

Commoning school

**Turning a school
into a space of community**

Zuzana Tabačková

Commoning school, Turning a school into a space of community

is a documentation of a collaborative project ŠAK Užhorodská by Zuzana Tabačková, SPOLKA, Primary school Užhorodská, Zuzana R., Jaro T., Jana N., Francesco B., Viki M., Lidka G., Monika K., Dávid H., Maťka R., Grétka Č., Jakub S., Matúš Dz., Matúš F. and many more.

Commoning school

documents the research and development project ŠAK – škola a komunita (school and community). The project was initiated by SPOLKA a group of young architects and urban researchers of which I am part, with the aim to explore the potential of primary schools as catalysts of community-making. The research was positioned within the specific context of post-socialist dormitory suburbs, which are characterised by weak community ties, a weak culture of participation, little or no social and cultural infrastructure, and little or no resources to build up such infrastructure. Especially in this kind of contexts, schools can be potentially used to provide the necessary infrastructure and be the catalysts of community making.

Our exploration started with the pilot project, ŠAK Belehradská, during 2016 and continued with the project ŠAK Užhorodská during 2017. During the first year, we researched and tested various ways in which schools can strengthen their community role in their neighbourhoods. The list of ideas we gathered and came up with is almost endless and it finds inspiration in education, community work, architecture, arts, law and politics. The result of the pilot project was a distillation of these ideas into a model of cooperation between the school and the community centred around a co-operative building of common space as the key tool for community-making. This model was then further tested and developed during the second year, in cooperation with the primary school Užhorodská. This publication describes in more detail the project ŠAK Užhorodská, while building upon knowledge generated throughout the whole project.

The project was developed with three different objectives in mind:

- assisting a primary school and its community in creating space for community in their neighbourhood through the collective building of common space on the premises of the school.
- demonstrating to the decision makers as well as the wider public, especially in Slovakia and Czech Republic, that schools can be spaces for community and that it is a very useful strategy in many contexts.
- providing a case study of architectural participatory practice, while demonstrating the utilisation of architecture tools and methods for the empowerment of people and at the same time expanding the traditional role of architects in the society.

The core of this publication is a detailed ethnographic account of the participative architecture process of turning the primary school Užhorodská into a space of community. This account is portrayed from the perspective of the author of this publication, an architect, who was the coordinator of the project. The account relies on various documents and interviews with other actors involved in the project, but it primarily presents one perspective and does not aim to be an objective account. What it does aim to do is to present the participative process in its roughness and nitty-gritty reality, rather than as a smooth linear process. In this way, it hopes to give an actual insight into these kinds of processes and to shed light on issues that participatory processes bring with themselves, including issues of power, expertise, aesthetics and available resources.

The project hopes not just to provide insights into the specific case at hand, but also to enable others to build upon the knowledge created during this project. This publication is one of the ways to make this knowledge available. Although the publication describes in detail one project in one context, by providing theoretical framework (commoning practices, schools as spaces of community, role of architecture), as well as critical reflective analysis of the whole process, and a detailed account of the various methods and tools used, it hopes to make the learnings relevant to a wider public and for various purposes.

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Overview

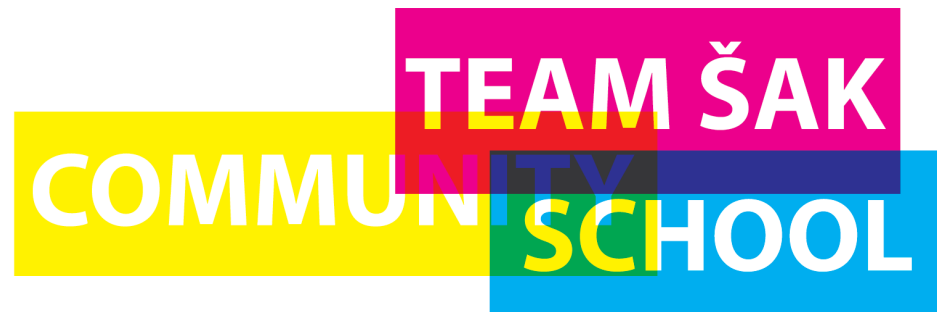
ŠAK Užhorodská

was a research and development project aimed at turning the primary school Užhorodská into a space of community. The project was executed in close cooperation with private primary school Užhorodská (Košice, Slovakia) between February and September 2017. The idea came from us, the initiators – young architects and urban researchers, with the intention to empower and enable the school to be the catalyst of community-making. We offered the school our expertise, time and also material and financial resources to assist it in establishing and strengthening its relationship with the neighbourhood by the means of participatory building of common space. Besides defining the overall aim of the project, we also determined its structure and the framework of our cooperation.

It was important for us that the process would not end with our collaboration, but continue beyond it. To achieve this, it was crucial to set up a process that the local actors would eventually be able to sustain by themselves. Therefore, it was important, that it was the school, as our main partner, doing the project with our assistance and not us doing a project in the school, although the two gradually merged. And thus, although the production was to large extend done by us, the school was the main actor when it came to the execution of the project. In this way, the project hoped to empower them and enable them to continue the project beyond our time-limited cooperation. Their active role and the scope of our collaboration was agreed upon by the partner school during our first meeting and confirmed throughout the process by various informal occasions.



View into the yard during the last day of the yard festival in June. The yard is "OPEN ALWAYS".



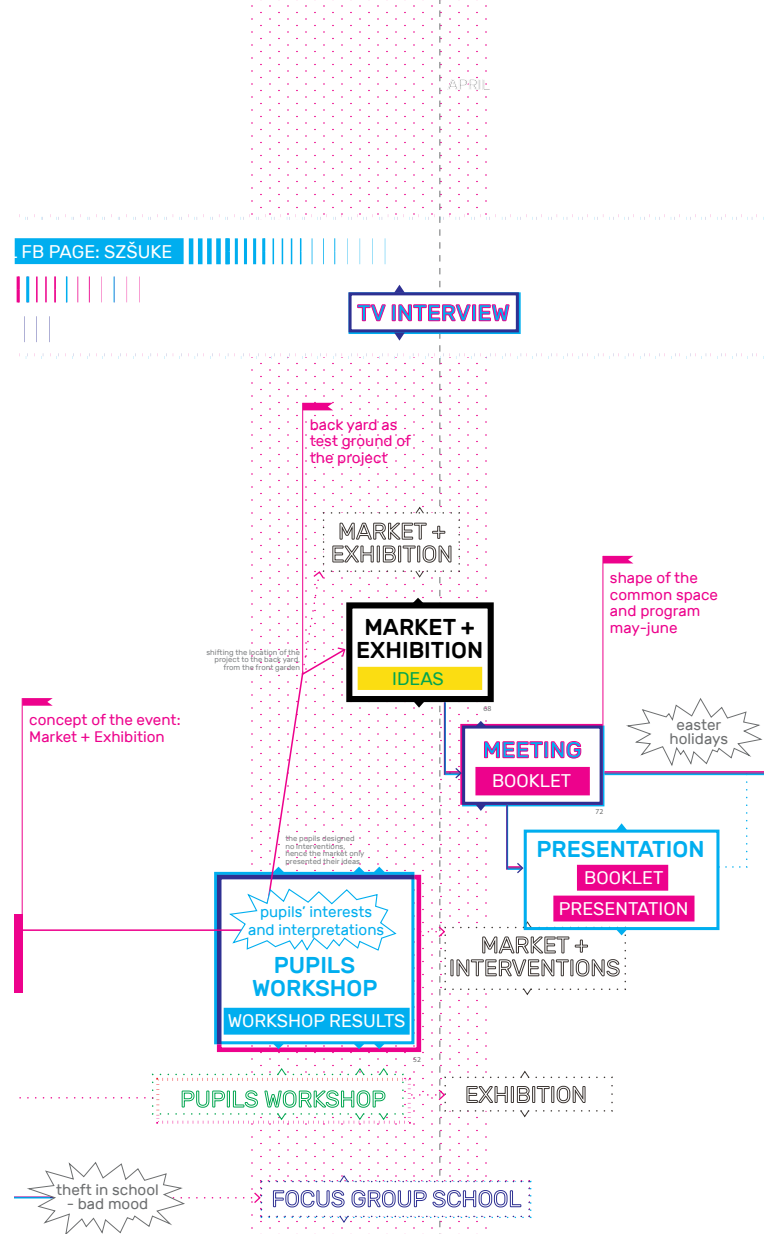
The actors of this process were varied, each with their own motivations and expertise. In order to understand the collective process in more depth, it is key to briefly examine the relationship of these various actors with the dynamics of the process. Therefore, all graphics in the publication use a colour code indicating the affiliation of the actors (see left page).

The actors are divided into three groups:

- the people in the COMMUNITY (neighbours and friends of the school),
- the people in the SCHOOL (teachers, pupils and staff of the three schools operating in the school building),
- and the people of TEAM ŠAK (myself, other members of SPOLKA, or individuals who temporarily joined the process upon our invitation).

A mix of two basic colours (e.g. green) indicates a double affiliation (e.g. pupils who also live in the neighbourhood). A mix indicates also a collectively created product (e.g. a purple intervention produced by the collaboration of team ŠAK and the school). Those events and activities marked in black indicate a collective action where actors from all groups were engaged.

This “colour-coding” aims at providing the reader with a quick visual overview of who was driving the process when. The publication does not always document in detail the individual participation of persons, but only the general affiliation of the participating actors. That being said, it is important to note (and to keep in mind when reading throughout this documentation) that most of the process depended on and was carried out by the two coordinators of the project, namely myself (as architect and team ŠAK coordinator) and Ms Jana Nimcová, teacher and vice-headmaster at the private primary school Užhorodská.



The process

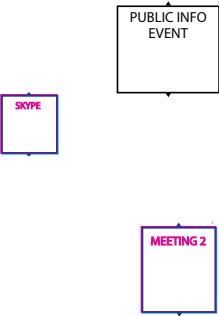
underpinning the project constitutes its very raison d'être. Therefore, in order to understand the project, it is crucial to not just know the individual elements and moments of the project, but it is important to understand the connections between them. In this way one can develop a better sense for the way decisions were made and power distributed. The text of this publication describes and reflects upon these relations. To provide the reader with a better overview of the process, there is an index representing the various elements and their relations (see section of it on the left). The index drawing (p. 16) depicts the process in chronological order, recoding the key decisions that shaped it, the events and situations that constituted it, the factors and significant documents that influenced it, and also features of it that were never realised (see p. 14 for a full description). A timeline of the process is also provided at the top of the drawing. The pink-tinted fields indicate my presence in situ. For the rest, communication occurred via digital space. Many smaller elements of the process were carried out by other members of team ŠAK living in Košice. The elements of the process, depicted by blocks, are assigned one or more numbers, which corresponds to the page numbers in the publication where you can find information about that element. The colour-coding (described in more detail in the previous page) is used consistently throughout the publication.

It is worth repeating that the process is depicted from the perspective of the author of the publication and only captures elements that happened in the framework of the project or that directly influenced it. Even though it does draw on various documents and interviews, it is still a subjective representation of reality, as it only records information that was visible and accessible to the author. However, there were probably many other factors that influenced the process and many other situations that contributed to the development of the common space in the way it was done. To unearth the latter, a series of in-depth interviews with the participating actors would be needed, but this lies beyond the scope of this project.

The drawing only depicts the timeframe of the project as it was proposed and agreed upon with the school in the beginning of the project. Hence, the drawing finishes in August, when we concluded our collaboration. Nevertheless, the process has since then taken on a life of its own (see p. 110).

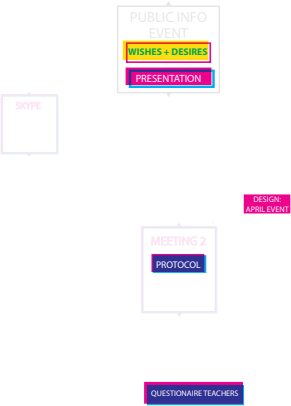
Situations

The core building-blocks of the process are temporal moments in which certain specific activities with a particular aim took place. These can be meetings, happenings, interventions, public events, or longer situations, like preparations. The drawing records only happenings that were realized as part of the project. There were (perhaps/hopefully) other things happening in the space which contributed to its development. These are, however, not recorded and thus not represented.



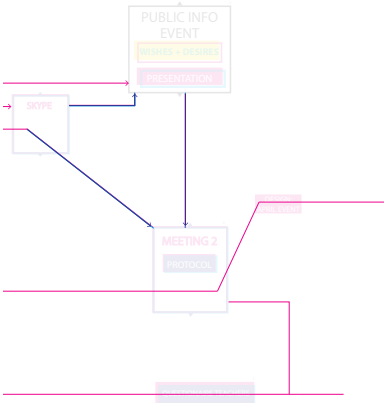
Things

Various documents and object were produced during the project, giving material form to the dialogue and ideas that emerged throughout it. They were produced during specific happenings, or outside of them. Latour's understanding of things, as objects that also have agency to act, it useful here (Latour, 2009). The things were thus materialisation of decisions themselves and actors which influenced future decisions. Therefore, they are very important to the process as its catalysts as well as its witnesses.



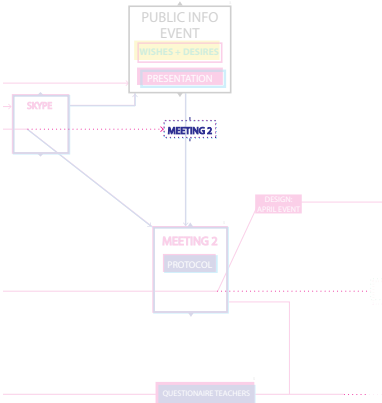
Process

While processes are often represented as a smooth and linear sequence of events, this is most of the time a misrepresentation. Things rarely happen as planned and adjustments and compromises are made on the way. The drawing thus represents the actual, changing course of the process. Straight lines depict the predicted course of the process, while diagonal lines signify a divergence from the plan. The reason for a divergence lay in the context around it. A small text briefly explains the change.



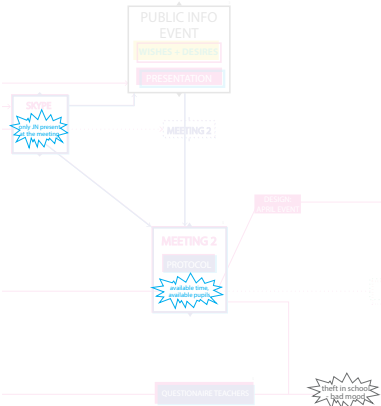
Other futures

As the process changed, certain ideas and plans were abandoned or modified. The process-drawing also records these developments, as they are important to understand the process in its entirety. It also shows how ideas developed and were shaped. Most of the time the ideas stayed the same and only formats changed.



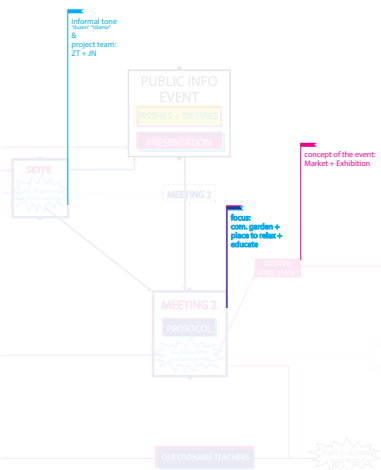
Factors

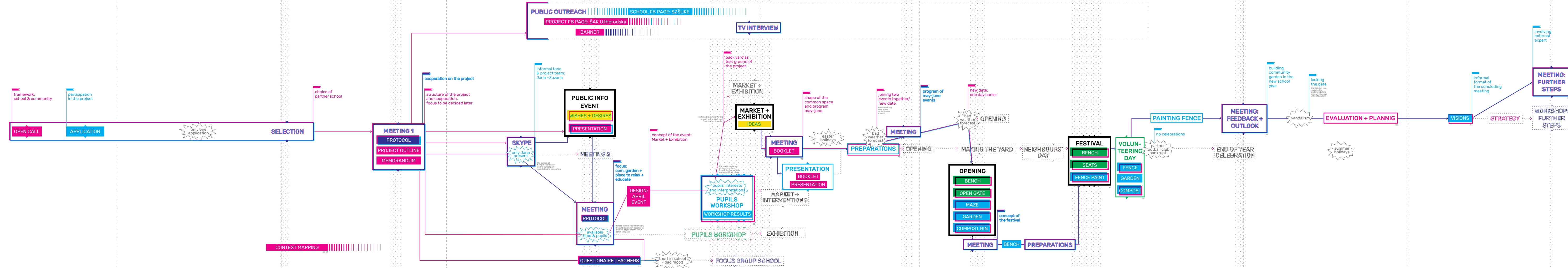
Elements that influenced the process in a significant way are also recorded in the process-drawing. All of these factors lie outside of the control of the project coordinators. Some were unexpected, whereas other had been predicted from the start (e.g. the summer break).



Decisions

To understand the process in its entirety, it is crucial to see the decisions that were taken to create the process. The drawing documents key decisions made and demonstrates their influence on the process.





Framework

Schools as spaces and places

are often overlooked when thinking about potential spaces for communities in our neighbourhoods and cities, in spite of their traditionally important cultural and social role in the local community. This natural community role and potential of schools is currently being rediscovered.

Good examples of this are *brede schools* in the Netherland, as well as so-called education landscapes (*Bildungslandschaften*) in Germany. Besides conventional educational functions, these schools also offer an array of community services, like public cafés, community halls, or workshop spaces that are open to use by the neighbourhood both during the classes and outside of teaching hours. A school is thus used all around the clock. From neighbourhood-planning point of view, this is desirable from at least two perspectives. On one hand, it saves resources because, for example, instead of building a cafeteria and a community café, the municipality has to build only one. Additionally, workshop spaces, exhibition spaces, auditoriums for cultural events, sports grounds and even libraries can be shared between the school and the neighbourhood. On the other hand, using the school all around the clock helps to create a centrality in the neighbourhoods. A community school can be and often is a strategic planning move: by concentrating many free time activity offers for various ages and interest groups, planners seek to create density, stimulate interaction and establish a truly lively place for the surrounding neighbourhood. This lively meeting point can then be also turned into a great source of informal learning for children and youth, as well as for adults. Thus, besides educators themselves, it is not only the bottom-up parent's initiatives who are recognizing the potential of schools, but also top-down policy makers and city-planners. (Coelen et.al, 2015; Million et.al, 2017; Montag Stiftung, 2012)

Beyond their functional features, schools are interesting places in the context of community-making because of the emotional ties most of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood have with it. In many cases, the majority of the people in the neighbourhood have spent some significant time of their life in their local school. They might have experienced it as pupils during their childhood, as parents during their adult life, or in some cases as both, if they stayed in the same neighbourhood throughout their life. The school grounds are thus filled with the memories of the local residents: memories of the first kiss, of childhood best friends, of hiding from teachers, of smoking in the toilets, of exploring the world, of experimenting and learning how to live. A school is thus a well-known place to most people in the neighbourhood, which is a great precondition for being the centre of its community.

Last but not least, schools are a special kind of public spaces which makes them great potential spaces for the creation of common spaces. In the Slovak context, the school property belongs to the city, but the headmaster has most of the decision-making power and is in practice fairly independent. The headmaster, or school leaders, are thus a kind of gate-keepers to the school grounds and they take the responsibility for it. This is a crucial difference to other types of public spaces guarded by the city bureaucrats. While organizing an event in public spaces often requires a long bureaucratic procedure, events on the school grounds only have to be approved by the headmaster. This allows for greater flexibility and experimentation. It also allows to build relationships on trust and set up own rules of use that are beneficial for the users and the owners of the space.

In summary, these four characteristics of schools – presented on the opposite site – make them interesting spaces and places to explore in the context of creating lively spaces for communities. This is particularly true in contexts where there is little structural support for community projects from “the top” and thus scarce resources for building and sustaining cultural and community centres. Especially in these contexts, schools can be an interesting partner for neighbourhood-regeneration projects, since they do dispose the above mentioned spatial resources and thanks to the many links to the people in the neighbourhood they have the potential to mobilize great social and also material resources. Project ŠAK builds on these potentials of schools and investigates how and to what extent they can be employed to turn schools into spaces of community.

Spatial resources

Schools are often the largest public buildings in the neighbourhoods and also provide the largest open spaces, like sports grounds, cafeterias, libraries and sports-halls. Why to build a cultural centre, if the school already has an auditorium? Might it not be more efficient to just renovate and extend it?

