

OCCUPATIONAL TRAINING FOR THE MENTALLY ILL THROUGH LANDSCAPING PROJECTS

PREGĂTIREA PROFESIONALĂ A PERSOANELOR CU PROBLEME ALE SĂNĂTĂȚII MINTALE PRIN PROGRAME DE AMENAJARE PEISAGISTICĂ

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Abstract. *The integration of mentally ill citizens through professional reorientation constitutes an important issue for a society that encourages human rights. The active involvement through work is important for the mentally ill as part of their therapy, but also for the society that can benefit from their actions. With respect to these issues, landscaping projects represent a good opportunity that fits properly with the requirements of this group, creating a positive environment through an active lifestyle, as well as for the society, that needs well-trained employees in a domain that continues to develop. In a sustainability- oriented society, the focus is on rehabilitating and maintaining the existing green areas as well as developing new ones. The article presents general considerations on the topic of training people with mental illnesses, through landscaping projects, as well as a case-study of such a program successfully implemented in Romania.*

Key words: *training the mentally-ill, social program, landscaping competencies*

Rezumat. *Integrarea profesională a persoanelor cu probleme ale sănătății mintale constituie o temă importantă pentru o societate fundamentată pe respectarea drepturilor omului. Implicarea activă prin muncă este importantă pentru starea acestor persoane, ca parte integrantă a tratamentului cât și pentru societate, care, poate beneficia de pe urma implicării active a acestora. Legat de aceste chestiuni, domeniul amenajărilor peisagistice constituie o oportunitate bună de punere în practică a acestor principii, prin crearea unui mediu de muncă favorizant terapiei, dar și prin faptul că reprezintă un domeniu în continuă dezvoltare. Într-o societate care pune accentul pe dezvoltare sustenabilă, reabilitarea și menținerea spațiilor verzi constituie un subiect de o deosebită importanță. Acest articol prezintă considerații generale pe subiectul implicării persoanelor cu probleme ale sănătății mintale în proiecte de amenajare peisagistică, precum și un studiu de caz despre un astfel de program implementat în România.*

Cuvinte cheie: *integrarea profesională a persoanelor cu probleme ale sănătății mintale, programe sociale, competențe în amenajările peisagistice*

INTRODUCTION

Landscaping work has proved to be both "restorative" and "interventionist" for the mentally ill, beginning with gardening practices in the asylums a century

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ago and reaching potentially new levels with the association of contemporary concepts such as social inclusion and equal opportunities in the latter decades. There is a therapeutic as well as a social dimension related to green work for the mentally ill, with focus on the agenda of social inclusion, of providing a sense of belonging to the mainstream community (Parr, 2007). Parallel to an appropriate activity that complements the therapeutic programs, there is an undisputed benefit for the community, considering the need to develop and enhance the quality of green areas in our cities for a sustainable approach to town planning.

During the last decades of the twentieth century, the tendency in western countries was towards the deinstitutionalization of people experiencing mental health problems, for better inclusion within the community, a system that in turn attracted criticism for the problems related to the provision of adequate health and social services. At the same time, there is a constant concern to identify the best jobs and work opportunities for people with mental health problems, so they can play a meaningful role in the community, just like everybody else (Parr, 2011).

There is a documented correlation between the quality of public open spaces and mental health, beneficial for everybody, as such developing training programs in landscaping for people with mental health issues facilitates contact with nature and develops an inter-determinate triangular relation between community, the mentally ill and public space (Francis et al, 2012).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Training people with mental illnesses

People experiencing mental health problems, even with severe illnesses, are able to acquire and maintain new knowledge and skills. As such, occupational therapy interventions should identify the appropriate training for an individual to succeed professionally, as well as to implement step by step measures to ensure the program's sustainability. Occupational therapy practices must be "knowledgeable about evidence-based research and apply it ethically and appropriately to provide occupational therapy services consistent with best practice approaches." Research suggests that applications in real-world environments are more effective than the ones that focus on pre-training or preliminary skill building, but, depending on the severity of the mental condition, cognitive adaptation training and job accommodations are necessary in order to compensate some impairments that limit a successful occupational development.

