CREATIVE PEDAGOGIES FOR URBAN DESIGN: REDESIGN OF URBAN POCKETS IN ZRENJANIN

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ABSTRACT

The modern era is often characterised by a hectic lifestyle, pandemic states and stress-infused work ethics, thus creating crucial issues of living and working in the 21st century. These issues have demonstrated several problematic areas in the field of education, especially regarding higher education levels. Creative pedagogical methodologies must be constantly innovated (reinvented) and adapted to increasingly rapid changes in a generally connected society, where young people are exposed to a multitude of information, and the ways of communicating science must be adapted to them. In this paper, the particular manner of creative pedagogies as a frontier to university education will be presented in the case study of a course at the University of Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture.

The “Contemporary Urban Concepts” course is an integral part of the first-year curricula of the Master of Integrated Urbanism. The paper aims to present the unique teaching methodologies alongside the students' results. In the school year 2024-25, students analysed the application of hybrid models of contemporary urban concepts, from a broader concept to the urban project of urban pockets. The results present these teaching techniques and processes in the example of Zrenjanin, a small city in Vojvodina, Serbia, where so many urban concepts through students' proposals have been implemented: from 15-min city and cycle city to green and blue infrastructure, green city, vibrant city, urban acupuncture, tactical urbanism, biophilic design, healthy city, happy city with elements of branding, sense of community and other specific elements and urban concepts.

The specific spatial guidelines showed as results in this paper can be beneficial for the local Municipality as well as for future research in the field of both creative pedagogies and small city urban hubs regeneration.

KEYWORDS _ *Modern education, creative pedagogies, urban pockets, Zrenjanin, Master of Integral*

INTRODUCTION

In the context of today's hectic, information-saturated and crisis-prone societies, higher education is undergoing a profound transformation. The traditional models of teaching, centred on static curricula, frontal instruction, and standardised outcomes, no longer suffice to prepare students for the complexity and uncertainty of contemporary urban and societal challenges.

It is therefore necessary to develop new creative approaches that can enhance and innovate study programs, while also enabling experimental pedagogical models that apply existing theoretical paradigms in new ways, in new spaces, and within new contexts. In the literature and recent research, numerous authors propose diverse directions for advancing the field of higher education through creative pedagogies, particularly in relation to understanding urban problems and urban design studies. These include: **place-based learning** (Gruenewald, 2003); **transformative pedagogy** (Salama, 2021) rooted in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and theories of experiential and situated learning (Kolb, 1984; Lave & Wenger, 1991); collaborative studio work, community-based projects, and **integrative methods** that connect design with issues of equity, ecology, and everyday life (Salama, 2015; Awan, Schneider & Till, 2011); **responsive pedagogy** (Salama, 2012); **active learning** (Giesenbauer & Müller-Christ, 2024; Kleinschroth, 2023) and **trans-critical pedagogy** (Salama, 2015).

In this paper, such an exemplary approach is demonstrated through the course ***"Contemporary Urban Concepts"*** within the curriculum of the first year of the Master of Integrated Urbanism at the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Architecture. Following a theoretical discussion of creative pedagogies within urban studies and integral urbanism, the paper presents the methodology of the course and its work with students through the implementation of the aforementioned approaches and directions.

The course activities are illustrated through group work on urban concepts and their various applications—from the micro, meso, to the macro scale—and through different modes of combining urban design principles within selected zones of the city of Zrenjanin, a small city in Vojvodina, Serbia. Through an analysis of the results produced by several student groups, the paper identifies specific teaching methodologies expressed through techniques and processes, as well as hybrid models of contemporary urban concepts that contribute to the development of the fields of urban design studies and integral urbanism.

CREATIVE PEDAGOGIES

Creative pedagogies, in the context of urbanism and spatial studies, offer an adaptive framework to engage students not only cognitively, but also emotionally, socially, and practically. These pedagogies prioritise active learning (Giesenbauer & Müller-Christ, 2024; Kleinschroth, 2023), co-creation, critical thinking, and problem-based inquiry, echoing principles from experiential and situated learning theories (Kolb, 1984; Lave & Wenger, 1991). They reflect the evolving reality in which students operate, as digital natives in a connected world, as individuals confronted with polycrisis (climate change, social fragmentation, pandemics), and as future professionals who must think systemically and act locally.

One of the core challenges in applying creative pedagogical approaches lies in navigating the tension between curricular standards and the open-endedness of creative processes. Institutions often rely on rigid accreditation frameworks, leaving limited space for experimentation and risk-taking. This echoes critiques from critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), which highlights the limitations of standardised models and calls for emancipatory and responsive forms of teaching.

