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Urban Design Workshops in the Education Curriculum: Advantages and Disadvantages

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Abstract. Urban design workshops have become a quality addition to the regular education curriculum in architecture, urban design, and landscape architecture schools. In many of these institutions, short courses or workshops are introduced as an obligatory part of the design studio. However, the quality of urban design workshops varies. This study focuses on twenty-five years of experience in teaching through workshops. Workshops, which are very often an extracurricular activity, can be used as a tool for curricular renovation and flexibility because they complement the studio program. The advantages of introducing programs with urban design workshops into education is that the professional subject changes every year depending on the current events taking place in the surroundings and the profession, and, in comparison to the compulsory curriculum, this dynamic component of studying links students and practice. During the course of the workshop, the students have to focus their thoughts, work, and results in a short period. This allows them to contemplate current events, and also to assess both their individual capabilities and knowledge gained through regular studies and extending the intuitive and intellectual learning process. The main disadvantage of urban design workshops is that only by completing all phases of a workshop will participants have the best results from every perspective. The first phase of preparing a workshop, when its themes and goals are set, places a lot of responsibility on the teachers that organize the workshop. Regular work usually occupies the teaching staff, and so this phase presents a burden for their educational and other activities at the school. The second phase is the very core of the urban design workshop, when all of the planned activities come together. It is essential for the participants to share their experiences and work in a common living environment for a few days. The results of the workshop—that is, transformation of their experiences into design—are seen in the third phase thorough exhibitions, presentations, or publications. It is usually difficult to continue workshop activities after the very intensive work in the second phase. The third workshop phase requires a new investment of creative energy.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on twenty-five years of experience in teaching architecture and urban design through urban design workshops. The workshop experiences started with two summer schools prepared in 1993 and carried out in 1994 (Found Places: Archaeological Sites and Marginal City Spaces, Izola, Ljubljana) and 1995 (Interpreting the Site: Archaeology, Architecture, City; Izola, Ljubljana). The topics and methods of the workshops ranged from archaeological deciphering of neglected and degraded urban areas in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia (which later developed through more thorough research on degraded urban areas), to proposals for representations of archaeological "found places" (resulting in a doctoral study of archaeology and architecture). In 1996, the Physical Planning Office at the Slovenian

Ministry of the Environment and Physical Planning prepared a public invitation for co-financing municipalities in carrying out urban design workshops and tenders. Through this activity, the Physical Planning Office wished to facilitate solutions to important urban issues in Slovenian towns. One of workshop themes was visions of the urban development of Izola or parts of it in 1996 and 1997. Some of the workshop participants were teachers and students at the University of Ljubljana's Faculty of Architecture. Accordingly, the idea grew that workshops, which have been an extracurricular activity, can be used as a tool for curricular renovation and flexibility because they complement the studio program. Based on these considerations, the EU Tempus project Restructuring the Main Course in Architectural Education was prepared; its goal was to develop intensive short-term courses for improving the regular main studio course and its curriculum. In addition, the project involved developing undergraduate teaching methods at the Faculty of Architecture, including the development and adaptation of teaching aids and materials, and staff and student mobility. The problem addressed was the varying quality of the main architecture courses at the Faculty of Architecture also because in many cases the tutors in the studio course highlighted the personality of the tutor as the leading educational motivation for students.

The wider objective of the project was to ensure that the university is in a position to offer education targeting the changing needs of the built environment. The realistic assessment of the wider long-term objective that the project would contribute to was improved consultancy contacts between the university, local authorities, government authorities, and local businesses. The development plan outlined the goal of restructuring and modernizing the content and quality of studio work through the following activities:

– To encourage and offer teachers in the studios and their students the opportunity for exchange. The presentation of outside views, issues, and solutions is a stimulus to education. It also offers students the opportunity to participate in international developments in their field of study and for tutors to review their teaching methods and material.

