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WALKSCAPES

Urban Regeneration through Education

Dossier

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Prepared by:

Public institution „eMundus“ in collaboration with Laboratorio Urbano di Prossimità (LUP)

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Walkscapes and Dossier

The project "Walkscapes - Urban Renewal through Education" is implemented under the Erasmus+ Small Scale Partnerships cooperation area, and is focused on the development of non-formal education practices through the exchange of experiences between two non-profit organisations in Italy - Laboratorio Urbano di Prossimità - APS (LUP), and in Lithuania – public institution „eMundus“.

The aim of the two-year project was to experiment with educational activities in the field of urban regeneration through urban exploration, inspired by the experience of the Roman collective “Stalker” and the trace left by its founder Francesco Careri in his book “Walkscapes - il camminare come pratica estetica”. The project aimed to teach young people in Italy and Lithuania the principles of urban renewal. Through Walkscapes activities participants learned about urban transformation and many other basics needed to restore urban culture.

Project objectives:

- To strengthen non-formal education practices in urban renewal (i.e. Walkscaping).
- To promote international cooperation between Parma and Kaunas in the field of urban renewal.
- To disseminate good practices in small-scale urban regeneration.

Between 2022 and 2024, the project was implemented through a series of seminars - walkscapes in Parma and Kaunas, as well as through best practice exchange meetings between the two project implementing organisations. Among the main outputs of the project, in addition to the walkscapes activities, an analysis was developed by surveying and interviewing young people in 3 areas: (1) socio-demographic information; (2) knowledge of urban regeneration; (3) citizens' participation in public actions for urban regeneration.

The project website has also been developed (<https://walkscapes.emundus.lt/>) with interactive maps marking the locations of the walkscapes, also partners developed dissemination materials, including a joint scientific publication with information on the walkscapes.

A **dossier** is the final outcome of a project and contains the following aspects:

- listening to the community of participants and focusing on mutual learning;
- a methodology that combines a normative approach to urban issues with a non-formal education approach;
- a description of the activities involving collecting ideas, visions and proposals for the chosen location of the exploratory activity, where the Walkscapes were targeted.

In this dossier, we will present the methodological framework of the project and conclusions. We will also discuss the following questions:

- Results of a **survey** carried out at the beginning of the project on the knowledge and actions of the project participants in relation to the broad concept of urban regeneration.
- Summary of the **methodology** used in the urban research activities.
- **Recommendations** based on the synthesis of the work carried out over the two years and the high level of participation, especially of young people, who took part in the various project activities.

Walkscapes in Kaunas and Parma were organised over two years.

The study of the Parma River gives us some ideas on how to transform it, at least from a narrative point of view, and hopefully put it at the centre of a more open, transparent and active debate, dominated by citizenship, civil society, citizen representatives and administrators.

Exploring the banks of the Nemunas River in the city centre, reviewing the existing buildings and the situation on the banks, implementing targeted guided walks, and inviting citizens, future architects (students of architecture), Lithuanians as well as foreigners, to the walks in order to generate ideas, allows us to come up with a number of suggestions, which we hope will be useful for the design of the city as well as for the more in-depth discussion in the decision-making institutions.

Urban regeneration survey

In the first phase of the project, detailed information was gathered in cooperation with the target groups (young people) and various organisations dealing with environmental protection and urban renewal, as well as interviews with members of the municipal administration with the LUP, „eMundus“ collaborated with Kaunas University of Technology, the Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture.

LUP and "eMundus" prepared a survey and interviewed more than 50 respondents in Kaunas and Parma in order to find out the opinion of the target group participants about the renewal of cities.

The aim of the survey was:

- To review the knowledge of the target group (young people under 29 years old) and other respondents (residents and visitors of the selected cities (Kaunas and Parma)) about urban regeneration;
- To investigate citizens' perception of their level of involvement in decision-making and participation in local urban regeneration;
- To gather suggestions on how the administration and other local institutions, especially educational institutions such as schools and universities, should act to increase the participation and knowledge of young citizens in urban regeneration actions.