However, this very constraint presents an opportunity for reinvention. The pedagogical frontier in higher education now lies in integrating hybrid models, where studio-based learning, fieldwork, digital collaboration, and speculative design converge, aligning with responsive and trans-critical pedagogies (Salama, 2012; Salama, 2015).

Courses such as "*Contemporary Urban Concepts*" exemplify how project-based learning in real-world contexts, such as the city of Zrenjanin, can serve both educational and societal functions. This approach aligns with place-based learning (Gruenewald, 2003) and community-oriented design methods (Awan, Schneider & Till, 2011), turning the city into a living lab and students into active agents of change.

Furthermore, new creative pedagogies align with broader trends of democratisation of knowledge and the shift from expert-centric to learner-centred models. In this shift, the role of the educator is redefined—from knowledge transmitter to facilitator, mentor, and participant. This relational shift is essential in helping students not only to acquire knowledge but to develop agency, identity, and a sense of relevance, in terms of transformative pedagogy (Salama, 2021). Ultimately, creative pedagogies in urbanism are not merely methods—they are strategies of engagement, acts of resistance against intellectual passivity, and tools for transformation. By fostering open-ended exploration, collaboration, and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), they respond directly to the challenges of the 21st century, offering fertile ground for both individual growth and collective regeneration of urban environments.

Integral Urbanism being interdisciplinary and holistic approach to urban design and planning that seeks to integrate social, ecological, spatial, cultural, and technological dimensions of urban life into a cohesive and inclusive framework, emphasizes relational thinking, contextual sensitivity, and interconnectedness across scales and sectors - architecture, landscape, sociology, ecology, sustainability, technology, and governance, to address complex urban challenges. This systemic orientation reflects the same aspirations found in integrative pedagogical models (Salama, 2015), which bridge theory and practice across multiple domains.

Therefore, to educate future urbanists capable of shaping inclusive, resilient, and meaningful cities, Integral Urbanism requires pedagogies that are:

- Experiental (learning by doing in real contexts), rooted in experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984);
- Interdisciplinary (connecting knowledge across domains), aligned with integrative urban design education (Awan, Schneider & Till, 2011);
- Collaborative (working with diverse people and perspectives), echoing studio-based and community-engaged methods (Salama, 2015); and
- Reflective and adaptive (engaging with uncertainty, change, and ethical complexity), consistent with transformative pedagogy (Salama, 2021).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The following section presents the methodology of the course, the structure of student group work, the steps in the analytical and conceptual process, and the study areas within the city of Zrenjanin, located in Vojvodina (Serbia).

Methodology of the course "Contemporary Urban Concepts"

Based on a study visit conducted by the teaching staff and students, as well as a meeting with the representatives of the City of Zrenjanin, several zones of interest to the city were selected as the focus of the course. The selection was guided by two key factors: on the one hand, these areas hold particular significance within the program of the National Capital of Culture 2025; on the other hand, they represent spaces essential for the city's future development and for shaping its open public spaces.

The course was attended by approximately 20 students, primarily architecture students, but also students from other disciplines, such as biology. Students were divided into groups of 3–4 members. The work was carried out through several steps, progressing from analysis of the area and relevant concepts to their application:

- analysis of the broader study area and selected urban pockets
- analysis of planning documentation to define challenges at the micro, meso, and macro scales
- fieldwork and assessment of the quality of open public spaces within selected urban pockets by empirically evaluating their inclusiveness, meaningfulness, safety, comfort, and pleasurability (Mehta, 2014)
- analysis and selection of contemporary urban concepts thematically appropriate to the detected issues
- identification of typologically similar spaces and thematic focus on one selected urban pocket
- definition of principles derived from selected contemporary urban concepts and the manner in which they can be applied to the chosen space
- creation of spatial-programmatic schemes based on the selected concept
- visualisations, scenario development, furniture elements, and other representational methods demonstrating concept application

Study area of the course "Contemporary Urban Concepts"

Zrenjanin is an urban settlement, the administrative centre of the Central Banat Administrative District, and the fourth most populous city in Vojvodina, the northern province of the Republic of Serbia. It serves as an important industrial and cultural hub. Zrenjanin has been designated the **National Capital of Culture for 2025**, which presents a unique opportunity for the revitalisation of key urban spaces and for strengthening the city's cultural identity on the national map. For this reason, a collaboration was established between the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Architecture and the City of Zrenjanin, to enable students to develop innovative solutions for urban pockets and strategic locations significant for the regeneration of the urban fabric.

