

Urban awareness project

Bulgaria

Urban Awareness is a pilot project for architectural education in school that was conducted at St. Sofronii Vrachanski High School, Plovdiv, as part of the festival One Architecture Week. In 2016 the issue of the festival was focused on the topic of citizen participation in the creation of the urban environment. In this context the project Urban Awareness aims to stimulate young people's sensitivity and critical view at their surroundings. The program was developed and tested by the "Children architectural workshop" and aims to broaden the scope of knowledge of small citizens of the city, focusing on the role of the urban environment as a learning tool. Developing awareness and desire for active citizenship is a process that must begin in early childhood. Examining closely their city, students form a sense of belonging, social responsibility, national identity and pride. The training involved two architects, one pedagogue and 18 students from 6th grade. The project was implemented during the school year, and was structured in 10 weekly exercises with duration of two hours each.

Main Topics

Our city: During the course the children investigated and analysed their district and school. They perceived the city as a living organism which was dependent on people's activities. The students started to distinguish the different types of buildings according to their function and tried to define possible types of human activities in them. They drew a mind map, giving examples from their neighbourhood. The children examined photos of three different cities, analysing the urban environment and discussed what kind of people live there and what is their social status. At the end they played a role game in which each student has a random role (child, retirement, driver, cyclist, a mother with a small child, builder, unemployed, etc.). Depending on their role the students put their requests for changes to the mayor and the chief architect of the city (in the role were the teacher and the architect).

From home to school: The students investigated maps in different scales: the city, the neighbourhood, the schoolyard. They learned to use simple maps and plans by playing the game Treasure hunt. They started to understand the basic signs and markings and finally could find their own apartment buildings on the map. They drew their route from home to school and discussed the reasons they choose it, places of interest, meeting a friend, fastest way etc.

Making route: The students started to understand the building traditions and their relation with the local culture, social, geographical and political context. Students explored examples of different buildings around the world and discussed their origin and the conditions that influenced them. The children walked around the neighbourhood and identified sites they like and those they do not like. At the end they created a tourist route of all their favourite places.

Investigation: Students explored the school environment with all their senses: vision, touch, hearing, smell and even taste. They defined different feelings and atmosphere of the surrounding spaces. The children examined the natural light in the classroom in various hours of the day and analyse its impact on the orientation of the rooms and furnishing. They worked in groups and created maps of senses - map of noises, light/shadow map of smells and more. At the end they analysed the finished cards and defined the pleasant and unpleasant places in their school.

Dreams in school: The students examined examples of various school buildings in the world, discussing what they liked. They thought about the architectural intervention that would improve their school environment. The children made collages on black and white photos of the facades of the school and its interior space adding flowers, greenery, additional elements, street furniture and more. They were introduced with the work of the architect and get acquainted with the complete process of design and construction. They understood the

purpose of different drawings and models and became acquainted with the architectural drawings of the school (plan, section, elevation), learning the main architectural elements. They explored different floors of the school adding lost doors, windows, columns and other missed elements on the plan.

Making models: On the base of their observations and analysis finally the students decided to design and create a bench in the school yard by using Euro palettes, because there were no places for sitting there. The location was chosen carefully because their bench had to be protected from sun and rain. They made a research and examined different examples of this kind of furniture. The students created a model of Euro pallet from cardboard in scale 1:10 and after that tried different three-dimensional structures and compositions of individual models. They thought about the relationship between human proportions and the furnishing that they used.

One to one scale: At the end of the project the students created one to one scale furniture and vertical garden made by recycled EUR-pallets. They developed their technical skills to work with different materials and instruments like saws, grinding machine, level, screwdriver and etc. The children could observe how this bench became a favourite stop for many other students. They were feeling responsible for the place and took care for it.

Observing children's development during the course it was noticed that their interest towards architecture was gradually increasing. It became clear that pupils were really excited experiencing their personal and familiar environment, feeling a sense of identity. They became curious about the relation between people's activities and the changes that occur with the surrounding neighbourhood areas and understood what sustainable environment was. Students' observations started to be more precise and they developed a sense towards different details in the built environment pretending being detectives or explorers. By participating in different hands on activities children improved their fine motor skills and became acquainted with the design process, developing sense of scale, shape and stability of three-dimensional compositions. They had been learning through playing without realizing that and were really excited to find similar topics in their school programs. During the last several workshops it became clear that students increased their self-confidence and social skills. By participating in individual or team activities, even some children who were very shy at the beginning, started to be more active and enthusiastic finding new friends in the group. At the end of the project it was observed that children became more precise and patient in their work. Gradually they increased their competences and confidence in problem solving situations and visual expressions, revealing more freely their creative potential. They also became familiar with many specific architecture terms which were introduced to them before. Some of the students were really very surprised that they enjoyed playing with recycled materials more than with plastic toys and constructors from the shop. Constructing one to one scale structures and working with real building materials created a sense of pride and significance in the young people.

It can be concluded that the architectural course includes practical exercises and activities close to the interests and competencies of students, by which they:

- Consolidate and build upon already acquired knowledge, skills and attitudes in school.
- Build cross-curricular connections.
- Apply the learned in school in their everyday life.
- Became actively involved in the improvement of their environment.