

# Student competitions as a socio-spatial tool for planning urban structures

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**ABSTRACT:** The aim here is to show interdependencies between theory and practice based on the example of student competitions in the Faculty of Architecture at Gdańsk University of Technology (FA-GUT), Gdańsk, Poland. These competitions broaden the spectrum of issues related to design and contribute to the better recognition of problems related to tasks to be solved. Both the teaching and application tasks of the competition are related to the development of the city in the direction of the desired spatial, social, cultural and natural cohesion. Also made possible is the involvement of various individuals and groups (stakeholders), including residents, in the transformation process. The main goal of this article is to show relations between the natural and urban environment, which are emphasised in the competition, by being open to a new look for both city and space.

## INTRODUCTION

A significant value of student competitions is related to the multi-faceted relationships occurring in public space subjected, on the one hand, to the competitive pressure put on cities with a health resort/spa function and, on the other hand, to the necessity to develop sustainable relations between, for example the city of Kołobrzeg and nature.

Kołobrzeg is a city in north-western Poland, in the central part of the West Pomerania Province, at the mouth of the Parsęta River at the Bay of Pomerania. Since the beginning of the 19th Century, it has served the main function of a national health resort (it has enjoyed the formal status of a health resort since 1962), and internationally since the beginning of the 20th Century. These days, it is the largest health resort in Poland in terms of the number of patients from both Poland and abroad.

The city, which numbers at present about 47,000 residents, has gone through various periods of development. One of the most important for its contemporary identity was the demolition of fortifications in 1872 and the gradual change in its character as a result. Since 1967, Kołobrzeg formally has had the status of a health resort, which is associated not only with an increase in popularity, but also with a number of problems characteristic of tourist locations.

Iconic sceneries (beach, sea), all elements of infrastructure, the external image, and diversity of consumption patterns are just some elements about which John Urry wrote in *The tourist gaze* [1], in terms of post-Fordist consumption. The dominance of consumption over production means that almost all spheres of urban life are subordinated to the aestheticisation of consumption. Considering the changes in consumption patterns that take place in numerous seaside resorts in Poland and around the world, Kołobrzeg comprises new features characteristic of contemporary ways of spending free time. This means that the foundations of urbanity with the characteristic features of a health resort are not only the complexes with these features, but also the number and type of cultural events, variety of sports and recreational services, and the ability of the city to attract talented individuals.

## STUDENT COMPETITIONS AS AN ELEMENT OF TEACHING

The practices of city development and renewal long have been accompanied by a diversity of approaches, combining methods and research. Solutions are based on assumptions. The request of the authorities of Kołobrzeg addressed to the Faculty of Architecture at Gdańsk University of Technology (FA-GUT), Gdańsk, Poland, to organise student competitions for the development of selected areas, was of a practical application and teaching nature. Among the important issues of this project was that of urban renewal meeting the expectations and needs of residents. They were guided by the assumption of an integrated approach of various interest groups (local government, academic, professional) to the improvement of the quality of life in the built environment. As many researchers have noted,

competitions are one of the most important methods of stimulating creativity, motivation for self-development and influencing the surrounding environment [2][3]. *Competitiveness of the 21st Century's economy is based on creativity* [2].

The social and cultural goals of this co-operation were to seek communication between various areas of academia. The concepts of space selected by way of competitions went beyond the presentation of the city as an *empty container*. Without returning to the cultural sources of revitalisation, the implementation of programmes for urban renewal will be vacuous. The purpose of student competitions in the case of Kołobrzeg, was to develop a balance between theoretical and practical education. Competitions offer students excellent opportunities to continuously expand skills, broaden horizons and educate themselves [4]. As shown through observation and numerous publications, *the relationship between a teacher and student is an important influence on the effectiveness and quality of education* [2].

## CASE STUDIES

The first competition was held in the academic year 2015/2016; the second in 2015/2016; and the third in 2018/2019. The object of the first competition was the *Transformation of the former Podczele airport into a facility with service and recreation functions, as well as housing*. A group of full-time undergraduate and graduate students took part in the competition, i.e. 11 two- and three-person teams. The competition task required proposing a functional and utility programme and presenting the method of developing an area of 80 hectares, constituting part of the area of the former airport. The result of the competition was a complex organised in a 20-hectare area, provided with recreational, sports and cultural services, in the vicinity of a newly designed living environment.