This collaboration is not solely an academic process, it forms part of a broader municipal effort to enhance visibility, attractiveness, and functionality through culture, spatial interventions, and creativity. It aims to create new spaces for everyday life, encounters, events, and cultural production. The concept behind Zrenjanin's candidacy is based on the idea of the meander – symbolic flows emerging from the city's space, history, notable individuals, and cultural and artistic production. When presented as a network, these flows reveal dense interconnections that shape the city's cultural identity. Starting from the river Begej and its former course as the fundamental physical meander, the concept also recognises other layers: urban structure, the legacy of prominent figures, diverse artistic disciplines, material and immaterial heritage, sports traditions, and even the everyday routes of citizens. Collectively, these flows reflect the city's dynamics and spirit.

Accordingly, the work conducted within the course "Contemporary Urban Concepts" addressed topics related to culture, protection and regeneration of cultural heritage, planning and design alternative open public spaces, renewal of historical units, and revitalisation and activation of the lakefront and riverbank areas along the Begej. The locations selected as the focus of the course include urban pockets and alternative spaces distributed across three main zones: (1) the area surrounding the Square of Freedom (serb. *Trg Slobode*); (2) parts of Small America (serb. *Mala Amerika*), a settlement formed on a river peninsula; or (3) the neighborhood of Bagljaš, situated in the western part of Zrenjanin. These zones encompass several critical urban points, including:

- the lakefront area between Small America and the city centre, abandoned industrial complexes, the former green market site, pedestrian bridge, Square of Zoran Đinđić (serb. Trg Zorana Đinđića), Grain

Square (serb. Žitni trg), and the Square of Freedom (serb. Trg Slobode) - shown in Figure 1 (top)

- the "bridge on dry land," grain silos, park areas, and small pockets near the lake as part of Small America - shown in Figure 1 (bottom)
- park and intra-block spaces in the Bagljaš residential area

Together, these locations form a network of significant points that contribute to the city's identity and are critical for Zrenjanin's future development as a city of culture, public space, and contemporary urban life.

