

Rural public space design: benefits of collaboration between local authorities and universities offering landscape architecture courses

Barbara Olczak¹, ✉ 0000-0002-9070-9640

Magdalena Wilkosz-Mamcarczyk¹ 0000-0002-4845-5990

Luiza Górka¹ 0009-0008-0963-2430

Joanna Makowska¹ 0009-0007-7927-8345

Jerzy Jan Niziński²

¹ Department of Land Management and Landscape Architecture,
University of Agriculture in Krakow

² Centre de recherche d'Ile de France, Institut de Recherche pour le Développement
(IRD)

✉ Corresponding author: barbara.olczak@urk.edu.pl

Summary

The study analysed the cooperation between universities offering courses in landscape architecture, architecture and urban planning on the one hand, and local authorities on the other. The issue was examined in the context of public space design in rural areas, which is much less frequently addressed by theorists and practitioners than public space in cities, as indicated by the literature review. As the students' projects concern the village of Cellettes in the Centre-Val de Loire region of central France, the authors reviewed the literature on the current framework for the development of public space in France. Particular attention was paid to issues related to the shaping of public space in villages, the changing expectations of rural residents, and the challenges faced by local authorities and designers. The article provides a multidimensional assessment of nineteen projects by fifth-semester landscape architecture students at the University of Agriculture in Krakow who were involved in the design of public spaces. The starting point for the projects was the assumptions presented in the form of two scenarios received from the mayor of Cellettes. The authors drew attention to the diversity of the projects, which may be valuable for authorities and residents in terms of functional and spatial decisions, as well as the choice of small-scale architecture, vegetation, and materials.

Keywords

rural public space • university-municipality cooperation • practical experience in teaching • diversity of approaches • Loire Valley cultural heritage • Cellettes

1. Introduction

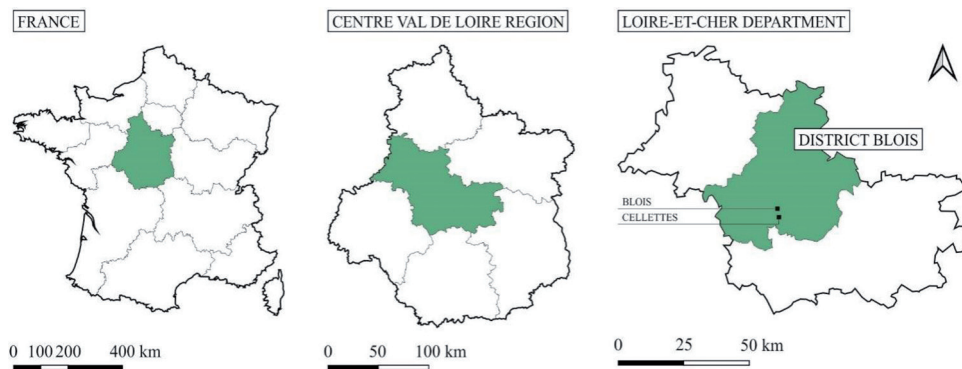
Public space is particularly important for addressing the needs of residents, improving their lives, and promoting social interactions [Birkner and Mix 2014, Gibout 2009, Bordes 2008, Demichel-Basnier 2021]. The Public Space Charter of the Society of Polish Urban Planners (2009) defines public space as a locus of transmission of various tangible and intangible products that satisfy diverse needs; an asset; and a resource of strategic importance to local communities. Authors of publications on public space design enumerate three primary characteristics of high-quality public space. The first one is vitality, which is associated with the number of users and frequency of use. The second aspect is the diversity of activities and users. The last feature is the place's identity [Ghel 1987]. Public space design has been extensively discussed in the literature, but primarily in the context of urban environments [Ning 2021, Cao and Kang 2021, Mansournia et al. 2020, Bouquet and Dubéchet 2018, Banos and Candau 2008, Lacquement 2017, Soszyński et al. 2016]. The review of literature on rural public space in France suggests that the space often fails to address the needs of local communities. Older people frequently experience isolation due to their reduced mobility and reliance on cars. Users do not feel safe, and the development fails to accommodate different kinds of needs that they have [Poirel 2021, Guilpain 2023]. Considering the global trend towards urban-rural migration and the above problems, local governments face a profound challenge in ensuring a vibrant and accommodating rural public space that attracts various age and social groups [Aubert and Gaigné 2003, Soszyński et al. 2016, Micek and Staszewska 2019]. Insight into user preferences is highly valuable and helpful when making informed decisions regarding public space [Mebirouk 2023, Berry et al. 2019]. Collaboration with universities that offer courses in landscape architecture or architecture and urban planning can also be expedient in this context.

