Cieszyn
When the main bus station of Cieszyn had to be temporarily moved, residents started to protest. But Zamek Cieszyn, the design centre of the city, saw an opportunity to re-imagine what users could expect from such a nerve centre. Together with locals, designers introduced a range of improvements to the bus shelters, from wooden benches and book-sharing boxes to a whole new information system that could change the face of this border town.
February 2017. For the inhabitants of Bolesław Chrobry Street, in Cieszyn, the morning started with a surprise. They woke up to discover that the main bus station had been moved… right beneath their windows. Because of the renovation of the train station and the construction of a new shopping centre, the municipality and transport company had had to find a new location where intercity buses could pick up and drop off passengers. Unfortunately, the location they had chosen was far from ideal.

“The buses were parked right in the centre of town from five in the morning onwards,” explains Beata Mońka, a member of the Human Cities team from Cieszyn. “There was a lot of traffic when children were crossing Chrobry Street. Passengers had nowhere to sit and wait. It was dangerous and–on a local level–a disaster!” Local residents, who had been neither warned nor consulted, were deeply dissatisfied with how their living space had been reorganised. They spoke with the vice mayor and asked him to find another place for the buses to stop. “What was interesting is that sometimes people just protest. But here, they were also trying to find solutions and suggest new locations,” Beata Mońka says.

A temporary bus station

This challenging situation was the starting point of the Human Cities experiment carried out by Zamek Cieszyn, the design centre of Cieszyn. The institution took part in discussions with the municipality and residents about the bus issue. In March 2017, when the city decided to set up a new temporary station in a car park near the castle, the Zamek Cieszyn team chose to prioritise it. Working on the design of the bus station gave the design centre the opportunity to improve the daily lives of bus passengers as well as local residents. In addition, the station served as a laboratory to prepare for the permanent station that will be constructed near the new train station. “We knew that the engineers of the transport company would just build a bus stop and that would be the end of the story,” explains Ewa Gołębiowska, director of Zamek Cieszyn. “As we had recently joined the Human Cities network, it was a perfect opportunity to make the temporary location more human and prototype the new station.”

That was the beginning of a long process to rethink the bus station from a user perspective. “People had been furious about waking up one day with the old station, so we started by telling them about the new one,” relates Beata Mońka. To put citizens at the heart of the design process, Zamek Cieszyn then invited taxi drivers, school pupils, tourist guides, students, and visually impaired people to take part in workshops. Local organisations like Stanisław Brzozowski Association/Political Critique helped them connect to residents living close to the car park. The aim of the consultation was to understand how people wanted the bus station to be improved and, more broadly, how transportation issues in Cieszyn could be tackled.

Learning to talk

“We need toilets, clear timetables and information, places to sit and rest, WiFi… All those things that were mentioned during the workshops are central to users,” explains Beata Mońka. But getting people to talk about their needs wasn’t that simple, as it was new to some of Cieszyn’s citizens. “Most people take the bus because they have no other options: no money, no car, no driving licence. So when we asked them about their expectations, they didn’t have any because they simply couldn’t imagine that things could work better.” To dig deeper, a group of students from a business school carried out a survey of 430 users of interurban transport services. Even children were invited to prototype the bus station of their dreams during a small design workshop, although “not all of their proposals could be integrated,” Beata Mońka admits with a smile.

Convincing the vice mayor Aleksander Cierniak of the relevance of this bottom-up approach to city-making was also challenging. Could this be a legacy of the communist period? “In Poland, public officials usually just follow the rules and tend not to ask people what they think,” Ewa Gołębiowska says. “But the vice mayor understood that you don’t need a huge amount of money to improve a lot of things; you just need to listen and talk.”

Since May 2017, the temporary bus station has gradually turned into a place to gather and share as a result of the dialogue process. “We set up a relaxing corner with wooden benches which has turned into a meeting point and picnic area for families and young people,” Beata Mońka recounts. “One night, a backpacker even settled down for the night in a hammock!” With the help of local citizens, Zamek Cieszyn also introduced a book-sharing box on a tree, free internet connectivity, a few flower pots on the grass, a bicycle rack… In summer, “it’s part of our daily lives and a place of joy for local people,” the Human Cities team member says.