– To update the current course with short-term courses that regulate both the dynamic of needs of the built environment and professional expectations. An architectural design is a synthesis and not a natural sum of all the requirements it should meet. A well-considered design is even more than this, which is precisely why it may be surprising and significant. Therefore, it is necessary for students to articulate their own views and perceptions. In addition, lectures address current technical, social, and cultural developments, and inform students of the latest professional issues. The short-term courses cover various topics, adding a range of architectural and urban tasks, including housing, public buildings, buildings and the environment, public space, city planning, and regional planning. These short-term courses are not tied to any particular year of the program, but are attended by a mix of students from all years.

The EU Commission approved the proposed project in 1998, which specifically addresses the undergraduate curriculum development in architecture (coordinator: Lucija Ažman Momirski). The application to the same EU Tempus call focusing on a specialized graduate course in urban planning for the degree of urban planning architect (coordinator: Peter Gabrijelčič) was declined, which shows that the EU Commission also recognized the basic need to transform the undergraduate program in architecture at that time. The project for the specialized graduate course in urban planning was approved a couple of years later by the same EU Tempus program.

All of the partners involved (in addition to the Faculty of Architecture, also the Rotterdam Academy of Architecture and Urban Design and the Graz University of Technology) played an active role in the project. The partners tested a collaborative studio project (New Entrance Pavilion of the Johanneum Museum in Graz) and cooperated in holding workshops in Rotterdam (Sensing Mobility and From the Freeway), Ljubljana (Building in Tradition: South Square), Koper (Integrating the City: Public Spaces), and Graz (Double Face, No Face). The studio work synthesizes the experiences of students from all other courses and introduces students to various design projects integrating teaching methodologies,

technical, functional, and compositional exercises, tutorials, and field trips. Workshops are an opportunity to bring together scholars and professionals from Slovenia and abroad to address critical and complex problems in contemporary architecture and urban design. Consequently, they complement the studio program, offer a new dimension of constant sharing of ideas related to design, and extend the intuitive and intellectual learning process in which students transform their experiences into design. Workshops give a design studio the opportunity to position itself in the framework of all design studios at the faculty and elsewhere, and therefore the studio gains a permanent instrument for its own quality control. Such an approach raises the standard of architectural education substantially in design studios. For example, in the case of the workshop Building in Tradition: South Square, numerous alternative solutions presented for this site in the very center of Ljubljana challenged past attempts, and students were able to advocate new approaches to transforming the square. Conference discussions on these topics continued at the meetings in Rotterdam and twice in Ljubljana, and concluded with a document outlining the essential elements of a workshop. The senate of the Faculty of Architecture accepted and confirmed the document in 2001. Since then, workshops have become an obligatory part of the program at the Faculty of Architecture, which confirmed the expectations of the EU Tempus project that the workshops would have a long-term impact on the further development of education at the Faculty of Architecture. The premise of this study is that all forthcoming workshops should follow the approved plan for workshop preparation and performance (Fig. 1), and that there should be no significant shortcomings in any of the elements of the workshops carried out.

2. Materials and methods

The materials for testing the defined premise are four workshops, titled:
- Koper: Integrating the City: Public Spaces;
- Mobile Cultures: Development Opportunities for Tourism in the Municipality of Piran;
- The Žiri Intergenerational Center; and
- Waterfront Redevelopment: Izola East.

The following summarizes the workshop content, the organizers and supporters of the workshops, and the time period of the main second part of the workshop.

Koper is the center of Slovenia's coastal region. Consequently, there are expectations for the development of administrative, commercial, cultural, educational, and industrial functions in Koper. However, residents have left and urban programs have been abandoned in some parts of Koper, such as the historical town core. All of these functions started to appear on the outskirts and in the new parts of the town (e.g., in Semedela, Olmo, and Žusterna). In parallel a new problem emerged: the programs were isolated and partly monofunctional. The key problems of the workshop were to find a way to emphasize Koper's unique and characteristic spaces, which at the time lacked an adequate audience, and to discover all of its sites with ambient, social, symbolic, and other potential that could benefit the entire city. The Faculty of Architecture held the workshop Koper: Integrating the City: Public Spaces in the Framework of Tempus JEP from September 13th to 22nd, 1999. The Municipality of Koper and the Ministry of the Environment's National Office for Physical Planning supported the workshop.

