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U-parks. U-turn we love, Utena district Municipality, Lithuania

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UTENA DISTRICT MUNICIPALITY

PROJECT

„U-PARKS. U-TURN WE LOVE“

Utena is one of the oldest cities in Lithuania. The city is 753 years old. It is located in the basin of Aukstaiciu highlands craved by the valleys of 4 rivers (Karsuona, Vyzuonele, Utenele and Rase), there are two lakes (Vyzuonaitis and Dauniskis) (28 391 residents in 2012). Utena has beautiful natural surroundings, but it's not a resort town. It is a city with large businesses such as meat processing plant, beer brewery, a dairy produce company, light industry, a clothing maker. In spite of

that, natural heritage is absolutely essential to Utena today. Utena borders on two National Parks and has itself created its own natural reserves to protect unique natural heritage.

For many years Utena municipality was working consistently seeking to create high quality landscape that could meet environmental and social expectations.

The decision regarding preservation of expressive natural urban areas was made right after the regaining Lithuanian independence. Between 1990 and 1998 the process of land restitution were started in the whole country. Although various persons expressed their interest to acquire these ecologically important natural territories, the Utena municipality succeeded in saving them remain open for public. The plan of Utena city central part was formed in order to specify the boundaries of parks and valuable natural areas which were proclaimed to be not privatized. Preparing the Scheme of Utena city green spaces in 1999, landscape character was analyzed and values, functions evaluated, proposals regarding the boundaries of parks were introduced and the most important milestones of parks planning were determined. The schematic solutions later were transferred to the City General Plan that retains the idea of sustainable development of the city.

The Utena city parks Project („U– parks, U – turn we love“) is long, continuous work started in 2002. Before that time green spaces, rivers, lakes and their coastlines were contaminated with rubbish, overgrown with low value shrubs and were not suitable for recreation and other social needs of local residents.

Within eight years four parks were legally formed and practically adapted to the needs of the local residents: City Garden located in the central part of the city (2005), the riverside of Krusuona River located in the densely build up residential area (2009), Dauniskis (2005) and Vyžuona (2010) parks as central

Methods of landscape restoration and renewal applied allowed development of new quality of Utena city environment, preservation of natural structure of landscape and continues system of green areas. The aesthetical values were revealed in the modern parks of the city. The results of this project served as a stimulus to raise quality of landscape in as many territories as possible.

The main aims of the Project were:

- to protect general structure of the landscape and the ecological network in the town;
- to enhance aesthetical and recreational potential of the natural landscape and create high quality recreational areas;
- to sustain accessibility to the main landscape values for all citizens and visitors;
- to improve quality of water;
- to build new connections and enhance better communication between the different parts of the city and the people;
- to raise the quality of living spaces;
- to improve the image of the town and the general climate for investment.

The project fulfils requirements and actively implements the National landscape policy of Lithuania (2004), The Law on Green plots (2006), Regulation on the Nature Frame (2007), other legal acts and territorial planning documents, it highly contributes to the enhancement of environmental, social, recreational, economic, cultural, aesthetic values of the landscape.

Because of cleaning the garbage, in some places – abundant bushes and water vegetation, water sewage control, the water quality in the small rivers and lakes was upgraded. New facilities and casual maintenance of the parks prevent wasting as well. New social functions will allow saving these areas as green corridors, preserving the natural character of the urban landscape and biodiversity in the future.

The recreational infrastructure was created:

- in 11 ha Dauniškis park: 2 km of new lightening paths, paths for bicycles, 1 bridge, 3 playgrounds, 1 sports areas, 3 parkings, 2 swimming places, musical fountain, WC installed, 50 trees planted;
- in 2,65 ha City Gardens: 1 km of new lightening paths, 2 bridges; water treatment installations; 50 trees, 1000 shrubs, 1300 m² parterres planted;
- in 1 ha Krašuona River riverside: 0,7 km paths, 2 bridges; 100 m² of shrubs area;
- in 35 ha Vyžuona park: 4,5 km of new lightening paths, 2,5 km paths for roller-skates, bicycles, 7 new bridges, 2 ponds cleaned, drainage system installed in 10 ha.

New bridges, safe, lightened paths system enhance better communication, forced new healthier lifestyles among all social groups of citizens. The everyday routes passed near the streets were

changed into pleasant walking through the parks shortening the way to the work, school. There was created access to main landscape values for disabled. Young people have a place to spend their leisure time with their friends. The green areas are popular among mothers with small children and elderly people, athletes and sports enthusiasts. Sports professionals hold physical therapy exercises in Dauniškis Park. Parks are full of Nordic Walking enthusiasts, joggers, skaters, cyclists and volleyball fans. Young Utena football players and athletes also practice there.

15 new working places were created, during the busiest season up to 25 people are working. Parks became a part of town cultural life, they play host to rides, concerts and other entertainment. An illuminated musical fountain built on Lake Dauniškis has become one of the most popular city attractions. The culture of park management, professional solutions of greenery was transmitted to the surrounding areas and had influence on the management of individual plots.