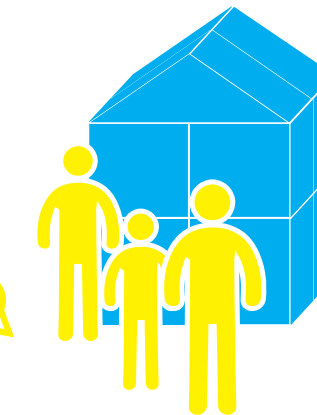
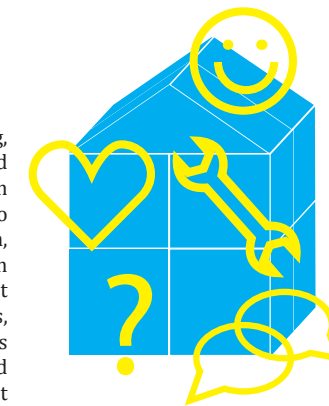


Underused resources

Whether it is the gym, the yard or the musical instruments, the school uses its resources only during a narrow time-window five days a week. And precisely when they are not used – in the evening, or during weekends and holidays – most people in the neighbourhood enjoy their free time and could potentially use them.

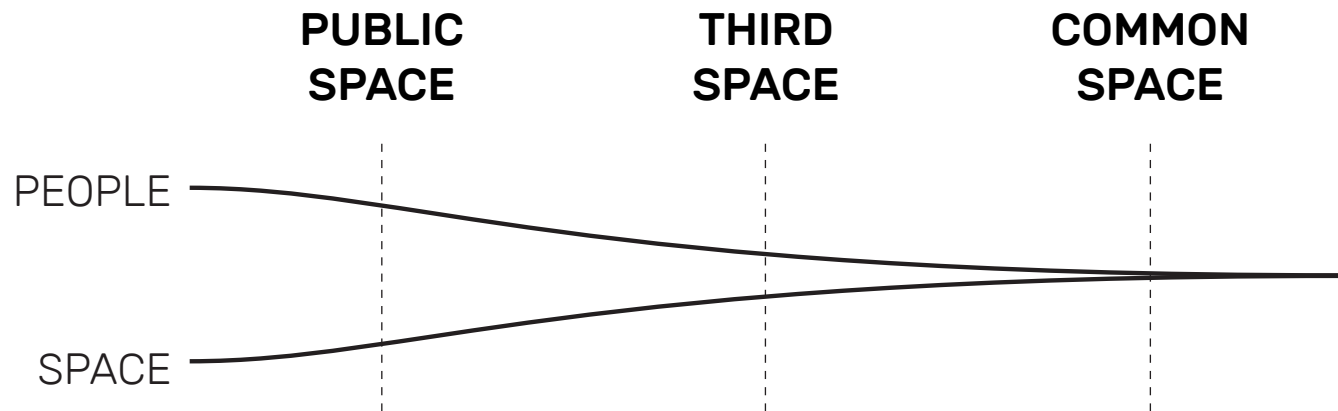
Space to experiment

Learning is not just about memorizing, it is also about experimentation and experience. In the school we learn not just math and sciences, but also more generally about how to learn, make mistakes and live together with others. It is the best ground to test new things, to learn from mistakes, to reflect and to go further. This does not have to be limited to the time and content of the formal curriculum but can go beyond it. Schools could act as spaces for informal and formal learning and experimentation for the whole neighbourhood and thus live up the original meaning of the word school: skholē, Greek for lecture room, but also leisure and place for discussion.



Meeting point

The school is visited by many children, youth and adults on a regular basis. People gather in its vicinity whether they want to or not. It is a natural meeting point, one that – with a little effort and imagination – could become a true meeting and hang out point for people of all ages.



“Community-making potential” of various publicly accessible spaces, illustrating the interconnectivity and interdependence of people and space. This interdependence works both ways. It shows thus, whether the space can exist without people and at the same time to what extend does the space influence the people.

Common space, third space and public space

are three kinds of spaces, all of which are open to public use and host various communities, but each of these does so in a different way. The differences are subtle, but significant. Because the project investigates the potential of schools as catalysts of community-making, it is important to determine what kind of space is best for community-making. This will in turn provide a clue about what kind of spaces schools should be turned into.

I will shortly outline the general characteristics of each space, while highlighting their relationship with people, in order to assess their respective “community-making potential”.

Public space is a well-known term. In the general understanding, it is publicly owned space (by the state, city, municipality etc), mostly open and accessible to people, although in some cases (like governmental buildings, libraries and schools...) access might be restricted (I do not consider here publicly used private space). It can be said that public space exists also without people, because its nature is determined by being in public ownership and ideally open to public access, but people do not necessarily have to use it. Furthermore, public space is heavily regulated. This means that, although some communities do manage to appropriate public space for their needs, this is mostly quite difficult due to the complex rules and restrictions imposed by the city. Although the rules can be changed, it is often a long and demanding process, which many communities are not well-equipped to embark on. Hence, the potential of public spaces for community-making is not very high.

Third space, or place, is a term popularized by Ray Oldenburg. Third places are usually private businesses accessible to the general public, where everyone is welcome. They are found all around the world – in the form of e.g. tabernas, Kiezkneipe, cafés etc. – and are essential for good neighbourhood life, as they provide a neutral ground upon which people may gather and socialize. The mood is playful and the main activity is conversation. Although the space itself is important, it is the people who make the place come alive, not the furniture (Oldenburg, 1997). In this way, the existence of space depends on people more than in the case of public space. Without the people, it would be just a normal pub or café. Furthermore, because it is a private space, it is also easier to change the space, since one can directly negotiate with the owner and the other guests, for example if it is OK to smoke inside despite an official ban. The concept of third space has thus a significant community-making potential.

Common space became in the last years a real buzzword. I will here adopt an understanding of common space as the product of as well as “a means and a shaping factor of commoning” (Stavrides, 2016). Commoning is a relatively new and complex term, which cannot be examined in detail in the scope of this text. In general, the term refers to a specific kind of self-organized management of resources by people, where the importance lies on preserving shared values and community identity (see Bollier et.al, 2015 for more detail). What is important to realize is the interdependence between people, resources and the rules by which the two are connected and managed. Common space is in this sense the resource that is managed and produced by the people, as well as the rules and social relationships that are produced through the process of commoning. The key point being that the space cannot exist without the people and also that the people are directly involved in creating the rules and shaping the space. The concept of common space thus provides the space for community-making and at the same time the mechanism of making the community.

The concept of common space appears to be the most useful concept of space to employ for turning a school into a catalyst of community-making. At the same time, it is the most vague, abstract and ambitions concept of publicly accessible space. In light of this, the project under consideration can be understood as an experiment in creating common space. It will investigate the characteristics of this space, as well as the potentials and limitations of constructing such space. The starting point are the following characteristics of common space:

- (common) space is a set of social relations,
- rules are created and re-created by the commoners (people involved in commoning),
- the space is open: includes newcomers.

The project will use these principles and concepts to create common space as a means and as a result of community-making in the school.

Architecture

, according to Encyclopaedia Britannica, concerns itself with the design of buildings – and this is what most people also think. While at the beginning of my architectural studies I certainly shared that view, now, 8 years later, I subscribe to a more multifaceted understanding of the profession, which I view as being concerned more generally with using spatial tools and techniques to achieve various goals, be it the erection of a building, the capture of profits, the creation of liveable neighbourhoods, or support for criminal investigations. Here it is not my aim to name and judge the many possible goals of architecture, but rather to expand the list. More specifically, this project investigates how architecture can be used to create common space. The following text briefly highlights various discourses in architecture that form the base for developing an architectural practice for creating common space. Given the understanding of common space outlined above, three areas of architectural practice emerge as crucial to discuss:

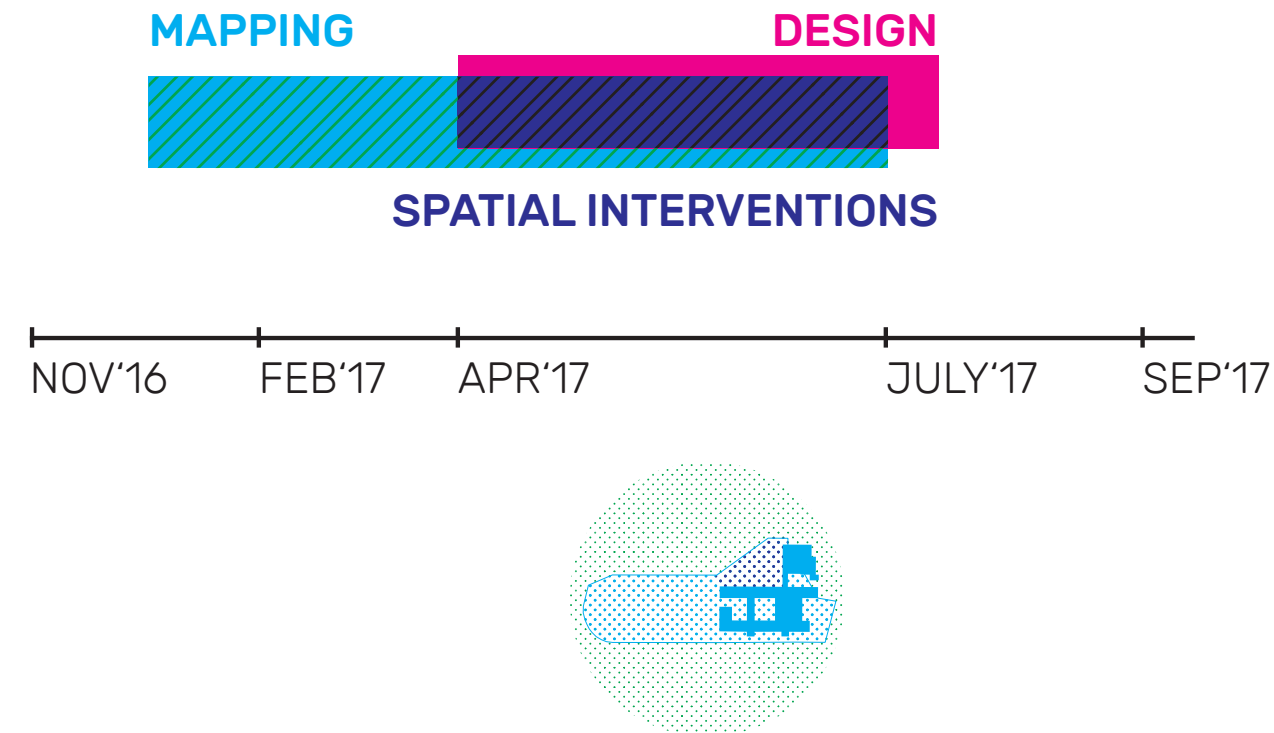
The first topic is the concept of space, which is central to architecture. Common space is described as “a set of spatial relations”, not just the physical place. This points to a theory of space that includes not just the material, but also the social and especially the relation between the two. Therefore, it will be important to understand and shape not just the physical space, which is the usual domain of architecture, but also to work equally attentively with the network of social relationships that exist in, and are shaped by, the material space (Stavrides, 2016; Löw, 2016).

The issue of people’s involvement in the architectural process is another key topic. Put simply, it is not possible to create common space without people and then “add” them afterwards, because there is no common space without them to begin with. This topic is at the heart of the discourse on participatory architecture practice, which started in the 1960s and has progressed, with a recent revival, until the present day. Here, I do not refer to those placatory participatory practices that are merely concerned with trying to persuade residents to accept a finished project. Rather, I mean participation as “a radical form of direct democracy” (Krivý, Thal, 2013), which creates an opens debate between all participants, emancipates the participants, and transforms the profession of architecture (Till, 2009).

Lastly, it is important to approach architecture and its outputs as processes and not as finished products, because common space only exists through the process of commoning. Here I turn to Latour and Yaneva (2008), who suggest, that in fact, all spaces and buildings are “moving projects” and that the profession simply lacks the appropriate tools to depict this “movement”: the angry client, the change of program, the appropriation after the building is “finished” etc. This is especially the case with common space, which only exist as a process and can never been “captured” by static, if glossy, photographs. Hence, the publication also strives to find a way of recording and understanding the project as a “flow of transformations”.

The architectural project of building common space builds on the three discourses outlined above: it views architecture as a participatory process; it considers the material and the social components of the space alike; and it pays special attention to the “flow of transformations”.

The following text elaborates in more detail the concrete methodology of the process, as well as concrete principles and methods.



The diagrams demonstrate the structure of the project, its timeframe and the spatial focus of the project during the various stages of the project.

The methodology

of this project is a participatory process of collectively building common space by engaging actors in the school and in the neighbourhood. In this section I will first shortly explain the structure of the 9-months long process, consisting of mapping and spatial interventions and then I will elaborate what is meant in this case by participatory practice (p. 29). In the second part I will present the methods that were central to the process (threshold spaces, synergy with the context and collectivity) (see p. 30) and I will also describe key tools (happenings, instructions and relational object) (see p. 31). It is important to note, that while the structure of the process was defined from the beginning, the concrete principles and methods were formulated through the process and not prior to it.

Mapppping

The underlying philosophy of the first phase of the project was inspired by the Appreciative Inquire technique (Cooperrider et.al, 2005), which focuses on the already existing assets and resources in a given context, rather than on what is missing (SWOT technique), and also directly engages people in designing and implementing change in their communities. The point was thus not just to get to know the context, but also to establish the first relationships among the people and to directly engage them in the issue. Using predominantly architectural methods, the mapping had the following objectives:

- getting to know each other: the school and the neighbours getting to know the team ŠAK and vice versa, school and neighbours getting to know each other and also people in the school getting to know each other better;
- finding out about people's motivations;
- identifying and forming the core team of the project, potentially including teachers, pupils, neighbours and parents;
- identifying already existing local assets and resources (material and social) at the disposal of the school and the community;
- forming a collective vision of common space by discussing the programmatic and spatial needs, desires and wishes of the people.

For details on the concrete techniques and the results of the mapping, see the chapter: Mapping the Context (p. 33).

Spatial interventions

The dialogue triggered during the mapping phase continued seamlessly into the second phase, when the common space was created through spatial interventions. The purpose of these interventions was simultaneously to create a community and the space for this community. The interventions sought to engage local people and build on their assets and resources. At the same time, the second phase was also a continuation of the previous efforts to explore the context, together with the participants. All interventions can be thus understood as a dialogue about common space. They create an informal participative environment where discussion occurs while performing other activities. Each intervention and its components were designed with specific objectives, either to motivate people to act, or to further investigate the potentials and limits of the space. Some interventions were permanent, some were temporal. They aimed to change the use and the perception of the yard in order to turn it into a common space. It was also important that all interventions were very simple – indeed almost banal – so as to empower and inspire people to do it themselves.

For details on the individual spatial interventions, see the chapter: Changing the Context (p. 61).

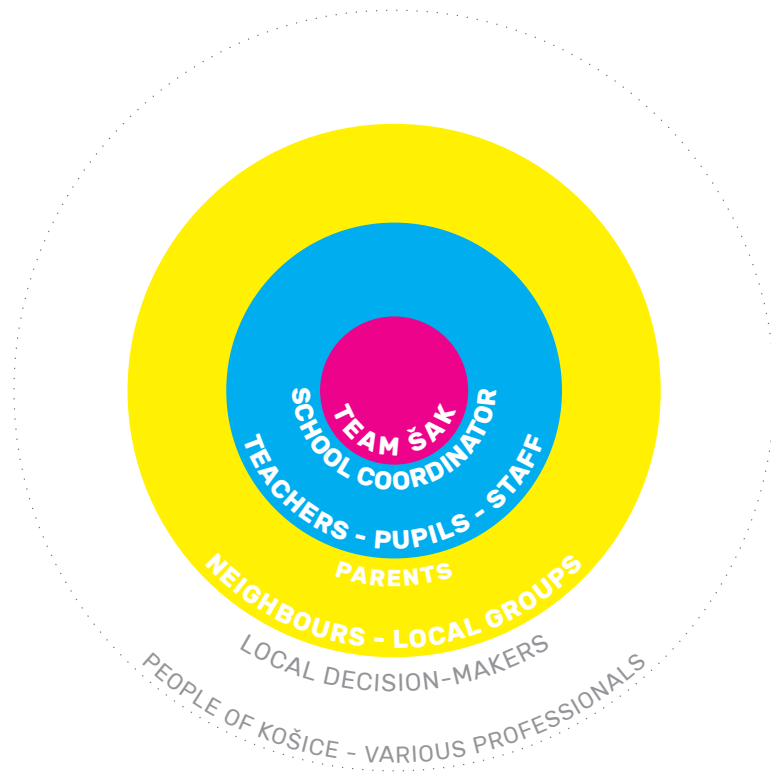


Diagram showing the key actor groups and the degree of their involvement in the project. Actors closer to the centre carry more responsibility over the project.

Participation

There are many different kinds of participation, practiced in different fields, with different methods and with different intentions. This project is an architectural participatory process, with the objective to actually involve people in a process of building common space. It uses predominantly spatial techniques (mapping, interventions, building) and it also integrates techniques from visual and performing arts, community-building, education and qualitative sociological research. The participatory architecture practice of this project can be understood as a specific kind of spatial practice and as a radical form of direct democracy:

Participatory architecture as a spatial practice is a method for:

- getting to know a given (social and material) context in more depth by encouraging people to formulate their opinions, needs and desires;
- testing spatial situations and atmospheres while getting an immediate feedback on them;
- creating relationships between people and the space as a way of fostering stewardship and a sense of belonging;
- involving people in a creative process of designing and creating space.

Participatory architecture as a radical form of direct democracy is a method for:

- testing and developing various forms of democratic processes based on negotiation and cooperation, rather than counting numbers;
- empowering and emancipating people by taking them, their opinion and expertise seriously;
- Sparking a public into existence by creating an “issue” around which people mobilize. For “the only way that a public gets pulled into politics is through content. The indirect consequences of action that people are affected by is what calls a public into being” (Marres, 2005: p.14).

All that being said, the process of participatory architecture should not be just an end in itself, but also a means to an end. In other words, it is not just the process that is important, but also its outcomes, namely the space (social and material) and its quality that is created as a result of that process. It is architect’s responsibility to ensure that quality, while at the same time allowing people to creatively participate in the creation. It is obvious, that during the process these two objectives often stand in competition and it is important to find an overall balance. The process must be thus precise in order to achieve given goals, while at the same time foreseeing, allowing and encouraging participants’ creative interpretation of and intervention in the process.

Here it is important to define the role of the architect, who is the initiator and the driver of the participative process. The architect should in this case not be just a mere technician at the service of the public translating their ideas into the physical world. No, the architect is also a creative spatial expert and she should also provide her vision of the world, as much as all other participants. To visualise the issue, I adopt and adapt the diagram of audience from the participatory artist Suzanne Lacy (on the opposite side) (Lacy, 1996). The diagram shows the artist – or, in this case, the architect – at the centre as the one who primarily drives the project. It also, most importantly, shows the architect imbedded in the context of all other participants of the project. The architect does not stand “outside” of the project and the public/the users/the audience is as much part of it as its initiator.

This understanding of participatory architecture calls for a specific attitude of the architect, who must be at once “in control” of the project (bearing responsibility, encouraging creativity and providing a vision) and ready to “lose control” by delegating power to others (Blundell-Jones et.al, 2013). Especially in the case of this project, the aim was indeed to gradually delegate all the power of the architect, thereby rendering my presence unnecessary.

Synergy with the context

In order to create a process that can sustain itself on a long-term basis it is important to embed it in the existing social and material context. This means, first of all, to establish partnerships with local groups and institutions who are implicated by the project. In this case it was first of all the school: the teaching staff, the parent's organisation and the classes and also local neighbourhood groups. It is important to understand their motivations and the organisational structures, as well as their assets and available resources in order to create a project that would be meaningful for them.

It was important to not add yet another layer of activities and responsibilities, but to create synergies between the existing structures and those of the project. This meant organizing project presentations during school meetings, doing workshops with pupils during art classes, and adopting established language and habits of working. A source of inspiration was the methodology of Eco-schools (2017), which embeds environmental topics in the usual course of schools' operation.

Building on the local assets and resources was thus not only a practical necessity (because of lack of funding), but also part of a conscious strategy to empower people by showing them that they do have many available resources already, be it for this project or another. At the same, it was an occasion to engage more people in the project by asking them for help.