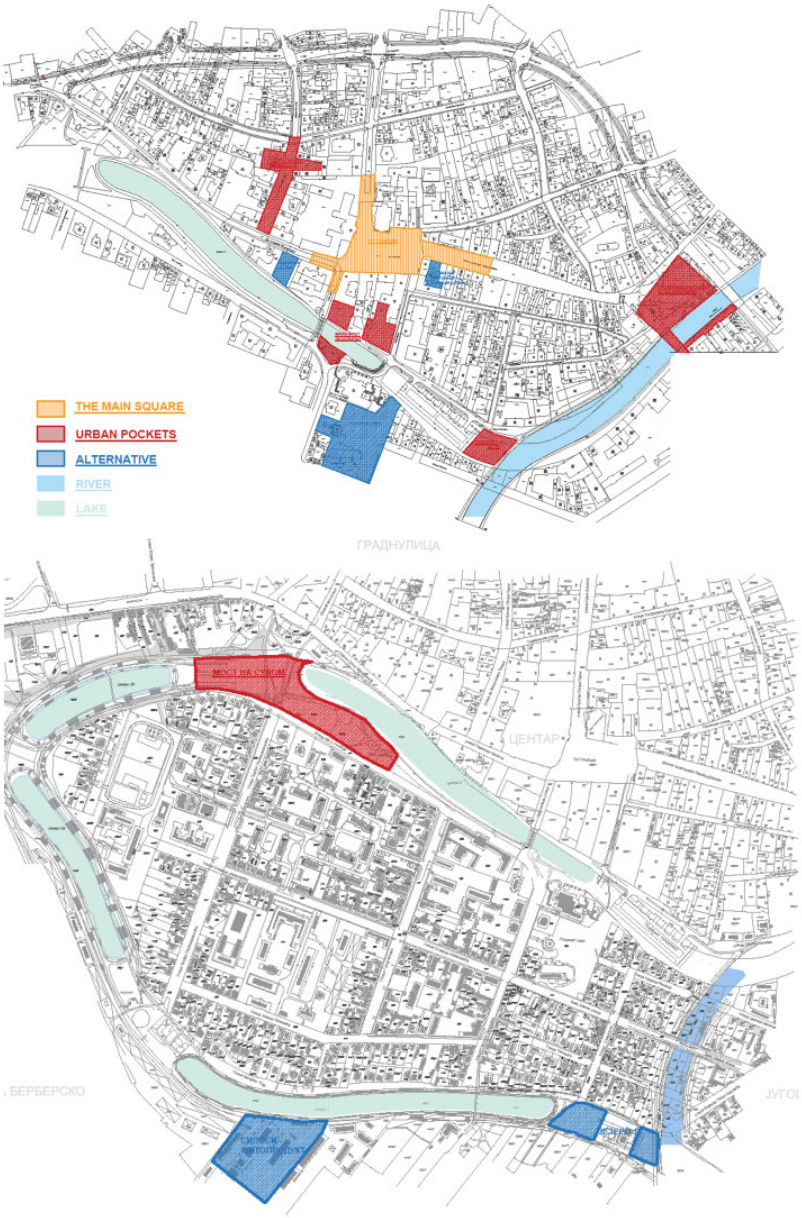


Figure 1: The position of selected urban pockets within Zrenjanin urban tissue (by the Authors)

RESULTS

There are presented results of the three selected student groups are presented in the form of posters containing all the mentioned steps in the methodology of the course "Contemporary Urban Concepts" – from analysis to implementation of urban concepts in a small urban pocket. On the left, there are analytical parts of work, and on the right, there are design proposals with program-spatial diagramming. Every group was focused on a different contemporary urban concept in order to solve the detected urban problem in the city of Zrenjanin.

Group 1 _ *From Green and Blue Infrastructure to Biophilic Design _ Active Green City*

The first student group (Figure 2) focused their analysis work on planning documents of Small America (serb. *Mala Amerika*), the mentioned zone of settlement created on the river peninsula. Through several planning documents, the student group considered zones near the lakes, park areas and other abandoned areas (bridge on dry land) within aspects of land use, mainly areas for sport, recreation and greenery. According to the defined problem of **underutilised lakeside space**, the focus was on the following contemporary urban concepts:

- ***Green and Blue Infrastructure*** – articulation of intervention in a contact zone between water and greenery
- ***Vibrant City*** – to define which content is most suitable to activate abandoned natural and park areas and foster social interaction, economic vitality and inclusion
- ***Green City*** – integration of natural elements and sustainable practices within urban areas
- ***Biophilic Design*** – to imagine new designs according to nature

The combination of mentioned urban concepts defined further steps in implementation of project based on principles of accessibility and connectivity of natural resources, inclusiveness and community participation, improvement of urban diversity, natural elements and sustainable and active mobility.

The student group compared the quality of space between the main square in the city centre and selected urban pockets in the lakeside zone. They identified problems of insufficient levels of safety, comfort and pleasurability in the lakeside spaces and focused on the urban pocket of bridge on dry land. It included making a proposal for further development of the location with zones for: (1) break and recreation, (2) break and water activities, (3) thematic park of the dry bridge and (4) zone for socialisation and interaction.

In the end, ambient pictures and details of horticulture and urban furniture contribute to the presentation of the possible implementation of mixing urban concepts in urban pockets.

Group 2 _ *Between Sense of Community and Urban Acupuncture _ 3 points : 3 parks*

Another student group (Figure 3) focused their analysis work on the candidacy book and other documents for Zrenjanin Capital of Culture, as well as the General Urban Plan for the City of Zrenjanin. The student group analysed the depopulation problem and heritage (history, culture, music tradition) of Zrenjanin. The spatial consideration was focused on the network of open public spaces in peripheral settlements of Zrenjanin, such as Bagljaš, the western part of the city. Open public spaces in Zrenjanin are part of the cultural scene and everyday life, hence the student group examined their quality in zones outside of the city centre. According to the defined problem of **abandonment and underused open public spaces in Bagljaš**, the focus was on the following contemporary urban concepts:

- ***Sense of Community (70%)*** – "feeling of space" as a fundamental value for people, as well as

making a more enjoyable, higher quality and safer place for the neighbourhood

- ***Urban Acupuncture (20%)*** – making small interventions on strategically selected points (*do-it-yourself* urbanism, tactical urbanism - temporary interventions)
- ***Healthy City (10%)*** – improving health and quality of life, making a healthier environment which encourages physical activity (park areas, equipped open public spaces)
- ***Happy City (10%)*** – making a pleasant living environment, not only functional and efficient

Additionally, the percentage of participation of urban concepts in the development of the intervention itself is predicted (70-20-10-10%). The combination of the mentioned urban concepts defined further steps in the implementation of the project based on principles of socialisation within the community, increasing the quality of life and mental health through the treatment of green spaces and the promotion of physical activity at sensitive points within the Bagljaš settlement, forming a network of urban pockets with different contents and gathering spaces.