The most important development alternative for the Municipality of Piran is tourism: in 2002, 24% of all Slovenian hotel stays were in the Municipality of Piran. Hotel stays represented half of the total income of the municipality. On busiest day of tourism, the population in the municipality doubled. Overly ambitious plans to develop tourism threaten the Mediterranean area in Piran with a loss of identity; for example, the Sečovlje saltpans are the only remaining saltpans in the northern Adriatic [1]. Because of their scale and landscape characteristics, they are one of the most effective tools for the entire
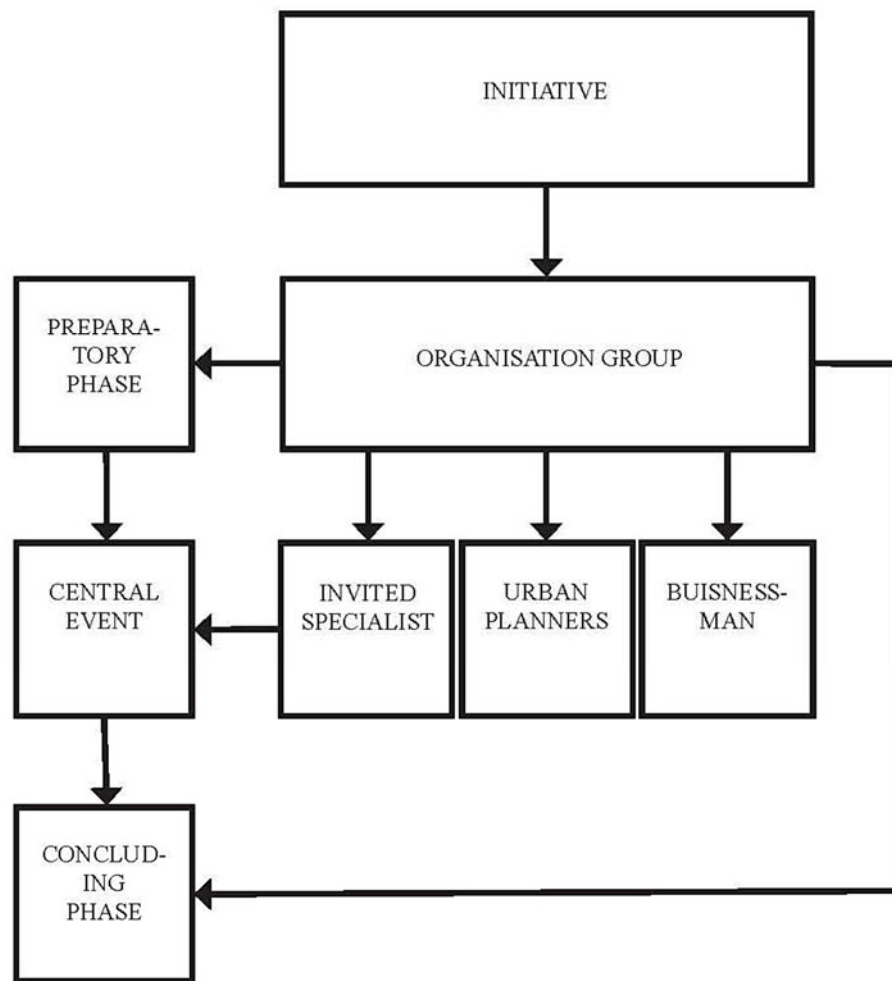
Figure 1. Plan for workshop preparation and performance

region's tourism success. The greatest danger to this concept was the plans the expand the Sečovlje airport [2]. The Faculty of Architecture held the workshop Mobile Cultures: Development Opportunities for Tourism in the Municipality of Piran from September 21st to 26th, 2002. The Municipality of Piran and the Ministry of the Environment's National Office for Physical Planning supported the workshop.