Collectivity

Creating community is about creating a sense of collectivity. Therefore, it was important to perform as many tasks as possible collectively, to build up the sense of the collective self, which would be reflected, materialised and supported by the physical space. Collectivity does not mean being best friends with everyone, but it does mean trusting others. It means sharing the joy, the work and the responsibility. It means respecting, as well as being respected by, the collective.

Building a collective from scratch is a long and energy consuming process. To develop trust in a heterogenous group of complete strangers, even if connected by a common cause, is challenging. Therefore, it is practical to engage already existing groups. People in groups are more confident and thus spontaneous and if they are open and welcoming, they can create the critical mass that encourages others to join.

Threshold spaces

Not everyone can or wants to be directly involved in the very core of the process – especially not at the beginning. Some people need time to join and some can only join sometimes. An open space – one really capable of welcoming newcomers – thus needs to be flexible, so as to allow people to choose their role and to position themselves as close or as far from the project as they find suitable. Consider the space of the camp fire vs. the space of a box. In the box, you are either completely in or completely out, or you are on the threshold, which is usually rather small space. Within the radiating space of a campfire, on the other hand, you are so to speak always in the threshold and you can choose to be closer or further away.

The project aims to create such threshold spaces in a material as well as a participative sense. On one hand, it creates different opportunities for people to participate in the project. These range from:

- being just an observer or a passive user (using the yard during interventions or outside of them), through
- being involved in discussions (answering questionnaire, talking, lending tools, participating in a workshop), all the way to
- taking ownership of the place (participating actively during events, proposing things, or taking complete control and organizing something of your own).

The different forms of participation were also designed with different target groups in mind, recognising that teachers, parents or neighbours have different motivations to join the project and their respective roles in it will be also different.

In the material sense, the project chooses a place, that is possibly open and thus allows people to gradually be part of the project. At first, they might only listen to the music from beyond the fence, peak through it, or observe the happening from their window. Later they maybe come in briefly during a concert and then perhaps they come to investigate the place closer when the yard is empty but still open. And next time they possibly join an event actively.

Happenings

One of the key components of the participatory process are situations that invite and engage people in a collective building of common space. The objective is not just to build, but also to perform, the common space by being together and doing things collectively – be it gardening, hanging out, building a bench or listening to a concert. These performances assign the space new meaning and have the potential to transform it just as much as built elements do. Happenings are carefully planned so as to create the common space and at the same time allow for spontaneity to occur, and for people to be creatively part of the process, if they wish. Happenings create specific spaces together with all participants. Designing them means to think of activities, people and their potential roles, materials, necessary tools, as well as the components of the existing environment, its present and desired character.

Instructions

The tool of giving instructions became crucial for the whole project. Instructions can be understood here in connection to the tradition of instruction art, where the participant following the instructions is still free and expected to interpret them, and so each individual realizes the artwork in his/her own way, with no one way being “the right one”. Architects are used to give instructions too – for example, coded drawings for builders. However, such instructions are not open to interpretation. Here, on the contrary, interpretation was desired, and thus the language was also adjusted to that of the recipients: clarity and simplicity. A good example here is the user-friendly manual for parking day <http://parkingday.org/resources>. In all instructions, there is a component of education. They guide individuals or groups through actions (how to make a maze), make them see certain things (drawing important places in the neighbourhood), discuss certain things (rules of the yard) or position them into certain positions (presenting the project to colleagues). In short, instructions enable participants to experience the project from within, as they create it.

Relational objects

In order to promote interactions in the space and with the space after the end of the happenings the common space is disseminated with objects that promote such interactions and keep the process going. These objects invite people to enter (open gate and sign), to linger (seat), to take care (flowers), to play (floor games), and to talk (fence painting). They might acquire a positive value, but they might also create controversies. For objects also become a means of eliciting different visions about the space, as they catalyse debates about the function and aesthetic of the common space.

Mapping the Context

The partner school was selected based on their interest showed by replying to open call. The school, SZŠ Užhorodská, is a small private primary school with approximately 40 children in class grades one to five (age 6 to 10), with focus on sports and one pre-school class for children with learning difficulties with three very engaged teachers. As it is a private school, most of the children do not live in the neighbourhood. The school is residing in a building of a state primary school. In this building is parallely in operation also a state primary school ZŠ Užhorodská with 9 class grades (ca. 200 pupils of age 6 to 14) and also a private sports 8-year secondary school SŠG Užhorodská with ca. 200 pupils in the age between 10 and 18. The pupils in the state primary school are all locals, living in the neighbourhood, while only very few of the secondary school pupils live in the area. The state primary school and the secondary school were not directly involved in the cooperation on the project, since the private school applied alone. Although the three institutions cooperate on some issues, they do not have a habit of collective gatherings of agenda-settings, which makes the cooperation and communication between the institutions difficult at the times. This created many frictions and obstacles also in the project, since as key actors, all institutions were directly implicated in the project of sharing space, whether they wanted or not.

The main focus of the school is sport, which is strongly reflected in the priorities of the school, the pupils and the parents. It also influences the schedule of the school, which is heavily loaded with trainings of various sports. The school also cooperates with major local sports clubs, especially with a major local football club. Although the focus is sports, the private primary school tries to develop also other areas, especially environmental topics and it also recently joined a program Eco School to structurally develop and work on its green agenda.

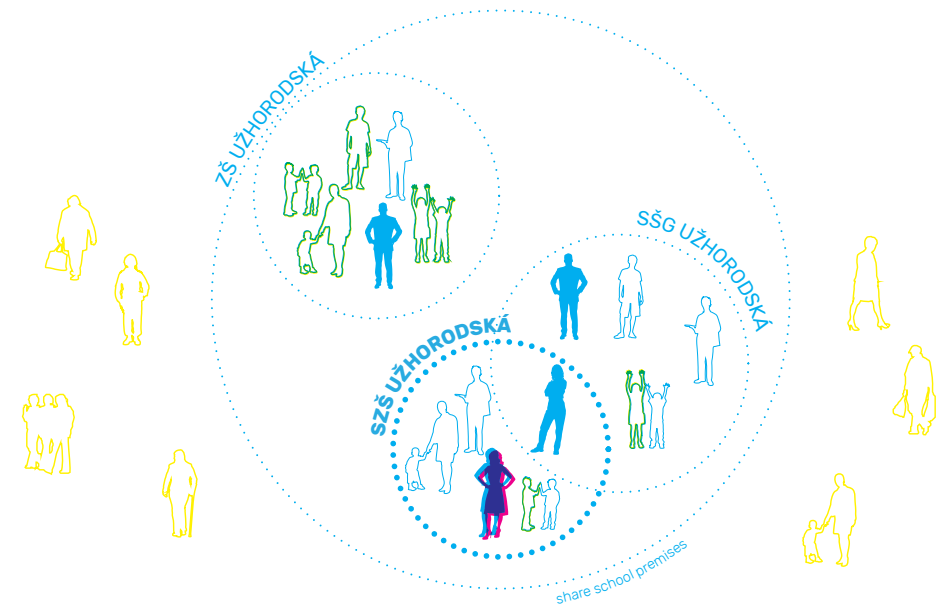
The school showed great interest and also motivation for the project, hoping to learn about working with community and perhaps build a community garden, which would be along their green agenda. However, since connecting with the community or opening the school grounds to the neighbourhood was not included in the programmatic strategy of the school, it was difficult to find and allocate an appropriate amount of resources for the realisation of the project. As a result of this, the entire responsibility for coordinating and realizing the project was delegated to a single person – Jana, the vice-headmaster of the school, who also applied for the school to do the project in the first place and it was in some way her own initiative to do this project, although greatly supported by the headmaster. Jana became the coordinator and was the link between the school and team ŠAK. In this way, she carried a big share of the responsibility over the project’s shape and also much of the knowledge generated through the project. It also meant, that all communication went through her in both ways and was in this way mediated and filtered.

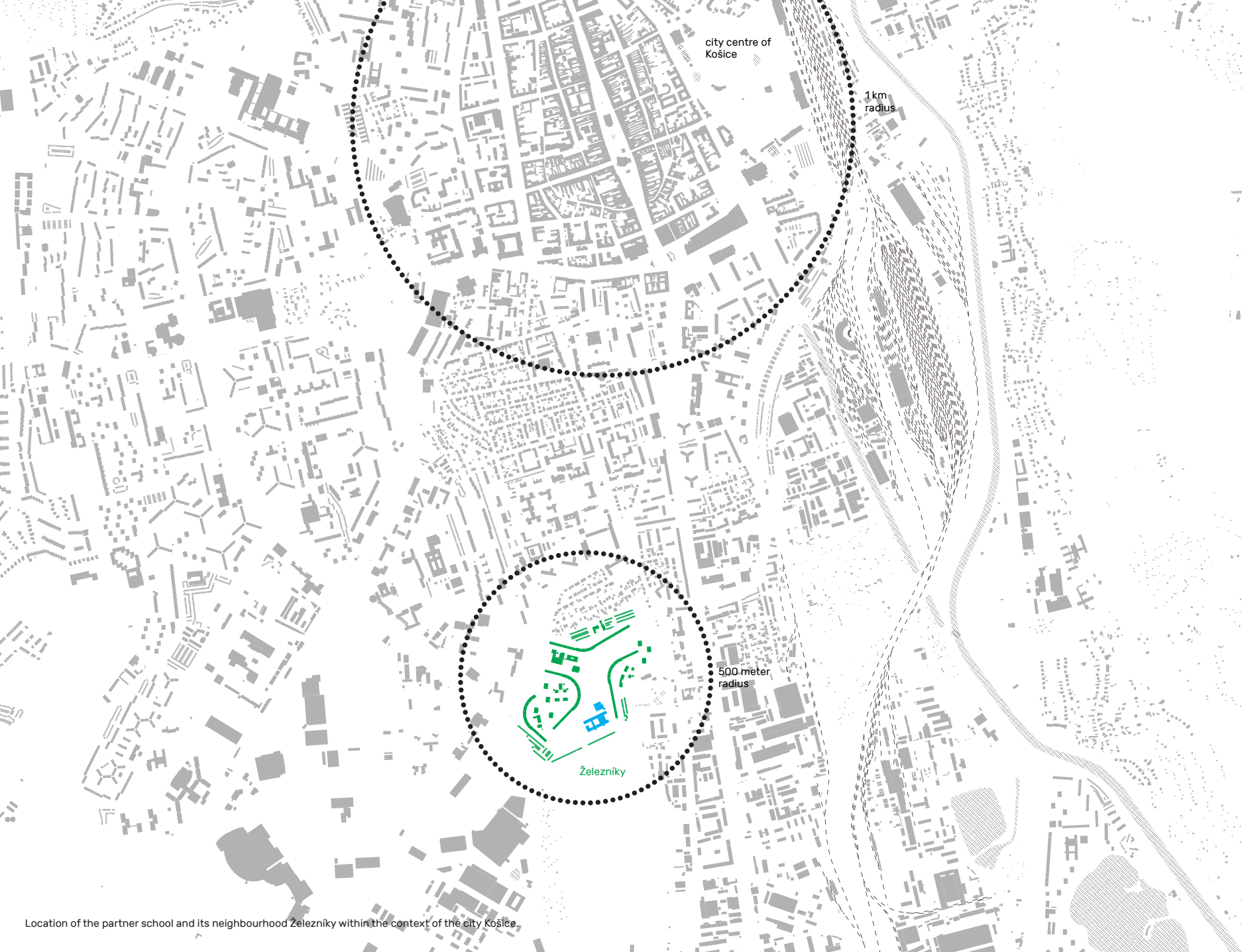
The school has three great assets:

- very motivated and open-minded headmaster and especially the vice-headmaster Jana,
- link with the Eco Schools project, which gives the school access to methodological guidance not just on environmental topics, but also on how to organize, motivate and involve pupils, teachers and parents,
- neighbouring state school, with whom they share the premises, since this school has access to the local children and local parents – neighbours, who are the potential driving force of the project.

Mapping of the school was done through:

- application form submitted by the school to participate in the project,
- structured discussion during the first project meeting,
- observations,
- informal talks during events, meetings and online exchange.





Location of the partner school and its neighbourhood Železníky within the context of the city Košice.



Železníky from bird's view, with the partner school on the central left of the image.
Foto credit: Miroslav Štöfa

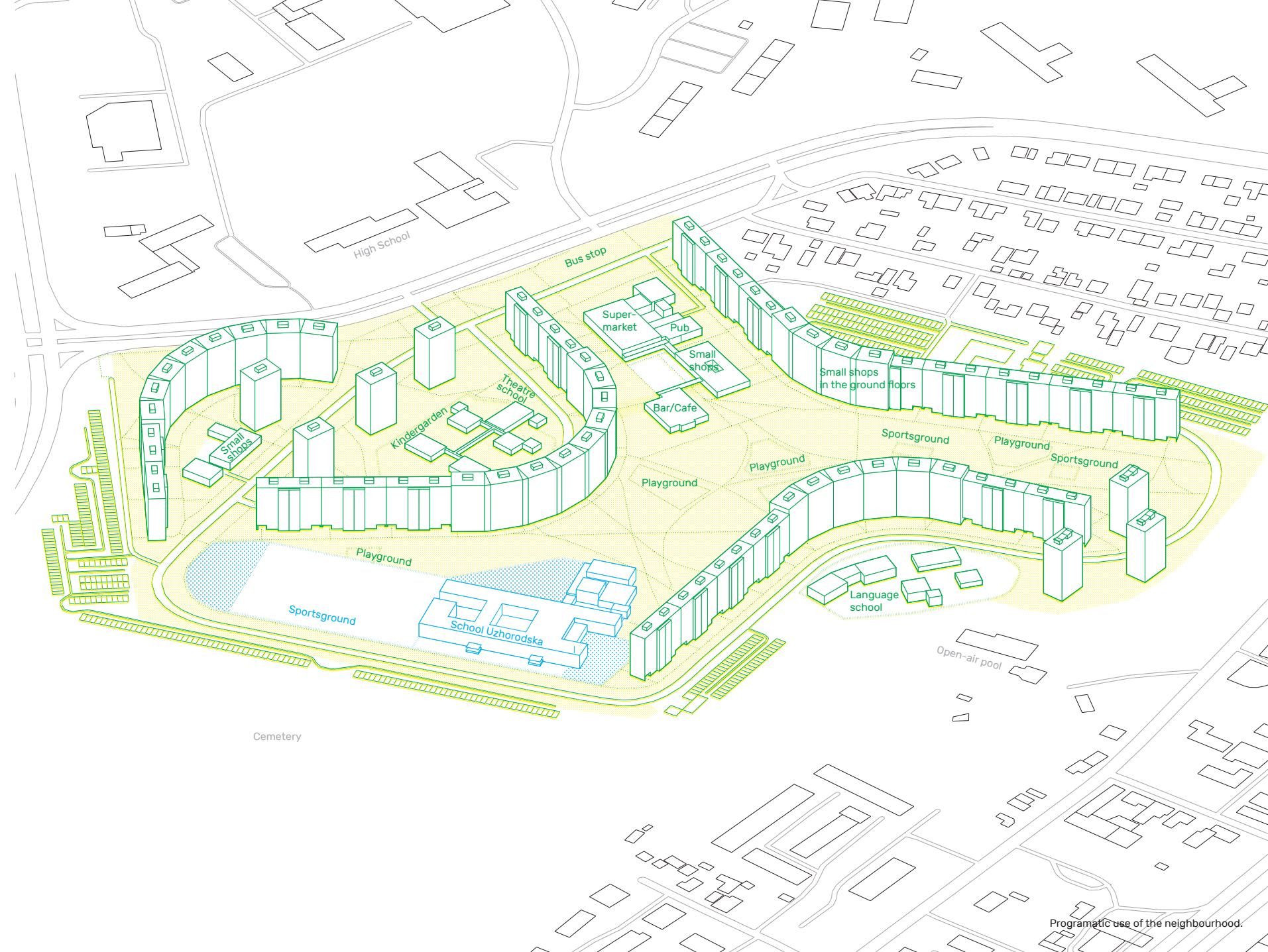
Železníky

is a suburb of Košice, Slovakia, where the partner school and thus also the project is located. The neighbourhood was built in the 70's in the typical fashion of the era. It is composed of standard 8 to 9 storeys panel apartment blocks that can be found in many other towns in various countries of the central and eastern Europe. Everything here has a precisely assigned function, leaving little or no space for interpretation, appropriation or experiment. The blocks, together with one kindergarten, one primary school, one commercial centre and a generous central pedestrian greenery create a well-rounded modernist suburb by the book for approximately 9000 people. The suburb is, however, long time not a suburb anymore, as it gradually gains centrality with the expansion of the town.

The neighbourhood is well equipped and ordered also today. It is well connected with the public transport, the kindergarten, as well as the primary school are functioning, there are also educational institutions with clientele beyond the neighbourhood, like a language school, a theatre school, a sports secondary school as well as the private primary school, who is the partner of the project ŠAK. There is a big supermarket, as well as smaller local stores and businesses located mainly on the ground floors of the apartment blocks. Here we find a hairdresser, a second-hand store, a bakery, a dog-salon, a café, a pub, a muffin-store or a wine-on-tap shop. The whole ensemble creates a sheltered, yet porous space, as the ground floors are regularly punctuated with large underpasses. The central greenery is well groomed, the pavements are in takt, there are bins for small litter as well as many functioning benches and public art from the socialist times. There are many new, as well as well kept old sports- and playgrounds and there is no problem with parking your private car. These are all trades of a well-kept neighbourhood in Košice, although it is surely no luxury.

The people you see passing through the central greenery are of various ages, mostly white and probably Slovak, although I am finding out from a local that there is a major mafia group from Ukraine living in her block. In the mornings and early afternoons, you meet mostly just elderly people, many of them lived here since the 70's. They are slowly strolling through the greenery, sometimes with a dog, suspiciously observing you observing them. In the late afternoon, the busy adults emerge, rushing home, many of them caring plastic shopping bags, looking too busy, but not too busy to notice you. There are also teenagers and kids, biking in circles, racing on roller-skates, hanging around on playgrounds. On the weekends and holidays the public space is not fuller, as many people regularly flee the town to be in nature, at their holiday house or simply elsewhere. Those who cannot afford it, stay and continue in their usual business.

Despite, or perhaps because of the monolithic public space, you see many people adopting the grass patches in front of their houses, which suggests, that there is some culture of taking care of things, willingness to have your own extra space and shape the space also for others, which is a good ground for commoning practices. There are also many young parents and also a lot of youth hanging out or doing sports, which could have potential interest and time to be involved in the project. The high blocks with hundreds of windows provide also a kind of natural surveillance of the common space, which can be a plus. However, there are no active organisations in the neighbourhood, besides the educational institutions, who could be potential partners for the project. The neighbourhood also does not have any local organisation, which would be responsible for the neighbourhood and so communication with the whole neighbourhood at once is difficult, as no infrastructure exists for it.