The student group compared the quality of space between the main square in the city centre and selected urban pockets of the Bagljaš settlement. They identified problems of insufficient levels of safety, comfort and meaningfulness and focused on three urban pockets – one park near the boulevard, another park as an inter-block space between buildings and a third one inter-block area between houses. After formal analyses of each urban pocket (movement, greenery, buildings, access), proposals were presented in the form of spatial layouts for various community gathering contents.

Group 3 _ *From Car-Free and Cycle City to Compact City _ Concept of spatial modules*

The third student group (Figure 4) focused their analysis work, like the previous group, on the candidacy book and other documents for Zrenjanin Capital of Culture, as well as the General Urban Plan for the City of Zrenjanin. The focus of this student group was a little bit different. They examined the connection between the city centre and peripheral settlements of Zrenjanin, especially through the lenses of cycle and pedestrian infrastructure. According to the defined problem of **insufficient cycling and content connectivity between the city centre and peripheral settlements of Zrenjanin**, the focus was on the following contemporary urban concepts:

- ***Cycle City*** – urban areas that prioritise cycling, have a good cycling network and "bike-sharing" programs
- ***Car-free City*** – urban environments where private vehicles are restricted or banned, giving priority to pedestrians, cyclists and public transport
- ***Improvement of 15-min City*** – Zrenjanin is a good example of a 15-min city by itself, but not in connectivity between the city centre and other parts of the city

The combination of the mentioned urban concepts defined further steps in the implementation of the project based on principles of making a comprehensive cycling network which connects the city centre and other parts of the city, especially as a part of the EuroVelo network, as well as improving the 15-minute city through a network for spaces of different content, based on compact principles.

The student group compared the quality of space between the main square in the city centre and selected urban pockets in peripheral settlements of Zrenjanin (such as Bagljaš, Ruža Šulman, Zeleno Polje). They identified problems of insufficient levels of inclusiveness, meaningfulness, comfort and pleasurability and focused on the network of urban pockets in Bagljaš. Proposals were presented in different combinations of modules providing various content in open public spaces for improving the existing 15-minute city concept of the city and pedestrian experience. They aimed to present spatial intervention through a modular system of smaller urban areas, each containing housing, local commercial contents and a safe public space for gathering and recreation.