The purpose of the workshop the Žiri Intergenerational Center was to identify the spatial conditions for integrating social, educational, cultural, service, care, and other programs into a modern model of an intergenerational center. The intergenerational center functions as a node in a widespread network of programs for social care and intergenerational cooperation. The center integrates household communities (the contemporary concept of a nursing home), palliative care, temporary care, daycare for the elderly, sheltered housing, an educational center, a preschool, a restaurant, a multipurpose auditorium, and other programs and services. The intergenerational center is a new model for social care for the elderly. The concept originates from anthropology, psychology, gerontology, and other humanities. Its basic idea is that the intergenerational links between all generations are crucial for the healthy growth of society and people [3]. The Faculty of Architecture held the workshop from July 2nd to 6th, 2012.
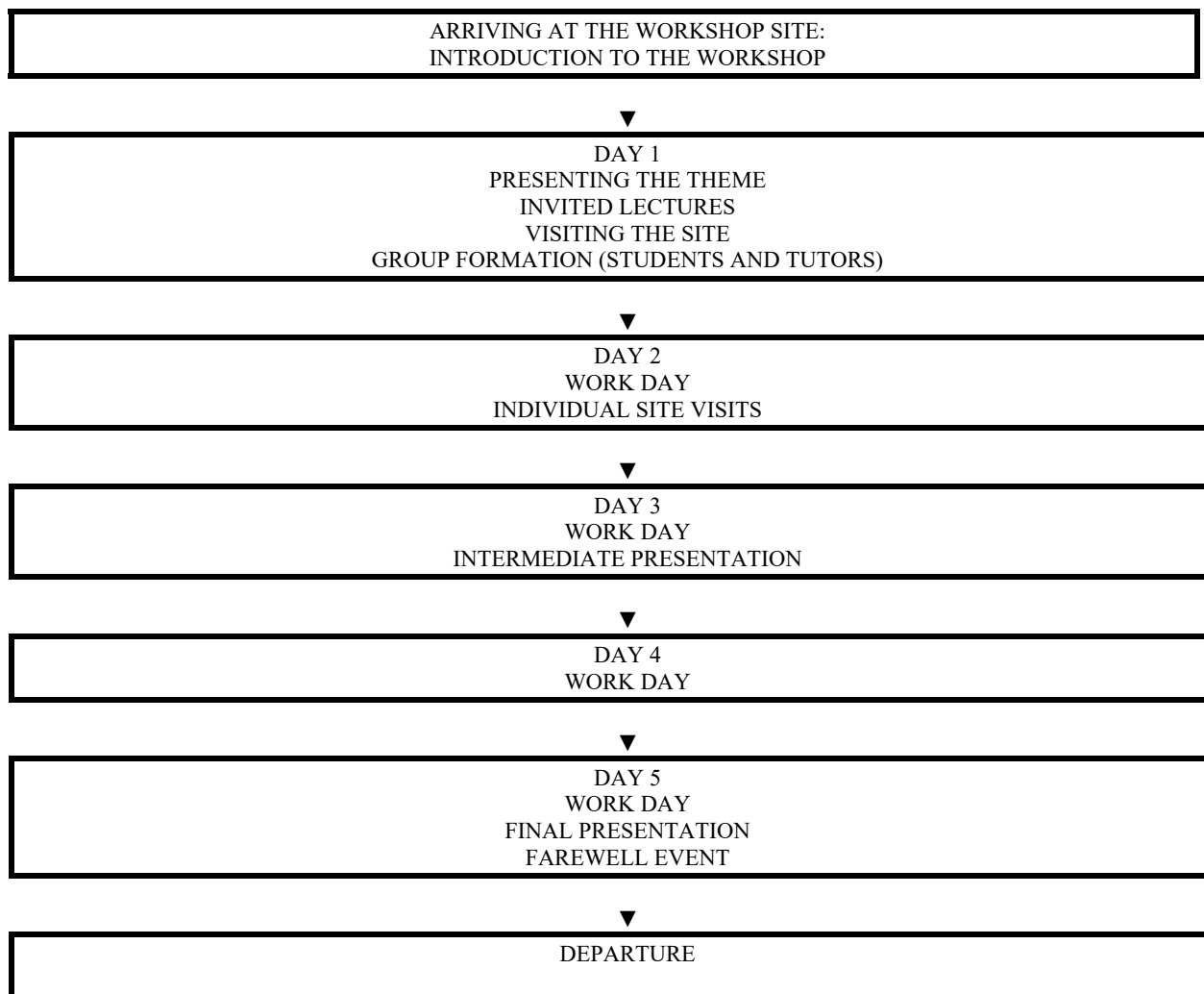
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│              ARRIVING AT THE WORKSHOP SITE:                   │
│              INTRODUCTION TO THE WORKSHOP                     │
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                          DAY 1                               │
│                   PRESENTING THE THEME                       │
│                     INVITED LECTURES                         │
│                     VISITING THE SITE                        │
│          GROUP FORMATION (STUDENTS AND TUTORS)               │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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│                          DAY 2                               │
│                        WORK DAY                              │
│                  INDIVIDUAL SITE VISITS                      │
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│                          DAY 3                               │
│                        WORK DAY                              │
│                INTERMEDIATE PRESENTATION                     │
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│                   FINAL PRESENTATION                         │
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│                        DEPARTURE                             │
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Figure 2. Plan of the central workshop event

