

Faculty of Architecture. University of Zagreb - CR

Participatory Design of Space

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In today's world, the built environment is increasingly understood not only through its environmental and economic impacts, but also through its social dimension. This shifts the role of the architect beyond that of a creative and technical expert to include responsibilities as a socially sensitive actor. Such a role demands new competencies, including interdisciplinary collaboration, inclusive planning, and participatory methods.

At the Faculty of Architecture, University of Zagreb, these skills are fostered through the graduate elective course Participatory Design of Space, introduced in 2017/2018. The course builds on the City Acupuncture initiative (active since 2009), whose interdisciplinary and participatory workshops laid the groundwork for the course's methodological framework. Structured as an intensive workshop, the course guides students through a complete participatory design process—from introductory concepts to the creation and potential implementation of a design proposal.

Each year's task is based on the needs of a specific local community. The design brief is intentionally simple, allowing students to concentrate on effectively incorporating participatory input. The process begins with introductory lectures and discussions on inclusive planning, communication, and the specific design site and task. Students then visit the location and participate in moderated discussions with local stakeholders. In this relaxed setting, stakeholders share challenges and opportunities without offering solutions. Students listen, ask questions, and develop a shared understanding of the context.

Following the site visit, students work in small groups—ideally in teams of three—to develop conceptual designs expressed through written statements and sketches. These are presented at a midterm critique, where stakeholders are invited to offer feedback. This step ensures alignment between users' expectations and students' emerging proposals. Students then refine their designs with faculty mentorship,

which encourages each group to explore a distinct approach. This results in multiple design scenarios for the final presentation, offering a range of solutions and enriching the community dialogue.

Final presentations are again held on-site, with local stakeholders providing feedback. Often, the community is surprised and inspired by the diversity and depth of the proposals developed in such a short time. For many students, it is their first direct exposure to both enthusiastic and critical reactions from future users—a valuable experience in empathy and responsiveness. Where possible, the most promising proposals are further developed, sometimes combining ideas from several groups. This promotes collaboration over individual authorship and offers students hands-on experience with joint project development. Participation in implementation is voluntary, but many students choose to remain engaged.

Throughout the course, students learn to critically evaluate participatory input, generate conceptual plans, articulate design intent, engage in user dialogue, and contribute to the translation of concepts into feasible outcomes. These skills are cultivated through teamwork, attentive listening, and mutual respect.

Aligned with the EAAE's pedagogical themes, the course prepares students to address emergent needs, develop value systems grounded in local contexts, and adopt holistic perspectives. Through small-scale tasks embedded in real-world settings, students gain first-hand experience in navigating complexity and plurality. The course bridges theory and practice, nurturing creativity and optimism, and ultimately redefines the architect's role—from service provider to active co-creator of shared spaces and futures, acting as listener, citizen, and moderator as well as designer.