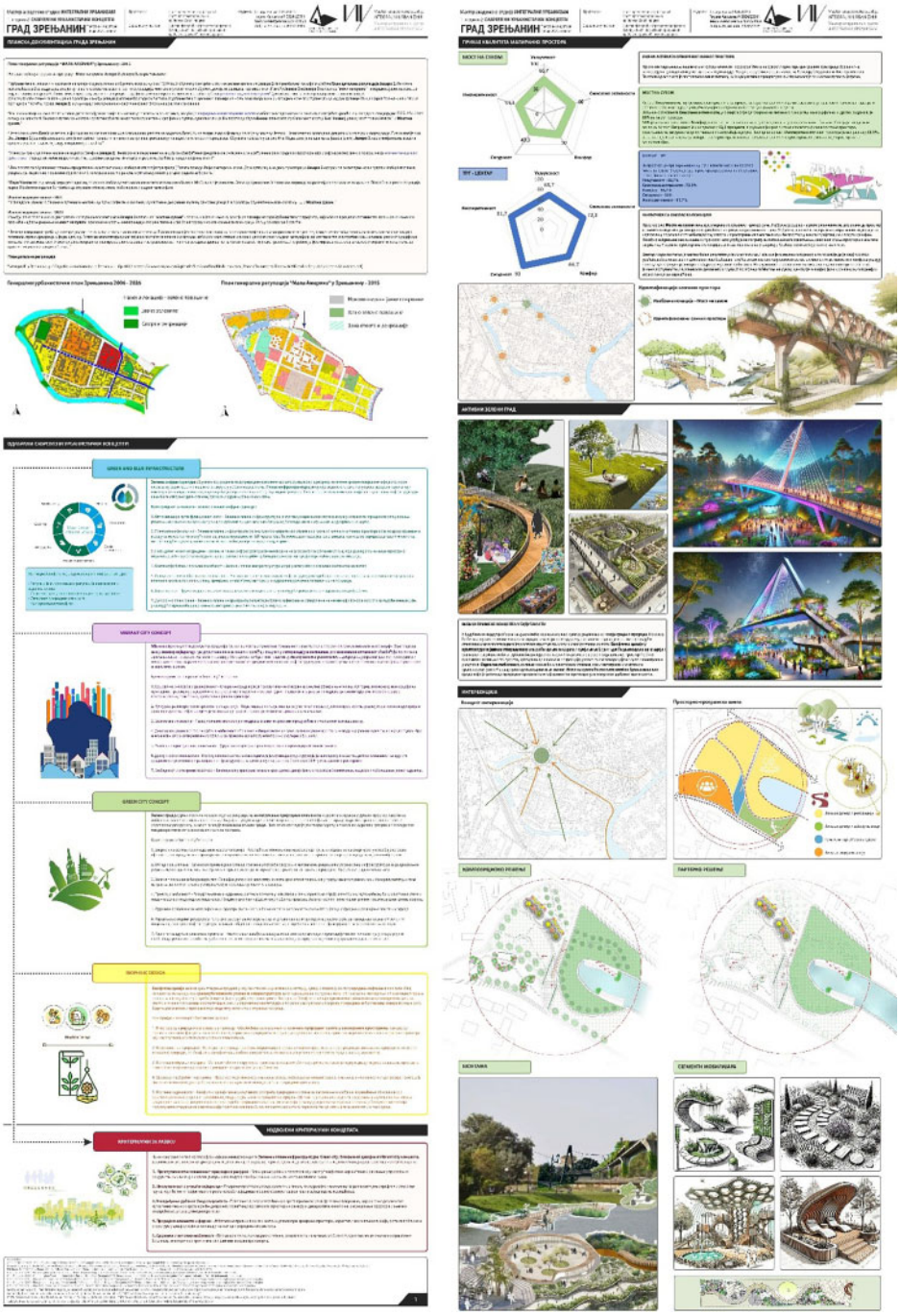


Figure 2: From Green and Blue Infrastructure to Biophilic Design _ *Active Green City* (students: Sofija Bačko, Tatjana Avramović, Milica Mitrevski, Anđela Veličanin)