The north-eastern part of the old town of Izola, which contains areas protected as natural and cultural heritage, was experiencing significant capital pressure. This location had what were probably the first spas in Slovenian territory, as well as fish canneries established in the nineteenth century. Today the main characteristics of the area are fenced-in industrial activities (the seaside promenade between Koper and Izola is also cut off by an industrial area) and a lack of green programs and systems. Slovenian and foreign investors sought permission to build three islands in Viližan Bay and start building large-scale tourist resorts. If the investors had been able carry out these plans, this would have completely changed the character of Izola and turned it into the largest seaside tourist resort in Slovenia. Issues that remained open for discussion were: 1) waterfront redevelopment from a shipyard to a tourist resort (the waterfront tourist plan), 2) waterfront redevelopment from industry to cultural heritage proposals (the waterfront culture and heritage plan), 3) a waterfront green system plan, 4) waterfront trails and a cycling plan, 5) an island or islands in Viližan Bay, and 6) a waterfront interface point [3]. The Faculty of Architecture held its workshop from September 24th to 28th, 2012. The European Union partially funded the last two workshops through the European Social Fund, which was carried out under the Operational Program for Developing Human Resources for 2007–2013, developmental priority 3: Development of Human Resources and of Life-Long Learning and priority axis 3.3: Quality, Competitiveness, and Responsiveness of Higher Education.

The methodology of a workshop has the following framework [5]:
- The urban design workshop starts with an initiative;
- The urban design workshop is an active link between three participating groups and one organization group:
  - The first group is an interdisciplinary group of invited specialists;
  - The second group brings together active urban planners and students of architecture, urban design, and landscape planning from the local, national, and international levels;
  - The third group mobilizes businesspersons that have a direct interest in dealing with the selected issue.
- The workshop is carried out in three phases of different durations:
  - Phase 1: Preparatory activities
  - Phase 2: Central event
  - Phase 3: Concluding phase

Following this methodology, we will check whether the workshops followed the method described, whether a problem occurred in any of the steps, and whether the advantages and disadvantages of the method described could be determined.

