Community architecture, empowerment, ecological awareness and community-based learning

Közösségi építészet, empowerment, ökológiai tudatosság és közösségi alapú tanulás

BALÁZS KÓSA - HAJNALKA BOGNÁR

Abstract

Community architecture is a relatively new field in Hungary. Social architecture, a similar area focuses on the conscious design of the environment and aims to influence human behaviour via the construction of community spaces. Social architects often involve the members of a given community. In community architecture, this involvement is conceived as a priority: community members are empowered via their participation in the entire process. They learn new practical skills and obtain relevant knowledge in funding, planning, decision-making and collaboration. As the construction proceeds, a local community is formed, representing its own goals, values, sense of mission, internal conflicts and solutions, and identity. Community architecture usually relies on local, traditional technologies and local staff and resources: therefore it often presents ecologically sustainable and safe solutions. In an academic setting, the model of community-based learning offers mutual benefits for all the concerned parties.

Keywords: *local community – architecture – empowerment – sustainability – community-based learning*

Összefoglalás

A közösségi építészet viszonylag új terület hazánkban. A szociális építészet a környezet tudatos tervezésével törekszik az emberi viselkedés befolyásolására, képviselői gyakran bevonják a közösség tagjait a folyamatba. A közösségi építészet terén a részvétel elsődlegessé válik, a közösség erőssé, képessé tétele a teljes folyamatban történik meg. Gyakorlati készségeket sajátítanak el, ismereteket szereznek a finanszírozásról, a tervezésről, a döntéshozatalról és az együttműködésről. Az építkezés előrehaladtával a helyi közösség kialakul/újjáalakul, saját céljai lesznek, megfogalmazza értékrendjét, küldetéstudatát, azonosítja belső konfliktusait és megoldásokat talál rá, maghatározza önnön identitását. A közösségi építészet rendszerint helyi, tradicionális technológiákra, helyi munkaerőre és más helyi forrásokra épít, ezért általában ökológiai szempontból fenntartható és biztonságos megoldásokat kínál. Egyetemi keretek között a közösségi alapú tanulás bevezetése kölcsönös előnyökkel járhat minden érintett fél számára.

Kulcsszavak: *helyi közösség – építészet – empowerment – fenntarthatóság – közösségi alapú tanulás*

"What is the use of a house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on?"
– Henry David Thoreau

Why community architecture?

Social architecture is defined as the conscious design of the environment with the aim of influencing human behaviour via the construction of community spaces. Social architects often (but not necessarily) involve the members of a given community in the entire

building process. Social architecture may rely on non-empowering forms of participation, in which top-down processes prevail. Decisions are made at the top and implementation is done by the people on the ground. (Marshall, 1998) Such an approach, however, may have some unwanted consequences: e.g., in the use, maintenance and management of the buildings that the given community does not identify as its own.

In community architecture, full participation and the introduction of bottom-up processes are considered a *priority:* community members are empowered via their collaboration in the entire process. The entire planning and building process, as a process of enablement, facilitates the development of personal skills and help acquire new knowledge for the members of the community. (Marshall, 1998)

Enablement is a key factor in the reintegration of marginalized population, which may significantly improve members' positions in the labour market. Another important result is empowerment: the process when marginalized persons, deprived some of the vital resources they are in need of, are assisted to take control over these resources. Empowerment results fundamental transformations in people's social status, self-esteem and consciousness. (Lakatos, 2009; Haricharan, 1995)

When entering a project in community architecture, members of the community obtain relevant knowledge in funding, planning, decision-making and collaboration; and acquire technological skills, as well as new communication, leadership and conflict management competencies. (Marshall, 1998) During the construction process a local community is formed or community ties are reconstructed; with own goals, values, sense of mission, internal conflicts and solutions, and own identity. Community architecture is *for and with* the people; therefore the new building will suit people's needs on the one hand; and they will understand financial and technological limitations on the other hand. Reliance on local resources and local technologies ensures cost-effectiveness, sustainability (protection form vandalism); and the development of local knowledge has a marked positive impact on employability. (Marshall, 1998)

Community architecture is not a panacea and the area has its own difficulties. Some of these have been identified as general problems in community development, such as complications in conflict management, planning and leadership within the community; a narrow, local perspective disregarding the broad context; and the idealization of persons or situations, which may lead to future disappointments. Success is significantly determined by the actual socio-economic and political situation. The process may be time-consuming and cannot be fully predicted and controlled as many people are involved in planning, decision-making and building procedures. Local "elites" may exploit other community members and the representation of all the stakeholders cannot always be ensured. Lack of interest and commitment are often due to discouraging experiences with previous project failures and the resulting loss of hope and mistrust. (Haricharan 1995; Marshall, 1998) These problems are rather frequent in countries with weak democratic traditions, but this is exactly the reason why community projects are all the more important in these areas.

Some problems are more specific to architecture, e.g., community architecture demands special attitudes and skills of the architect to treat possible distrust and conflicts. Poor workmanship and long delays are another difficulty. (Marshall, 1998)

The above challenges can be answered by accurate needs assessment; by exploring the architect's new roles and introduce new contents in the study programmes of students to acquire new skills; by consulting experts in communication and conflict management; and

by providing targeted trainings for the local participants. (Marshall, 1998) Action research with its constant feedback mechanisms (Baráth, 2006) is a feasible approach in project evaluation.

