

PAPER • OPEN ACCESS

Young Leaders of the City of the Future

To cite this article: D Śmiechowski 2019 *IOP Conf. Ser.: Earth Environ. Sci.* **290** 012160

View the [article online](#) for updates and enhancements.

You may also like

- [Towards single-trial classification of invasively recorded auditory evoked potentials in cochlear implant users](#)
G Bauernfeind, M J Teschner, S C Wriessnegger et al.
- [Secondary school students' conceptions about the viscous behaviour of liquids](#)
Lukas Faltin and Markus Sebastian Feser
- [‘Yeah, I think I understand it, but what’s it all for?’](#)
Malcolm G Cornwall



ECS
The
Electrochemical
Society
Advancing solid state &
electrochemical science & technology

DISCOVER
how sustainability
intersects with
electrochemistry & solid
state science research

Young Leaders of the City of the Future

D Śmiechowski

Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Interior Design Faculty, ul. Myśliwiecka 8, 00–459
Warszawa, Poland

Abstract. Sustainable built environment aimed at community's well-being is possible to be striven for – with substantial involvement of citizens. Cultural vitality and freedom, social equity, environmental renewability, economic prosperity and solidarity are high global goals, although everyday reality depends to the largest extent on the way our closest surroundings are treated – according to common will and visions, individual attitudes, skills. Wider interrelationships concerning the inhabited space and its values, are evident to those who are emphatic, open to constant learning, imagining, experimenting, cooperation. This should concern, in larger and larger extent, the younger generation. An important point of departure for a new paradigm is the conjunction of environmental care and active participation, to foster self-agency within citizenship. Engaging young leaders in planning processes and governance, gives a chance to facilitate the implementation of invaluable potential, as well as puts education into practice – within the important lessons of everyday democracy. Examples of educational projects as well activities of school groups and youth councils may prove the value of this potential. The set of Sustainable Development Goals as well as the postulated Polish Architectural Policy contain the message ready to be translated both in educational and design practice.

1. Youth participation and leadership, democracy in practice

The emergence of conscious, open, imaginative leaders is a crucial need of today's society, or at least a need of and a task for local communities that would have an overall influence on development. Quality non-authoritarian leadership, as one of the conditions for sustainable development (not mere survival), may be understood first of all as a human ability to listen, cooperate, integrate. It asks for the will to perceive, to exchange, to develop the dialogue based on equality, partnerships, responsibility that is extended far beyond the stereotypical rule executed by elected officials.

In the *Operating Manual For Spaceship Earth*, Richard Buckminster Fuller expressed his assumption of the future understanding of democracy: “The procedure we are pursuing is that of true democracy. Semi-democracy accepts the dictatorship of a majority in establishing its arbitrary, ergo, unnatural, laws. True democracy discovers by patient experiment and unanimous acknowledgement what the laws of nature or universe may be for the physical support and metaphysical satisfaction of the human intellect's function in the Universe”. [1]

Considering that the youth of today should hopefully turn into open and active citizens and, also possibly, conscious politicians of tomorrow, new grounds have to be broken not only for the methods to ‘educate’, what is mostly prescribed by the school or other institutions, but to let the unique perspectives of children and teenagers find the best possible nourishment and expression already at their age.

Young people are usually well informed about their local environment (as every-day users), ready to ask questions and propose innovative or just logical solutions – without fear, often across the clichés. Under the condition that they are given an open field, freedom to act, recognition.



It would be ideal, if astonishment, critical view, new ideas were possible to find their way aside from their formal education, although some of the school practices and curriculums may be of help. Creative impulses are needed, concerning the types of relevant educative activities that are most viable – socially, culturally, environmentally.