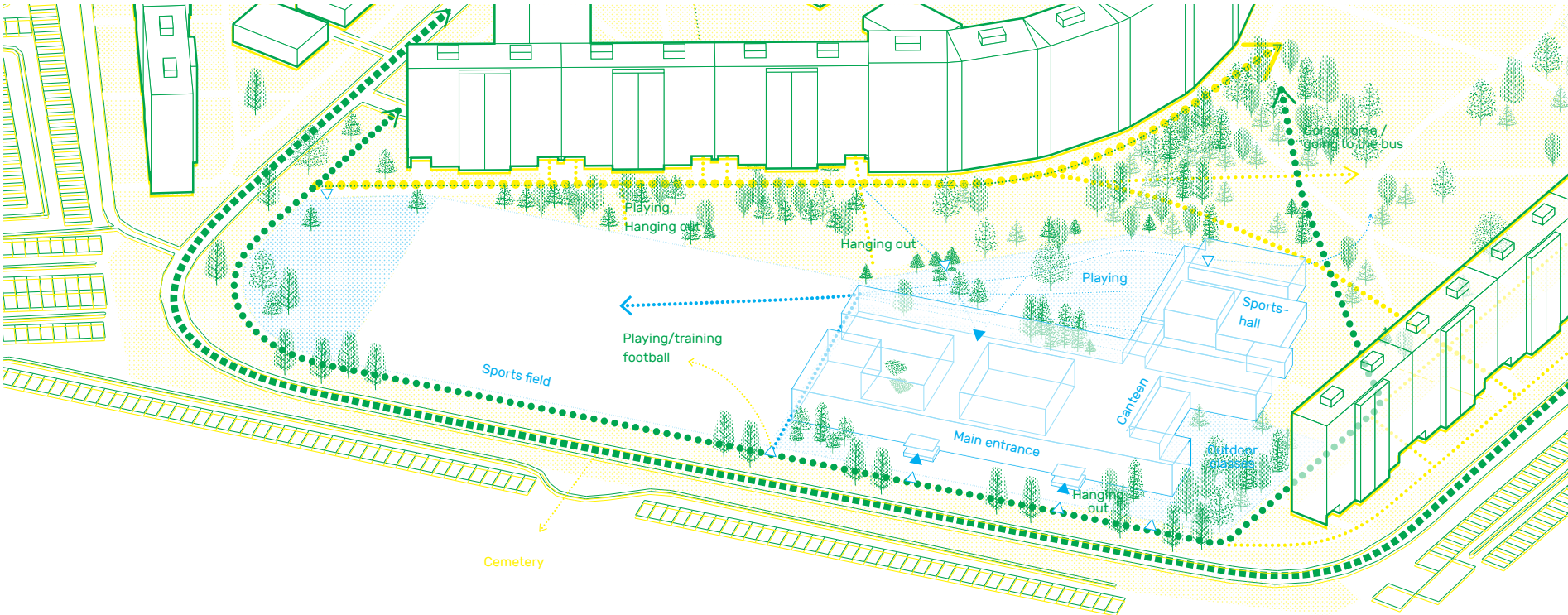
Programatic use of the neighbourhood.

The school

is located on the far end of the neighbourhood. It is approximately 7 minutes by foot via the central greenery from the bus stop, the commercial centre and the access road for cars. The entrance to the school is located along the outer edge of the neighbourhood, away from the central greenery, facing the access road, a large pipe and the side entrance to the main town cemetery. The school was built also in the 70's, like the rest of its surrounding, and besides a brand new artificial turf on the large sports field and some new windows, much of the building is still in its original state and is badly in need of a general renovation.

The school has four large outdoor spaces. The most prominent one is the large football field, which is used on regular frequent basis by partner football club and so the pupils not involved in the clubs, or the locals get only rarely a chance to use it. The trainings and matches, solely of children and youth, attract many parents, who arrive with a car, standing around the field, chatting, supporting their children. The sports activities are fun to watch also for the locals, who also stand around the field, on its opposite side and so they never meet, only their gaze does. At the far end of the football pitch, there is a large space with sparse young trees, which is at the moment used only as storage of rubbish. On the other side of the school, there is a green, overgrown space squeezed between the school and the housing blocks. In the past year, Jana started to work on this space with children. They groomed it, built bird houses, created a floor patch from natural stone, brought logs to sit on and set up a herbal garden. The private primary school used then this space occasionally as an outdoor classroom. And then there is a green yard, that connects the school with the central greenery and if it wasn't for the fence (with a locked gate), the school and the neighbourhood could have been one. The yard has some old trees and a patch of broken concrete. It is used seldom by the smaller kinds in the afternoon club. However, it is a frequented space, as it is the corridor between the changing rooms and the football pitch. It is also used by pupils as a shortcut when leaving the school. They just jump over the locked gates in the fence or slide through the whole in the fence. But no one lingers. There are no benches, only empty plastic bottles, wet cardboard, and dirty clothes. And there is a stench of piss near the locked gate in the fence, as the footballers use the location as their toilet on regular basis. On the neighbourhood side of the fence are benches and a little clearing, where people do linger. Lone older ladies with small fluffy dogs sit on the bench, observing the passer-byes. And a group of young parents with their children meet here on regular basis in the afternoons to chat, while the children play without a playground, occasionally sneaking in and out the school yard through the gap in the fence. The atmosphere is overall peaceful, with whistles and yelling from the football trainings.

The school has also some underused interior spaces, but it is precisely the above described yard that is the biggest spatial asset of the school, since it is a direct link with the neighbourhood in a physical and also social sense, as pupils pass through it regularly to go home. It is also very easily accessible from the school, as well from the neighbourhood, via the gate. The space is also well overlooked by neighbouring blocks, which are the audience and the surveillances.





Central greenery: public space between blocks.



View across school's sports field: the school (on the right) in the context of its neighbourhood.



Mini shops and "private" gardens on the ground floor.



The school back yard, frequented by the football players to go from changing rooms to the field.



People of Železníky.



DIY floor and stools in the front garden of the school, created by partner school.

People

who spend their time in the school and its vicinity are at the centre of the project. These people can be categorized into four groups: teachers, pupils, parents and neighbours. While in the end it is of course about the individuals, it is practical to consider groups of actors to begin with. For each group has its own relationship with the school and this relationship predisposes to a large extend their particular motivations to be part of the project. Different groups of actors have different potential roles with different expertise, as well as different time available to invest and they also speak different languages. The diagram on the right illustrates the level to which the project implicates various actor groups. The project should engage all core actors in order to avoid a sense of exclusivity of the project. The following pages present the methods used to engage the various actor groups and also describe findings of those attempts.

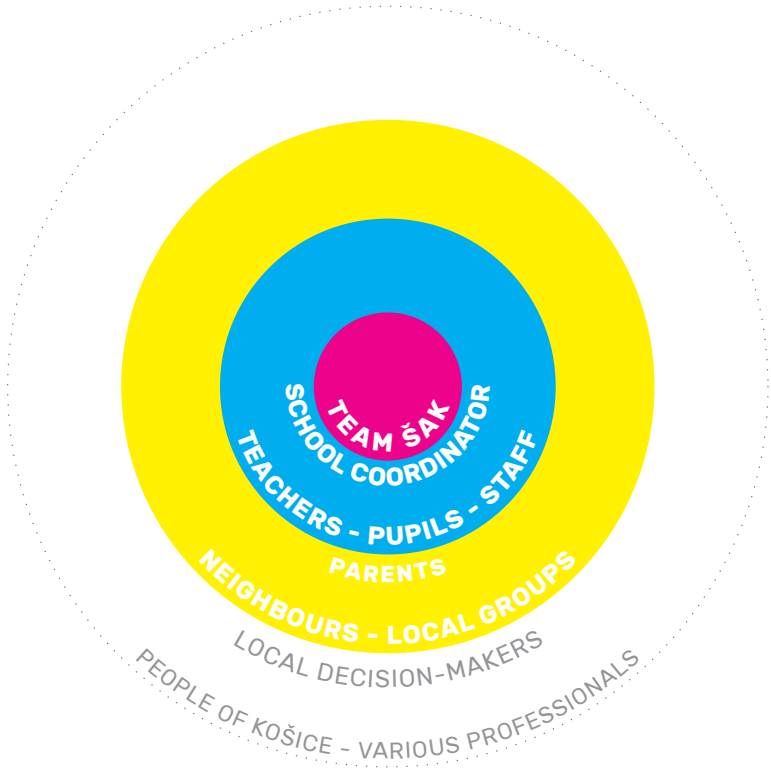


Diagram showing the key actor groups and the degree of their involvement in the project. Actors closer to the centre carry more responsibility over the project.

School staff

Teachers and also other employees of the school are important actors, since the project takes place in their working place. The aim was to find out as much about them as possible, so that the process can be designed to support them in their work by finding synergies between their needs and the objectives of building common space. It was important to involve staff from all three institutions, not just those of the partner school. It was crucial to get on board especially the state primary school, since they are the link to the neighbourhood. By being involved in the project, the teachers could then motivate and involve local children and also motivate parents, who are the neighbours of the school. The state school could also benefit from incorporating work with common space into its curriculum. The teachers were officially informed about the project by being invited to the Public Info-meeting (see p. 64), where only teachers from pre-school showed up. Followingly, a simple questionnaire in a form of a postcard was designed to address teachers more specifically and directly. Each teacher received the postcard together with a formal letter explaining the project and the mapping phase and also invited them for an excursion guided by an expert on school gardens. We would visit a local community garden, which is functioning on the premises of a school. The trip would be used as an occasion to explain the concept of common space and the benefits of it to the teachers and also to lead a more in-depth discussion about the teachers' needs and desires. This, however, never happened, as the planning of the excursion was interrupted by an act of vandalism of teachers' office by some pupils, who were dissatisfied with their final exam results. It can be only guessed, whether some teachers would attend the excursion (which would be in their free time) or whether their motivation dropped to zero only after the event. One way or another, the excursion was postponed to never and the discussions with the school staff happened only on informal level during the interventions.

Vážená pani učiteľ/ka/pán učiteľ,

v rámci projektu ŠAK / škola a komunita asistujeme škole na vytváraní stratégie na zlepšenie prostredia školy skrz zapojenie komunity. Vaše názory a nápady sú pre túto stratégiu kľúčové. Preto Vás prosíme o Vaše odpovede na nasledujúce otázky. Dotazník je anonymný. Po jeho vyplnení ho prosím vhodte do vyhradenej krabice.

Ďakujeme, tím ŠAK

1. Akú atmosféru má prostredie školy? Opíšte aspoň tromi prídavnými menami.

2. Ktoré je vaše obľúbené miesto na škole a prečo? Opíšte čo tam robíte a ako sa tam cítite.

3. Aké extra miesto alebo priestor Vám na škole chýba?

(viac o projekte na skolakomunita.sk alebo facebook.com/skolakomunita)



**Unikátny pilotný projekt
zameraný na budovanie zdieľaných priestorov na pôde školy
v spolupráci s komunitou Železníkov.**



Dear Ms./Mr. teacher,

as part of the project ŠAK / school and community, we are assisting the school in creating a strategy for improving the school environment by engaging the community. Your opinions are for this strategy crucial. Therefore we kindly ask you to answer shortly the following questions. The questionnaire is anonymous. Please throw the filled questioner into the box.

Thank you, team ŠAK

1. What is the atmosphere of the school? Use at least 3 adjectives.

2. What is your favourite place in the school and why? What do you do there?

3. What extra space are you missing in the school?

(you can find out more about the project at skolakomunita.sk or facebook.com/skolakomunita)

Neighbours

When it came to neighbours, the project aimed to focus in the first place on parents of the younger pupils (6-12 years old) living in the neighbourhood. Many of these parents are often already active in the school by providing materials, helping with painting classrooms or they co-organise school trips. The project aimed to build precisely on this motivation and amplify it, by allowing the parents to co-create something that would be beneficial to them, not just to their children. A creation of common space would be such place, for they could use it also once the children grow up and even leave the school.

As mentioned above, the project aimed to approach the parents through their existing structures – parents’ meetings – but the school failed to accommodate the access to these meetings. If there was such organisation, it didn’t seem to have much power, or to be active, as they did not show much presence during the course of the school. The project also couldn’t locate any active groups outside of the school environment. Therefore, the project had to approach the neighbours as individuals or rather as a crowd by inviting them to various events.

The first occasion was the Info event, that explained the aims, objectives and visions of the project to the public (see p. 64). At the event, questionnaires were distributed and used as a conversation opener to lead informal discussions about the neighbourhood, about what kind of activities are they missing in their neighbourhood and also how could they be involved in the collective building of common space, that is, what skills and resources they have, that they could share/contribute with. The questionnaires (shown on this page) were after the event also available in an online version and distributed through project’s Facebook page. However, probalby due to a small public reach of the page, there were no online participants. Further dialogues with the neighbours were led during the Spring market of things and ideas (see p. 68) and also all other spatial interventions were an opportunity for an informal dialogue.

Since there was not a formed group to work with, but rather many individuals, it was especially important to keep all neighbours involved, at least by informing them about the possibility of how they could be involved. This strategy of “keeping the doors open” was also important for showing, that is it is not a closed school project, but really open to everyone. For that purpose, two tools were employed: three physical banners that informed the public about the project and about the newest event coming up, including also flyers with the basic info about the project and a Facebook link, which was the second tool: project’s digital space, where all information about events and similar projects were posted. The idea was to transform this online space later into an online community, where people could share things, ideas and time. This was, however, beyond the scope of this project.

Škola Užhorodská otvára svoje priestory všetkým, ktorí chcú zveľaďovať svoje okolie a zlepšovať svoje susedské vzťahy.

O aké aktivity máš záujem? Čo ti na Železníkoch chýba?

<input type="checkbox"/> tvorivé dielňa	<input type="checkbox"/> upečením koláč
<input type="checkbox"/> kutilská dielňa	<input type="checkbox"/> konverzujem anglicky
<input type="checkbox"/> cyklodielňa	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> požičiam náradie
<input type="checkbox"/> psíčkarske stretko	<input type="checkbox"/> zaobstarám drevo
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yoga	<input type="checkbox"/> zahrám hudbu
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> futbal	<input type="checkbox"/> zaspievam
<input type="checkbox"/> koncerty	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> zasadím kvety
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> záhradkárčenie	<input type="checkbox"/> opravím bicykel
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> kompostovanie	<input type="checkbox"/> ozdobím miesto
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> pestovanie bylín	<input type="checkbox"/> požičiam repráky
<input type="checkbox"/> pečenie chleba	<input type="checkbox"/> mám známosti
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> vytvorím web stránku
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> zložiť od papiera na priateľský projekt

Iné nápady a komentáre?

Kontakt na vás (napr. email)

www.skolakomunita.sk FB: ŠAK / škola a komunita

Škola Užhorodská otvára svoje priestory všetkým, ktorí chcú zveľaďovať svoje okolie a zlepšovať svoje susedské vzťahy.

O aké aktivity máš záujem? Čo ti na Železníkoch chýba?

<input type="checkbox"/> konverzácie v angličtine	<input type="checkbox"/> venujem svoj čas
<input type="checkbox"/> diskusný politický klub	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> prídem sa porozprávať
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> čitateľský klub	<input type="checkbox"/> požičiam vrtačku
<input type="checkbox"/> tvorivé dielne	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> upečiem koláč
<input type="checkbox"/> kutilská dielňa	<input type="checkbox"/> konverzujem anglicky
<input type="checkbox"/> cyklodielňa	<input type="checkbox"/> požičiam náradie
<input type="checkbox"/> psíčkarske stretko	<input type="checkbox"/> zaobstarám drevo
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yoga	<input type="checkbox"/> zahrám hudbu
<input type="checkbox"/> futbal	<input type="checkbox"/> zaspievam
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> koncerty	<input type="checkbox"/> zasadím kvety
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> záhradkárčenie	<input type="checkbox"/> opravím bicykel
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> kompostovanie	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ozdobím miesto
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> pestovanie bylín	<input type="checkbox"/> požičiam repráky
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> pečenie chleba	<input type="checkbox"/> mám známosti
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> KINO	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 11.12.12	<input type="checkbox"/>

Iné nápady a komentáre?

Kontakt na vás (napr. email)

www.skolakomunita.sk FB: ŠAK / škola a komunita

School Užhorodská opens its space for everyone, who wants to improve their surrounding and neighbour-relationships.

What kind of activities interest you? What do you miss in Železníky?

<input type="checkbox"/> conversations in english	<input type="checkbox"/> i give my time
<input type="checkbox"/> political discussion club	<input type="checkbox"/> i come to have a chat
<input type="checkbox"/> reading club	<input type="checkbox"/> i lend my drill
<input type="checkbox"/> creative workshops	<input type="checkbox"/> i bake a cake
<input type="checkbox"/> building workshop	<input type="checkbox"/> i speak english
<input type="checkbox"/> cyclo-workroom	<input type="checkbox"/> i lend my tools
<input type="checkbox"/> dog-owners meeet-up	<input type="checkbox"/> i get building timber
<input type="checkbox"/> yoga	<input type="checkbox"/> i play music
<input type="checkbox"/> football	<input type="checkbox"/> i sing
<input type="checkbox"/> concerts	<input type="checkbox"/> i plant flowers
<input type="checkbox"/> gardening	<input type="checkbox"/> i repair a bike
<input type="checkbox"/> composting	<input type="checkbox"/> i decorate the place
<input type="checkbox"/> planting herbs	<input type="checkbox"/> i lend speakers
<input type="checkbox"/> baking bread	<input type="checkbox"/> i know people
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

How could you help?

Other ideas and comments?

Contact (e.g. email)

www.skolakomunita.sk FB: ŠAK / škola a komunita

Škola Užhorodská otvára svoje priestory všetkým, ktorí chcú zveľaďovať svoje okolie a zlepšovať svoje susedské vzťahy.

O aké aktivity máš záujem? Čo ti na Železníkoch chýba?

<input type="checkbox"/> konverzácie v angličtine	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> venujem svoj čas
<input type="checkbox"/> diskusný politický klub	<input type="checkbox"/> prídem sa porozprávať
<input type="checkbox"/> čitateľský klub	<input type="checkbox"/> požičiam vrtačku
<input type="checkbox"/> tvorivé dielne	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> upečením koláč
<input type="checkbox"/> kutilská dielňa	<input type="checkbox"/> konverzujem anglicky
<input type="checkbox"/> cyklodielňa	<input type="checkbox"/> požičiam náradie
<input type="checkbox"/> psíčkarske stretko	<input type="checkbox"/> zaobstarám drevo
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yoga	<input type="checkbox"/> zahrám hudbu
<input type="checkbox"/> futbal	<input type="checkbox"/> zaspievam
<input type="checkbox"/> koncerty	<input type="checkbox"/> zasadím kvety
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> záhradkárčenie	<input type="checkbox"/> opravím bicykel
<input type="checkbox"/> kompostovanie	<input type="checkbox"/> ozdobím miesto
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> pestovanie bylín	<input type="checkbox"/> požičiam repráky
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> pečenie chleba	<input type="checkbox"/> mám známosti
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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31 May · 🌍

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Community

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príď na ďalšiu spoločnú akciu

ŠAK UŽHORODSKÁ
ŠAK, škola a komunita

Banner hung on the fence of the school informing about the project and upcoming events.

Pupils

The children and the youth of all three institutions were another important group of the project, since they spend much of their day in the school. They know the school and they have also motivation to co-create it since they do it in effect for themselves. It was desirable to involve especially pupils living in the neighbourhood, since for them the project had a "double use": as a space during school and also outside of it in their free time. In this way, they have potentially more motivation to be part of the project, since the results of their work will be (in an ideal case) accessible to them also on long term – even after they have left the school. Living in the neighbourhood, these pupils can also provide important insights about the wider context of the school, be it its history, current issues or important actors. The local pupils would in an ideal case become ambassadors of the project in the neighbourhood, engaging also their parents, neighbours and friends.



Results of the first workshop: map of the school with ideas for improvement.



The children wanted mostly a place for sports and when asked second time then a place to play. Here, for example, they drew a game-room, including probably all kinds of game they know, mixing the digital and physical.



Fitness, or gym was very popular among the pupils, since they are all athletes and the school has no gym.



Marking, what programs could improve the school.

To address and reach pupils is rather easy, since they are organised in classes. The structure of the school permits to work with pupils in standard blocks of 45 minutes, which allows for a more concentrated workshop format to take place. To justify the workshops to take place during classes, it should be not just a play, but also education. And indeed, to investigate, discuss and design space falls under the category of built environment education, which is increasingly appearing in schools. The topics of built environment do not have to be discusses only during art classes, which are perceived as the more open format. The pupils can for instance learn and practice doing interviews during language classes, through which they can then map out the needs and wishes of their parents and neighbours. Alternatively, the workshops can produce artworks representing the space, which can then be a great conversation opener for further discussions with parents and teachers. Involving pupils actively in the mapping is also a way of empowering them. The knowledge is created with them and thus also stays with them.

Unfortunately, only little of the above objectives could be tested and implemented in this project. The school could provide for the workshops only one class of pupils, from the private school, and so only very few of the kids were actually from the neighbourhood. Furthermore, given the school's focus on sports, the schedule of the pupils is packed with trainings and they do not even have an art class. Therefore, the workshops had to take place during the afternoon club, which didn't allow for good concentration.

Given the available resources, the workshop with the one class was divided into three parts, each 90 minutes long during two weeks. The idea was to develop a discussion about the common space, starting with investigating the school in the context of the neighbourhood, consequently formulating ideas and wishes and finally translating them into a concrete intervention that could be realised during a public event.

This plan, however, turned out to be too ambitious already in the first session. The individual tasks focused on describing the neighbourhood were either not communicated well, or had little significance to pupils of which the majority didn't live there, since pupils could not really follow. To engage them, a spontaneous change of plan was made, focusing more on the school itself. The session finished with a map of ideas for improving the school and sketches of these ideas (see previous page).