2. Object and method

The article aims to showcase the diversity of student conceptual designs for an area specified by local authorities. Collaboration between universities providing space-related courses and local authorities can be valuable for both sides. Before evaluating the designs, the authors conducted a literature review on rural public space design and relevant challenges, with a focus on the specificity of the French countryside. The analysed aspects were aligned with the local characteristics: predefined scenarios and proposed design approaches. The assessment followed the methodology of a multidimensional evaluation of the current state, as described by Ewa Kubica [1999]. It was adapted to the current purpose of evaluating nineteen conceptual designs of recreational areas in Cellettes on the Beuvron.

In September 2024, the authors met with Joël Rutard, the Mayor of Cellettes, and visited the area of interest. After the meeting, the mayor provided the authors with a file summarising the land development framework in the form of two functional and spatial scenarios [Étude d'aménagement... 2023]. The scenarios were developed based on pre-designed surveys. They provided guidelines for functional, spatial, compositional, and visual aspects of land development design, as well as specifications for park and street furniture, materials, and vegetation. The scenarios and photographs of the current state from September 2024 were the starting point for the conceptual designs created by third-year engineering students of landscape architecture at the University of Agriculture in Krakow as part of their Public Space Design training.

The study area is located in Cellettes, the Centre-Val de Loire region, Loire-et-Cher department, Blois district, eight kilometres south of Blois (Fig. 1).



Source: original work based on comersis.com

Fig. 1. Study area location

Cellettes is a sparsely developed rural municipality. It is located in the very heart of Pays des Châteaux, a syndicate of eighty-nine municipalities constituting a public body for inter-municipal cooperation (Établissement Public de Coopération Intercommunale) with a population of over 150,000, which is over one-third of the Loire-et-Cher department. The first settlement in the area that is today Cellettes was established by a sixth-century eremite, Saint Mondry. In the twelfth century, his sanctuary was replaced by the Saint Mondry church, surrounded by a cemetery. The building was redeveloped in the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. The church's tower is an important local cultural landmark. The place sits on the right bank of the Beuvron, a tributary of the Loire. It is here that the main street is located, with the church, mayor's office, and heritage single-family housing [Périodiques régionaux 1976, Agglopolys, accessed 9.07.2025]. The Vignoble de Cheverny vineyard is a jewel of the municipality's natural heritage. Its cultural heritage includes the Saint Mondry church, eighteen châteaux, and heritage houses on the main street. The study area sits on the left bank

of the Beuvron, near Île du Moulin. It occupies 6.74 hectares and is intersected by a pedestrian and bicycle path connecting the centre in the north to residential areas in the south. The path leading to Château de Conon is the sightline terminating at the church's tower. Today, the area remains undeveloped (Fig. 2).

SAINT MONDRY CHURCH



THE MAIN STREET IN CELLETES



THE BEUVRON RIVER

VIEW OF THE SITE FROM
A FOOTBRIDGE OVER THE BEUVRONVIEW OF THE CHURCH TOWER FROM
THE SITE

Source: Authors' own study

Fig. 2. Current state, cultural heritage, and study area

Before commencing the evaluation, the authors analysed the scenarios (Fig. 3). They then passed them on to the students with preliminary analysis results. In addition to assuring compliance with the functional, spatial, compositional, and visual framework for vegetation, the choice of park and street furniture, and materials set in the scenarios, it was essential to reflect the place's character and history as part of the Loire Valley. Another important consideration was to employ naturalistic designs fit for the size of the community and the needs of all users. The possibility of expanding the functional design was voiced at this point.

Dimensions D1.1 to D1.6 of the multidimensional evaluation of the concept designs for the recreational area on the Beuvron concern general guidelines common to the two scenarios. Dimensions D2.1 and D2.2 involve assumptions for the first scenario, and dimensions D3.1 and D3.2 concern the other scenario. Dimensions D4 and D5 are auxiliary evaluation criteria relevant to the validity of the design solutions and the suggestion to expand the functional domain of the design. Dimension D4 includes an inspiration from the regional history and local characteristics, while dimension D5 introduces new functions.

