WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR REALISING SPATIAL QUALITY? EXPERIENCES FROM THREE INTERDISCIPLINARY EDUCATIONAL EXERCISES

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INTERDISCIPLINARY WORK: LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AND SOCIAL WORK

Practitioners and policy makers involved with space often focus on one specific aspect of space which, according to their expertise, is either the social or the physical layer of space (Loopmans et al. 2011). At the same time, it is generally accepted that these layers can never be seen as completely separate. Children and teenagers too rarely make this artificial subdivision between layers of space (Nordström 2010). This means interventions in space call for interdisciplinary work, where the diffused knowledge can be combined in specific projects. Much can be won from interdisciplinary work: it is a shared learning process (De Visscher & Sacré 2017; Sacré et al. 2016), it helps to create more supported projects, and it helps in finding integrated interventions that better suit social and physical realities of a space (Khan et al. 2013; Jacobs 2004). Therefore, we believe there is great potential in bringing together spatial and social educational programmes, as social aspects of space are often marginalized in spatial planning practices, specifically in landscape architecture (Brown & Jennings 2003). However, little is known about *who does what* in these interdisciplinary processes, specifically when there is participatory work involved.

Keeping this in mind, we set up three educational exercises, in which certain hindering factors for interdisciplinary work (e.g. financial difficulties and competition) were not present. These interdisciplinary exercises can be seen as part of a cooperation between the BLOK research project¹ and the educational programmes of Social Work and Landscape and Garden Architecture at the University College of Ghent. On the one hand these exercises serve as a laboratory for studying the roles and tasks each professional gives to themselves and others, and on the other hand it prepares students for working in interdisciplinary contexts in their future work.

EDUCATIONAL EXERCISES AS LABORATORIES FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY COOPERATION

The three exercises can be seen as a part of the research by design component (Zeisel 2006) of the BLOK research project. The given goal was to gather information about possible social or physical interventions that would increase the spatial quality as perceived by children and teenagers (Marreel et al. 2018; Horelli 2007; Horelli 1998). One interesting aspect of working with students was the observation of how different groups of students cooperated and managed the interdisciplinary work. In order for this to happen spontaneously, we asked students to organise themselves, without much interference from teachers.

The **first** case was a design exercise that focussed on the neighbourhood *Watersportbaan* in *Ghent*, a modernistic high-rise environment consisting of social rental housing. We brought together students of Landscape Architecture and Social Work a first time during the analysis of the environment and a

¹ The BLOK research project (Hogeschool Gent, 2016) examines the meaningfulness, liveability and opportunities for self-development of vertical housing environments from children and teenagers' perspectives. The goal of this interdisciplinary research project is to advise social and spatial professionals on possible interventions to improve spatial quality in these environments.

second time in organising a feedback moment with inhabitants (**figure 1**). The **second** exercise was organised with visiting Landscape Architecture students of ELASA² (**figure 2**), with whom we worked on the *Watersportbaan* again in an intensive two day workshop. The **third** exercise again included both disciplines. We worked on the neighbourhood *Lange Velden* in *Wondelgem*: a recent, medium rise environment with apartment buildings around a central grassy field. In this exercise the approach was different because students received participatory research information (Kind & Samenleving 2017; Cope 2009; Derr et al. 2018; Christensen 2004) *before* working on the project.

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Analysis and reflection on the different academic exercises, and feedback from students, teaches us not only about the different roles and tasks that both disciplines assigned to themselves and to each other, but also about *how* the interdisciplinary dialogue was approached by students. Besides general conclusions about interdisciplinary exercises, we have also noticed a need for social awareness amongst the design teachers in order to guide the processes in a qualitative way (Brown & Jennings 2003). We have summarised five important lessons for socio-spatial intervention processes. We hope these lessons might help improve future interdisciplinary educational exercises, but more importantly, they might prove useful in the general exploration of roles and tasks for Landscape Architects and Social Workers in interdisciplinary planning practices.

- 1. A good understanding of the roles and tasks. Of oneself, and of others involved in the planning process. We noticed that for students, it is usually clear what they need to do when working on an individual project. However, when being confronted with different disciplines, confusion arose about the tasks *they* were supposed to take up and what roles each disciplines should play. The start of an integrated process is an important moment in which it needs to be explored how the skills, knowledge and frameworks of each professions can be beneficial, and this needs to remain very clear throughout the process.
- 2. Common grounds and goals. It is important to know that different disciplines often have different ways of understanding and approaching space. Although their methods and vocabulary might be different, usually all professionals focus on working towards a shared goal. It is useful to know and to recognise each other's professional framework without letting go of one's own framework and professional integrity in accomplishing this shared goal.
- 3. *Equal starting positions, time and resources*. Students felt demotivated when working on a shared project with the knowledge that others had more time available or had already been working on the exercise for a while. They felt like their opinion or expertise was less valuable since they did not have equal knowledge of the project.
- 4. Constant and guided dialogue. We noticed that as soon as the two groups of students were not actively working together, many ideas got lost, and students started referring to their standard library of ideas. We believe it is important to have continuous interaction and dialogue, as well as interdisciplinary guidance from teachers, in order to ensure the quality of the proposed interventions without becoming too focused on generic, professionalised solutions.
- 5. Influence of the requested final result. By comparing the different exercises, we noticed that the influence of the requested final result has a large influence on the process itself. Asking for a visual presentation on panels, for instance, is very specific and limits the amount of possible outcomes, and can also be very labour-intensive, which means less time is available for a qualitative planning process. Additionally, asking for a visual plan puts a clear focus on the physical and aesthetic aspects of a design, and might undermine the importance of the more *social* layers of space and other possible interventions. Finally, we could say that an outcome-focused evaluation automatically tends to shift the focus on the end result rather than the process that was conducted.

² European Landscape Architecture Student Association (https://elasa18be.wordpress.com/)

TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 1. Students during the dialogue moment with children of the neighbourhood



Figure 2. ELASA students presenting their observation and ideas for social and spatial interventions



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