The second session was more playful, since it took place during the afternoon club. The task was to create collages on top of photos of various places in the school, imagining how could these be improved (see one example on the previous page).

The two first sessions didn't really manage to create an engaged debate about the space, but they did provide an insight about the general needs of children, which was strongly shaped by their focus on sports. It became also clear that simpler, more playful and interactive formats are more suitable and that work in smaller groups is necessary to really create a discussion with the pupils.

The third workshop (images on the right) created a simple interactive format for investigating two undefined outdoor spaces of the school. To manage the discussion better, I invited my colleagues from the collective SPOLKA to help with the workshop. The class was divided into two groups, each investigating one space. The workshop took place mainly outside. To begin the discussion, the pupils were to “describe” the space – its materiality, use and atmosphere – with the help of word cards and surrounding materials. Then, with a help of cards, we discussed what kind of space it could be and what interventions would be needed. To conclude the workshop, the two groups presented their designs to each other and discussed its qualities. This workshop produced interesting results, although the pupils lost motivation mid-way, as it was very cold outside. The “designs” were presented at the Spring market of things and ideas (p. 68) and used as a conversation opener to discuss the space with the visitors.





Local assets, needs and desires

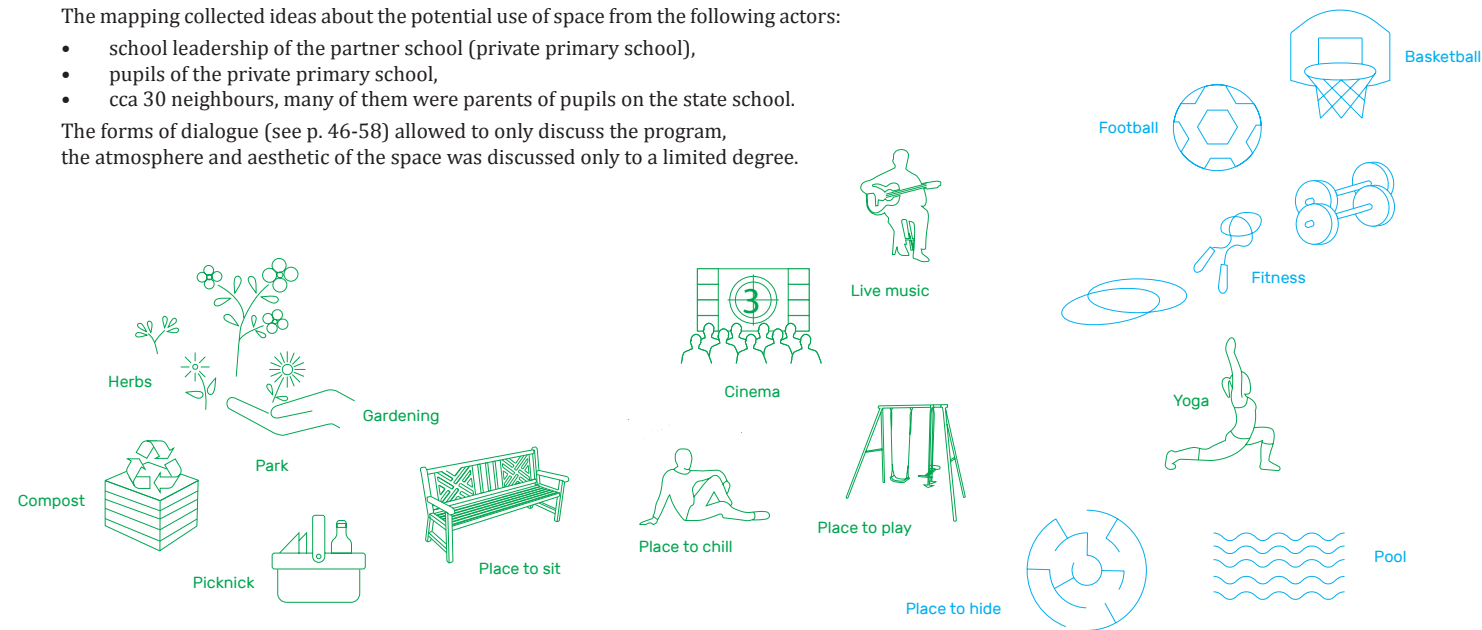
are the elements from which the common space can be created (for the design, see p. 72). The results of the mapping were analysed through an adapted version of the ABCD (Asset-based community development) technique, using principles and philosophy of the appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, 2005). These techniques focus on the existing assets and potentials in communities and build on those, rather than looking at weaknesses and threats (typical SWOT analysis). This double page outlines the results of the mapping with a view of building common space.

Needs and desires

The mapping collected ideas about the potential use of space from the following actors:

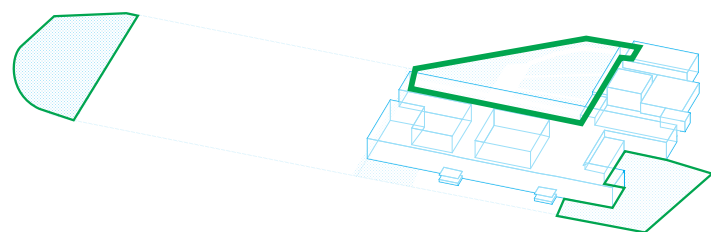
- school leadership of the partner school (private primary school),
- pupils of the private primary school,
- cca 30 neighbours, many of them were parents of pupils on the state school.

The forms of dialogue (see p. 46-58) allowed to only discuss the program, the atmosphere and aesthetic of the space was discussed only to a limited degree.



Spatial assets

The school has 3 great underused outdoor spaces that could be shared with the neighbourhood. The middle yard is most suitable to begin with, because it has a direct access from the school, as well as from the neighbourhood. Furthermore, the yard is already a frequented place (see p. 40)



Actors

The project aims to engage the school (pupils and teachers) and the community (parents, neighbours).

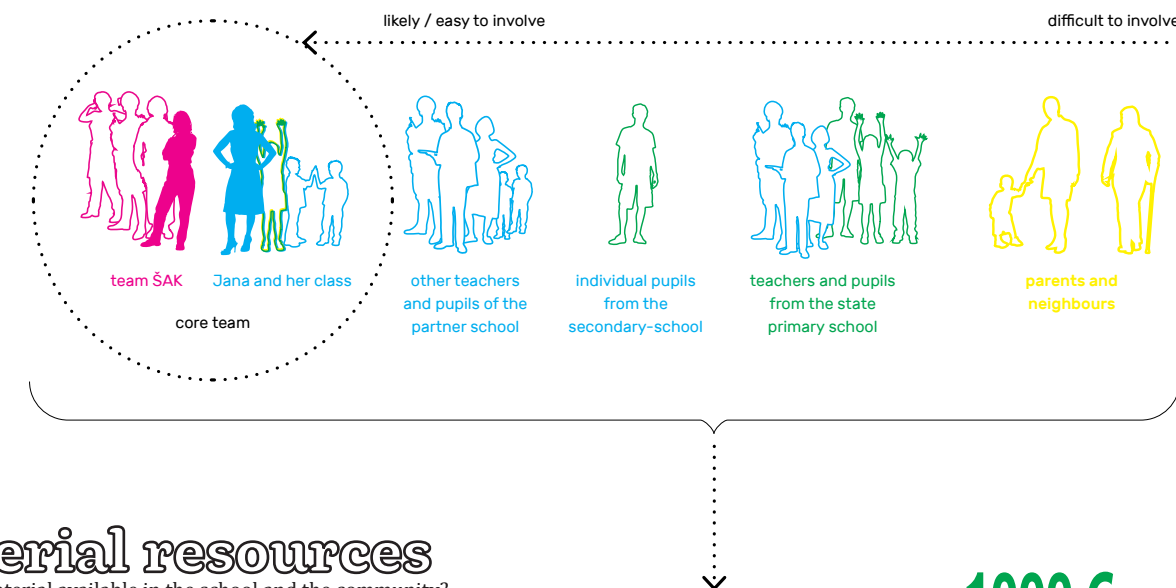
But who will actually take the responsibility in this first phase?

The mapping phase didn't reveal any active people ready to bear the responsibility, besides Jana and her class.

Nevertheless, the project aims to gradually involve the other key local actors too.

The diagram below outlines who are the potential key actors in the first phase of building common space.

The aim is to engage more people in the core team and thus share the burden of responsibility.



Material resources

What is the material available in the school and the community?

Resources are in this case linked to people. Therefore, the more

people join, the more resources the project has.

This is especially true for the time resource.

The project could also benefit from the methodology provided

by the program Eco-Schools, where the school takes part

anyway. It could help them especially with motivating other

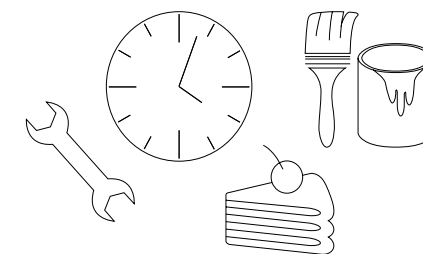
teachers and building a sustainable change.

To supplement the lack of resources in the beginning, the

project provides the school with a grant of 1000 Euro to realise

the intervention (this was part of the project deal from the

beginning).

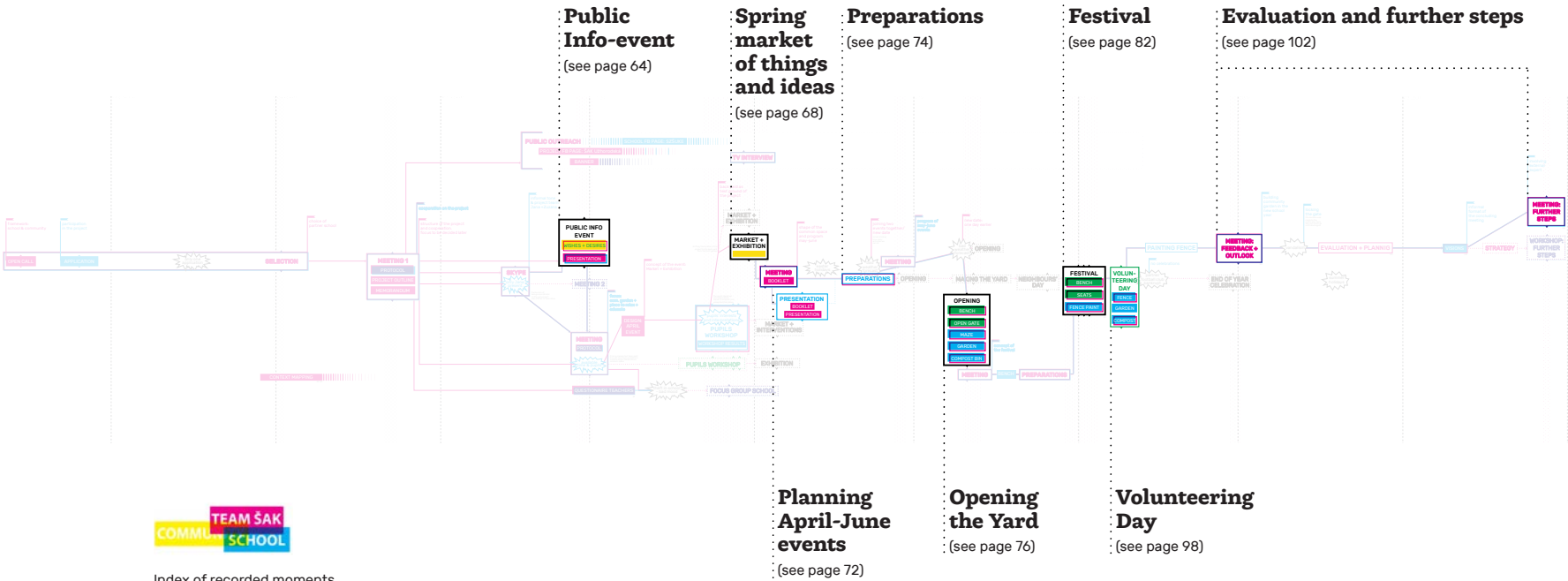


**Changing
the context**

The moments are the key happenings of the process. They are mostly, but not only, events centred around spatial interventions, that engaged the school and the public in the collective building of common space. Although these happenings can be read and understood by themselves, mainly as occasions of spending time together on the school yard, they are really to be understood in relationship to each other and to the overall process. The following pages are a catalogue of these moments. To really understand them, the relations between them and thus the project itself, it is important to appreciate the wider context of these happenings and to read them in their context (see the diagram below).

The organizer of all events was the private primary school Užhorodská in collaboration with team ŠAK and this was communicated via the media channels propagating the events. As the place of all events was communicated the school Užhorodská, a new neutral entity, blurring the boundaries between the three institutions on the school premises.

The moments are presented through text, photography and in some cases also through narrative drawings, that record the character and details of the moment. The drawing on the right demonstrates the structure and codes of the narrative drawings.

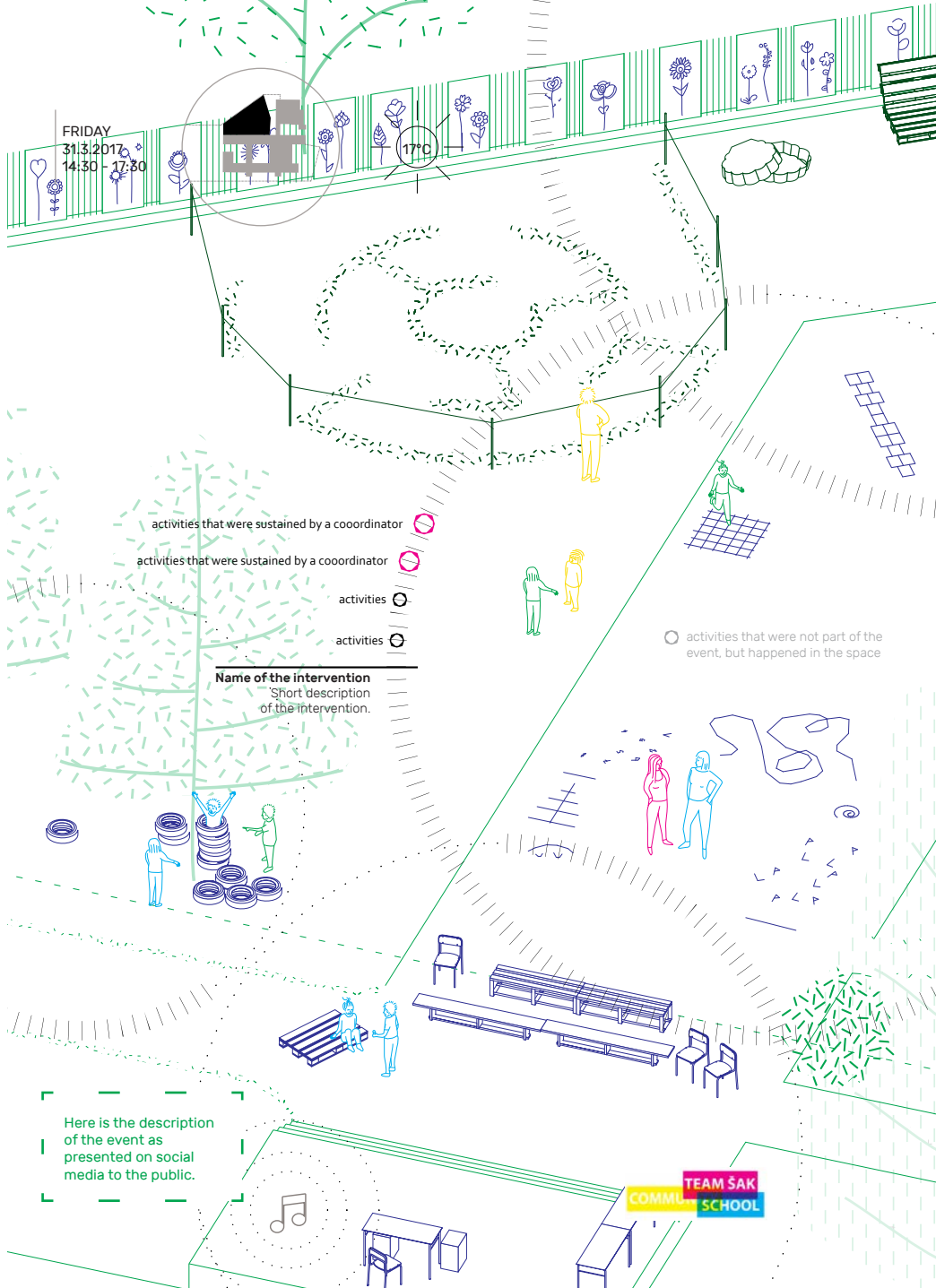


Index of recorded moments.
For the complete process see p. 16.

Structure of narrative drawings:

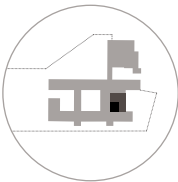
- The colours signify the affiliation of elements of the drawing. The colour code is the same as in the whole publication (see p. 11 for more information).
- Interventions that took place during the event are drawn in purple, older interventions are presented in dark green.
- The circles illustratively highlight and comment the individual interventions/elements of the happening. Accompanied by a short summary of the intervention, they also record the activities produced by the intervention. The circles also indicate the duration of the element in relation to the overall duration of the happening, as not all illustrated interventions took place necessarily at the same time.
- A green box presents the description of the event on Facebook.
- Activities, in grey, disconnected from the circles, note activities happening during the event, but were not induced by it.

Each drawing is further accompanied by a standard block, summarizing the time, weather and place of the intervention.



Public Info-event

THURSDAY
28.2.2017
16:30 - 18:00



The event was the first gesture, a sign towards community, that the school is welcoming them and that they are invited to be part of collectively building a common space. The aim was to inform the school and the public about the project ŠAK, about the process and about its main actors. The aim was also to spend together nice time in the school and in this way start changing the perception of the school. It was also a way to do the first mapping of people’s needs and desires, to find out about them and also to get first contacts to people that might be potentially interested to take a more active role in the process.

The event took place in the canteen of the school, which is very easily accessible via the main entrance of the school. There were about 20 guests, children and adults, from various groups:

- teachers from the private primary school,
- parents from the private primary school,
- parents from the state primary school,
- children – pupils from the state and private primary school,
- two ladies – neighbours of the school.

The guests were invited via flyers, but most impact had personal invitations by Jana.

To establish friendly atmosphere, the school provided tea, coffee and some sweets. At the beginning, Jana greeted the guests and shortly introduced the project. Then I briefly presented the project, as its coordinator. With the help of images, I introduced the aims of the project ŠAK, followed by a brief description of the concept of common space with examples of some concrete forms it can take. I described the model of ŠAK, which is based on sharing the resources between the school and the community and finally showed some examples of events and interventions from the school Belehradská, where the project took part the year before. Afterwards the info-banner and its location was introduced as well as the Facebook page as information channels. At the end of the presentation the guests were asked to fill in the questionnaires about their wishes and their resources they are willing to share. The presentation naturally dissolved into an informal talk about the wishes and resources as the guests were filling in the forms. The guests talked among themselves, the hosts mingled and engaged in conversations with some of them. The atmosphere was friendly and comfortable, with children roaming around and conversations taking place naturally. As the forms were filled, guests lingered for a bit and then gradually left.

Although 20 people might seem little, it was great success to have people from all key actor-groups present at the event. We managed to get first ideas about the community and their needs and to establish important first contacts and relationships. It was felt that the school took ownership of the project and that the project comes from them and that they are the motor of the it. The dramaturgy of the event was planned by me, including the texts of all presentations, the invitation material, as well as details like to get tea and some snacks. The school took it seriously and did all that we planned and also went beyond, buying the snacks and providing cutlery, personally inviting the people. The ideas from the questionnaires were incorporated into the overall program for April-June (see p. 58).

We are inviting you for the introduction of the project for the improvement of our school and its surrounding.

We believe, that the school can be the centre of the neighbourhood – a common place for the pupils, parents and neighbours. That is why we are opening the spaces of the school for everyone, who wants to improve their neighbourhood and their neighbourhood relationships.

Come for a cake and coffee, you will get to know great neighbours and you will find out more about ways in which we can together improve our neighbourhood.