SCENARIO 1: MEADOW WITH FLOWERS			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • design an orchard, while preserving and highlighting the view of the church • keep the grassland open with clumps of trees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • preserve the sightline terminated by the church tower • sports area: skatepark, street workout, traffic park (in the southern part of the site) • meeting and picnic zone • walking and park area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • design a system of circulation pathways for the site with external links • emphasise the link to the buildings with a row of trees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • restore the site's boundary • highlight the view path from rue du Conon
SCENARIO 2: RESTORING THE BORDER AND DESIGNING A FOREST PARK			

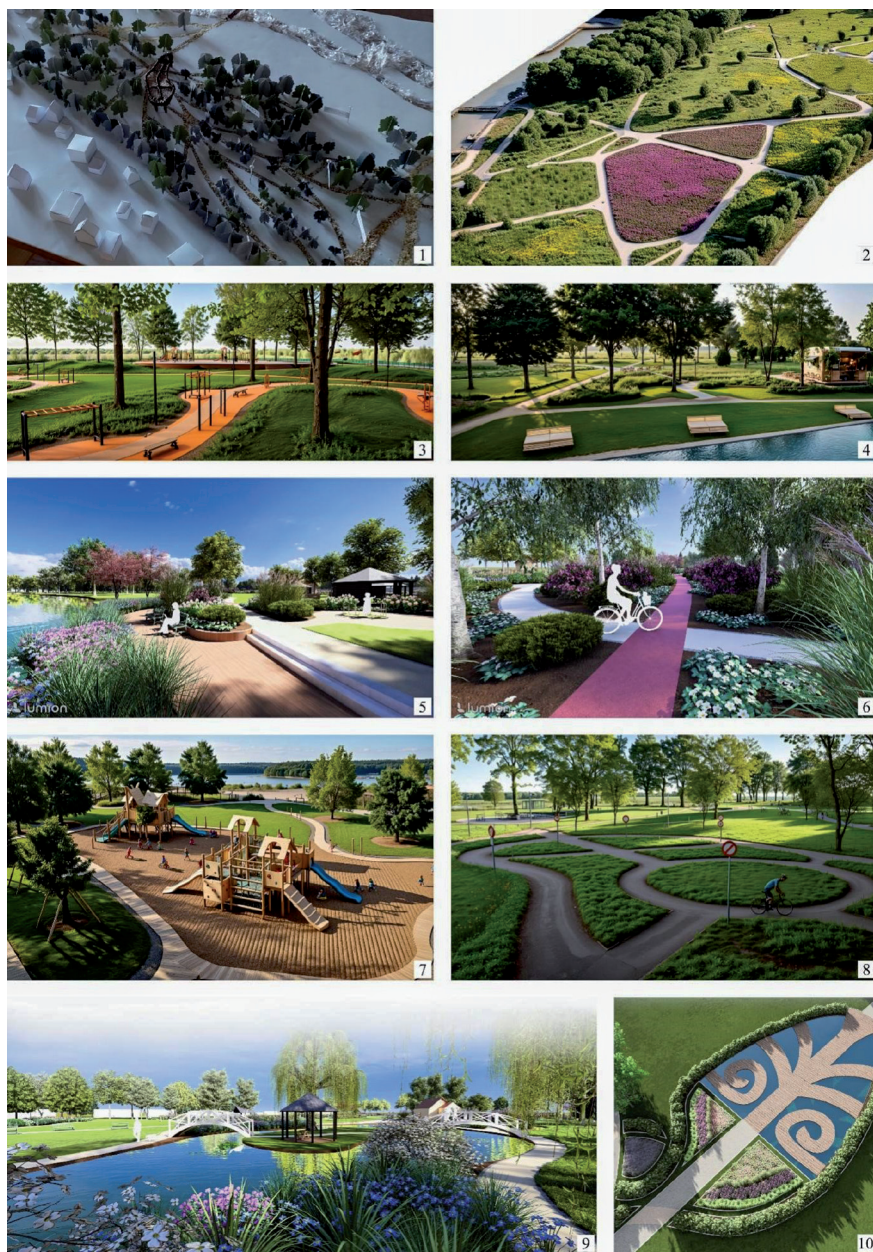
Source: Authors' own study

Fig. 3. Analysis of the scenarios provided by the mayor of Cellettes

Dimensions D1.1, D1.3–D1.6, D2.1–D2.2, D3.1–D3.2, D4, and D5 are binary. Dimension D1.1 concerns the preservation of the sightline terminated by the church tower, where 1 means preserved sightline (no tall vegetation obscuring the tower), and 0 means disturbed sightline. Dimension D1.3 reflects the presence of meeting and picnic places (1 point), or their absence (0 points). Dimension D1.4 is connected to the presence (1) or absence (0) of a walking and park area. Dimension D1.5 served to evaluate the correctness of the pathway layout design and its links to the surroundings. Correct proposals received 1 point, while missing or insufficient links meant 0 points. Highlighting the circulation links with rows of trees was an important consideration in the scenarios, evaluated as dimension D1.6. Designs with rows of trees were assigned 1 point. When the links were not emphasised, the dimension scored 0 points. The first dimension of the first scenario, D2.1, involved an orchard worth 1 point. If a design did not include an orchard, it received 0 points for this dimension. The other dimension in this scenario, D2.2, concerned the preservation of the existing grassland, interspersed with clumps of trees. If this requirement was met, the design received 1 point. Dimension D3.1 for the other scenario involved the spatial restoration of the eastern boundary of the site. If this requirement was met, the design received 1 point. Designs where the boundary was not restored scored 0 points for this dimension. Another binary dimension (D4) refers to drawing inspiration from the local history and characteristics. Designs drawing on the local history and cultural heritage of the Loire Valley were assigned 1 point. If no links to the past were found, the score was 0.