1. Urban regeneration, what is it?

The first open question in the questionnaire is: "**What do you think should be the objectives of urban regeneration?**".

Most of the answers were fairly consistent, pointing to the deliberate use of public areas to meet citizens' common needs. More responses were related to strengthening the sense of community identity by creating accessible spaces for socialising.

One answer reflects the combination of several objectives:

- "1. It is important to restore degraded or undeveloped areas or neighbourhoods;
2. It is important to create an understanding of the culture that characterises particular places;

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3. Provide opportunities for social inclusion for those at risk of exclusion".

More detailed answers from the survey of participants in Kaunas:

- 8 respondents believe that urban renewal should be about:

green spaces, cycling infrastructure, at the same time encouraging the use of clean vehicles.

- 12 respondents believe that urban renewal should be about:

a **comfortable** lifestyle for local residents, design is really for everyone and is the basis of everything, both the visual part and the **usability**.

- 4 respondents believe that the following are important for urban renewal:

to **cooperate with educational institutions**, to create harmony, the city's Chief Architect should communicate and cooperate with communities, not only take care of the signatures required by business representatives and real estate developers.

2. Opportunities for creativity

Almost all the participants were critical of the efforts of the municipal administration, so that the decision-making process related to the city plan and the management of public areas takes place only among those participating in the administration, the vast majority believe that it is necessary to involve local communities.

Although it is publicly said that the involvement and opinion of the citizens is important and it is mandatory in many countries according to legislation, the organization of direct discussions with citizens regarding the plans of the municipal administration is considered an underrealized opportunity and in rare cases it happens that the administration only presents the decisions that have already been made. Such a perception can be determined by various reasons, the final effect of which is obstacles to the active participation of citizens.

Some of the suggestions made to address this problem include:

- organising public competitions for ideas and projects
- Involving different groups of citizens directly through targeted meetings on urban renewal
- organising public surveys by the municipality
- organising urban regeneration seminars and presentations of ideas (including discussions and proposals from the public)
- implementing an electronic idea submission system
- interacting on social networks to ask questions and provide answers
- interacting with school and university pupils/students, conducting surveys based on place of residence, presenting plans at an early stage, or maybe having a dedicated portal, developing e-events where people can access the proposals and express their views and ideas for improvement

A city's greatest resource is the energy and ideas of its inhabitants - let's harness them!

3. Opportunities for youth

Although it may sound like an election campaign cliché, the results of the survey show that both Parma and Kaunas respondents believe that the situation would be better if more people under the age of 30 were involved in the decision-making process.

Particularly sensitive areas for development are:

- the school curriculum is seriously lacking in urban renewal and sustainability issues related to the city;
- the insufficient number of public spaces for young people that are easily accessible;
- young people's views are not sufficiently taken into account when decisions are taken regarding changes to the city's public spaces.

Respondents of the survey in Kaunas believe that the local municipality hardly takes into account the opinions and ideas of 14-25 year olds when planning urban renewal, but a large part of them believe that the municipality pays enough attention to improving the accessibility of public spaces for young people. Also, the majority of respondents think that it is very important to include topics such as sustainable infrastructure, mobility, adaptation to climate

change and urban renewal in the general curricula for students. All respondents agreed that pupils and students should have a say in the management and renewal of urban spaces around their educational institutions.

Respondents suggest ways to activate pupils and students in order to involve them more in the management and renewal of urban spaces around their educational institutions:

- organising workshops for school/student students, both for proposing ideas and for physical implementation
- organise competitions for municipal funding
- pupils/students should take the initiative to discuss, decide, propose and obtain funding with the help of student councils, school/university administrations and municipalities
- pupils/students should take care of and maintain their own environment and organise work to create leisure spaces
- use alumni organisations to promote the theme of the environment in schools/universities or other educational institutions

4. The problem is in the prioritisation

Interestingly, different respondents disagree on the priorities that urban regeneration should address. Regarding the different thematic areas that should be the focus of potential urban regeneration interventions, respondents were almost evenly split on the various suggested areas: sociality, sport and well-being, greenness, art and creativity.