3. Results and discussion

The municipalities provided the initiative to prepare the workshops in Koper and Piran. The Faculty of Architecture defined the theme of the workshop in Žiri. The initiative met with an exceptionally good response from the mayor and the entire community of Žiri. The Faculty of Architecture also selected the content of the 2012 workshop in Izola, especially with regard to the current spatial projects along the city's waterfront. Because the starting point of the topic offered an opportunity for critical evaluation of municipal projects, the municipality was not involved to a greater extent in the workshop. The results of the workshops usually allow significant improvement of existing spatial and planning solutions as well as the application of a participative approach, and so the non-participation of stakeholders is a missed opportunity. In any case, the aim of the workshops is not for experts to uncritically support solutions that do not correspond to their expertise.

In all four cases, tutors from the Faculty of Architecture comprised the organization group. In the case of Piran and Koper, planners from the city planning office strengthened the organization group. Such support is essential for bringing together the general public with researchers and practitioners in the region. Information from the community was also indispensable in Žiri. The organization group prepared a study on the topics at the local, national, and international levels. Such a study offered the organization group the opportunity to develop the theme of the workshop in detail and to become familiar with the main research at each level. This had an impact on invitations to experts from various professions to the workshop and urban planners' involvement. All four workshops were international. This means that the invited specialists represented not only different disciplines, but also discussed local problems in a larger, international context. In the case of Izola, the workshop was intertwined with another international project on the subject, so that truly high-quality views on the selected topic came from a number of other professions; the organizers prepared two events that complemented each other. The involvement of stakeholders with a direct interest in solving the selected problem remained an issue. Many do not view the open discussion (and thus its unexpected results) as a contribution or a means to the best spatial solution and other results. Through the awareness of their financial position, the power that investors have is usually reflected in the relationship to ideas developed by experts and even students. In some cases, when students were members of the winning teams in public competitions, prominent owners did not even want the students to attend the presentation of their study. The workshop also offers completely new, unexpected ideas, and here the role of young people is irreplaceable.

Preparatory activities were time-consuming and affected the implementation of the central part of the workshop, which lasted five days, except in Koper. The introduction to the workshop took place on the day of arrival, which was a day before the workshop started. The idea was that the participants should first receive as much information as possible, so that the lectures and the on-site visits took place on the first day of the workshop. At the end of the first day, the students and their advisors were divided into groups: one advisor instructing a group of four students or two advisors instructing a group of eight students. Such group arrangements offer significantly greater instructional benefits for students: during all five days, the students are in constant contact with their tutors and they obtain feedback faster than during standard teaching, when some instructors have to deal with three hundred students or more during a semester and they cannot possibly concentrate on just a few students. This is important for more than teaching practice because the teacher-student ratio also affects how teaching quality is assessed at a particular university.

Based on the information obtained and experiences during the site visits, the groups started to work on the second day and the first half of the third day. Smaller groups were more flexible and they often decided to re-examine the area. The first presentation of ideas was on the afternoon of the third day. These presentations are extremely important because the groups offer their first conclusions. The reaction of other groups and invited critics is extremely important. Because of the groups' established and defined visions and the intensity of the work, the atmosphere between the students and the advisors was relaxed. During the first presentation, students' participation in the discussion was much more lively, emotionally involved, and content-oriented.

By examining their ideas for the first time, the students revised their previous solutions and improved them. Over the next day and a half, the students sought to present their solutions as clearly as possible, which is increasingly facilitated today by computer technology. During the workshop, the students have to focus their thoughts, work, and results in a short period. This allows them to contemplate current events and also to assess both their individual capabilities and what they have learned through their regular program by extending their intuitive and intellectual learning process. It offered students opportunities to test the architect's mission and introduced routes of communication with the general public. In general, such an approach can reveal conflicts of ideology and approaches between schools and society as a whole, and it can also signal the start of cooperation between students and a future client.