Dimension D1.2, sports areas, was evaluated in terms of functionality (F) and location (L) on the site in reference to the scenarios. Both components were evaluated binarily. Scores of 0 were assigned to designs that did not conform to the functional and positioning requirements, while compliant proposals received 1 point.

Dimension D5 encompasses other functions and elements of the design that are not required in the scenarios. Its score range is 0–3, depending on the number and diversity of additional components. If no additional functions were proposed, the design received 0 points. Three points were awarded for correctly chosen and diversified functions. Fewer or less diversified functions were granted 1 or 2 points.



Source: Authors' own study

Fig. 4. Selected design components: 1 – layout design 6; 2 – layout design 17; 3 and 4 – fitness trail and riverside in design 4; 5 and 6 – surroundings of a planned reservoir and layout of paths in design 16; 7 – wooden playground in design 18; 8 – traffic park in design 4; 9 – surroundings of the planned reservoir in design 16; 10 – regional cultural references in design 2

Table 1. Multidimensional evaluation of the designs

	D1							D2		D3		D4	D5	
Conceptual designs 1–19	General guidelines							Scenario 1		Scenario 2		Links to the regional history and genius loci	Other functions / design components	Total score
	1	2		3	4	5	6	1	2	1	2			
	Preservation of the sightline terminated by the church tower	Sports areas: skatepark, street workout, traffic park / location		Meeting and picnic places	A walking and park area	Pathway layout: links to the surroundings	Highlighted links to surroundings / rows of trees	Orchard	Preservation of the existing grassland, interspersed with clumps of trees	Restored boundary / forest park	Emphasised continuous view from Rue de Conon			
		F	L											
1.	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	3	11
2.	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	13
3.	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	5
4.	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	10
5.	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	13
6.	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	3	13
7.	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	2	12
8.	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	7
9.	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	9
10.	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	3	12
11.	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	3	13
12.	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	2	10
13.	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	2	10
14.	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	10
15.	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	12
16.	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	3	12
17.	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	3	10
18.	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	2	12
19.	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	3	12