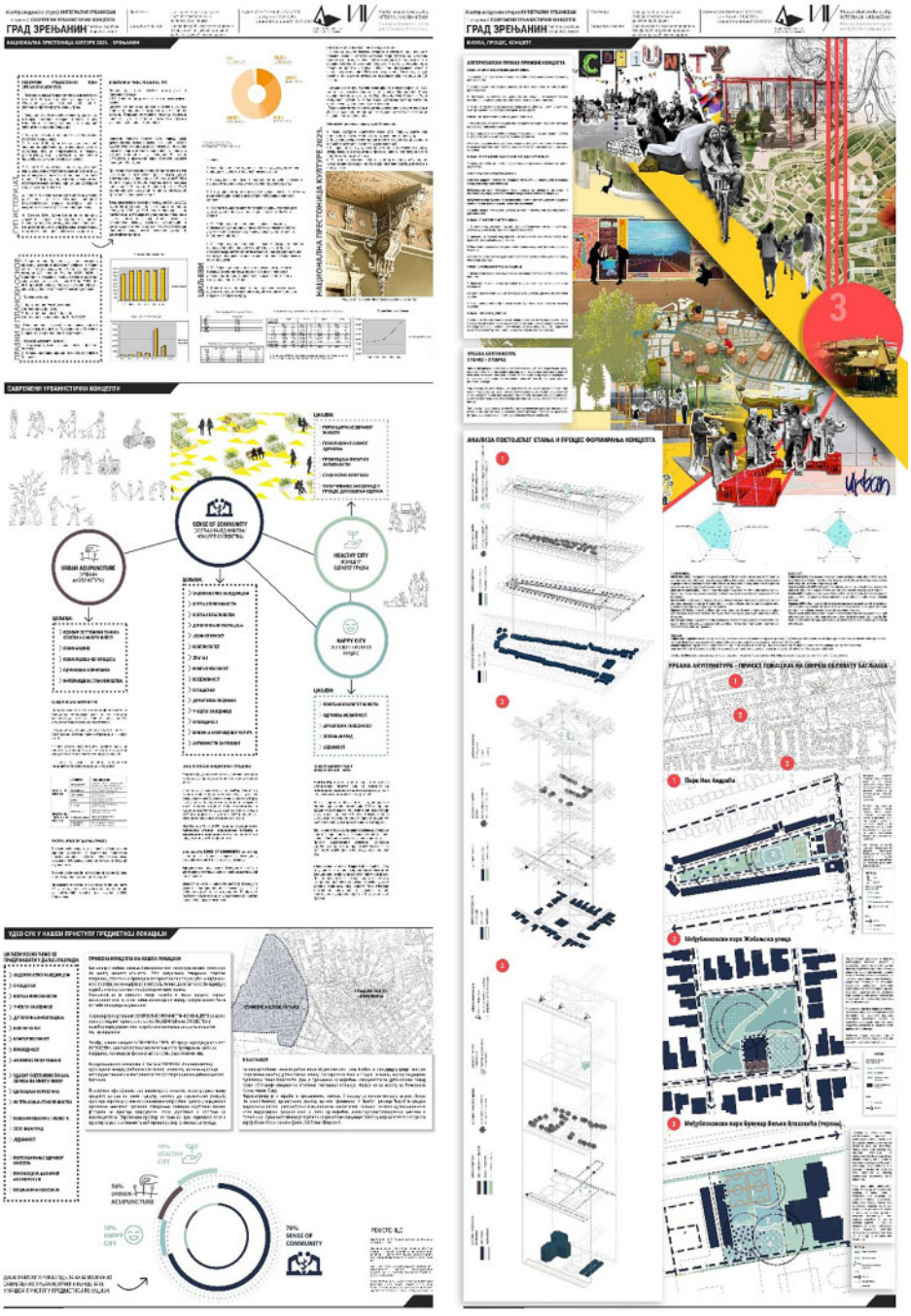


Figure 3: Between Sense of Community and Urban Acupuncture _ *3 points : 3 parks* (students: Sara Bejatović, Jana Krstić, Jovana Milosavljević)