Taking advantage of the waterfront location strong relations between the urban and water were developed (see Figure 1). The concepts fit into the latest tendencies of relational urban ecology. Four teams were awarded prizes in the competition. All the projects were presented at exhibitions in Gdańsk and Kołobrzeg. City authorities gained important material that presented possible visions of the development of the area.

It should be emphasised that an important motive behind the project was to obtain analytical and research material, which would be helpful in making decisions regarding the implementation of the area of Podczele. On the basis of concepts or their fragments, it was planned to indicate guidelines for a local development plan to be developed for the area. The competition projects made valuable contributions to the discussion about the area's future. The visions of the development of the resort shown in the student projects highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy for the transformation of the former airport.

Owing to the competition, special attention should be paid to the creation of a system of public spaces related to green and blue infrastructure. Thanks to the competition, the city authorities and its residents became aware that such an environmentally valuable and attractive investment area should be the subject of further consideration, before binding decisions were made regarding its future. This fits in with more general European recommendations regarding a holistic approach to spatial order, revitalisation and environmental protection (e.g. Leipzig Charter, New Athens Charter, RIBA, ACE (Architects' Council of Europe) and others).

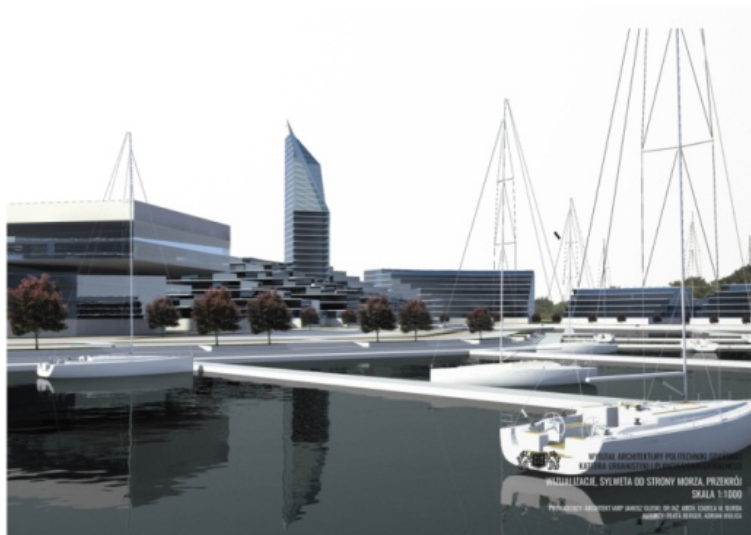


Figure 1: View of the designed Marina of the Podczele Resort. The winning project in the 2015/2016 competition by Adrian Mulica and Beata Berger. Urban Design I. Group led by architects: Janusz Gujski and Izabela Burda.

The second edition of the competition was held in the academic year 2016/2017. The aim was to prepare the concept of land development in the vicinity of the existing amphitheatre. Eleven two- and three-person teams of first semester students of full-time undergraduate and graduate studies took part in solving the problem. The object of the competition was to develop a concept for the modernisation of the amphitheatre along with the presentation of a strategy for the

deployment of utility functions, greenery, and pedestrian and vehicular communication in its vicinity. In the face of identifying the problem of the lack of continuity of public spaces, an important goal was to create links between the project area, as well as the surroundings and the city centre (see Figure 2). On the basis of the studies and analyses carried out, the students attempted to indicate the possibility of transforming the Kołobrzeg amphitheatre and developing the area in its surroundings with the area of Aleksander Fredro Park.

Noting that the positively perceived fragments of the city do not create a specific, clear system, and that they constitute various *islands* adjacent to places perceived in negative terms, the authors of the projects took care to create a consistent layout of public space zones. The overriding sociological and urban goal was to rebuild the identity of the place in reference to the city centre. The approach to the project was based on the culture factor as a catalyst for change, which is so critical today. It was assumed that the renewal of this area will contribute to the increase in identification with the place and to the strengthening of social integration. Similarly to the previous edition of the competition, the designs of the three awarded teams and of the other participants could be viewed at exhibitions organised in Gdańsk and in Kołobrzeg.



Figure 2: View of the stop of a designed cable car line. Zuzanna Leszczyńska and Dawid Kłoda's project was awarded a prize in the 2016/2017 competition. Urban Design I. Group led by architects: Janusz Gujski and Izabela Burda.