This result shows that the respondents do not have a sufficiently uniform perception of the needs of the city. Although everyone recognizes the growing need for urban renewal interventions, at the same time, images of the use of renewed public spaces do not find a common denominator.

Survey respondents in Kaunas answered differently to the question "Which three places do you think are most in need of urban regeneration intervention? 5 possible

categories of parts of the city emerged:

- sleeping areas (Šilainiai was the most frequently mentioned)
- residential districts (Aukštieji Šančiai, Vilijampolė, Palemonas, Romainiai)
- parks and natural areas (riverbanks, Panemunė and Lampėdžiai parks)
- pedestrian paths and streets
- specific sites (mentions of historic buildings in disrepair, development of traffic and parking in the city centre, “Sajungos” square)

The majority of respondents (50%) agreed that parks and other natural areas should be a top priority for the regeneration of underused public spaces in the city, as well as the importance of integrating a range of functions in these places.

“Walkscapes” as a methodology

One of the main objectives of the project was to improve an intervention approach that could be used both as an activity that could be used in an educational programme and as an urban regeneration action. We learned that this type of intervention is possible and indeed recommended to accelerate the development of analytical thinking and normative thinking among participants.

On the other hand, this type of approach is limited because it takes a relatively long time, longer than the usual educational units, for these activities to produce results. It is very important not only that the one-time research activities last longer, but also that this method can fail if there is no opportunity to visit the analyzed spaces later and get involved in the process of their improvement and restoration.

Walkscape Torrente Parma – Workshop 2022

In discussions with the creator of the Walkscapes concept, Professor Francesco Careri, the LUP members were repeatedly convinced of the need to fully experience the space of the river (the river chosen for the study is the Parma River), to spend days and nights there, in order to be able to grasp more deeply the essence of a place that is not easy to comprehend and which is supposed to be the subject of the Walkscapes.

Far from being able to implement these tips within the framework of the project, the first workshop-walk to experiment with Walkscapes took place in June 2022. The workshop lasted for five days, during which we visited different places along the river and tried to provide different kinds of thematic insights: historical/urban, architectural/political, ecological/environmental and artistic

The thematic approach, developed collectively, was designed to raise research questions rather than answers. The questions we were able to answer were based on participants' feedback on the materials offered to them at the beginning of the workshop: note maps and job cards. Some participants' final projects were architectural projects and landscape photography projects.

Therefore, the methodological approach of the first workshop was to enrich the cultural experience of each participant through urban exploration activities and other theoretical and practical work. This experience can be used by the participants later on in the development of their personal projects.

Maretto Dreamin' - Workshop 2023

The second walk, conceived and realised by the imagination of the participants of the first workshop, who organised the activities together with LUP, took the form of a mixed art installation, which was carried out in parallel with the urban exploration. In this iteration, the flaneuristic spirit of the Walkscape became more apparent through the search for a non-existent place.

The search for Maretto, the legendary beach on the banks of the Parma stream, remembered as a summer destination for young Parmesans in the 1960s and 1970s, has been carried out both physically and metaphorically, with a collection of photographs capturing the aesthetics of the Romanesque holiday tourism of the 1960s by placing it in the context of the part of the riverbed around the "Ponte Nord".

By creating a contrast between the local ecological situation and the aesthetics reproduced in the scenography with actors and photographers, the aim of the workshop was to denounce the forced abandonment of the relationship with the river by the newest generations of Parmesans due to ecological degradation.

„Walkscape“ Karaliaus Mindaugas avenue in Kaunas

For the walk in Kaunas, Lithuania, we chose the Karaliaus Mindaugas Avenue, next to Lithuania's largest river, the Nemunas. Avenue is one of Kaunas' main transport

arteries. The traffic here is intense - both public buses and trolleybuses, as well as private vehicles, constantly travel along this route. The street is also densely populated, with many residential houses, commercial establishments, shops and restaurants, a petrol station and side streets. Karaliaus Mindaugas Avenue is home to some of Kaunas' main shopping and business centres.