2. An example of the *Young Leaders of the City of the Future* project

In a project, potentially leading to substantial urban transformations towards sustainability, two groups of young people – mostly secondary school students – were proposed to take part in the school and out-of-school activities, specially dedicated to the subject. The project encompassed two cities, one in Poland and one in Norway. The expected outcome was to build a 2025 (and further) agenda of sustainable development of the city of the future, as well as to organise campaigns aimed at putting ideas into practice. The background of the activities was the opinion poll conducted in secondary and high schools in Legionowo (2015), according to which only 20% of students regarded citizen participation in planning and shaping of public spaces as important. This, and other polls of similar kind in Poland, prove a modest level of public consciousness on the matters of citizen involvement, as well as the quality of built environment, showing a need to tackle the problems seriously.

The central site of action – Legionowo (population 54 000) is a Warsaw's satellite town. The Norwegian counterpart was Kristiansand (population 88 000). The project, starting from April 2015, was led by the *GAP Polska Foundation* within the framework of the *Citizens for Democracy* programme of the *Stefan Batory Foundation* and was operated by the *Polish Foundation for Children and Youth*.

The international character of the project allowed for a wider scope of activities including communication of architecture and citizen participation in practice. The primary goal was to inspire students, as sustainability leaders, to postulate and imagine changes, present their visions and take creative actions in their schools, communities and on a scale of a whole town. Physical city-space provided a field of action to perform, with the use of the tools characteristic for architectural education. The representatives of secondary and high school students from Legionowo, encouraged by the cooperation with their Norwegian peers and the *Green Centre – Climate Alliance* from Kristiansand, were working on new ideas for sustainable urban environment. Young people were motivated, empowered to use their education and environment holistically, to show a perspective of influencing, re-creating the surroundings consciously, with care. In this way a kind of a *forum* was created to express their views and ideas that are otherwise uneasy to get heard of.

In Legionowo, most of the activities within the year of the project's duration were workshops and training sessions. The rhythm of the project's activities was based on five-hour Saturday's working sessions (workshops), mostly outside of schools – in the main Town Hall's conference room or a space in the sports centre, adopted for the needs. Some activities also took place during school classes. All of this work had a strong practical dimension. Some was of more creative character (resulting in practical solutions), and some concerned with learning of new “soft” skills, aside from the school curriculum. The project method built the backbone of all activities – be it a public debate, working with the media or sociological interviews. Training workshops included planning the campaigns, achieving media skills (filmmaking, news reporting, interviews; setting up a blog), practising non-violent communication (compassionate, collaborative communication – according especially to the Marshall Rosenberg's theory and practice).

3. The expectations of young people regarding their environment

Many young people prove to be more aware of some aspects of today's world situation than a large number of their parents, teachers or local council members. They are distinctively conscious of the helplessness of humanity towards environmental crisis, pollution and unavoidable climate change, senseless exploitation of Nature and endangered biodiversity, conflicts about resources and especially problems with energy and food security, neo-feudalism and colonialism, collisions of belief systems. The rapid development of media technologies helps to spread the information and create new forums for discussion but, on the other hand, carries a risk that humans escape the reality of the living world.

What is positive, some new phenomena are born, parallel to the decreasing trust in the “old-style” politics, overwhelming commercialization and consumerism, excessive economic expansion. Many young people reject the compromised life model and feel the need to escape or rather leave for a new one. New motivations, inspirations to create a prosperous, vibrant community are awaited and may be found. The positive proposals are the possibility: – to strive for a modest, more sensible life; – to look for a right form of daily work as a crucial factor in relations to others as well as self-development; – to cooperate, share the activities, experiences within a group; – to engage in arts and crafts; – to feel inspired by nature and care for nature. In effect there is a chance for dissolving the aging clichés and finding new solutions through engagement, free experimentation. The city of the future or sustainable built environment in general – aimed at by new generations – is a habitat co-planned, co-designed, and democracy is understood more widely.

4. Project partners and their potential

The leading organisation initiating the project – **GAP Polska Foundation**, registered in 1998 in Warsaw, is affiliated with Global Action Plan International. The mission is to empower and encourage individuals and communities to practice an increasingly sustainable lifestyle. Its programmes have mostly been school-based, directed to help students, families, teachers to make significant contributions to the solution of environmental problems by consciously modifying their own ways of life. The activities differ from the standard public information or educational campaigns or environmental education envisaged by curriculums. Here, the input to the *Young Leaders of the City of the Future* project comes from experiences of programmes leading to documented, long-term behaviour change within individuals and small groups. The methods based on empowerment help individuals and groups to define their own goals, explore potentials, identify and remove barriers, consciously build new habits and commitment, direct attention to what is or might be possible.