In the academic year 2018/2019, the third student competition devoted to the renewal of the urban space at the Parsęta River was organised. The main problem in this case was the lack of friendly and sociopetal waterfront space that was attractive and inspiring enough to engage in various activities, and designed for various age categories. Students of the first semester of the full-time graduate course (12 two- and three-person teams) took part in the competition. Five teams were awarded prizes in the competition. Three prizes and two distinctions were awarded. The public infrastructure connected with the river and open public spaces played a most important role in this project. The students' concepts contained a supplement to urban functions and were based on building the image of a place integrated with the city centre.

The dominating category from the point of view of this competition was the revival of *urbanity* in the waterfront space neglected from the urban and social point of view. The main goal of the projects was to create places for meetings and interactions between residents (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: View of the newly developed form of a fragment of the northern wharf of the Parsęta River by Karolina Paczoszka and Marta Romanowska. The winning project in the 2018/2019 competition. Architectural and Urban Design I. Group led by architects: Marek Gawdzik, Elżbieta Marczak and Izabela Burda.

All of the contestants designed a series of elements that made it possible for users to get closer to water. Along the wharf, elements were proposed, such as stairs leading down to the river or a part of the wharf designed in the form of an amphitheatre, which could become an important cultural attraction. In some of the studies aimed at ordering and introducing new footways, footbridges were included to make it possible to descend to the water level and walk over to the other side of the river.

To use freely any space arranged in a new way, the winning project proposed the placing of mobile elements of structural landscaping on land and just above the water. An important advantage of some of the projects was such development of the waterfront space as to create opportunities for its use in various weather conditions and at different times of the year. Assumptions adopted in the competition are associated with a more general problem of the holistic view of environmental issues

*...one of the most noticeable deficiencies in architectural education is a weak connection with environmental engineering and water management issues. While urban adaptation and mitigation strategies should be developed in-between these competencies and disciplines, highly intensive architectural studies curricula, built according to the European Directive 2005/36/EC, isolate future graduates from environmental issues [5].*

## STUDENT COMPETITIONS AS A TOOL IN URBAN RENEWAL

Revitalisation is one of the issues that makes people realise how important it is to combine and treat with equal attention the various layers of the complex space that is a city, i.e. physical, urban, architectural, social, cultural, communication and mental. In this sense, the concept of city - because of the complexity and comprehensiveness of revitalisation practices - demands interdisciplinary approaches. The effects of student competitions show that co-operation between various city actors is possible and often contributes to the changing of attitudes towards urban renewal. It consists in taking into account broadly defined socio-cultural, economic and natural goals, at least at the discursive level. Owing to it, urban policy is often subject to change, for competitions can be a valuable inspiration for residents who, through participation in post-competition exhibitions, have the opportunity to express opinions about the transformed space.

It can be assumed that the formula of competitions remains valid, because it facilitates the understanding of surroundings and the suggestions of visions coupled with time and space. Just as the city identity is not given forever, public space constantly is being negotiated and reproduced by its users. As shown in the latest sociological research, in the reality of Polish cities, open public spaces are in the opinion of the surveyed residents a key plane of identification [6]. Thus, they contribute to a more general, especially European, tendency to seek a new language of architecture and reject simplified models of developing the relationship between humans and the environment.

*This departure from space as a territorial whole - a container that is attributed a function (social, economic, state) in favour of space as a socio-ecological whole - is very important for understanding the relationship between the city and nature [7], cf. [8]. Today, cities such as Kołobrzeg seek the sources of revival and renewal in waterfront spaces, in connection with culture. What is more, in recent decades, public spaces have gained importance in European and world urban planning, resulting not only in more and more interesting projects and realisations, but also in the presence of this category in urban and sociological discourse.*

The properties and controversiality of the *public space* category itself are based on one common definition for the diverse practices and overlapping activities of various social groups. None of the references to *public* is naturally a universal construct that sums up the collected whole. Therefore, reference is only to specific conditions, situations and places defined by the accepted competition assumptions. They were about adopting a general principle regarding accessibility, new meeting places, integration, identification and identity.

It was considered advisable to focus attention on the spaces of the practices, experience and events that obligate engagement in more permanent than individual or consumer types of behaviour. Even if these assumptions went beyond the possibilities and abilities to engage in actions consolidating or organising life, the ambition of constructing places for starting up a community - spaces of identification - which, in the conditions of the global competition of cities, deserve special attention, still remains close to academic thinking. Especially so as in the era of neo-liberal economy public spaces are exposed to supervision, appropriation and privatisation.