Unfortunately, Karaliaus Mindaugas Avenue is not fully adapted for people. The unexploited potential of the waterfront, still prioritized by transport over pedestrians, the street structure divides the urban integrity as it divides one cultural layer into several parts. And these are just a few of the problems of this big street (avenue). This artery of active transport is also an obstacle to access to the city's green zone - Nemunas Island, so there are 3 underground passages that lead to the Nemunas embankment, 3 pedestrian bridges to the island. On the island, which is the green zone of the city, buildings of national importance and for entertainment are being built - an event and sports arena, a modern science museum, and a swimming pool was also built, which became an attraction for the citizens due to water entertainment.

During the event, participants walked along Karaliaus Mindaugas Avenue, explored its surroundings and listened to its history. Walking is inseparable from public spaces and architecture and is a way to encourage public involvement in the renewal of urban spaces. Algimantas Grigas, the guide of the walk, gave a detailed talk about historical buildings such as Vytautas the Great Church, the Kaunas Faculty of Vilnius University, the King Mindaugas Vocational Training Centre (formerly the Jewish Gymnasium), the Kaunas County Fire Rescue Board building (built in 1929), the Jewish Children's Primary School (built in 1931), and the new bridge connecting the city to the Nemunas Island.

After the walk, the participants discussed the problems of the separation between the centre of Kaunas and the river Nemunas and the possibilities of exploiting the potential of this place.

Relevant problems

- **Division of semantic layers.** In one of the Karaliaus Mindaugas av. sides is the oasis of peace – Nemunas Island. The other side of the street is the historical part of the city: the old town and new town. Wide Karaliaus Mindaugas avenue divides these sides, thus dividing the whole structure of the city into several parts
- **Materialism as consumer culture.** In Karaliaus Mindaugas av. a clear emphasis on materialism as consumption culture can be observed: commercial advertising,

abundance of shops, as a result, promotion of consumption can raise questions about human values, lack of sustainability.

- **The relation of nature.** The high concentration of cars and business activities can raise questions about the relationship between humans and nature. Is this intensive urban model compatible with nature care and sustainability? How does this affect the conservation of ecosystems and natural life forms?
- **Traffic jams. Karalius** Mindaugas Avenue is a very busy traffic route used by both cars and public transport. The high number of cars can cause traffic jams, especially during peak hours.
- **Pedestrian safety.** Although the avenue is a popular walking path, there are places where adequate pedestrian infrastructure may be lacking. There are not enough pedestrian crossings in certain areas or they are inconveniently placed, inaccessible.
- **Drought problems.** Sometimes a long drought can affect the health of the trees and the care of the greenery. This can cause drying and reduce the visual appeal of the street.
- **Noise level.** Due to the high traffic flow, Karalius Mindaugas avenue can be noisy, especially with a high number of cars and the intensity of public transport
- **Loss of community.** Due to the large flow of people and shopping malls, there may be a feeling on the street that people are losing their personal identity and community ties. The street does not encourage mutual communication, stifling social, individual, mutual relations.

On a hot summer day, while walking along Karaliaus Mindaugas Avenue and the Nemunas embankment, the participants noticed that people of all ages walk and ride bicycles on the embankment, but there is no place to sit down, rest, hide from the sun, and that there is a need for arbors and resting places. There was also a proposal to plant more trees in order to better protect the embankment from the traffic pollution of the avenue. A separate lane should mark the bike lane for safer movement, as it is now a shared road, so collisions are possible.

In order to ensure that the Nemunas embankment is a safe and clean environment that respects the environment and nature, and that the citizens of the city can enjoy this unique area, it is necessary to take care of the ecosystem of the Nemunas embankment, to promote the preservation of the local flora and fauna, and to provide clean and orderly viewing areas for the natural objects.

