

**READING OF AN URBANISED LANDSCAPE -
UNESCO SILENT LAKE LEARNING CENTER**

REFLECTION

Alongside the fast development of cities, digitalisation, threats of an unstable political situation and a wish for a simpler life, more and more citizens are migrating towards rural areas. The absence of agriculture is not a problem to them - the countryside is not a place for making a living, it has become a place for living. These modern nomads tend to organise themselves in communities occupying the countryside while still being connected to the city.¹

Being temporarily part of such a community, situated at the Silent Lake in the Unesco Biosphere Bory Tucholskie forest around three hundred kilometers northwest from Warsaw, I was able to witness its development.

The community around the Silent Lake was initiated by a small group of friends and their families who a couple years ago decided to acquire a piece of land at the Silent Lake with the intention to experiment with a more sustainable way of living based on the principles of permaculture and natural building techniques.

The experience of spending the summer in this place inspired me to reflect more intensively upon the relation between humans, nature and the built environment which became the starting point for my graduation project.

¹ W. Lofvers, M. Musch, The Countryside / Het Platteland, OASE#63

As described within my research thesis I decided to perceive the Silent Lake in the context of a polycentric urbanised landscape² composed of different types that have varying degrees of urbanisation. Within this framework it became clear that approaching this kind of site only by means of "traditional" top down architectural analysis in which the designer relies mostly on rigid analytical frameworks in order to understand the site would not suffice to develop an accurate reading of the Silent Lake's landscape. Hence it became important to frame an alternative methodology through the use of three complementary analytical approaches that allowed me to expand on the particular geological, industrial, agricultural and social history of the Silent Lake. In this context I think that even though the methodology developed within the research is not to be seen as prescriptive method that would fully replace existing analytical frameworks, it can be seen as a valuable addition that allows to question the current state of the art and through that become a starting point could potentially contribute to the way designers approach analysis in order to advance analytical frameworks that would permit to understand more precisely the blurring conditions within a polycentric urbanised landscape in which we operate nowadays.

Another important aspect of the graduation project became the transition between research and design. As opposed to the initial intuition, in which I believed that the project would mainly focus on the development of the Silent Lake community and its premises, it became clear within the final stage of my research thesis that the design proposal would have to become a bridging element between the Unesco Bory Tucholskie Biosphere and the Silent Lake community. The proposed design brief consisted in developing a Unesco Learning center within the premises of the Silent Lake that could benefit both, the wish for a sustainable lifestyle of the Silent Lake community as well as broader educational activity that would help to develop the Bory Tucholskie Forest in a sustainable way and possibly become a case study that could be extrapolated into another context, considering that there are around 700 Unesco Biospheres around the world. Further the investigation made during the graduation process could more generally contribute the use of more sustainable construction methods within the built

² S. de Wit, *Hidden Landscapes: the metropolitan garden and the genius loci*, Doctoral thesis, TU Delft, 2014

environment and symbolically underline the importance of the relation between humanity and nature.

In this regard even if the core idea of the design project emerged naturally out of the research it became a challenge to spatially articulate its findings. Being outside of the usual “comfort zone” of the urban environment in which the context would very much inspire the architectural expression, I had to develop a framework that would revolve about climate design principles and natural building techniques engraved in a tradition of vernacular architecture. This allowed me to work very specifically with the topography, vegetation, climatic conditions and natural materials available at site.

Aside of the architectural challenges I found it partly difficult to be part of a design process that was linked with a place and community that personally is very close to me. On one side this resulted in very interesting group dynamics that would allow me not only to compose theory within the research but also offered the possibility to test my findings and discuss them with a group of people living at the Silent Lake. On the other side I sometimes found myself in the situation that my emotional involvement with the group would block me in my design decisions.

In this sense it became even more important to delineate very carefully design principles that would not only operate on an ideological level related to the Silent Lake community but should be engraved in the social and ecological context of the Bory Tucholskie Biosphere. My initial intention was to integrate the principles elaborated within the design process in my research thesis. Still because I was still at an early stage of the design when finalising the research thesis I was not able to verbalise the additional layer of information gained during the design phase. This is why I would like to develop an additional conclusion to my research thesis after P4 consisting in a precise writing about the architectural principles of my project in form of a design brief for the Unesco Silent Lake Learning Center in order to draw an even completer picture of “the reading of a urbanised landscape” and allow to transfer the results of my graduation project into a future context.