In the end of the nineties, GAP activities were among the first steps in combining ecological and architectural education for children and young people that were initiated in Poland. The school eco-teams’ work, for example, encouraged teachers and students to propose changes within school grounds (also kindergartens), as important outdoor education facilities. These and other experiences, connected to ecological education that was already quite well grounded in a school system, had helped to elaborate the architectural education programmes (i.e. *Dialogue with Surroundings*). Architectural – spatial aspects of environmental (ecological) education had not been visible since.

In the project *Young Leaders of the City of the Future* the present situation of built environment was shown as interconnected strongly with problems of the Earth's resources. One of the campaign's themes or groups, respectively within this project, were the Water Explorers. This motif has developed since the time of the project into the current Foundation's activity (the programme *Water Explorer*).

The Norwegian project partner – **Grønt Senter**, is both a competence centre and a meeting place dedicated to sustainable community development. It has been sharing its space for a number of activities like green town-planning (in cooperation with NAL – Norwegian Architects Association, in the context of the Cities of the Future Norwegian government's programme, 2008–2014). It cooperates in environmental certification, shares its space for board and planning meetings of authorities and actors in the environmental field. Its experiences include extensive cooperation within the city and region, voluntary projects supervised by leaders, project management, creating and caring for the community garden. The media covering and feedback show a substantial potential for its growth. The common goals of the Centre and its partners are to point out positive and transferable environmental solutions, to act as a driving force in efforts to reach climate policy objectives, to show practical examples. The Kristiansand municipality delegates to the Green Centre some of its tasks, like the promotion of community's sustainability (green community development).

5. International and local study trips and site visits

During two international travels, the project partners' representatives could get to know one another and visit places. The Polish-Norwegian teams visiting Kristiansand and Legionowo were accompanied by

architects and city-planners, with ecological activists as tutors. Students from Poland visited Kristiansand to see the extent of implementation of sustainable development policies. During the tour to Norway, the workshop at the Green Centre in Odderøya was organised. The group prepared food, using vegetables and herbs from the community garden situated by the Centre. The organisational structure and activities of this innovative institution were presented as a possible model for a Sustainability Centre in Legionowo.

The Green Centre presents a living example of how to plan, design, develop a public institution of this kind in the best possible way and how to make sure it would influence its wider surroundings, as well as attract many visitors. Designing of such a centre was then one of the work tasks during the visit to Kristiansand and later in Legionowo (at the architecture workshops, with the main focus on green design, project development, expected activities, running costs reduction – energy conservation and gain, etc.).

Next to the Sustainability Centre, its gardens and all other specific features, the second field of interest both in Kristiansand and Legionowo were green urban areas in general. With the main questions to answer: how should they be designed to be appealing to general public and how to engage the users in their design and care. Visions for creating green public areas in spatial relation to the Sustainability Centre and other places and areas were sought. Sketches for an imaginary project to develop green urban areas were drawn on the map that in fact could become a corrected development plan for the city, according to a new vision.

Students from Norway visited Legionowo to meet their Polish peers, and especially to attend school meetings in which members of students' self-governments participated. There was also a possibility to talk to the mayor and council members. The assessment of sustainability within community's resource management was planned from the point of view of citizens (the list of issues compiled, the questions formulated to be asked during meetings with the municipality representatives). This survey's aim was to find and strengthen the benefits potentially resulting from conscious usage of resources and to unveil possibilities of improvements. It encompassed study visits of utility companies (water, energy, transportation and waste management) but also divisions within the municipality, responsible for spatial planning and care for public green spaces.