Walking along the embankment in the direction of the riverbed leads to the confluence of the Nemunas and Neris rivers, a unique part of the city and a unique experience for the city's visitors, a route that can be offered and promoted to tourists, and another reason to cherish the embankment path.

„Walkscape“ – H. ir O. Minkovskiai street in Kaunas

On 28 September 2023, Lithuanian project team organised a guided walk for the group on H. and O. Minkovskiai Street in Kaunas, on the left bank of the Nemunas.

Participants explored the street spaces from a pedestrian perspective and discussed the challenges of the planned extensive development of the district. The journey started at the Aleksotas cable car (funicular). The guide Algimantas Grigas interested the participants with a story about Levinas Minkovskis, a grain merchant of Jewish origin who lived in Aleksotas, and his sons Oskaras and Hermanas, and told about their professions and lives, as well as the achievements in the fields of medicine and mathematics that made them famous, for which a street has been named after them. Herman was a mathematician who developed the theory of geometric numbers and taught Einstein, while Oskar was a pathophysiologicalist who discovered that diabetes is caused by pancreatic pathology. This discovery led to the invention of insulin.

On the way, H. and O. Minkovskiai Street, the participants noticed the new residential buildings being built - this area is being gentrified and becoming a prestigious residential area.

The participants stopped at the former Jewish synagogue and at the Nemunas embankment, where the Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis concert hall and a pedestrian bridge connecting Aleksotas and Nemunas Island are planned to be built.

During the tour, the participants had the opportunity to visit the territory of Nemunaičiai - a new multifunctional project (studio of architect R. Palekos), to see the newly built residential houses, the Nemunas embankment, which will be open to the people as a walking area - promenade; also the participants learned about the planned leisure spaces, offices, communication infrastructure, as well as about the planned preservation of the old historical buildings - the remains of the port and the tower.

Participants got acquainted with the oldest industrial heritage - the Aleksotas Mill (completed in 1890), other old grain processing and storage facilities and railway lines.

Finally, the participants visited the old Jewish cemetery of Aleksotas, surrounded by railway tracks, not visible to passers-by but carefully maintained

View of the Parma River – Recommendations

Democratic and participatory processes

The Italian partners in the project focused on the management of the Parma riverbed, which has been empty and relatively neglected and unused for a long time. The targeted walks and discussions show that, when confronted with a complex urban planning problem, the young community of participants, who have been provided with theoretical and practical tools, are able to come up with useful and interesting proposals that can be put into practice.

The thoughts and ideas expressed during the two walksapes are proof that in Parma, as elsewhere, there is a need to develop this type of opportunities for citizens. The direct involvement of citizens in complex issues, especially if age groups that are less well represented in decision-making processes, has many advantages, including the creation of new networks, the activation of social dynamics aimed at improving circumstances and the dissemination of new ideas.

The days of targeted walks along the river not only changed the attitudes of the participants and all the people who came into contact with this project activity, but most importantly, it created a connection between people and place. The direct participation of citizens in the debate on the use and renovation of public space facilitates the assumption of responsibility for that space, first in theory and then in practice. These processes need to be planned, structured and put into practice for any urban renewal process to be a real success. Without the active involvement of citizenship, the efforts of any administration will always fall short.

Informality and institutionalisation

Clearly, one of the key themes explored in the walks was the need to imagine the possible role of regulation in the access, use and function of the Parma stream, especially the section of the river that runs through the city centre. The research revealed that, on the one hand, there are increasing examples of squatting, where large parts of the riverbed are occupied by private individuals without any rights to use the river for private purposes, while, on the other hand, there are no formal regulations on how citizens can use this space. Some parts of the river can only be accessed by overcoming obstacles such as nets, gates, etc., the existence of which does not appear to be particularly justified.

The importance of informal communication and meetings was often noted during the project,

especially in the exploration of urban public space, and the opportunity to propose ideas to decision makers is a very important public freedom, which makes people realise that the use of public space is a responsible step and that the opinion of the citizens of the city should be considered when making changes. The discussions have not led to a consensus and a more detailed analysis is needed for a better management of the river.

