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PLAYFUL ARCHITECTURE

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ABSTRACT

The development of spatial values and the level of awareness of a quality space depend on the experience a person has in early youth. Therefore it is sensible to educate already the very young, and along with them the general public, to be able to take part in the future decision-making processes regarding the design of space as successfully as possible. Such education has long-term effects on the development of spatial literacy, values related to the design of space and the general public's taste. Moreover, it indirectly helps change the urban and built structure, as awareness results in a demand for a higher quality built environment. Education about the environment, architecture, space and sustainable development has been developed and promoted in several different ways by the majority of European countries since the 1980s. Since then, this has been a subject of increasing importance as an instrument of environmental policies. In 1999 the International Union of Architects (UIA) established a work programme named Architecture and Children at the initiative of a few countries. The programme connects countries that share similar educational objectives in the fields of architecture and the environment. A subsidiary group to the working group Architecture and Children was operating in Slovenia under the patronage of the Chamber of Architecture and Spatial Planning of Slovenia from 2009 to 2013. Since 2013 the group Playful Architecture is working within Center for Architecture. One of its key tasks is the organization of workshops under the title of Architecture and Games, which culminated in a handbook to help teachers introduce the topics of space and architecture into their classrooms.

KEYWORDS

Architecture and children, education about the environment and space, workshops, learning through experience, spatial literacy, quality of living space, Golden Cubes award

1. INTRODUCTION

The professional architectural community has long been warning about the low level of spatial literacy and spatial design as well as emphasizing the need for the introduction of education in this field at an early age. The children of today are the future participants in environmental design through a number of different roles, from legislative, engineering, to investing and other ways of public participation in the decision-making processes. Their ability to make quality decisions will depend on the knowledge, experience and abilities gained through education.

The level of spatial culture is determined on the one hand by the legal framework and the experts and, on the other hand, by the habits regarding the use of space as well as the values of the society as a whole. This is the reason why many countries in Europe and the United States responded to the UIA and United Nations call for education about the built environment during the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2015) with the inclusion of these contents into the educational programmes of elementary and secondary schools.

As also expressed in the UIA Built Environment Education Guidelines, the education of themes related to the environment and values is based on the presupposition that every individual as well as the society as a whole should assume responsibility for our activities in the environment. This is possible only if we are well instructed on these topics. It is already confirmed that the development of environmental values and the level of awareness about the quality of living space depend on our experience from early youth. Therefore it is reasonable to educate the young already in kindergartens as well as in elementary and secondary schools to teach them to cooperate as successfully as possible in the decision-making processes regarding the system of space design and development in general. Considering the fact that children spend a lot of time in the school environment each day, this should be the vehicle for conveying social values and exemplary design. If children are brought up in a quality environment, which they also learn to respect, they will endeavour to preserve and create it also in their adulthood.

Based on this, we listed a few key points for the Slovenian Architecture and Children programme:

- The spaces of Slovenia are of equal importance to the Slovenian language (National Programme for Culture 2008–2011)
- Architecture is part of the most direct experiences in our lives.
- All people, not just architects, form our environment, and our environment forms us.
- The purpose of familiarizing children with the environment and the role of architecture is not to raise architects.
- Through this type of education we emphasize the quality of intervention in the environment.
- Education related to the environment has a long-term effect on the development of spatial literacy.

2. ARCHITECTURE AND CHILD EDUCATION PROGRAMMES IN SLOVENIA

As researched, knowledge of space and architecture is found in the school curricula of various subjects, but transmitted in ways that are often deficient, old-fashioned or uninteresting for children. To improve interaction and the dissemination of information regarding the education of architectural themes provided through formal and non-formal institutions, the Chamber of Architecture and Spatial Planning of Slovenia decided in 2009, according to the example of foreign countries, to establish a working group called "Architecture and Children", which would deal with the education of children about architecture. The aim of the group was to connect different partners, either already working in the field or having an interest in it. To establish a basis for such work, we examined different foreign programmes. The Built Environment Educational Guidelines of the UIA, in particular, provided us with the conclusion that the key to the problem of education in Slovenia lies in the poor education of teachers on the subject. Therefore we set the following objectives:

- To familiarize teachers with the subject.
- To connect architects with schools and provide as direct an experience as possible for the children.
- To prepare high-quality didactic material.

