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A challenging EFLA congress 2012

The European Federation of Landscape Architecture EFLA held its regional congress named «Green infrastructure, from global to local» between Saint Petersburg (Russia), Stockholm, Uppsala (Sweden) and Helsinki (Finland) in June 2012.

From the beginning the organizers' aim was clear: introducing a long-term infrastructure vision, building cooperation with numerous events, presenting interesting contributions and strengthening the EFLA network. Arriving in Saint Petersburg is impressive: the streets and underground transport network are built on a large scale, and the buildings appear as majestic remnants of the Soviet period. In this context, the Marble Palace suited perfectly the holding of a congress with attendees and lecturers from all over the world and provided wide-ranging and thorough material to participants (with site visits in three countries).

One of the first topics was the «Urban green infrastructure for climate benefit» by Nancy Rottle, from the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Washington (USA). «Planners and designers are challenged to find solutions to help prepare for the inevitable impacts that existing atmospheric carbon levels are predicted to cause, while also promoting practices that will minimize those levels and therefore potentially reduce the severity of effects.» Nancy Rottle presented several practices, especially regarding stormwater management. Water harvesting, cleaning and re-use can reduce energy used to pump water, or can maintain the full climate-mitigation function of vegetation while being integrated in the landscape.

Saint Petersburg

Peterhof, Saint Petersburg.

Saint Petersburg itself was not forgotten: in the «Venice of the North», priority is given to preserving historic elements and at the same time introducing contemporary landscape elements. One of the best examples is the Nevsky Prospekt, a main axis crossing the town from west to east. Regulations were developed in 2010 in order to protect its heritage and improve the urban environment quality. This is essential in these places flooded with tourists: the vegetation definitely creates an architectural image. During her presentation «Saint Petersburg's green infrastructure», Maria Ignatieva, Professor at the Uppsala University, went back over some key points of Russian green infrastructure today: composed of a random combination of gardens, parks, and street trees it doesn't lead to favorable urban environment conditions. As a result, large undeveloped areas are found in the central parts of cities and suburban areas are isolated. Saint Petersburg is not an exception to this rule. Although there is potential for development in the suburban areas, where the construction sites and open spaces are, the problem is to introduce green places in the historical centre. At the same time, suburban neighborhoods are suffering from a lack of interest in comparison to the historical centre. However, with the latest masterplan in 2004, the town keeps improving its infrastructure, like the establishment of green corridors along the transport areas.

During the congress some unusual topics were also approached: «The green infrastructure for the Dead» by Wingsze Vincci Mak, from Hong Kong; «Vegetative outdoor advertising as a green infrastructure» by Krzysztof Herman from Poland; «Scenarios for the recognition of seasons in cities» Indra Purs raised this problematic in Latvia, where 4 / 5th of the year is out of season according to the conventional landscape practice design.

Helsinki and Stockholm

Walking in the Kaivopuisto park in Helsinki and on the sea front, was the occasion to discover other landscape management methods. As Professor Clas Florgård showed in his presentation «Perspectives of urban blue-green infrastructure», Stockholm is from many points of view a model for a well-developed structure. Blue-green fingers connect the surrounding countryside as wedges into the very city centre, providing possibilities for clean air to enter the city, as well as ecological corridors. Conference goers visited a number of key open spaces in Stockholm and surroundings (Hagaparken, Berzelii Park, Kungsträdgården, Hammarby Sea City: Stockholm's largest urban development project, an eco-cycle model designed to ensure organic recycling throughout this area).

Typical landscape between Helsinki and Stockholm.

Lime tree path in the Kaivopuisto park, Helsinki, with «Treegator» water management, a system coming from England.

Iona Tudora from Romania presented «Scales of landscape, Scales of design – for a green network in Bucharest», a dramatic example of the development pressures of Bucharest, where nearly everything natural is demolished to build a house or a parking lot. This lack of vegetation is even to be found in the private gardens.

Work together for a better environment

Frédéric Dellinger talked about the «Green infrastructure and stormwater management in a city center» with the example of Lyon, third largest city in France. Another French colleague, Olivier Damée, spoke about the improved quality of life thanks to new urban landscapes along the tramways, in his presentation «Public transportation and green infrastructure: a new city for its inhabitants, the case of tramways in France».

Nigel Thorne resumed: «From my perspective as president of the EFLA, the event was a real success for us, acting as it did as our regional congress and allowing the Federation's members to once again enjoy the professional challenge of visiting members countries across Europe (...) The congress concerned indeed not only green heritage but also future constructions. (...) Only close collaboration between committed landscape architects, urban planners, technicians and politicians (...) can manage the development and improvement of sustainable living conditions, while campaigning for long-term, well-thought-out solutions over short-term economic gain. This exchange platform showed us how different governments induce different ways to design. The local government is definitely a major key to achieving better blue-green infrastructure. Bit by bit, the situation is changing. The European Landscape Convention has also become more powerful. Let's work together for a better environment!»

Laure Aubert