Early Hungarian traditions

Community architecture has its more than three-century-old pre-modern precedents in Hungary. In rural areas, houses were often built by lay teams named „kaláka", and experts were hired only for very specific tasks. One's relatives, friends and acquaintances worked in kalákas in their spare time. The hosting person or „beneficiary" ensured daily meals and wine for the team. Reciprocity, a basic social norm was always manifested in kalákas; thereby these teams strengthened social capital and helped those – the majority of the rural population – unable to pay for the costs of the construction. (Király-Nagy, 2003) As a result, anyone in need in the rural community could receive assistance and was able to return it in the future. A healthy social relationship was established in which the roles of supporter and receiver were exchanged, and, as a consequence, no one was exploited; and one's self-esteem was not diminshed either.

Every year the Civil Kaláka Program is organized in Transylvania, when people who consider these traditions important assemble and work together in some community project. The resulting buildings make local citizens' and visitors' lives more comfortable. (Kovács, 2006) Due to major changes in technologies, kaláka may be very different from its original version, both in agriculture and in the construction industry. Its basic feature, reciprocity, is preserved in all forms of modern endeavours.

Community building projects and community-based learning

"Responsible architects think very much in terms of the whole community"

– Walter Gropius

Universities have a major role and responsibility in the complex development of their locality by sharing updated, relevant scientific results in the service of the community. In community -based learning (CBL) projects, students' academic work is performed in the context of the local community. Students collaborate with non-profit organizations in various projects in order to practice their future profession in real settings. (http://www.princeton.edu/cbli/) The main goals and gains of CBL projects in architecture are the following:

- planning and construction is performed in real community settings therefore students are involved in working on practical problems, and in a socially responsible way
- leadership skills and conflict management skills are learnt
- partnerships are formed among state, local government, for-profit and non-profit organizations and the academic sector
- new materials and technologies may be developed that meet housing demands, ecological sustainability requirements, and financial restrictions. (Feuerborn, 2005; Udoku, 2001; Kósa, 2013)

These projects introduce aspects of diversity and ethics in the curricula of the students. Interdisciplinary teams are formed in which architects work together with social

professionals: community and social workers, social politicians, sociologists, anthropologists etc.

The ideal learning environment for community-based learning is characterized by openness, clear expectations, tolerance, solidarity and dialogue. Students learn how to take responsibility for their own work, their own community and environment.

The b2 Students' Group for Innovation was established at the University of Pécs in 2011 to put CBL principles into practice in Hungary. In the past two years, students have developed a marked sensitivity to social problems, discovered the complexity of potentials inherent in all development projects, explored one another's and one's own creativity, learnt to respect and improve each other's ideas and have learnt to take responsibility for their own decisions. (Kósa, 2013)

Conclusion

Community architecture is one of the possible responses to the problems which the 2008 global crisis has presented for the architect. As Udoku (2001) noted, it may change architecture's middle-class perspective into a more complex community endeavour, what requires a reinterpretation of the role of the architect, as well as the role of the university. Community architecture projects serve the intertwined goals of enablement and empowerment, thereby strengthening and enriching communities.

References

Baráth Á. (2006). Résztvevő közösségfejlesztés (pp. 83-110). In: Baráth Á., Hollings, J., Jones, Macáková, S., Szilárd I. (szerk.). *Egészséges roma közösségek építése. Oktatási kézikönyv. [Building Healthy Roma communities. Training Manual. Chapter V. Participant Community Development.]* Brussels: IOM – International Organization for Migration. http://www.princeton.edu/cbli/ (Last visited on 18. 08. 2013.)

Feuerborn, G. J. (2005). Making Architecture, Making Community. The Pedagogy of an Urban "Rural Studio". *Arch 407/507 Human Factors & Architectural Research Methods*. https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/1920/ARM_Feuerborn.pdf?sequence=1

Haricharan, S. (1995). The different appoaches to community participation have different implications for development. *Social Work Practice* 3: 13-17.

Király-Nagy, É (2003). Kalákában végzett munkák: A házépítés*. Parola* 1-2: 18-20.

Kósa, B. (2013). *Közösségépítő – építő közösség*. Pécs: DLA disszertáció. Kézirat.

Kovács, Á. (2006). Székelyföldi kalákakrónika. *Országépítő* 4: 1-28. http://www.orszagepito.hu/szamok/teljes/2006-4m.pdf (Last visited on 09. 05. 2013.)

Lakatos, K. (2009). *A képessé tétel folyamata*. Budapest: Közösségfejlesztők Egyesülete.

Marschall, S. (1998). Architecture as Empowerment: The Participatory Approach in Contemporary Architecture in South Africa. *Transformation* 35: 103-108.

Udoku, O. (2001). Visions of Architecture in the Neighbourhood*. AEE:* 2-9. cebe.cf.ac.uk/aee/pdfs/UdukuO.pdf (Last visited on 09. 05. 2013.)