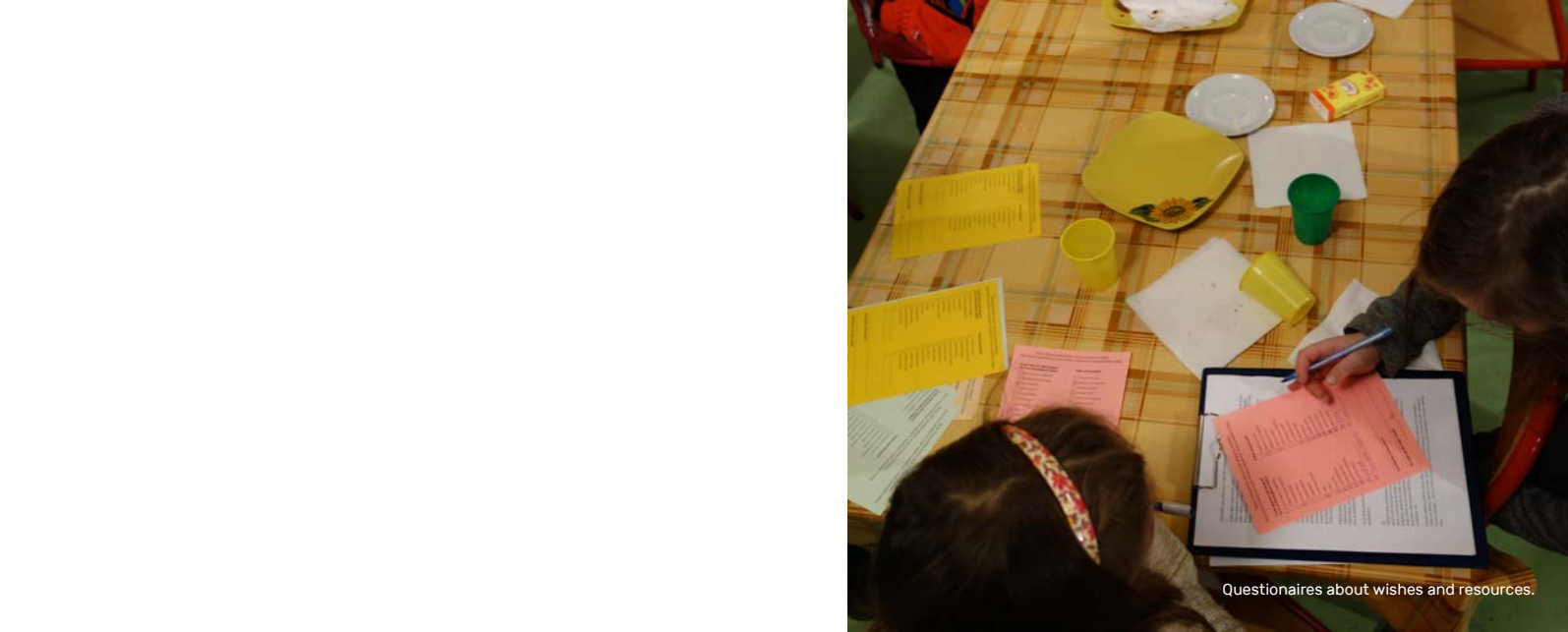
We are looking forward to meeting you!



Introducing the project to the public in the school’s canteen.



The public event took place in the school's canteen.



Questionnaires about wishes and resources.



Also two neighbours came, who have created a little garden in front of their block, just by the school.

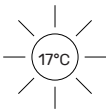
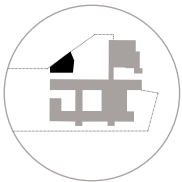


The parents discussing with the headmaster.



Spring market of things and ideas

FRIDAY
31.3.2017
14:30 - 17:30



This happening was the first outdoor public event of the project. The event had three main objectives, derived from the general aims of the project:

- First of all, it was about creating friendly inviting atmosphere on the school yard, where everyone would feel comfortable and welcomed. This was to show, that the school yard can be a nice place to just hang out in the free time and not only during the school.
- The second objective was to test the space of the back school yard as the place, where the common space could be created.
- The third objective was to engage neighbours in a conversation about the neighbourhood, their needs, desires and about the school yard.

The place of the event was decided in the last moment. Jana was proposing the area around the main entrance, I, based on the mapping, saw great potential in the back yard of the school and wanted to test it. On the day of the event, we opened the locked gate: upon my and consequentially Jana's re-request, the key was found, the gate unlocked and replaced by a new functioning lock provided by me.

We played jazzy music, set up the free market, snacks, drinks and also the models created during a workshop with pupils (see p. 52 for details on the workshop). Pupils from Jana's class and team ŠAK (5 helpers) created the critical mass. Then the headmaster and 3 other teachers joined. Some brought clothes and stuff to the free market, some were interested in the project, some just chatted. The place was busy, trespassed by footballers going to and from their training on the school's field, their parents and pupils going home. Jana's pupils were inviting people on the street to join the event. Some come by, some were dragged in by their own curious children, attracted by the stuff of the market. My and two others from team ŠAK chatted to approximately 10 people from the neighbourhood about the project and their ideas. They provided us with valuable in-sights about the neighbourhood and many gave us their contacts, interested to know about the next events.

Everyone was very positive and in good mood. Children running around, trying out clothes, running in and out the yard, eating snacks and cakes, adults chatting. The overall atmosphere was friendly and buzzing. Or as Jana put it: "There was this incredible new energy when we opened the gate!"

The yard proved to be a great space for building common space for the school and the community, for it really connects the two. Thus, all other interventions concentrated on this space only. Gathered information from the neighbours and the teachers was incorporated into the overall collage of ideas, which was the base for the design of further interventions (see p. 58). The contacts we gained were unfortunately not cultivated for the lack of time and I have not personally encountered these people at any of our future events.

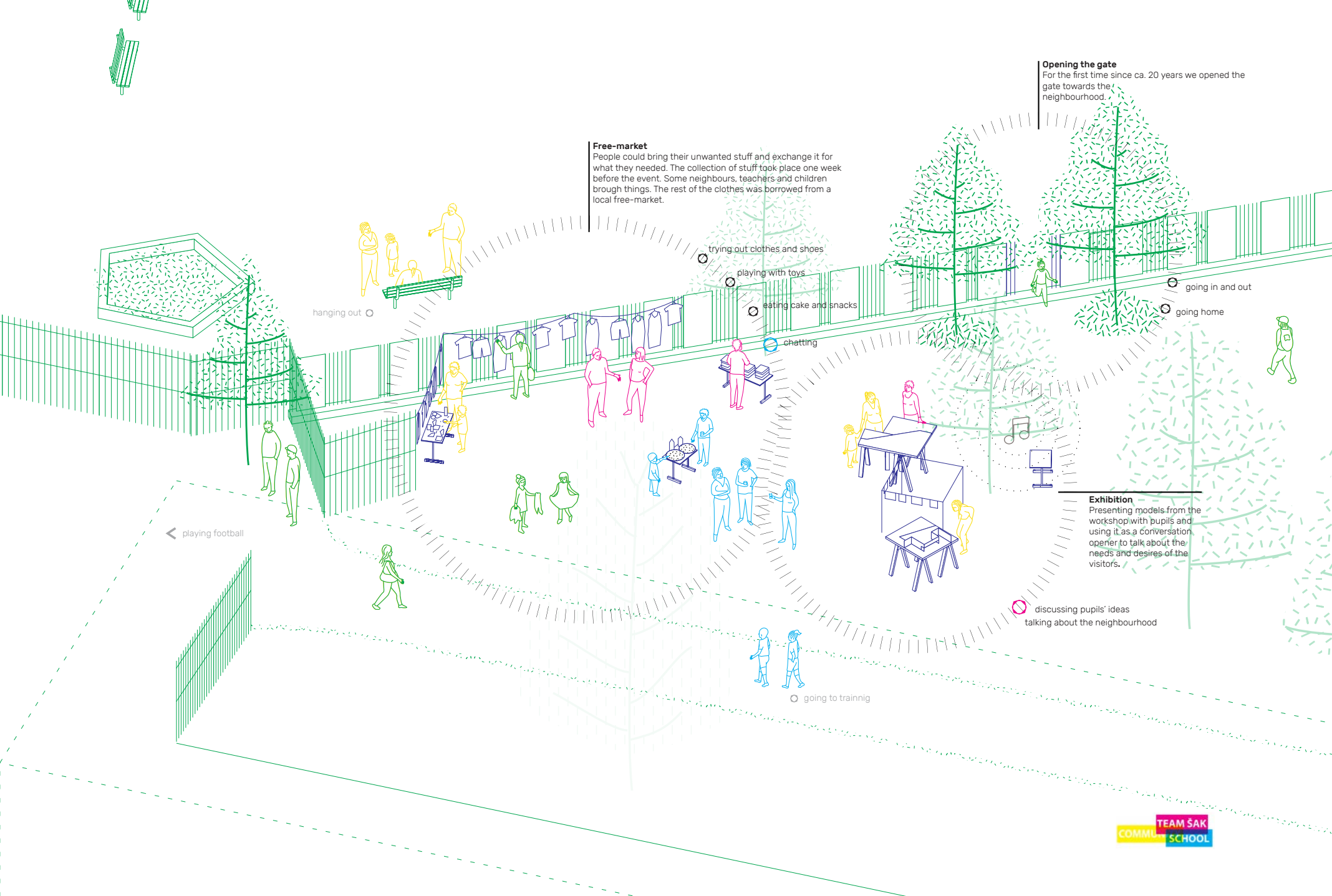
Do you have at home things you do not need?
Clothes, books, toys or other things?
Bring them to the school Užhorodská in the week from 27.3. and you
can exchange them during the market for useful things!

Come to enjoy a nice Friday afternoon in the school yard.
You will get to know other parents and neighbours and you can enjoy
home-made snacks!
+++++

Part of the event is an interactive presentation of the designs of
the pupils of the school for the improvement of the school, which they
created during the workshop "TOGETHER we design the SCHOOL".

We want to know about your opinion: what does our school and
community need? Come to tell us about it.

We and the children are looking forward to meeting you!



Opening the gate
For the first time since ca. 20 years we opened the gate towards the neighbourhood.

Free-market
People could bring their unwanted stuff and exchange it for what they needed. The collection of stuff took place one week before the event. Some neighbours, teachers and children brought things. The rest of the clothes was borrowed from a local free-market.

trying out clothes and shoes

playing with toys

eating cake and snacks

chatting

going in and out

going home

Exhibition
Presenting models from the workshop with pupils and using it as a conversation opener to talk about the needs and desires of the visitors.

discussing pupils' ideas
talking about the neighbourhood

playing football

going to trainning



The model with ideas of the pupils was a conversation opener to talk about the neighbours' needs and wishes.



Food is a must!
It is the most universal community-making tool.



Clothes and objects were a great attraction, especially for children.



Presenting the collages of pupils from workshop,
with their ideas for the improvement of the school yards (green boards).
Directly exhibiting the ideas of the visitors for the improvement of the school yards (middle frame).

Planning April - June events

After the mapping phase was concluded, and with spring fast approaching, it was time to design the events and interventions through which the common space would be created. As explained above (Methodology, p. 27), the kind of participative architecture that underpins this project would have required the active participation of the key actors in this crucial phase of the project. However, this did not happen, as there was no actual group formed by now, with which a participative workshop of designing the space could happen. Closest to this was the workshop with pupils (p. 52), but also there we didn't manage to design concrete interventions.

However, it was important to start doing things, as it was felt and Jana expressed it too, that people wanted to see something happening. Instead of direct participation of the people, they participated indirectly, through the material gathered during mapping. Based on this material (see Local assets, needs and desires, p. 58) I designed the shape of the common space and also proposed a series of events through which this space would be gradually collectively built, ideally with the help of the pupils, teachers, parents and neighbours. Events were as important as the physical building. It was important that the people would recognize the continuity between our first dialogue and the building of the space, so that they would recognize themselves in the shape of the common space and would be thus more motivated to be part of it. Because I designed the spatial interventions and not the people, I didn't want them to be permanent. Rather I conceived them as tests and occasions for dialogue about the space. They tested various spatial, aesthetic and programmatic uses of the yard and also different formats of events, as well different times. Even the material interventions were to be temporal, so that they can be later replaced by the design preferred by the people. These interventions were meant to be just mock-ups, but of course, had to be real enough. I presented the design to Jana and she agreed fully without objections. The design and the events were then communicated to the teachers by Jana at an internal special meeting (see a part of the content on the right). The public and the parents were informed about individual events, but not the overall design, through leaflets, posters, banners and Facebook.

It was important to design one vision of the yard, rather than separate occasions, so that people can see where it's going. It was to be more transparent in this way. It was important to set the dates not just to make things easier for the organisation, but especially so that the teachers and the neighbours as well know when to expect what things to happen and can plan around to join, if they wish. Nevertheless, the teachers said that even this was too late and they could not plan to join. Furthermore, many of the events were cancelled or moved to other dates, because of bad weather or lack of interest.

Part of the presentation of the design of common space, as presented to the teachers. (here translated from Slovak)

ACTIVITIES FOR BUILDING COMMON SPACE (the exact content is open to your ideas)

- 28.4.

OPENING THE YARD
official opening of the school yard to the neighbourhood + **first interventions**
- 12.5.

MAKING THE YARD
second interventions
- 26.5.

NEIGHBOURS' DAY
neighbourhood picknick + **third interventions**
- 2.6.

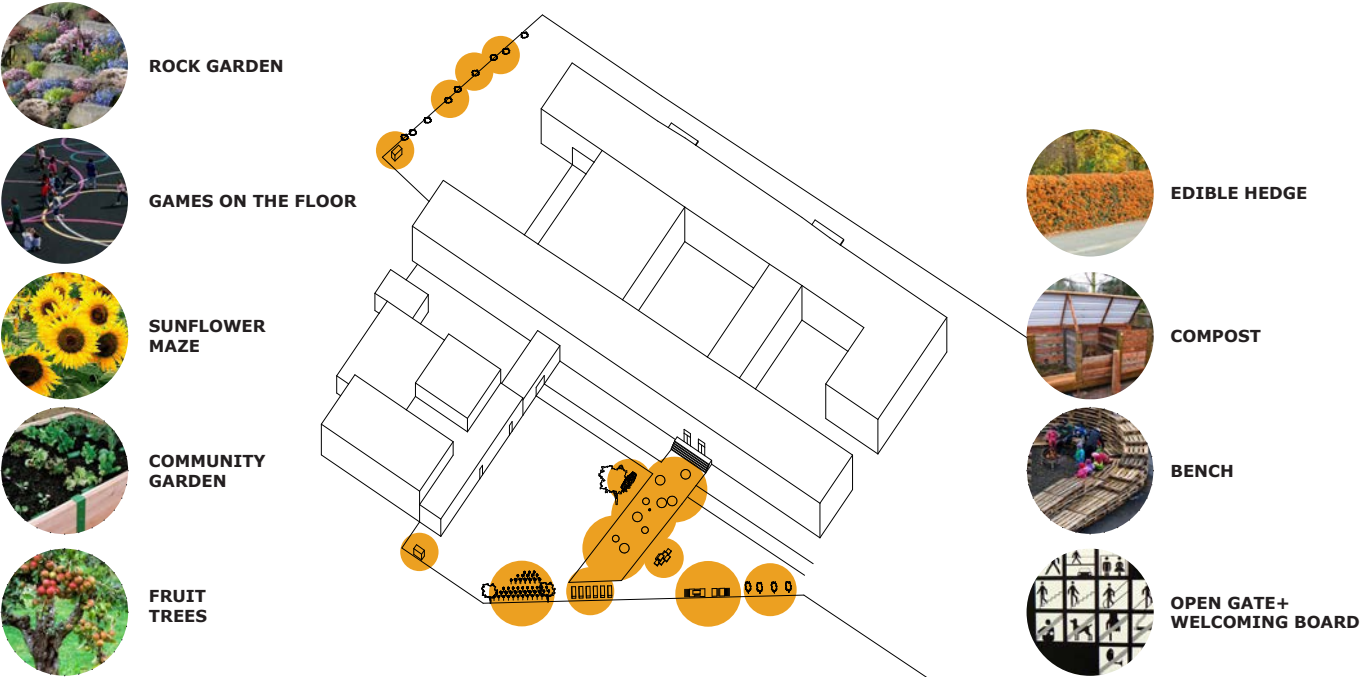
“USE THE CITY FESTIVAL”
(the content is still open) (part of the city-wide event)
- 9.6.

“OUR CITY”
improving the front garden (part of a Slovakia-wide event of *Pontis Foundation*)
- 10.6.

“WEEKEND OF OPEN GARDENS”
opening the yard to the public (part of a Slovakia-wide event of Ministry of Culture)
- 23.6.

END OF THE SCHOOL YEAR CELEBRATION
(the content is still open)

DESIGN OF THE COMMON SPACE on the basis of the mapping of needs and resources



Preparations

The way to involve the school and the community in the building of the common space, was to ask them to help with some simple preparations for the upcoming events. The school received many tasks, that were crucial to get done. I provided them with the materials and instructions and it was up to them to decide to do the tasks or not, or to delegate. All instructions were communicated through Jana.

The key task was to plant sunflower seeds into little pots from toilet paper, that we would then later plant together outside and create a large maze, during the official opening of the yard. All teachers were offered this activity during the presentation of the April-June events. As far as I know, only Jana's class planted the sunflowers. Through Facebook and banners, the neighbours were also invited to plant the seeds (located in the banner) at home and to bring the little plants to the opening event.

The neighbours were also asked via Facebook to help with setting up the herbal garden. They could bring some plants to the school to plant these together later at the event. Jana proposed to also directly ask the neighbour ladies who were at the Info-event to donate some plants from their garden. This didn't happen, instead she bought flowers from the money they got from collecting old paper.

The other task was to prepare the gate in the fence and its surrounding for the official opening. The gate and the fence around it, as well as an old board on the fence should be freshly painted. Two pupils from the state primary school volunteered upon Jana's request. Happy to skip the class and too keen to paint, they started without Jana's full instructions, using up all the paint to paint just the gate and themselves. No paint was left for the board or the fence.

The task of symbolically deciding the new rules of the yard was delegated to Jana's class, as it was the only environment where a discussion, not just voting, could happen. I asked them to decide on the content of the new information board, welcoming the visitors by the gate to the yard. I provided them with various pictograms, from which they should choose, what will be not allowed in the common yard and to what activities they invite the guests to. Through discussion, the new rules of the space were formed. The results were posted on project's and school's Facebook page and the people were asked for their opinions. Without any reactions, besides many "likes".

Jana also used her contact with a local business, and organized a donation of 40 pallets, needed for the construction of a large bench. She also organized their transport to the school, assisted by two keen pupils from the secondary school in exchange for skipping a biology and English class. No other classes were engaged in the preparations and also not all preparations were done. Mainly, the school did not find the time to weed the yard and to clean the space. It is understandable that not all tasks were done, since it apparently all again hinged on the same single person.



Pupils helping with bringing pallets donated by a local business.



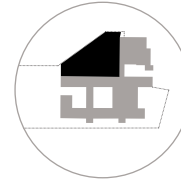
Sunflower sprouts planted by Jana's class to be planted later outdoors to form a large maze.



Pupils creating the new rules of the yard.

Opening the yard

THURSDAY
11.5.2017
15:00 - 19:00



17°C

The event was to be a celebration, a performative official opening of the yard to the neighbourhood by symbolically opening the gate, setting up a welcoming board with the new rules of the yard and doing the first physical interventions. The event was the beginning of the collective building of common space and its objective was to mark this moment in time. The yard was to be transformed from a closed school premise into an open space for the school and the community.

The planned time of the event was end of April, but due to very bad weather forecast I decided to reschedule it, as creating friendly and open atmosphere on the yard was one of the main objectives and this can not be done well when it's cold and rainy. Jana was fine with this, maybe even glad, and thus I merged the content of the first two events into one. However, the bad weather persisted, and three days before the already rescheduled event I decided to reschedule again, to one day earlier (to Thursday), because a rescheduling for the time after, was not an option. I have informed people in the social media and also on the posters. Rescheduling, however, turned out to be a very bad move, as due to a short notice, probably very little people registered the change. The weather forecast was wrong and on the Friday (the original date of the event) it did not rain and perhaps some people still planned to come and were faced with disappointment that inexplicably nothing was happening and that it was all done. This was at least the reaction of the local TV crew, who unexpectedly came to film the event, on the Friday. So, I at least made a little radio entry for the 5 o'clock news, informing about the opening of the yard to the public and noting the opening hours.