The Slovenian working group started its work on the World Habitat Day in 2009 and commemorated this day with a conference held by Laurent Tardieu, a French architect, who runs architecture workshops for children and teachers at the architectural centre Arc en Rêve in Bordeaux, as an example of good practice. His important findings on the education of children about architecture and space have helped us in many ways with the creation of our programme and the Playful Architecture workshops.

Through our experience we can claim that children learn mainly through activities and play, provided that the experience and a planned, structured environment, and teaching tools feel interesting enough. Children build their knowledge and personality through direct experience, in contact with space, objects and people. Children are able to learn from experience with unbelievable speed, draw relations between different bits of information, use architectural terminology spontaneously and form answers to different questions related to architecture and space. Through work with different materials, problem-solving and conversation they come to understand the fundamental laws that govern space. Therefore we often see in the workshops that teachers turn out to be just simple mediators of knowledge, since space is the main factor of learning and the children are active researchers of it.

What is also very important is that children need to experience that in architecture sometimes not only one answer is correct, but that there is rather a multitude of different views and needs, stemming from individuals or various groups of users that one should learn to compare, evaluate and also decide. The key factor in acquiring the competence of finding a common solution is group work, a frequent method of learning in workshops. A one-day workshop about architecture and understanding space can have a much greater influence than a year-long direct teaching.

We want to emphasize that the intention of these workshops is not to raise young architects, but to familiarize children with architecture as a reality, observable in day-to-day life, providing them with different views on it. Children educated in architecture will become critical adults and active participants in deciding on the issues of their environment in the future. Moreover, on the basis of early development of knowledge about space and architecture, we can expect the future students of architecture to be better equipped for the career they choose.

There are many attributes of architecture that children usually learn by themselves during the course of the workshops. Architecture is never discussed directly with the children. The conversation about architecture, houses, towns, rooms, furniture, structures, etc., emerges naturally as a consequence of the activities and observations.

3. PLAYFUL ARCHITECTURE WORKSHOPS

The Architecture and Children working group prepares workshops for all age groups: pre-school children, elementary school and secondary school students, as well as other cultural and educational institutions across Slovenia. The workshops form the material for preparing the manual intended to help teachers with the education of children about space and architecture. The manual *Playful Architecture* was published in 2013 and it helps teachers to introduce the topics of space and architecture into the classroom and workshops.

Our unique concept of organizing the workshops is that each individual architect donates a workshop to the children, thus concluding the circle of giving and receiving knowledge. A concept that includes so many people is unique to the entire UIA. We noticed that if architects are asked to perform a single workshop, each one dedicates a lot of thought and creative energy to its preparation. This way we provide diversity and personal note to the workshops, which are never the same. When analysing the workshops, we have noticed that they can be divided into framed thematic categories: urbanism, architecture, interior design, landscape design, and industrial design. All categories can be upgraded during the year and the study programme. The difficulty level of the workshops can be adapted to different ages. The results then, of course, reflect the understanding of a certain problem or challenge according to the age of the participants.

From 2009 to 2015 over 300 workshops were held in Slovenia by renowned Slovenian architects. Thus about 4000 children aged 4 to 18 were included in the activities.

We design special programmes for schools and pre-schools, according to the requests and demands of the institution in question.

The working group on Architecture and Children would like to see efforts in the field of education about space and architecture evolve into a movement that could spread to all institutions related to child education. Nonetheless, understanding architecture also forms part of general education, as architecture is a discipline of a high cultural, social and economic value.

The workshops include different teaching methods, from practical work and skills, confronting problems, project work, team work, study of examples, action planning, constructivism, tours, field days and field work. Several methods can be used simultaneously within the scope of a single workshop.

4. NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL GOLDEN CUBE AWARDS

In 2010, for the first time, the International Union of Architects organized a public tender for the Golden Cubes awards presented to people and organizations working in the development of programmes and projects for children concerning architecture and the built environment. As it is written in the tender, national workgroups were asked to select the nominees in the suggested categories and forward them to the UIA. To raise awareness of the importance of space, Slovenia

decided to establish a national variant of the awards. Therefore the Chamber of Architecture of Slovenia, in partnership with the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport, Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning, National Education Institute, Museum of Architecture and Design, and the Faculty of Architecture issued a tender in October 2010 to encourage projects related to the education of children and young adults about architecture and the built environment. The Golden Cubes awards were also awarded in 2012 and 2014.

5. CONCLUSION

“I want my children to understand the world, but not just because the world is fascinating and the human mind is curious. I want them to understand it so that they will be positioned to make it a better place.” Howard Gardner, Psychologist and Educator. Source: International Union of Architects, 2008.

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