Fig.9), <http://landscapestruktura.blogspot.com/> (Fig. 10).

The results show that exhibitions, blogs and publications are an exposed filed in architectural education which is convenient for multiple information interchange, contributes to the formulation of a complete picture of the particular topic, and improves the communication among students and between teachers and students. First of all, exchange of information is fast and more efficient, displaced topics are transparent providing better students' work, and communication among students and between students and teachers is improved. Then, visibility of work is at a much higher level, as well as completeness of research process and design. At the end, dissemination of results is fast, something like a well established cooperation between the architect and the city (widens the vision in an endless public or even web field).



Figure 6, 7, 8: Exhibitions

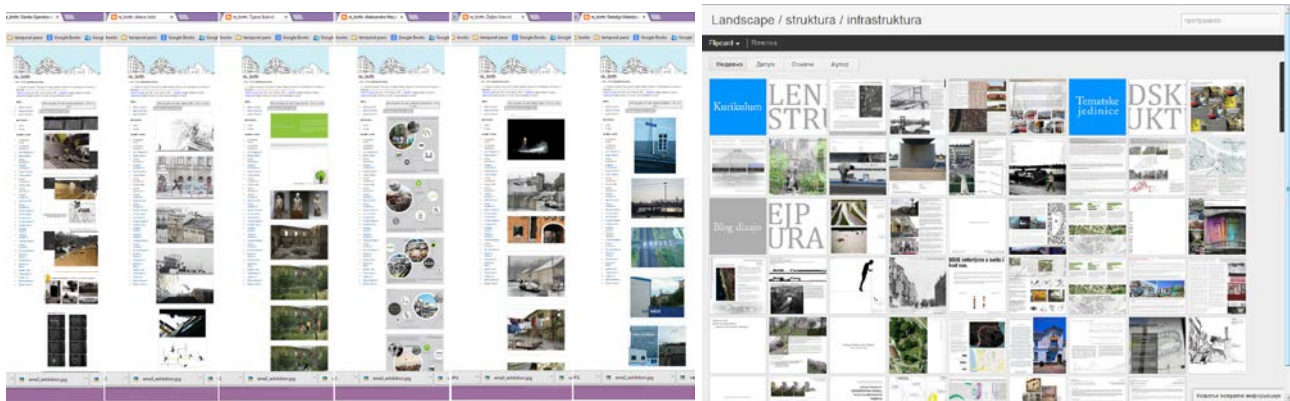


Figure 9 and 10: Blogs

### Conclusion: Towards Socially Responsible Architect

It is a contemporary belief that the scope of architecture is not a neutral and isolated area, but rather an integrated part of a wider social reality. The idea of "real" architecture is no longer based on buildings that are spectacular, non-contextual and non-sensitive to their surroundings, but is directed towards those buildings that protect the environment from and for the people. Peter Eisenman believes that the role of architecture is not to address social, economic and environmental problems, but to improve its own discourse and paradigms (Locke, 2004). He believes that causes of environmental problems, as well as actions taken to mitigate and resolve them, should be sought primarily within the fields of economics, sociology and politics. The route Eisenman has for these claims is that architecture deals with regulating and designing spaces, not society, and that it is a footprint of a culture in physical space, the materialization of all general and specific social values, problems and conflicts. By wondering what sustainability means in the architectural arena, Soria-Lopez (2006) argues that really sustainable and simply good architecture must satisfy simultaneously all dimensions: logical (scientific, technical, functional), ethical (security, low impact, protection, good use) and aesthetic (beauty, meaning, emotion). In that way sustainability becomes a means to achieving better quality of life for the society as a whole, not a goal in itself, just for architecture or nature. So, the role of the architect is to incorporate this dialogue into the project by listening-understanding-responding to the "voices of the natural and cultural context" and interlock it with the experience of the users of the real place.

Unlike the traditional model based on hypothetical components, an integrative approach involved with the real setting is becoming the core of architectural education. Learning through the actual reality, involving with its limitations and potentials, the key factors were set up. In this way the fundamental principles of place-based and experience-based pedagogy is widened whether through large or small scale, permanent, temporary or ephemeral intervention, and implemented in particular place, society and time. Through different angles and points of consideration, as well as through innumerable obstacles and potentials students face with, it is possible to educate a socially responsible architect capable to accept and learn from the place and society, to approach, deal with and combat real space problems, through accessing a philosophical, social, environmental or other practical dimension in trying to be create a place.

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