Despite the rescheduling, there were enough people to do what we set up to do. There were approximately 20 pupils from Jana's class, age 10-11 and perhaps 10 other younger children. Two 9th graders from the state school helped with digging the maze, skipping an English class. Two other teachers also joined. Besides me, there were two other persons from team ŠAK to help me with the event. Jana and the other teachers were coordinating the gardening, while team ŠAK coordinated the maze. I was assigning tasks to newcomers, while trying to chat to some. Two parents helped out too. One came to pick up her daughter who was by then working in the yard and she stayed to help. Another parent, a neighbour, came by too. She saw us from her window and wanted to help, because she could not come the next day, on Friday, for the opening (she obviously did not notice the change of the date). She knew about the project and the event, as she attended the Info-event in March and her son is a pupil in the state school. When I thanked her for helping us, she reminded me, that there is nothing to thank, because after all she is doing it for herself too, since the yard is also for them. There was, unfortunately, little time to chat with her and to really include her in the group, as she was working alone away from the group. The atmosphere was overall buzzing and result-oriented, with unfortunately really too little time to engage in conversations. The focus just lied elsewhere and we did manage to get a lot done, although, not without pullbacks, starting with the rescheduling of the event.

Opening the gate
The yard will be from this event open to the public.
The old fence board becomes a new welcoming sign.

pasting the yard sign

painting the board

cutting trees

Grooming the entrance
Painting the fence board white, for the new yard sign.
Making the entrance more attractive and welcoming. This was not planned, it was own initiative of a neighbour who came by to help!

going to traininig

making a maze

spading the ground

planting sunflowers

planting sunflowers

Sunflower maze

The intervention combines elements of play, garden and a place to hide. Fast-growing sunflowers should make up a maze by September time.

Test bench

Pallets in a seemingly ad-hoc pile create a kind of bench, which is a test of aesthetics and a way of advertising the next event, when a big bench will be built in this place.

piling up pallets

gardening

cutting bushes

planting herbs and flowers

sweeping the floor

chatting

Garden

Clearing overgrown garden, planting herbs and flowers, as well as cleaning the area from old pine tree needles and weed. It is all a part of making the yard nicer, having a reason to care for it and getting something back from it - the herbs.

The supposedly main 'act' of the event – putting up the sign – happened unfortunately three days after the event, without any public. We had to wait, because the board was not painted before the event, only during it and it took long time for the paint to dry. Three days later the board was still too wet for the sticker that I have prepared. And so, the sticker sign, originally planned to be of temporary nature, became all too permanent, stuck in the fresh paint for ever.

The sunflower maze also didn't work out as planned. The ground, unexpectedly full of big gravel, was hard to dig and probably not the best base for growing sunflowers after all. Since only Jana's class provided sunflower sprouts, further seeds had to be planted directly in the ground to fill the whole maze. The plants from Jana's pupils survived and grew into small sunflowers, but the majority of the new baby sprouts was eaten by some animals. I was informed by Jana, that the pre-schoolers were regularly watering the sunflowers. But it is not clear if someone took care of them during the hot months during the summer break. In September, there was no grand maze to be seen.

Best results triggered the test bench. Jana and the headmaster immediately proposed to paint it, but otherwise did not object the form, material or the stability and security of the object, giving me a green light to design and build a large version of it. In the week after the event a pre-school teacher brought four of her own pallets and created another seat, by the fence. Another colleague also brought a small plastic sand-pit for the children to play in.

Although there was little time to talk during the event, at the end of it we sat together with Jana and the headmaster to discuss the event and to plan the next one – Festival. After presenting my idea of building the bench, Jana and the headmaster proposed to organize a garden party for International Children's Day. It was a very productive moment, possibly geared by the achievements and the atmosphere of the event.

Overall and despite all setbacks, the event was a success, as it created a space for engagement and interaction with the space. It is unfortunate, that not more people could be part of our final discussion about planning the next events.

Compost
A place where school can put all the rubbish from the yard, in order to keep it nice.

building a compost bin

WE ARE IMPROVING OUR NEW COMMON YARD!
Let's create a place for us and our children.

Come with us to celebrate and to open the gate to our new common yard!
Together we will make the yard lively with new greenery and flowers:
- we will plant sunflower maze,
- herbal garden,
- and fruit trees!

Come, help us to make our surrounding nicer and get to know your neighbours.

We are opening the spaces of the school for everyone,
who wants to improve their surrounding and
improve relationships in the neighbourhood.

We believe that the school can be the centre of the neighbourhood,
a common place for the pupils, parents and neighbours.

Join us!



Pupils and teachers grooming the garden and planting new flowers and herbs.



The gate will be from this event on open, with a new welcoming sign.



Digging last bits of the sunflower maze to plant the seeds.



Pallets as a test and as an advertisement for the big bench to come.



A neighbour who joined the event suggested to shorten the trees. So she did.



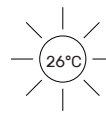
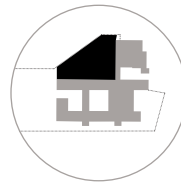
Jana's class cleaning and re-planting rocky garden and cleaning the yard.



The school has now also a compost to put the dispose of organic waste from the yard.

Festival: day 1

THURSDAY
1.6.2017
08:00 - 18:00



The first day of the festival started already during the school time, with program mainly for the private primary school, although anyone else could join too. The gate was open. The theme of the interventions was play and entertainment, as it was meant to be a fun day for the children in the first place. This was meaningful in assigning the yard a meaning as a place to play through the performance of the pupils and other participants. All interventions were thus games, that will also stay in the yard afterwards and the children and adults can come and play them any time. The pupils learnt these games and performed them, giving the yard a meaning as a playground. The occasion and motivation to play was a competition between small teams, where almost all pupils participated.

- setting up the paints
- painting the fence
- painting each other
- chatting
- scrubbing the fence

Fence painting
Painting large colourful flowers along the whole fence.

Bench
First steps towards building a new large bench, on the basis of a foam model.

Game: cans
Throwing stones into cans.
How many points do you get?

Pavement games
Obstacle run, tic-tac-toe and big hopscotch, drawn on the floor with tape

Tires
A pile of old car tires waiting to be assembled into seats turned out to be the best material for spontaneous entertainment.

Game: tires
Competition in rolling car tires.
One against one. Who will be first?

Concert
A duo: father and son (5th grader of the school), playing and singing Roma songs.

Game: throw at circles
A large concentric target is marked on the grass, the aim is to throw a stone at its centre.

The day started at 9 with a full-on concert of Šani Sássi (a known singer in the area) and his son, singing catchy, mainly Roma songs. Jana organized the concert, as Sássi junior is her pupil and they have also performed in the school before. The music attracted also two neighbours, who joined us in the yard form a couple of songs. Others were watching from the surrounding windows. The pupils of the other institutions were also cheering from the windows of the school, as it was probably impossible to learn anyway. After repeated invitations from us, they came down and joined us in the yard for the final songs.

Energized by the music, the day continued with painting flowers on the fence. In order to avoid a chaos and to assure certain aesthetic coherence and standard, I developed the following system of co-creation. The children were given instruction prior to the event to draw a flower. I also sent them for inspiration examples of simple fantasy flower illustrations, to encourage them to go beyond the standard tulips and daisies. Before the event my colleague drawn stalks on the fence, setting up the overall composition, and the children were to only paint the flowers, leaving the rest as it is. With no time to treat the rusty fence, there was no point to paint it all, using only acrylic paint, as it will anyway wash off or crack away soon. Hence, I opted for an option of leaving the rusty context as the background. Plastic glasses with pre-mixed colours and designated paint brush were given out to children, avoiding the tricky part when 40 individuals try to mix their own colours. Some people followed the rules, some interpreted it. Everyone had fun, the result freshened up the yard, although the rules did not work absolutely, as my expectation was a more minimalistic aesthetic result. The important thing here is, that people have taken ownership of the fence and continued painting throughout the day, in their free time and also in the days after. Not only children painted, it was especially the adults – the teachers, who continued with the painting until there was no more paint.

While pupils painted, the team ŠAK prepared and organized various games, that were prompting the children to interact with the space. After finishing their flowers some children helped with setting up the games, some were busy playing with old car tires, some were snacking, some chatting, some were entertained by teachers, who were the whole time actively co-creating the playful fun atmosphere and engaging and motivating pupils. Shortly before lunch and into the afternoon, the games were played in teams of two. The results were marked with chalk on a newly built board (done the day before, during preparations).

The yard got calmer as the official school time finished and some pupils left for their afternoon activities. Pupils from the state school came by too and some older pupils too, talking to the teachers, promising that they would come help us tomorrow. Those who stayed, kept playing games on their own terms, painting the fence, or mainly hanging out in the shade and chatting. Some also helped with setting up the pallets for building the bench. Afternoon siesta. The atmosphere was calm and friendly, with occasional visitors and trespassers, but no neighbours came. Perhaps the event seemed too closed for the public, even though it was advertised as open and invitations were sent via Facebook also during the event.



Painting the fence. Also teachers had fun.



Designing a hopscotch.



Part of the "fence-mural" painted during the festival. Recorded in September.



Concert of Šani Šass and his son, who is a pupil in the school.
The concert was joined also by some pupils from the state school, at first shy, then pouring out of the building.



The most fun thing were old car tires and their multiple applications...



Afternoon siesta and helping out with sorting screws.



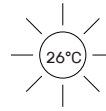
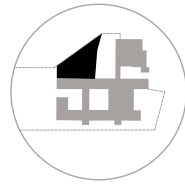
The artists...



The most popular game was without doubt tick-tack-toe,
which was during the day interpreted in many different ways.

Festival: day 2

FRIDAY
2.6.2017
13:00 - 18:00



26°C

Fence painting
Continuing with painting the fence.
This activity develops spontaneously
and with no coordination.

painting the fence
chatting

The second day was very different to the first one, as we mainly concentrated on building the bench and the tire-seats. The main aim was to be just present on the yard, possibly involve people in the process, talk to them and well, build the bench and the seats.

The bench was designed by me and I made a small foam model to help communicate the design and its features to the participants. Having done all calculations before and a sleek 3D model, I was hoping that we can just set up a transparent production line and get even children involved in sawing, screwing, carrying... The reality was different. Since the pallets were not standardized, there were huge structural and optical differences between single pieces and thus the whole construction process required an expert and close attention to structure and detail. Fortunately, there was a skilled person on the team (not me) and together, under my coordination for spatial preferences, we got the bench together.

Similarly unparticipative was the construction of the tire seating. The design was borrowed from refunc.nl (<http://refunc.nl/>) who kindly also explained the construction method to us and allowed us to use it for the project. However, drilling holes into tires was just too difficult for the small pupils and there were no older ones. Some did help with fixing the screws, but the job was a bit too uninteresting for them as a free time activity.

Unanticipated were activities aimed at improving the sunflower maze, but on Thursday it became clear, that something had to be done. The plants were not growing or were eaten by some animal and so I bought more seeds and Jana with her pupils planted them in the afternoon. Furthermore, because of the fence, the maze created a dead space in the yard, so I developed a system of tunnels from hexagonal mesh to protect the plants, while at the same time allowing people to use the maze in the process of its development. The pupils got involved in this activity too.

The headmaster, possibly inspired by the use of recycled materials, suggested, that they have a storage full of old school furniture and that maybe something of it could be used in the yard. Before, when I asked Jana about such resource, she said there was none. So, we visited the place and found a beautiful freestanding triangular magnetic board that could be placed in the garden. Coincidentally, there were some workers coming to fix some doors on the coming day and so she arranged the transport of the board promptly.

The afternoon was thus in a chilled working mode, with pupils coming and going, or just passing through the yard. Some promised again that they would come to help, because they couldn't today. Some kept playing the games and some kept painting the fence with the left-over paint. At the end of the day there was lots of work done, but we still had plenty of time to chat in between and get to know each other and the school better. Besides Jana and the headmaster, there were some parents, who were befriended with either of them, who came by for a chat and to hang out for a bit. A neighbour came by too, interested in what is happening there. She saw us from her window. She turned out to be the mother of our friend and so we had some grounds for connection. We chatted about the neighbourhood and she said that she will come tomorrow. At some point the headmaster also proposed to organize a jazz band befriended with her son to come and play for the next day. Satisfied with the amount of work we got done and in anticipation of the last day, we called it a day.

Improving the maze
Making the maze more
accessible and planting
additional sunflower seeds.

putting up a wire "tunnel-fence"

planting more seeds

planting small sunflowers

chatting

Tire-seats
Making seats
from used car tires.

making seats

going to trainig

Bench
Made out of old pallets, the bench can be used for sitting,
climbing or playing. There are also two green-boards
to be used with chalk.

building the bench

sawing the pallets

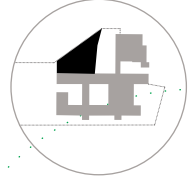
piling the pallets

painting the boards

chatting

Festival: day 3

SATURDAY
3.6.2017
12:00 - 20:00



Fence painting
Still continuing with painting the fence sporadically.
27°C



Scan the code for a video capturing the atmosphere on the last day
Author:
Ingrid Kepková
(team ŠAK)

The last day of the festival was there to finish all the work and mainly to hang out, to spend nice time on the yard and to create comfortable and open atmosphere. Besides the team, Jana, the headmaster and the film crew, there were also others spending the whole afternoon with us. The neighbour, who came the day before who is the mother of our friend came and hangout with us, talking and trying out clothes. And there was also a friend of the headmaster, whose child also visits the school. They were painting the fence, hanging out and chatting with the headmaster mainly. Because it was Saturday, there was no training and no school and thus no pupils. But two came, the two 9th graders who were promising for two days that they will help us. They were helping the whole afternoon with sanding the bench. And other, younger children came too. They were curious, or seeking a refuge. They lingered for a bit, playing with the toys, checking the painted fence, painting a little. Then they left and others came. A band came too with a crew of about five people, who helped setting up the apparatuses and then hanged out on a side. The film crew got evidently bored, as not much was happening and they came up with the idea to make the entrance to the yard more visible from the outside by painting giant arrows. A radical intervention that I would never dare to propose, for it is so bold. But this was their idea. Jana agreed, I provided the paint and the entrance got a new sign that reads "OPEN ALWAYS", a radical statement made by the locals. Since all was running well and smooth, I could concentrate on preparing instructions and tools for the Volunteering Day, which was coming in one week and neither I or Jana will be present to instruct the volunteers. Meanwhile the magnetic board was installed according to my instructions. And then I found out that I lost my wallet, or rather it got stolen and everyone became obsessed with this issue for the rest of the event. This created weird atmosphere and distorted the perception of the event. Meanwhile the band started to play jazzy music and with the progression of time more neighbours entered the yard, even if for a small visit. A group of five children played hopscotch and even adults came to check things out. By then we were all exhausted and everyone just enjoyed the music, instead of engaging in conversations with strangers. There was incredibly comfortable atmosphere, despite the drama over stolen wallet. We stayed longer than planned, as the band played until the shadow took over the yard completely. We packed, said bye and Jana drew me to the police station to report the theft, where we said bye to each other without making any further plans.

Entrance
Spontaneous decision to make the entrance to the yard more visible by painting giant arrows.

- painting the fence
- chatting

Free-market
Clothes and stuff was borrowed from a local free-market, people could come and take some clothes or exchange it.

Concert
Jazz band plaining very nice and atmospheric music.

Bench
Made out of old pallets, the bench can be used for sitting, climbing or playing. There are also two green-boards to be used with chalk.

TEAM ŠAK
COMMUNITY SCHOOL





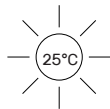
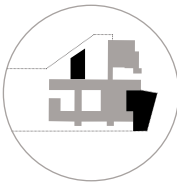
The fence and the gate between the school and the neighbourhood, view from the neighbourhood side. In March, before the project started. The gate is locked with a rusty chain and the rusty sign reads: DOGS PROHIBITED ON THE SCHOOL PREMISES!



The fence and the gate between the school and the neighbourhood, view from the neighbourhood side. During the Festival. "OPEN" "ALWAYS" is written on the fence. The sign reads: Welcome on the common yard! The yard is open: ...School Užhorodská . (and in small yellow font:). Entry upon your own risk.

Volunteering Day

FRIDAY
9.6.2017
09:00 - 16:00



The volunteering action was part of Slovakia’s nation-wide volunteering marathon “Our City” run by a well-known philanthropic organisation. Organisations and institutions who join get a small grant to buy materials and also some volunteers for one whole day to improve the city. This marathon happens every year. Engaging the school in this project was a way of showing them another easily available resource to improve their spaces. The activities of the event had to be planned already in March, when we were still considering the front school garden as the space for the project. Therefore, I planed all activities to take place in the front garden. The activities were presented to Jana and fully agreed upon back in March. The event was also a step towards passing on the responsibility to the school, or rather, putting them in a position where they will perform the host, as I was not planning to be at the event. Jana was meant to be the coordinator of the event, but something important came up and she couldn’t be there either. Thus, the whole hosting was passed on to the headmaster and a teacher from the pre-school. I bought the materials and prepared them together with written instructions in the school. The instructions were then passed by Jana to the teacher.

The details of how things went were passed to me back again through Jana. According to her account and judging by the pictures on Facebook, the event was a success. The 37 volunteers from 4 different companies painted the new bench (although not exactly according to the instructions), scrubbed and painted the fence in the front garden (although not completely, because I didn’t buy enough paint), dug up old bushes and planted sandthorn plants to fill the gaps in the hedge along the fence, built a compost bin from pallets and even raked the garden and planted some more flowers that I am not sure where they came from. The volunteers were very motivated and even went to buy more paint for their own money to paint more. The headmaster was very impressed by the event and they are already planning to involve the volunteers next year. The event also engaged the janitor of the school, who was until now very pro-actively against the project and would not lend us even an old wire brush. He first flipped out when he saw all the unprofessional handling of paint and bushes, but then his heart got softened up by the young female volunteers and he was suddenly very glad to be part of it all. The event seemed to be a great success, engaging also pupils, but no people from the neighbourhood, but there were already enough volunteers on the go.

The event motivated to immediate further action. One week after, the pupils from the secondary school painted the whole fence in front of the school, by the main entrance, with their own paint and tools. Unwittingly they painted over the locks too, so now all the gates must stay unlocked.



Painting the bench: volunteers and pupils together.



Pupils as the hosts.



Volunteers in action.



Painting the bench: volunteers and pupils together.



...and the garden is going too...



Pupils helping to make the space around the school nicer.

Evaluation and further steps

were the topics for the 2 months during the summer break of the school. These months were focused mainly on evaluating the project from the perspective of the school, as the project was in the first place about assisting them in establishing and strengthening their relationship with the community. In this context, it was important to see what was the impact of the project from school's perspective and whether and how it will continue beyond our cooperation. To find this out, I set up a meeting at the end of the school year with Jana and the headmaster. The objective of the meeting was to evaluate the project, its results and the collaboration with us, as well as to discuss further trajectory and concrete steps of the project for the coming school year and possibly the years after.

We met on a Saturday in the headmaster's office, where we also met for the first time. The atmosphere was friendly and everyone was speaking openly. Although Jana and the headmaster expressed overall satisfaction with the project, their words were not hopeful, but rather sober and a bit tired too, which is reasonable, given that it was the first day of the summer break. They both talked about the new atmosphere that the project brought, especially in the relationship with the neighbourhood. This was reflected in this year's increase in enrolment into the first year of the state primary school. The rising numbers of pupils were also named as the single biggest aim for engaging the community and continuing the project. Since some years, there is a gossip in the neighbourhood that the school is not good and that it is closing. By doing various activities, by taking care of the yard and by talking to people, the neighbours allegedly see, that the school has a genuine interest in doing good. "Openness, is a sign of a good school," said the headmaster. However, they have expressed their slight disappointment, that the project didn't engage more people. "It had impact," said the headmaster, "it just wasn't so wow, but it did deliver what was said in the beginning." Jana also doubted the impact of the project on the macro level, but saw it positively, that at least those 30 children (her pupils) had this experience and met new people. "The free-market," Jana said, "only if just 5 children got something out of it, it was the first time that they exchanged things and this could have been a very important moment for their lives." The pupils also noticed the change and when replying to a third-party questionnaire about the school, many wrote, that they like that they are doing projects and that things are happening.