6. Architecture workshops within a broader scope of the project's activities

Communication of architecture is bilateral: a dialogue between professionals and young people, a mutual experience and exchange concerning the environment in its local and global senses. Experts (architects, sociologists, journalists) take a position of partners in the processes. First of all they play the roles of enablers but also mediators, consultants, advisors. In a common project, each step determinates or triggers the next, leaving the door open to moderate the initial assumptions in time. The project gives young people a chance to work with pedagogically skilled architects, who have a holistic worldview. The activities relate to spatial development, resource management, governance priorities. Young people work on real-life solutions and participate in site visits, debates, workshops. They get a chance to express their own needs, the needs of others but also the needs of environment in its broad sense. This kind of work, together with professionals, teachers, activists, is summed up and postulated, a further development, in the chapter on culture of space (baukultur) and architectural education for all, proposed by the "Polish Architectural Policy – the policy of quality of the landscape, public space and architecture". [2]

Most of the results of the project in Legionowo were immeasurable in a short time, although they were clearly connected to the architectural policy postulations, as well as strategic goals – the Sustainable Development Goals. They were to become contributory to strategic documents, concrete policies, further practical or imaginary projects, as well as overall social change. Much of the subject matter was focused on homes, workplaces, educational, cultural and sports facilities, public spaces, transportation networks and means, and especially – public green areas. Team-work was strongly promoted. The activities were grounded in the critical analysis of current planning policies and other resources, concerning the city's visual outlook and functional features, as well as in school curriculum

elements possibly related to architecture and civic education. Consequently, the project participants and their fellow citizens were expected to have an opportunity and necessary conditions fulfilled to find themselves more ‘rooted’ in their surroundings, to understand more “what is behind” the local built environment (its physical and metaphysical aspects), in order to develop more respect and care.

During the architecture workshops, the interest in the activities increased among the participants but also from the local media. Public presentations by the students were addressed to school communities, council members, local media, general public. The project was also communicated through the internet, by partners’ networks, but also by young reporters trained during the time of the project.

The architectural workshops resulted in discussing the visions for the city of the future, while exchanging ideas and learning to use new tools, starting to practice a common language (conversation, sketches, models, etc.). The visions did not have to be radically ‘futuristic’, nor ‘very original’ as the graspable “future” is not meant to be distant. In the “present” there are “future” solutions already possible – existing but often unseen. Young people usually express their ideals of better quality of life in their community quite straightforwardly – with proposals of more functional, esthetical, green spaces.

The subjects of projects were discovered in a simple manner. They were not prepared beforehand but resulted from initial discussions and individual sketching. Then, the group work followed, concentrating on chosen themes, usually the ones concerning public spaces, mostly the transformations of small scale barren spots. This accounted for a systematic place-making, as the teams started to develop the projects further. The seemingly schematic or clichéd proposals were often redeveloped in quite an innovative way (in comparison with the existing state). For example, an integrated network of green spaces, and most of all – gardens, places of activity and meeting points, in connection with bicycle and pedestrian paths proved to be a good set of themes in relation to a sustainable way of living.

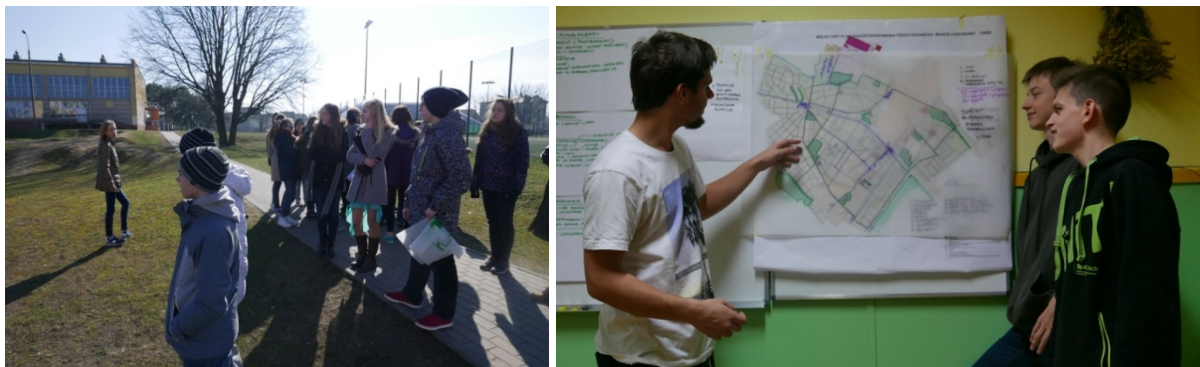


Figure 1.