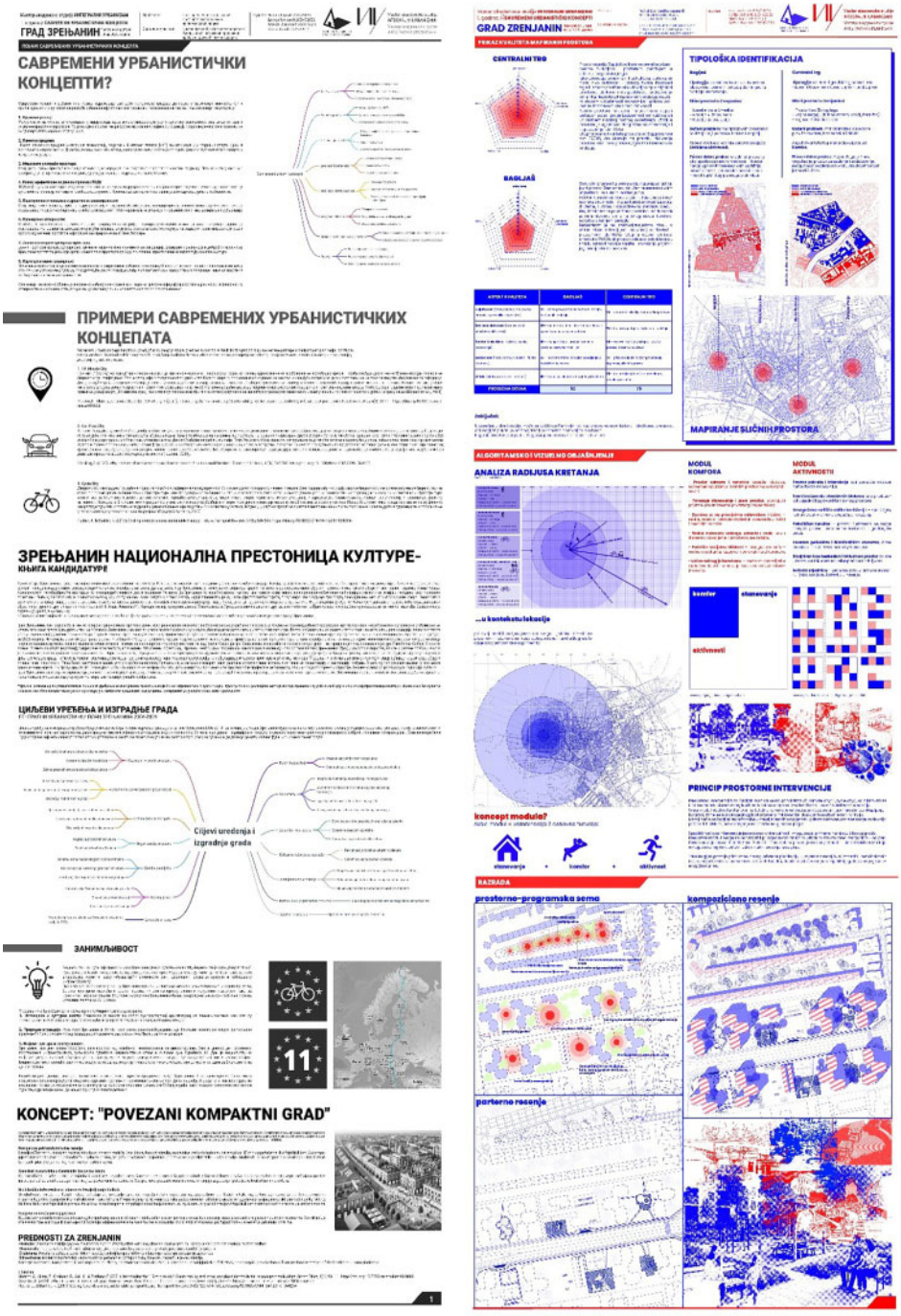


Figure 4: From Car-Free and Cycle City to Compact City _ *Concept of spatial modules* (students: Nevena Terzić, Darija Čučković, Marko Lacić, Aleksa Jovanović)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of the three student groups demonstrate how diverse contemporary urban concepts can be meaningfully applied when supported by creative pedagogies. Although each group worked with different themes and spatial contexts, their processes reveal common patterns: iterative learning, place-based engagement, integration of systemic thinking, and the development of creative agency. When viewed through the theoretical framework of creative pedagogies, the course "Contemporary Urban Concepts" emerges as a structured, yet open learning environment that blends *experiential, relational and imaginative* modes of knowledge-making.

Comparative Insights Across the Three Groups

Group 1 worked with ecological concepts (Green–Blue Infrastructure, Green City, Biophilic Design), emphasising *embodied and affective learning*. Their design process was grounded in on-site sensory exploration and ecological interpretation, demonstrating how nature-based thinking can activate underused landscapes.

Group 2 focused on social values (Sense of Community, Urban Acupuncture, Healthy/Happy City), illustrating *relational and participatory learning*. Their proposals responded to neighbourhood identity, everyday practices, and small-scale tactical interventions aimed at strengthening local cohesion.

Group 3 addressed mobility and spatial structure (Cycle City, Car-Free City, Compact City), using *constructivist and systemic learning*. They explored how modular interventions, cycling corridors, and improved connectivity can support a more integrated city.

Together, the three approaches highlight **ecological**, **social**, and **systemic** dimensions of creativity in urbanism. This comparative diversity reflects the core idea of creative pedagogies: enabling multiple ways of thinking and designing within a shared methodological framework.

Creative Pedagogies in Practice

Across all groups, creative pedagogies contributed to:

- **Experiential learning**, through field observation and on-site comparison of central and peripheral public spaces.
- **Collaborative meaning-making**, where students negotiated concepts and translated them into spatial proposals.
- **Imaginative scenario building**, grounded in local relevance and the specific challenges of Zrenjanin.
- **Systemic reasoning**, connecting small interventions to broader ecological, social, or infrastructural networks.

These outcomes suggest that creativity in urbanism is not merely expressive but integrative, linking analysis, context, and design.

Challenges and Opportunities

Despite institutional constraints such as rigid curricula, limited time for fieldwork, and evaluation systems not adapted to iterative processes, the course shows strong potential for more flexible, hybrid pedagogical models. Cities themselves functioned as "living laboratories," enabling authentic learning situations and enhancing student motivation. Furthermore, collaboration across academia, local government, and civil society can strengthen the relevance and impact of student work while helping students develop professional identity and agency.

Also, creative pedagogies support the principles of *Integral Urbanism* by fostering:

- Interdisciplinary thinking,
- Participatory and iterative design, and
- Context-sensitive, place-based understanding.

The Zrenjanin case demonstrates how students can integrate ecological, social, and mobility perspectives into coherent proposals, contributing to more inclusive and sustainable urban transformations.

CONCLUSION

The comparative results show that creative pedagogies enable students to navigate urban complexity through experiential inquiry, collaboration, and systemic imagination. The course "Contemporary Urban Concepts" illustrates how such pedagogies can cultivate the competencies needed for future urban practitioners, competencies essential for responding creatively and responsibly to the multifaceted challenges of contemporary cities.

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