Active protection

The research also showed that more and more valuable initiatives are being taken by informal groups of citizens, especially young people, rather than by associations or networks of associations, which are involved in the environmental protection of the riverbed, especially its cleaning and waste collection. On the other hand, this phenomenon, although absolutely positive, points to the shortcomings of the institutions that tend to be concerned with the protection of the river environment in the city.

As already mentioned, the formalisation of river spaces can, among other positive aspects, facilitate the management and protection of riverbed areas, which are naturally unable to avoid anthropisation and are therefore the most heavily used by people.

It cannot be said that the municipality and the agencies that manage the protection of the river bed, such as AIPO, are not interested. However, it is suggested that all citizens, not just public administrations, should take responsibility. This starts with developing a sense of ownership of the people and the space.

Routes and integrated system with the city

Finally, in this document we want to stress that the river must be seen as an integrated part of the urban system. It must be involved in creative and participatory processes, and then become a focus for joint management and protection by various institutions and citizens.

This framework must consider the places to be used, the areas in need of protection and the halt to anthropisation. The creation of cycling and walking paths and equipped areas for use by citizens and tourists can quickly revive interest in the role of the river in the city. This is particularly important in the river's more remote areas, in order to exploit its heritage and redevelop peripheral green spaces.

A new narrative is needed to reflect the city's relationship with the river. Walkscapes proposes this narrative from different points of view, involving young people in the

process and giving the river Parma a new and vibrant aesthetic.

Recommendations for Nemunas Embankment regeneration (Karaliaus Mindaugo Avenue and H. and O. Minkovskiai Street)

Green spaces and cycling infrastructure

- Develop and create new green spaces that integrate cycle paths, promoting the use of environmentally friendly means of transport.
- A separate cycle path along the Nemunas riverbank will increase safety and comfort for cyclists and pedestrians.

Making living comfortable

- Create public spaces that meet the needs of residents and promote social interaction.
- When designing public spaces, consider both visual appeal and comfort, so that they are accessible to everyone.

Cooperation with educational institutions

- Integrate urban regeneration and sustainability themes into school curricula, promoting youth participation.
- Organise workshops and competitions for pupils and students to submit their ideas and contribute to projects.

Citizen involvement in decision-making

- Organise public competitions for ideas and projects, involving different groups of citizens.
- Implement an electronic idea submission system for citizens to submit their proposals and participate in discussions.
- Organise seminars and public surveys to encourage direct discussions with citizens on urban renewal plans.

Involvement of young people

- Promote youth participation in urban planning through special events, workshops and competitions.
- Creating public spaces for young people that are easily accessible and responsive to their needs.

Integration of historical and cultural sites

- Preserve and integrate historical and cultural sites such as those on Karaliaus Mindaugas Avenue and H. and O. Minkovskiai Street.
- Encourage the development of tourism by promoting unique routes, such as the walk from the confluence of the Nemunas and Neris rivers to Karaliaus Mindaugas Avenue.

Improving transport and traffic

- Reduce traffic congestion and improve pedestrian safety in Karaliaus Mindaugas Avenue by creating additional pedestrian crossings and reducing the number of cars.
- Encourage the use of public transport and reduce noise levels by extending green spaces between lanes.

Fostering community

- Creating spaces that encourage interaction and communication between community members through public seating areas, gazebos and benches.
- Organise events and activities that promote community spirit and a shared sense of identity among the city's residents.

Implementation and monitoring

- Carefully maintain the ecosystem of the Nemunas riverbank, promoting the conservation of local flora and fauna.
- Involve local communities in the maintenance and management of public spaces, encourage volunteering and cooperation.

Šios rekomendacijos padės atnaujinti Kauno miesto erdves, užtikrinant jų patrauklumą, patogumą ir tvarumą tiek vietos gyventojams, tiek miesto svečiams.

These recommendations could help to renew Kaunas' urban spaces, ensuring their attractiveness, usability and sustainability for both local residents and visitors.