Workshop participants first of all wanted to create and renew those places where people meet, the recreational trails, all connected to nature. They wished to activate or care for the existing sports’ grounds (also outdoor gyms in schoolyards to be used during breaks). They also expressed a clear need to make overall changes in educative institutions, not only transforming their interiors to be more spacious, with daylight and greenery, but opening the school surroundings for more active usage, including a setting of gardens with ecologically grown and edible plants. A growing tendency is noticeable that students are interested in possibilities to engage in hands-on work.

The first activities of garden projects were to collect information and viewpoints on possible locations, best ways of cultivation, composting, etc. After a concept had been worked out, it was necessary to organise campaigns to realise the idea (handing out leaflets, producing and placing the posters, collecting signatures, organising the funding). During all these efforts a project, confronted with opinions and expertise, becomes realistic. The school garden idea is easily understood and transferable. The motivation is clear – to help everybody to become healthier, smart, more knowledgeable towards nature, as well as to strengthen the availability of locally grown food. There is a growing tendency of treating such projects as a chance of bringing more self-sustainability, food security and altogether –

more sense to life, although the realised schemes are still much too small in number. Modest solutions and simple organisation of processes are emphasised. The know-how of a small-scale local food production may be treated as a rediscovered skill. The holistic approach is mirrored in coherence with the farm-to-table concept. The strict requirement for ecological cultivation methods makes the projects still more impressive, professional but also creative and morally valid. The arguments for more garden projects are that they are felt as user-owned. They may be treated as an expression of both bottom-up and top-down processes (if municipalities or NGOs also initiate and support them). Although they seem to be ‘scattered in space’, they tend to belong to a common framework or network, giving more strength, influence, and perspectives.

Practical work with young people on the future of local, as well as global environments, would seem to be an obvious activity but it proved to be quite unusual, exceptional in Legionowo. There is a great potential to be used but, in reality, the helplessness often wins. It has to be acknowledged though that the representatives of younger generation are most open to new ideas, seeing the unexpressed needs of a large number of citizens. The idea of sustainable development, the possibilities to participate and engage in an intercultural dialogue have proved to be the main motifs, interesting enough to arouse attention and trigger action.

The most viable questions asked were: – how to relate to the “real” planning processes?; – how non-professionals („laypeople”) can effectively express themselves as included in planning processes, design, etc.?; – how to use the resources most efficiently?; – how to plan and proceed with interdisciplinary and intercultural cooperation?; – in which aspects and how can the education system be influenced?; – what are the most practical and convenient tools to work with, to attain a more conscious, active, self-governing society? To ensure democratic debates on these questions, the sites chosen for common work are best if they are of “neutral” character: away from home, school or town-hall. An individual, well-designed *third space* dedicated to workshops and debates would be needed. So, the idea for the *Sustainability Centre*, being a meeting point, a kind of a hub, became one of the main themes.



Figure 2.

7. A chance for youth councils, related to empowerment and the expected city transformations

An interesting contact for the project was the Vest-Agder Children and Youth Council (VABUR), an umbrella organisation representing a body of interests of young people of the region of which Kristiansand is the capital. This council is also a centre of competence in the fields of organisation, economy and youth participation in general. In comparison to Poland, in Norway there has been a strong institutional long-term support for the youth councils already for a number of years. Their members are often older and have, as citizens, more opportunities to engage in public debates and projects. Anyway, in Norway there is more financial prowess.

The youth council’s role usually means consultations for decision makers, debating the matters concerning young people and community as a whole, working on projects for the community, achieving

good visibility, publicity. In theory, all these activities mean participation, involvement, influence and learning experiences. A youth council should have a local coordinator (with appropriate approach, communication skills) but there is also a role for experts coming „from outside”. The council should have its sound mission, be ready for envisioning and action – for the common interest.