Occupational practices for people with mental health problems should include a four stages approach:

1. Recommendation for professional services;
2. Evaluation
 - identifying an appropriate occupational structure,
 - analysis of performance through observation and assessment;
3. Following an intervention scheme
 - supported employment policies,
 - developing specific educational programmes,
 - training for real-life situations, including finance administration,
 - management of health care provision,
 - strengthening community living skills,

- focusing on exercise and outdoor activities,
- cognitive as well as emotional training;

4. Follow-up (Brown, 2012).

Considering the social context of Romania, a successful program should target issues related to the reluctance of occupational inclusion for the mentally ill in all the four stages of the training. In Romania, the current legislation, in particular Law no. 448 of 6 December 2006 on the protection and promotion of rights of people with disabilities, promotes principles and stipulations for equal opportunities for people with disabilities including fiscal facilities for the employer. Referring to the training of persons with disabilities, according to law, these are to be organized programs that pursue qualification, training and specialization. Authorities need to create the conditions for people with disabilities to have the right to choose and practice their profession, trade or occupation, to gain and maintain employment, in order to advance professionally. Unfortunately, the norms for the application of this law, approved by Government Decision no. 268/2007 of 14/03/2007 do not specify anything about practical methods of achieving these goals of the Act. Most programs for training people with mental health problems are carried by NGO's that focus on the social inclusion and equal chances of disabled citizens. AREAS NGO in Suceava, has a long history of occupational training for people with mental illnesses, including 4 workshops of occupational therapy for the patients of the Psychiatric Hospital in Burdujeni. The project for training 20 people with mental health problems in the Citadel Park of Suceava in the field of landscaping, that is presented in this article, represents an initiative of AREAS NGO.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Description of the Citadel Park of Suceava

The green area that links the city centre of Suceava with the seat citadel of the Musatini dynasty has been transformed into the town's green lung in the 1970's with the effort of architect and city planner Nicolae Porumbescu, in parallel to the design of the House of Culture and main square. The concept of the project was inspired by the San Marco Plaza in Venice, the city square opening to the forest and the citadel in the same manner as the Piazza opens itself to the lagoon. For decades, the park represented an area animated by people enjoying open-air activities.

What could be the most important place of recreation for Suceava, at the foot of the Fortress of Prince Stephen the Great, is currently one of the most disagreeable and dangerous areas of the town, with destroyed alleys, nonexistent public lighting, uncovered manholes, broken stairs and permanent floods. This is a situation that persists for years without anyone able to invest in the rehabilitation of the park. And all this for the simple reason that the whole forest area located near the Citadel is owned by Suceava Forestry Department, specifically in the Forestry District of Pătrăuți. Under these circumstances, the management of Suceava City Hall claims that it doesn't have the ability to invest in the rehabilitation and redevelopment of the park, "an enclave in the city" and in terms of the Forestry Department, the institution has responsibilities only in protecting the forest fund.

Considering these premises, the aim of the project proposed by AREAS NGO is to rehabilitate the urban green space from the centre city of Suceava through involvement of the local community and people with mental illnesses in educational environmental activities. One of the dangers of bringing new life to an area with great arboretum value would be the insertion of spaces for leisure that would perturb the natural state. The best practices, on the other hand, include the involvement of the community in maintaining and restoring the quality of the space.

Project detailing

Capitalizing on the potential for green rehabilitation of the park described in the previous chapter, the project envisioned by AREAS NGO aimed at training 20 people with mental health problems in the field of landscaping work on the premises of the Citadel Park of Suceava. Through training activities in the open-air that took place so close to the city centre, the organization intended to tackle the issue of discrimination by demonstrating practically and bringing awareness to the public that the mentally ill can be integrated in the society with equal occupational chances. A secondary objective was to rehabilitate parts of the park, especially alleys and to implement public furniture in order to bring new life to an area that needs to find a renewed sense of belonging to the local community

Based on the four stages previously described, the programme was phased in such manner to include theoretical and practical courses with the involvement of qualified social workers. After an evaluation stage, the selection and assessment of the trainees, the year-long training course included:

- theoretical courses,
- workshops for urban furniture,
- gardening and tree caring,
- repaving of alleys.