They talked also a lot about the relationships that were established, about things that surfaced and about what they personally realized and learnt. For example, they started to talk to the ladies in the neighbourhood, that came to the Info event and that they have now a very good relationship with the guys who made the video. The project, for them, revealed also the character of people, especially those in the school, who were very sceptical about the project, almost actively against it and didn't want to join. It was not clear if this was because of the project or for some other reasons. They were in general sad, perhaps disappointed about the attitude of the people in the school. Jana concluded, that at some point she decided, that they do not need the others, if they didn't want it anyway, and that they will just do it by themselves. At the same time, it was noted, that it was hard for many teachers to join, because the project was not planned well in advance and things were not dealt with systematically.

According to Jana, the project was demanding, because there were many things happening parallely: on one level, there were relationships to be built within the school, like the pupils from the secondary school, the cooks, the janitor and other teachers and then there was the work with the community outside of the school. She shared her realisation, that for her it was important to first be a community within the school and then to work with the outside community. It was seen as positive, that the project touched places, that were not touched ever, like the fence. At the same time, it was criticized, that things didn't get finished and that by focusing on the back yard, their front garden got overgrown. Also, it was pity, that not all ideas that people formulated got realized, although it would have been possible.

When asked about changes in the yard, they had little to say. Instead they talked about what more could be done and the conversation focused on developing a community garden on the back yard, as a place for the pupils but also for the neighbours, as a way to attract them. We were talking about the horizon of one, maximal two years. The school had no vision beyond this time-frame. These were some of the ideas they suggested:

- continuing changing the yard: more trees, more seating, more park with a garden, where children can play and relax,
- each class would have a patch in the garden to take care of,
- some patches would be available for the community, so that they can use it; this would be adver-tised on the school's website,
- focusing on the pupils from the neighbourhood as a way to attract the neighbours,
- creating a fixed schedule for the whole year and letting the teachers know already in September, so that they can integrate it in their plans,
- events like free-market in autumn and spring,
- creating an overall plan for where to build/plant what (help needed from team ŠAK),
- engaging the parents more, by giving them concrete tasks and responsibilities, creating databases and knowing precisely who will come to the event, so that it can be better organized,
- preparing the ground already in September with the help of the secondary school pupils,
- involving the teachers by proposing them a credited seminar on the topic of garden and teaching, alternatively offering a workshop on community garden planning to the classes during the first week of school.

We agreed, that they will formulate their visions and ideas for the community garden in the context of the school and the neighbourhood. Jana would furthermore consult the project with her friend, a consultant for community gardens and environmental education and a mentor in the Eco-schools program. We concluded the meeting by setting up an appointment for the end of August, to develop a concrete strategy and further steps for them to take.

By mid August the engagement dropped severely as I didn't receive any further information from the school, even upon further request. Thus, I saw no point in creating any grand strategy for them, if they do not participate in its development. Hence, I opted for a more scaled down workshop format, with the aim to communicate mainly my ideas to them and see if any of it could find an implementation, or trigger a reaction. Upon my request, we set up the meeting, as planned, for the end of August. Jana meanwhile spoke with her environmentalist-specialist friend and notified me, that her friend would be indeed very keen on continuing the project and working with the school on setting up the community garden. I also knew this person, as I in fact discussed the project briefly with her in February, but not since.

We met in August in the school with Jana and the environmentalist specialist. The headmaster didn't come. The meeting took place in the garden and had more informal tone. With Jana, we explained the specialist what we have done so far, what worked and what were the main challenges, as she was not properly informed of these prior to the meeting (I though Jana did this, when she discussed the issue with her). Then we together discussed and designed the strategy and concrete further steps with the aid of a structure prepared by me, centred around the following topics, presenting also some ideas and suggestions:

- concrete form of the garden,
- available resources,
- responsibility burden and organisational structure for sharing it,
- involvement of the neighbourhood,
- cooperation with the state primary school.

The discussion was very fruitful and after one hour we had a realistic concrete plan for the further development of the yard, centred around the development of a community garden. The key idea was, that the environmental specialist would take over the process and be its coordinator and supervisor. The school could even find the resources to pay her, as the key organisational ideas was, that she would lead an after-school club for the pupils. The 12 or so pupils in the club would carry the organisational general responsibility for the garden and the activities around it. Each class would then have its own plot, plus some extra plots would be built for the neighbours. Regular monthly markets would be an occasion to meet and to involve new people. The markets would be an open format with changing content, and a different class would be responsible for its organisation on rotational basis. To kick off the process, there would be a seminar for teachers, similar to the one we planned and failed at in April. The whole process would be in synch with the school's action plan for the Eco-school project. The meeting finished on an optimistic note, with a to-do list for Jana and a new coordinator of the project! The next step was for Jana to present this to the school and get them on board. We all left in a good mood, energized by the meeting and the future prospects. I passed on the responsibility for the project, offering my help with consultancy or visualisations, whenever they need. I was very happy with this development, because it meant, that the project had a continuation beyond my presence.

However, the progress of this plan is currently on hold, since it was eventually not possible to find the funding and no other alternatives were developed.





The yard of the school in March, before the interventions.



The yard of the school in late September.



The yard of the school in March, before the interventions.



The yard of the school in late September.

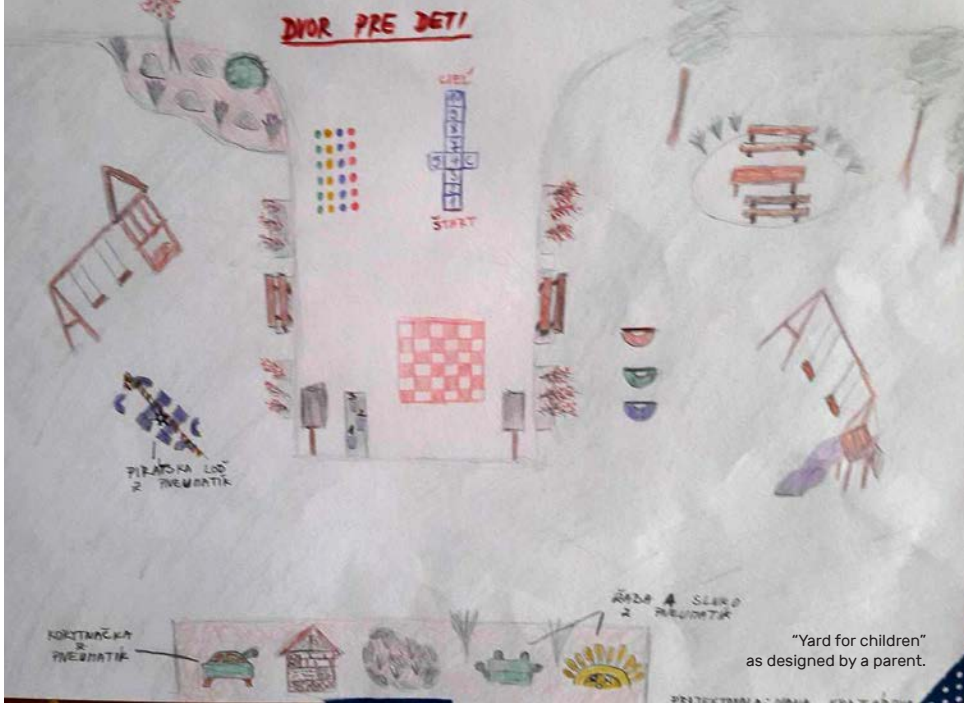
ŠAK is over, long live the yard!

While writing this publication, pondering about and doubting the meaning of it all I get a message from Jana on a Friday evening in mid September. It reads:

“Zuzi.. things are happening...today the state school started to work on the yard.. they raked it, the garden was refilled...all children in classes 1-5 contributed with 5 euros and bought outdoor furniture, which will be mounted next Saturday...and they will cook goulash. and parents will come...and they are chasing us to work. Do you get it?? I don’t...but the teachers had rakes and were working hard. I am speechless [...]” (own translation)

And then, two weeks later I get another picture from her, a plan/design for the yard, proposing various interventions, a drawing apparently made by a parent. I asked a friend to inspect the situation in mid October and the drawing became a reality. The parents did much more than just a bench. They bough also two big playground modules, extended the existing rocky garden and created even a new one. They also created some play elements from tires and refreshed and extended the games we created on the pavement (see images on the right). At the same time, all tire seatings disappeared and they are allegedly planning to also disassemble the pallet bench, because it is kind of broken and anyway they have apparently mixed feelings about it, as one teacher reported, because they don’t know if it’s for seating or for playing and climbing. The new design of the yard does not count with this bench.

I cannot say at the moment whether there is any causality between the project and these developments, but it would be too much of a coincidence, if these were not interconnected. In order to understand these developments better, a further investigation is necessary. This, however, is possibly a topic for a follow-up documentation, as I now suspect that the development of the yard will continue.



Final remarks

Common space in the school

– understood as a tool for community-making and as a spatial product, did exist temporarily throughout the project during the events and increasingly also between them, until the summer holiday came. However, due to our limited success in involving enough local actors to continue the process, the common space as it was created ended with the school year in July 2017. Nevertheless, the fact that the parents are organizing themselves and starting to shape the yard suggests that the process continues, just in its own way: The yard is being developed further and it prompts people to interact and to co-create. It can thus be said that this school did have an underused and overseen potential to be a space for community, as a temporal community was created and a more long-term one is potentially being formed.

It is questionable whether the yard will become an open space for the community, as it was originally envisioned and performed throughout the project. For now, it is locked again to protect the new garden and the swings. To open or not to open is a dilemma that cannot be resolved in theory, but only in praxis. The yard is actually well frequented and also well overlooked by the neighbouring houses to be “guarded” by the people themselves. It is now up to the school and the community to decide and to negotiate on the openness of the yard. The project showed them how that reality would be like. Besides, the welcoming sign with gigantic arrows and an “OPEN ALWAYS” invitation by the gate remains, as well as the possibility to jump over the gate.

The future of the yard, as well as the long-term impact of the project is at the moment impossible to judge. However, the project had also more immediate, positive effects praised by the participants themselves, including: getting to know people, spending enjoyable time together, learning about the context, having a place to hang out outside, and – importantly for the school – more pupils signing up to attend the school (see more in Evaluation and further steps, p. 102).

Although engaging a school as a community-making actor proved to be productive, the project revealed also some challenges and limitations of this approach. All potentials of school, for example, proved to bring with themselves also their challenges:

- Spatial resources: the school had five underused outdoor spaces and further spaces indoor. The back yard where the project was carried out was chosen because of its central location in the neighbourhood, and its ease of access for both the school and the neighbours. However, this might not be always the case: schools may have available spaces that are not easily accessible, as in the case of the other available spaces in the school with which we worked (front garden, internal courtyards and interior spaces).
- Underused resources: there were many available school tools that we could use for the project, like spades, a projector and speakers. Some, like drills and electric saws, were provided by team ŠAK. School may also be able to acquire new tools through the many existing grants for community-related projects.
- Meeting point: the yard where the project took place was and is a lively meeting point, since the pupils cross it to go home, small pupils play there occasionally in the afternoon, and other children and parents pass through it because of the football trainings. However, it is rather a transit point, where few people linger on. When we provided benches and opened the gate more people started to come by, but still few of them hung out there. The challenge with school spaces is that people perceive them as school spaces. And the connotations of school spaces are not those of community meet up, hanging out, relaxing and openness. Using schools as community spaces therefore requires rewriting the coding of the space, which can be a challenging and long process entailing a change of perceptions and habits. Therefore, it was important to communicate well the project’s objectives and make the events open and programmatically interesting for everyone. The atmosphere and the variety of visitors of the events prove that this is possible. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the existing history and relationships people have with the space are at the same time a great potential and a challenge.
- Space to experiment: The nature of schools as public institutions for learning has two sides. On one hand, it is really a unique space, as it belongs to the public, but is practically governed by the headmaster (in Slovakia), making it relatively easy to obtain authorisation for spatial interventions and the organisation of gatherings. If the headmaster is open and there is a relationship of trust, as there was in this case, the school can really be a space of experimentation and learning. On the other hand, this experimental nature can be perceived negatively and even create distrust on the part of people with more traditional understanding of what a school is and should be, including some of the teachers. In our case, teachers were indeed apparently disturbed by the experimental nature of the project, in part due to the lack of proper advance planning. Of course, one could simply exclude these teachers from the process per se, but that would be rather hypocritical. At the same time, including only some teachers in the process caused splits in the collective, and put some of the participating members – above all, Jana – in an awkward position with their colleagues.

The other significant limitation of the project are the available resources.

Firstly, one must have the time necessary for the development and implementation of this project. Although the project looked for synergies with the existing context, there was still a need to invest extra time into the coordination and production of the project. This is somehow obvious and it was extraordinary that the school – Jana – was ready and willing to invest her, essentially, free time into this project. However, this is not a sustainable model, as it puts extra strain on the teacher and the school must be able to find a way to compensate the teacher for her or his work. The problem with available time is also present among the parents, where most of them work full time jobs, besides taking care of their children and the last thing they need in their free time is to work more. For engagement work should rightly be considered a form of “labour”, and it would therefore be good to think of ways to “retribute” the most active members.

Besides time, it is also a question of material and financial resources. Even if the project is developed in good synergy with the local structures and in a context that is rich in resources, it is to be expected that external resources will occasionally be needed, for example to repair stairs, cut the grass, or build a bench. It must be recognised that the local resources available in the school and the community for sustaining and developing a common space are limited.

In the course of the project we partially addressed these challenges by deploying external resources, such as financial grants to pay material and experts, and volunteering schemes. Long-term partnerships with local businesses or ideally not-for-profit organisations or groups, as well as setting up a dedicated non-for-profit company, could be further steps in achieving sustainability.

This project

aimed to engage people in the creation of a common space on the premises of a primary school. It aimed to create a space and a community that would continue to live and develop the space after the project itself would come to an end. As the documentation shows, the space was formed and some people were also engaged in its co-creation, but the common space was temporal and did not continue beyond the time-frame of the project. Nevertheless, the story of the yard does continue, as it is currently being developed by the parents (see p. 110). These developments, however, are not a direct continuation of the project, but rather a reaction to it. This suggests that there was in fact a sufficient number of engaged and motivated parents ready to collectively build a space and that at least some of the teachers did indeed welcome such an endeavour. The fact that our project did not manage to engage these people and even drove them to the point of creating an alternative process suggests that the participatory component of our project was not carried out well, since these people apparently felt excluded. In this last section I shall thus reflect on this failure by briefly recapitulating the process, focusing on the participation of the various actors.

The apparent exclusion of potential participants within the local community is a troubling issue, because the project started out with the clear objective to actively involve teachers, pupils and parents in the view to ensuring the long-term sustainability of the process. To achieve this objective, the project started with a public info meeting (p. 64), inviting anyone to come, to learn about the project and to discuss its potential form and shape. Contacts were exchanged to inform the participants about the next steps and events. A similar, but more participative introduction of the project was also planned for the teaching staff and the parents in the parents’ organisation. However, the importance of these introductions was apparently not communicated clearly enough to the school, which failed to provide sufficient access to approach these groups in order to involve them early on in the project. Furthermore, our attempts to involve pupils, and thus indirectly their parents, were limited by the fact that it was only possible to organize a workshop with one class of pupils. As a result, it was difficult to develop a comprehensive dialogue with the local actors and their participation was thus only fragmented (see People, p. 46-59). I have attributed the hesitant beginning marked by a lack of interest and available time to a plausible lack of urgency that the project presented to the local actors, which could have been possibly linked to the degree of openness of the project. The project didn’t propose a concrete issue, but rather first called for a discussion about the issue.

The discussion about the space initiated during the mapping was thus only limited and it produced only small fragments of common space. These had to be pieced together with much interpretation to create an actual vision of the space. Pressured by the school to “start doing things” and with the arrival of the warmer months, I created a vision of the common space on the basis of the available fragments, hoping that people would recognize their own fragment in the whole and that this would motivate them to participate in building that space. However, this vision was not meant to define the final form of the space, but was rather intended as a means of continuing the discussion started with the local actors. I hoped to create a better ground for a lively discussion by providing a very concrete issue and by using a more (inter)active form: the actual building of a common space. Therefore, a series of spatial interventions was designed and teachers, pupils, parents and neighbours were encouraged to join in during public events to help with the creation of the space. For the parents and the public, there was no actual occasion to discuss the overall vision for the common space as the first event started by directly implementing the first physical interventions (the teachers were presented the vision by Jana, without much feedback). The idea was to use these events as an occasion to discuss and to co-create.

However, the events were not visited by many parents or neighbours and if, then there was usually too much to do to actually engage in a meaningful conversation. At the same time, many of those that actively joined the events also proposed their own ideas about the yard and these were then also realized (trimming trees, painting fence, jazz band, ...). The spatial interventions were meant to create a community and a space for it. This happened, but the community, which was consequently forming the space was in the end made out of me, Jana, the headmaster, teachers from the pre-school, about 30 pupils and other members of the team ŠAK. And thus, as the created space became increasingly our space, it became also decreasingly open to the ideas and interpretations of the others.

I cannot say with certainty what exactly discouraged people to join the process. But somewhere along the way we apparently excluded those that were actually ready to be engaged. While differences in aesthetics taste could have played a role, this cannot be considered the main reason. To wit, although the parent’s design did not retain our seating from old tires or the pallet bench, it did include many play elements from old tires (see p. 110). So, perhaps, the fact that not many people participated was a reaction to our “colonisation” of what was in the beginning of the project presented as their common space. Of course, in order to confirm this interpretation, it would be necessary to consider the accounts of other actors, especially those who stand behind the new developments. This, unfortunately, lies beyond the scope of this documentation.

Despite the shortcomings discussed above, I do not doubt the appropriateness of the methodology developed through and used throughout the project (see Methodology, p. 27). Instead, I see a need to perfect the practice of this methodology by developing a better sense for when to control and when to lose the control. When to decide and when to let others decide. As the initiator and the main driver of the process, I struggled to develop a framework of participation that would be robust enough to provide a common vision to motivate people to participate, without being so rigid as to break and crumble when people did participate. For if one completely lets loose, there is a risk that nothing would happen, but if one is too controlling, there is no space to participate. In truth, I have not found an answer to these complex questions, for I believe that it is a skill that is to be acquired through practice.

The result of the project is not a well functioning common space with an ever-expanding group of commoners, as I would have wished. Such ambitious goals can only be achieved at the end of a much longer process than the one put in place by this project. However, the project did set certain local processes in motion and was in itself a rich learning process for all participants. The project physically revitalised and also (even if temporarily) brought life into one underused school yard. Thanks to it, new friendships were formed and participants experienced, tried and learnt new things. Furthermore, the project demonstrated, that even in Slovakia things can change and that another mode of living together is possible. Last but not least, it allowed me to test and implement theoretical notions of participatory architecture and common space in praxis and explore and develop the meaning of these terms for myself. Thus, the end of this project is potentially the beginning of many new ones.

For the case of starting a new project, I shall close here with a check-list of absolutely necessary ingrediencies, some of which were definitely missing in this project and made it all that much more difficult:

- school with local ties,
- open-minded headmaster,
- engaged school project coordinator,
- time,
- suitable space,
- good alliance with teachers,
- great alliance with parents,
- some money,
- patience,
- reliable friends.



School picture as it should be. Team ŠAK, the headmaster and Jana's class.

Thank you

to everyone who contributed to the realisation of this project. Many thanks to the headmaster Ms. Monika Katunská and especially the vice-headmaster of the primary school Užhorodská Ms. Jana Nimcová for being exceptionally open minded, patient and incredibly flexible. Thank you for the trust, time, energy and love you put into the project. Many thanks also to all pupils, parents, teachers and neighbours who invested their ideas, time and energy into the collective effort of building a common space. And thanks to all those who just came by, because that first step too takes some courage. And thank you, friends and family members who were an integral part of the team ŠAK and who were always available and ready when it was needed. With your skills, time, energy and motivation it was possible to realize the ambitious vision of this project in such a short time.

Thank you also for kindly allowing the reproduction of your photos:

Jana Nimcová, pages: 65, 70, 74, 75, 81 (bottom left), 118,

Monika Katunská, pages: 80, 99-101,

Ingrik Kepková, pages: 9, 83, 95,

Dávid Hanko, pages: 87 (top right), 88, 94, 107, 109, 111,

Grétka Čandová, pages: 86 (middle), 94.

Zuzana Tabačková,
Berlin, Oktober 2017.

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