Primarily, the youth city council's activities were expected in Legionowo as one of the key elements of the project, aiming at establishing dialogue and partnership with civil servants and with other municipality and local community representatives. Another of the project's particular aims had been to give both the youth activists and the "adult" town council members a chance to use their potential, achieve meaningful goals, practice democracy in its deeper sense and cooperate locally and internationally.

8. Deficits of local democracy and chances for local sustainability agenda

In fact, the presumption of the existing youth council joining or leading the project proved in Legionowo to be practically impossible to fulfil. After recent municipal elections, the youth council had been dissolved (with a perspective to be re-established “later”). During the project, there were efforts made of re-introducing of the youth council, but with no results. So the informal group of the most active young people took on only some of the standard or primary practical forms of activities of youth councils. To fill the gap, a group of activists decided to form an interschool committee for eco-development and their domain of work concentrated in the field of the media (they gathered under the name of their newly published paper – “*The Young Leader*”). Only one student from the former youth council in Legionowo declared to be engaged in the formation of the new council and only one of the Town Council members managed to join and support the activities of young people, of this informal group. This proved a general lack of continuity.

In Poland, generally, if a youth council exists, a discontinuity of activities is also due to the age limit (too low). One of the inherent differences between youth representatives, as formally recognized partners for municipalities in Poland and Norway is the age. In Norway, the youth council members' age limit is 26 years, while in Poland they are limited to 18 years – until the end of secondary school. The time of being a youth council member is too short (a few years – just as the term of office in municipalities). It is also important to say that the Polish youth council members have no voting rights, what makes still more of a difference.

In Poland, in spite of theoretically open possibilities, there is either a lack of youth councils (as it had been in Legionowo) or, if they exist, their mission and performance is often not serious enough to really serve local communities or global needs. In the year 2014, in the whole country, there were approximately 200 youth councils, which was a considerably small number within 2478 municipalities altogether. The lack of so many possible youth councils may indicate either that they are of little importance for the municipalities, or maybe *vice-versa* – they might prove to be of too much importance if the young population felt really encouraged to engage and call for transparency, openness and participation in governance. The crucial element of participation, based on partnership (with colleagues, teachers, council members, other organisations, institutions, other citizens) is often missing. A significant percentage of teachers are too passive to empower the students to engage, especially in after-school or out-of-school activities. There are also problems of financing, connected with lack of freedom to act (self-agency deficit).

One of the obstacles to the formation and activities of youth councils is that they have too much of a “political dimension”, as the persons who coordinate their activities are meant to be municipal council presidents. In result, if they at all exist, they are either engaged in “decorating” the events held by municipality officials or in organising single and non-meaningful actions, rather than working with long-term, sustainable projects or programmes (for example engaging in building a non-existent 2025 *sustainable development agenda* that had been an important aim of the *Young Leaders of the City of the Future* project). Nonetheless, some good practice examples of youth councils' activities can also be found in Poland, especially of consultations in planning processes, where sustainability may be on the agenda. As a follow up of initiatives and deliberation, in which youth councils, or groups of activists,

are engaged, some accessible tools for citizen participation may be used more purposefully and more economically (as the Local Initiative and Participatory Budgeting). The participation of young people may lead to new models of governance and even civic-management, resulting in overall changes in the way urbanised areas perform. There are chances in this field, of Legionowo and other towns and cities, based on the experiences of projects such as the *Young Leaders of the City of the Future*, that has been and extended lesson of both participative democracy and architectural education.

References

- [1] Fuller R B et. al. 1969 *Operating Manual For Spaceship Earth* 85
- [2] Andrzejewski P, Baranowski A, Buczek G, Chwalibóg A, Chwalibóg K, Śmiechowski D, Wojciechowski S and Wolski P 2018 *Polityka jakości krajobrazu, przestrzeni publicznej, architektury* (Polska Polityka Architektoniczna, Narodowe Centrum Kultury, Warszawa)