Towards new signage for Cieszyn

With the approach of winter and the cold, this little paradise has had to shut its doors. But even in the middle of January, the temporary station is unlike any other. One of the bus shelters is dedicated to the memory of Zofia Kirkor-Kiedroniwa, a woman’s rights activist from the beginning of the 20th century. It was designed by the Stanisław Brzozowski Association/Political Critique. “I think the most important thing has been to transform the temporary bus station into a social place,” says Joanna Wowrzeczka at the association’s head office. “This kind of work, which is not done individually but together, has made us look into the future.” Several bus shelters are now covered in texts and pictures rather than advertisements. “We’re very proud of it,” Ewa Gołębiowska emphasises. “We are now discussing with the vice mayor and the transport company whether all of Cieszyn’s bus shelters could commemorate famous citizens.”
Cieszyn, the capital of the eponymous duchy, existed as a single city from the end of the 13th century until World War I. After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, a new border was established between Poland and Czechoslovakia which followed the course of the Olza River, passing through the middle of Cieszyn. The city was therefore divided into two towns and between two countries. Many families were also separated as a result. After the Nazi occupation, the situation persisted until the fall of socialism and the integration of Poland and the Czech Republic into the European Union. Today, simply by crossing the main bridge, you can freely walk from Český Těšín (24,650 inhabitants) to Polish Cieszyn (35,824 inhabitants), the side where our story takes place. Both cities are crossing points for people travelling from one country to another.
The bus stop became a popular meeting and picnic place for families and young people.
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With the help of local citizens, Zamek Cieszyn also introduced a book-sharing box on a tree, free internet connectivity, a few flower pots on the grass, a bicycle rack.

A design centre in a castle

In 2000, the castle (‘zamek’ in Polish) of the formerly united city of Cieszyn was restored with European funding. It is located on a hill close to the city bridge and the border with the Czech side of Cieszyn. Zamek Cieszyn, one of the first design centres in Poland, opened right next to the castle in 2005. It serves as an incubator for entrepreneurs and “craftspeople” as well as a hub for tourists. The idea of establishing a cultural institution like this in a small historical town may have seemed crazy at first. But today, it hosts numerous events and workshops and attracts students from nearby towns like Krakow and Katowice. Zamek Cieszyn joined the Human Cities programme in 2014 and organised the Human Cities event during its annual design celebration in January 2018. Building on the successful experiment that had been carried out in 2017, Zamek chose “conflict” as the main theme of its conference. The methodologies that had been used with Cieszyn residents were tested with Human Cities partners to deepen research on signage. About 20 European participants, with little knowledge of the city, were given the task of finding their way from the train station in Polish Cieszyn to the one in Český Těšín. The exhibition of the Human Cities project was held in the former checkpoint at the border: a building that has fortunately been out of use for 10 years, but that serves as a symbolic reminder of the value of unity.
Moreover, timetables and maps don’t look the same here as elsewhere. During the consultation, local residents often mentioned that it wasn’t easy to find one’s way around the city. Some of the workshops were therefore devoted to developing a new information system, and panels were put up in the temporary station. The results of the experiment have been used by the graphic designers responsible for the permanent signage of the future train and bus station. “We made them question the functionality of the building”, explains Lubomira Trojan, vice director of Zamek Cieszyn. “What route would people follow? What would be the best way to get from one station to another?” Justyna Kucharczyk, a specialist in information design and teacher in the city of Katowice, started working on the train station at the same time as the design centre began work on the temporary bus station. “The work Zamek Cieszyn did with user groups helped us understand the historical and spatial issues in the city,” she points out. “They provided us with valuable information that we used to design our panels, like the places people are proudest of.”

A year after Zamek Cieszyn started looking after the temporary station, the permanent one was opened. “People’s first impressions are very positive. What we need to do now is check that the adopted solutions are working: is the information legible and helpful, is the furniture comfortable, is the technology working properly?” says Lubomira Trojan. All of this could also be the start of a larger effort to redesign the city’s signage, which suffers from a general lack of clarity and coherence. On the other hand, Beata Mońka and Lubomira Trojan both admit this will take a long time, as the municipality has to be convinced. Whatever happens, there will be one lasting, invisible, but momentous legacy of Zamek Cieszyn’s Human Cities experiment. “We showed politicians that even a temporary solution can be attractive,” Ewa Gołębiowska insists. “And most importantly, the municipality is now open to the idea of listening to people’s opinions to improve the city together.”
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