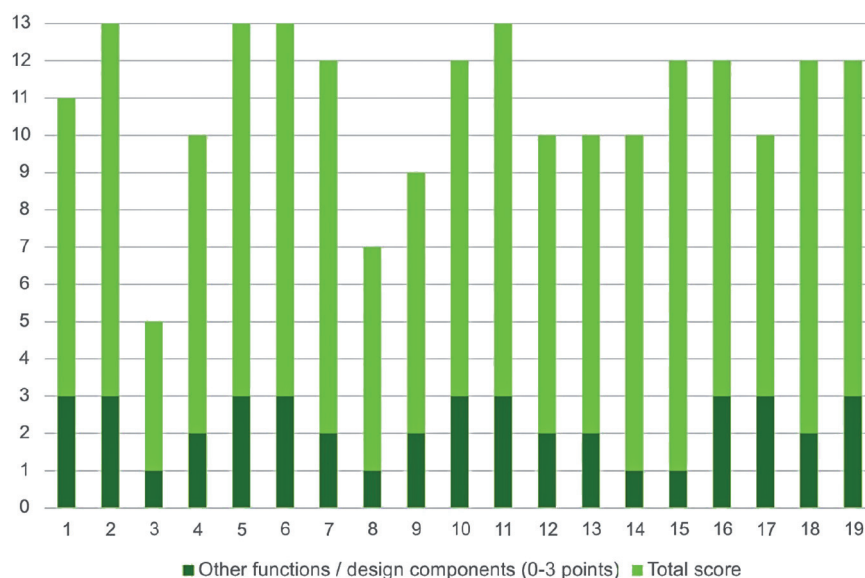
3. Results

The first part of the multidimensional evaluation concerned the general requirements operationalised into six dimensions, one of which was evaluated in two aspects, resulting in seven scores. Three designs covered all the dimensions. Thirteen proposals satisfied five or six dimensions. One design was consistent with four general dimensions. One submission satisfied only two prerequisites. The authors proceeded to evaluate scenario-specific dimensions. Ten designs were consistent with both dimensions for the first scenario, and nine satisfied only one guideline. The scores for the other scenario were more varied. Five designs met all five requirements, ten conformed to one, and four submissions did not meet any of them. Note that the students could choose to follow any of the scenarios. Two designs met 100% of the specifications for the first scenario and 0% for the other. The authors evaluated the designs in terms of any explicit connections with the regional history and cultural heritage. They were found in seven out of nineteen works. The last dimension was the addition of new, supplementary functions and components. No projects were assigned zero points in this area. Five designs were given one point, and six submissions received two points. The remaining seven proposals earned the maximum three points. The students suggested improving the development with features such as still and flowing water, a combination thereof, river piers, fountains, sculptures, a rock garden, an amphitheatre, a food truck stand, outdoor chessboards, extensive playgrounds for both younger and older children, pétanque terrains, or sports fields. One design included a canopy walkway approximately four metres above ground, featuring stairs and slides. The proposed arrangements included cafés, garden pavilions, pergolas, gazebos of various sizes and forms, as well as barbecue and bonfire sites. Vegetation was diversified, but tended to be freely placed and arranged in a geometric pattern. The students often planned wildflower meadows in line with the spirit of the place, and appealing flowerbeds of local plants. The fifth dimension involved analysing the alignment of the functions to the requirement framework, including various age groups, and their appeal. The evaluation is summarised in the Table 1, and its results are visualised in Figure 5.

4. Conclusions

The multidimensional evaluation revealed a substantial diversity in the students' designs. Some drew on the local history while others did not. Each functional and spatial proposal was sophisticated to some extent. The conclusions drawn from the evaluation can inform collaboration between universities and local authorities. Thanks to the students' conceptual contributions developed as part of the learning experience, the municipality has several proposed plans instead of a single design by one designer [Olczak and Nawrotek 2018, Paprzyca 2017, Šimkovičová et al. 2024, Buława et al. 2025]. This empowers decision-makers, who usually lack expert knowledge, to review diverse concepts that unveil the site's potential and its possible uses. This way, they can pick and choose parts of different designs and combine them into a single one

to be implemented. Additionally, residents could vote to choose the design they find most suitable from among many proposals. This allows the primary users to indicate the approaches they find the most satisfactory. This participatory model comes with a significant advantage: the residents' opinions are based on drawings, i.e. views, cross-sections, and most importantly, visualisations. With such informational abundance, aided by a selection of street and park furniture, materials, and plants, people not versed in spatial planning can more easily make decisions and identify designs they prefer than if they were using a merely textual description. Such public consultations took place in Szczecbrzeszyn in 2024 and in Jerzmanowice-Przebinia in 2016 [New Market Square in Szczecbrzeszyn 2024, Olczak and Nawrotek 2018, Muras and Turyk 2016].



Source: Authors' own study

Fig. 5. Results of the multidimensional evaluation

Moreover, this approach is also valuable for teaching efforts in courses such as landscape architecture or architecture and urban planning. Instead of focusing on theoretical projects, students have an opportunity to interact with local authorities, which often specify their general qualitative expectations of the design. During such practical design classes, students travel to the site to survey it with photographs and make a dendrological inventory. They can also talk to the site owners, discuss residents' and users' needs, and learn about the authorities' preferences.

Most of the submissions conformed to a substantial part of the multidimensional evaluation criteria. From the point of view of the municipality, the most valuable dimensions are D4 and D5: links to the local cultural heritage and additional func-

tions. All the works included additional functions that exceeded the specifications and tapped into the site's potential. The authorities and residents can review the designs and decide whether the functions are relevant and whether they should be included in the official scenarios. Note that several designs included sculptures, such as works by Louis Derbré, whose gallery is located in the Château de Conon, situated in the municipality (Musée-promenade Louis Derbré). This aligns with the trend of introducing art into rural areas as reported in the literature [Delfosse and George 2023].

In summary, collaboration between local authorities and universities offering courses in landscape architecture or architecture and urban planning can be beneficial both to the municipality and to future landscape designers.

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