The most obvious are the aesthetic changes of the landscape. The most of green plots were “nobodies” land without any management for many years. Totally grown up expressive valleys of small natural meandering rivers and their waterfronts were not perceivable and not accessible. The most important task was to reveal and open the natural meanders and confluences of the small rivers. Management of Dauniškis lake shore and its new installations recreate panoramas of the town. All parks were planned in a manner to maintain and strengthening natural features of the expressive landscape, preserving natural continuity, the most important natural ecotypes and accommodating new plants due to different ecological conditions. The Utena parks distinguish with the plenitude of water bodies, perennial flowers in the background of characteristic for the whole region woods vegetation.

After the development of first parks the majority of citizens satisfy with results, more respect and confidence with the work of specialists of the Municipality administration appear. Public became more open for further discussions and started to react in the same direction.

The public met the Krašuona riverside and Vyžuona park landscape planning documents with interest and supported them actively. In the Krašuona riverside case individual residential land plots are in very close contact and interaction with the public riverside. The concrete landscaping of the both – public and private – land was actively negotiated, consensus was found.

With the changes of landscape, change of culture of participation in the decision making process changed too. The new parks (Vyžuonaičio and Krašuona) development projects were initiated in 2010 by the residents of surrounding areas; they are active participators in the process of planning and designing.

The project effectively increased the public’s awareness of the importance of landscape in terms of human development, individual and collective well-being. Awareness rising was one of the most important and necessary task of the project. The processes of ideas generating, planning, implementation and management are public. In order to have the support of public broad information company was organized. Information about the architectural contests, planning and implementation was spread in the local media, official websites of Utena district Municipality, Lithuanian Association of landscape architects. After implementation, special discussions and events for citizens were organised, information stands with information about parks authors, facilities, landscape values in all parks were installed.

Special interviews showed that Utena citizens recognized the importance of landscape management in their individual and collective well-being, the parks development had the positive effect on their everyday life, community building, understanding of their town as good place to live in.

Utena district Municipality could be considered as official institution who declares the importance of landscape for the town identity and life quality of the citizens. Started from the small park reconstruction architectural contest in 2002, using only short municipal budget for it implementation, now Utena has 50 ha of developed parks and is planning 2 new parks – the actions are long lasting and covers whole town area.

It should be noted that transformation of green areas in the city and development of other infrastructure of the city were performed at the same time. Thanks to consistent, coordinated actions performed in the different fields the heating rates of the city are the lowest among all Lithuanian locations, the emissions of CO₂ were reduced by 60 percent, the city was among the first cities that started to use sewer gas for the production of electivity. The Municipal Council Regulation provides

involvement of communities in the decision-making process (this is very unusual both in Lithuania and abroad). The award of 2009 that was given for the best use of European Union funds confirms productive work of the municipality.

In 2012 the Utena municipality Park project „U– parks, U – turn we love“ was awarded with the National landscape award. The winner was selected from 27 candidatures. The National Landscape Award in Lithuania was established in 2007, when regarding to European Landscape convention the National rules governing the landscape award were prepared and adopted. First competition was organized in 2008, but the winner application wasn't submitted to the Council of Europe for Landscape Award.

Besides The Landscape Award session of Council of Europe, Utena in 2013 took part in the contest „The International Awards for Liveable Communities 2013“ patronized by the organization United Nations (UN). The criterions of the contest are similar to the provisions of the European Landscape Convention: development of the quality of natural and urbanized landscape; preservation of Arts, Culture and Heritage; application of the best practice in the field of environment protection; participation and empowerment of the society; promotion of healthy life-style; strategic planning. During the contest the city of Utena was among 500 contenders of its category, i.e. among the cities with the population between 20 to 75 thousand and it was recognized as the city that is the best place for living. The facts regarding the recent alternations of industrial city of Utena were mentioned during the contest. After these alternations various parks, squares were established in the city, tourism was expanded. So, Utena is a good example that the green network (in Lithuania – Nature frame) can be successfully preserved in the industrial town and fulfil both the environmental and social needs (local communities strengthening) as well.

The project “U-parks, U-turn we love“ illustrates how a real protection, management and planning of landscape can guarantee a constant maintenance of landscape, sustainable use, also to integrate environmental, social and economic interests and show the example to others.

However, all the awards received by the city of Utena should be seen as a commitment to remain working in the same direction, to keep going spreading knowledge, sharing experiences and proceed progress.

The lessons that were learned during a work – the ability to keep ears open to the needs of people, to communicate, collaborate and co-create with various specialists and Local politicians, also bright smiles of local residents should be considered as the main achievement of this project. This idea is reflected in the official slogan of the city of Utena: “Utena is the city of happy people. We build the city that is suitable for happy living. For everyone“.