The last workshop presentation was more formal, attended by representatives of the municipalities and other stakeholders. An exhibition of the results of the Koper workshop was held at the Koper Regional Museum and a workshop publication was prepared. In Piran, the results of the workshop were graphically enhanced after the workshop and a large flyer was designed for the workshop. At the Žiri workshop, the students completed their proposals during the central event, followed by many presentations of ideas and reflections from the workshop and a research volume that presented the issues and possible solutions. Another research volume, published after the Izola workshop, presented the most important ideas and results in comparative graphic form. The Max Fabiani Prize for student work recognized the results of the workshop in 2014.

The evaluation of the methodology used shows that the formation of the first group followed the ideal scheme (Table 1). It is becoming increasingly difficult to involve local architects and urban planners in these short but intensive courses. On the one hand, this is an echo of the economic crisis, and on the other hand it reflects resistance to unexpected ideas that may emerge. No one from the third group attended the workshops.

The evaluation of the three workshops phases shows that three phases of different durations (preparatory activities, central event, and concluding phase) followed the ideal scheme (Table 2).

Table 1. The three participating groups in the Koper, Piran, Žiri, and Izola workshops.

	Koper	Piran	Žiri	Izola
Group 1	Local national international interdisciplinary	Local national international interdisciplinary	Local national international interdisciplinary	Local national international interdisciplinary
Group 2	National international	National international	National international	National international
Group 3	Not present	Not present	Not present	Not present

More days for the central event is reasonable if additional activities are foreseen, such as participatory meetings, or if the area of the theme is very large. The advantage of introducing programs with urban design workshops into education is that the subject changes every year depending on current events in society and profession, and, in comparison to the core curriculum, this dynamic component of studying links students and practice. Workshops, which are very often an extracurricular activity, can be used as a tool for curricular renovation and flexibility because they complement the studio program.

Table 2. The three workshop phases in the Koper, Piran, Žiri, and Izola workshops.

	Koper	Piran	Žiri	Izola
Phase 1	Faculty and municipality organization	Faculty and municipality organization	Faculty (and municipality) organization	Faculty organization
Phase 2	Nine days on site	Five days on site	Five days on site	Five days on site
Phase 3	Exhibition, booklet	Exhibition, booklet	Presentations, volume	Volume, exhibition, award

The main disadvantage of urban design workshops is that only by completing all phases of a workshop will participants obtain the best results from every perspective. The first phase of preparing a workshop, when its themes and goals are set, places a great deal of responsibility on the teachers that organize the workshop. Regular work usually occupies the teaching staff, and so this phase is a burden on top of their teaching and other activities at the school. The second phase is the very core of the urban design workshop, when all of the planned activities come together. It is essential for the participants to share their experiences and work in a common living environment for a few days. The results of the workshop—that is, transformation of their experiences into design—are seen in the third phase thorough exhibitions, presentations, or publications. It is usually difficult to continue the workshop activities after the very intensive work in the second phase. The third workshop phase requires a new investment of creative energy.

Figure 3: Exhibition of the results of the Koper workshop at the Koper Regional Museum

4. Conclusions

In our experience, the early workshops were definitely a reaction to the fact that a high proportion of students that entered architecture did not come into contact with practice [6]. In some cases, the state (e.g., in France) or schools (e.g., in Germany) have far greater control, advised and supported by professionals. In Spain, even though there is a powerful architectural profession controlled through the school, the profession has little formal input into education. Another alternative that draws together practice and academia is the day-release approach (in the previously described Tempus program, such an example is the Rotterdam Academy of Architecture), in which the student is a full-time member of a practice and attends classes in addition to working [7]. The workshop remains a continuous learning program and an ideal mix of practice and research, also balancing situations in which the transfer of practice into faculty programs influences the development of education in the form of an architecture office where educational criteria do not take priority.

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