

Socially Engaged: Design Conference 2014

Post-conference press release

Socially Engaged Design Conference 2014 was the first ever of its kind in Cyprus. The symposium took place on Saturday 3 and Sunday 4 May 2014 at the Research Centre of the Architecture Department of the University of Nicosia, it was organised by design group Schedia and as its title suggests focused on social design.

A range of UK and Cyprus based practitioners, academics and researchers explored the relationship between the field of socially engaged design and the development of the urban environment. Most of the speakers focused on the Cypriot city-scape and examined to what degree social design methodologies are being used in Cyprus and if and how the participating communities truly benefit from the application of these methodologies. Others presented what the term means to them and how they use it in their everyday practice, sharing with the audience inside knowledge, theories and ideas.

Our audience comprised of students, academics, creative practitioners, lawyers, creative thinkers, architects and urbanists. Representatives from the Town Planning and Housing Department as well as from the local authorities were invited but, sadly, were unable to attend. We feel that, had they been present, they could have shared their inside knowledge about the legal frame of urban development as well as be inspired by some of the case studies presented by the speakers.

The conversations that took place during the Q & A sessions, workshops and round table discussions were constructive, inspiring and informative. The round-table discussions tackled the following questions:

- What is the role of central and local government in the city-making process? Specifically, how can communities establish a continuous, meaningful and long-term dialogue with local government?
- How can young people become empowered to take responsibility for changes in their neighbourhood? What would motivate them? How can we learn to be an active community member from a young age?
- What is considered public space? What do we mean by ‘sense of publicness’? How do we inhabit public spaces?
- In light of the financial crisis (particularly in Cyprus), how can we achieve a better use of the existing city infrastructure instead of building anew? How can existing elements become the base for social innovation?

Below we list some of the main themes that were touched upon during the 2 days:

- Practitioners, architects and planners should design not to serve their own professional appetite for experimentation but to serve the social needs of the community and tackle their social issues and questions.
- Some of the case studies that were presented were small in scale but they offer long-term effects and have a big social impact even after the end of the project. Some revived neighbourhoods in subtle ways and provoked a positive debate about the development of an area.

- It is vital that designers, stakeholders and developers invest in the longevity of a project and plan for its sustainable use by the community.
- Socially Engaged Design should empower local communities through an ongoing dialogue with the stakeholders and local authorities to be able to influence and contribute towards urban developments in their area.

The event was curated by Despina and Marina Hadjilouca, founders of the design group Schedia (www.weareschedia.org).

For further information on the list of speakers and their talk summaries please visit our website: www.sedconference.com