Under these conditions, the issue of their availability and quality in the face of rapidly changing needs and the dominant individualistic interpretation of city design becomes the subject of concern, discussion and dispute. In the case of Kołobrzeg, it may be the quality of routine meetings, proximity or locality that is more important for its residents from the point of view of sensing their own place in the city.

As other researchers rightly point out, the experience resulting from co-operation with city halls in connection with revitalisation constitutes a creative polemic with the existing records of documents, i.e. local spatial development plans and decisions defining the current development directions of a given area, also indicating the direction in which a given space should be transformed to meet the expectations of future young users [9][10]. This approach requires interdisciplinary teaching methods that integrate the global and local scale.



*Locality means taking account of original features of a place, the population, tradition and architectural heritage, as well as legal, environmental and social conditions characteristic of a place [9]. In addition, it is fresh and not contaminated with stereotypical thinking about space, place and ways of transforming it. It is often a basis for changes in the design guidelines when organising architectural and urban competitions addressed to professionals [11][12].*

*The formula of student architectural or urban open competition, which is an opportunity for democratic expression and a test of social maturity of the authors, allows for a broad view of a discussed issue, indicates the full spectrum of possible spatial and technological solutions and, thereby, illustrates the essence of the potential [11].*

## STUDENT COMPETITIONS AS A TOOL OF SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

In the classical participation model, known as the *ladder of participation*, there is a big difference between insignificant ritual participation and holding real power that makes it possible to change the environment. It is only the redistribution of power that allows citizen involvement in building plans and social, cultural and spatial programmes. One of the elements of participation that the students could use in the competitions was consultations, which were accompanied by meetings with the authorities, hearings and public presentations.

It should be emphasised that seminars and lectures devoted to the sociological and ecological aspects of developing urban space are part of the students' educational programme in the Faculty of Architecture at Gdańsk University of Technology. This is reflected in numerous students' monographs that are part of the contemporary identity discourse taking place not only in the academic community, but also in local communities.

*Polish society now pays greater attention to environmental protection issues. As a result, it has developed ecological awareness, meaning that it has attained some knowledge that economic development processes should not disturb the natural balance and that the environment should be protected from further degradation. The growth of social awareness of the environment has been accompanied by an increased scope of responsibility on the side of local authorities. In many cases, local councils (gminas) have met the needs of citizens and implemented comprehensive environmental protection programmes [13].*

What can be noticed in many cities, also in Kołobrzeg, is an institutional change observed in the public sphere of the city. *It consists in moving from a model of power omnipotence towards a model of civic participation in all spheres of urbanity, also in the area of discussions about the identity of the city and its inhabitants ... [6].* Orientation to needs

*...organizes the activities of local authorities focused on creating the best (competitive, attractive, effective) conditions for their satisfaction. In the residents' satisfaction model, the issue of identity remains in the domain of power convinced that it creates the identity best suited to the needs of the urban community, having the attribute of competitiveness on the market of other urban identities, both within the city and on the nationwide scene [6].*

In a sense, owing to student competitions, Kołobrzeg was submitted to competitiveness in terms of the potential changes envisaged in the designs as a response to contemporary standards of urbanity. However, the adoption of such an assumption requires the city, and not only the students, to include a reflective perspective in the management process, the centre of which is building a balance between local authorities and the local community. The final result of the participation, thus understood is the achievement of a higher quality of life and the empowerment of individuals and communities in the public sphere. If participation transforms architectural design from an authoritarian act into a process, it begins with identifying the needs of users and goes through the various stages of negotiating formal and organisational assumptions to finally reach the phase of usage, open to continuous interaction and new meanings.

## CONCLUSIONS

Competitions are also a space for students' creativity and strengthening the subjectivity of residents. Importantly for students, the attempt to address existing problems, which is included in the competition formula, is always motivating. It makes them participate in classes with greater involvement. Undoubtedly, competitions can be considered one of the socio-spatial tools in developing urban identity.

The city is still a laboratory in the sense attributed to it by Chicago sociologists. Although it is the residents who deserve the name *experimentalists*, other *experimentalists* also participate in this process, including students. They experiment not only with the development of urban space, and its transformation, but above all with attributing new meanings to it.

In addition, student competitions can be considered one of the tools that support the activity of residents in the revitalisation of the city, because they are one of the forms of social participation, a type of *invitation*, by the authorities, to all residents to participate in the process of making decisions about the city as a common good; they reduce the initial *incompetence deficit* of the residents and constitute an attempt to formulate prerequisites helpful in making specific decisions by planners, urban planners, politicians and officials, to meet the needs of residents and other users.

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