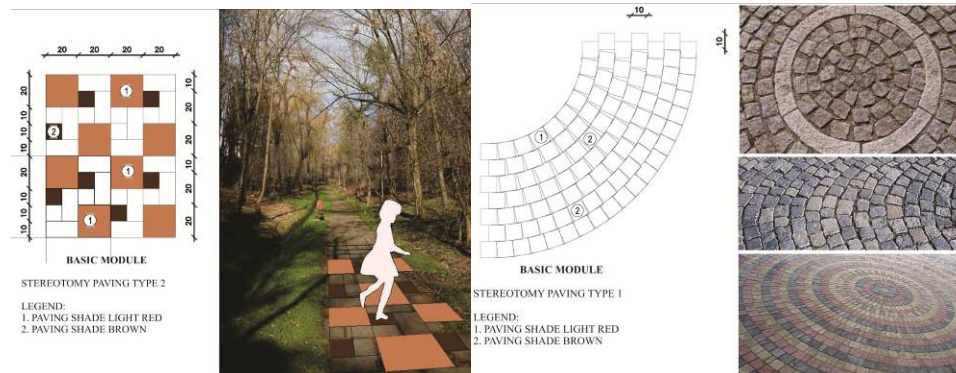


Fig. 1 - Stereotomy paving types

The structure of the program provided the possibility of the theoretical courses to run in parallel to the practical applications, with the possibility to

conduct the courses on urban furniture and parts of the practical courses on gardening in a workshop. The authors identified the paving schemes of the existing alleys and proposed designs with respect to the original configurations, (Fig. 1).

The authors proposed a series of designs for public furniture, that the people with mental health problems could learn to assemble using simple modulated wood elements. Considering that the problems of the trainees ranged from mild to serious, the designs ranged in turn from simple to complex. The concept was unity, producing architectural pieces that would reunite people and community with nature, (Fig. 2).

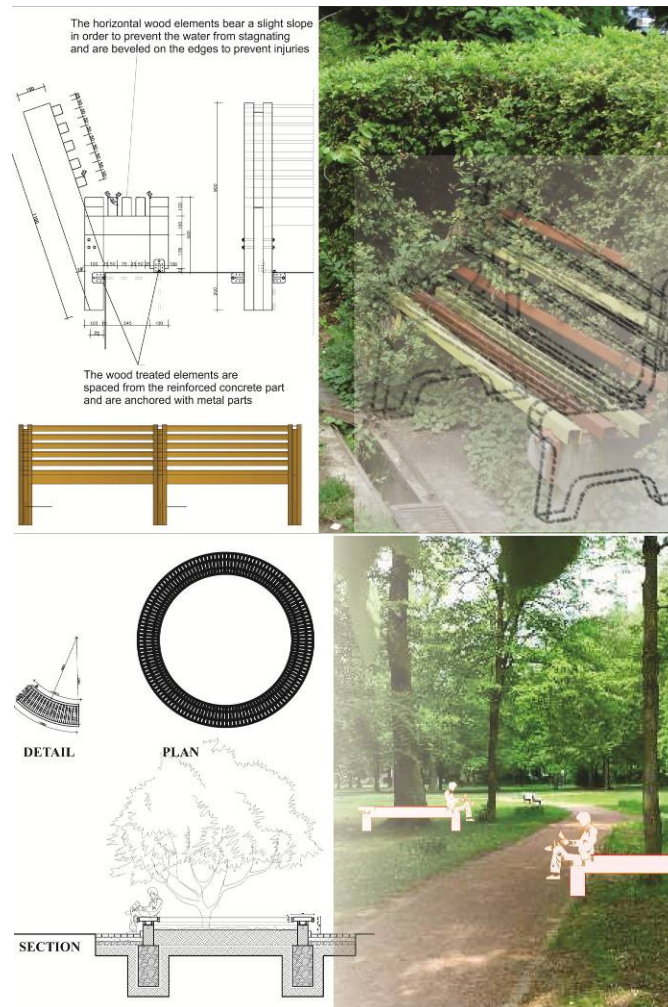


Fig. 2 - Proposed park benches - details

CONCLUSIONS

1. Unfortunately, the initially conceived project, presented in this article, did not receive founding, because the financiers considered that the focus had to be on training persons with mental health problems and secondary objectives were not part of the program. With a positive and creative attitude, the members of AREAS NGO managed to incorporate the ideas of this project in two different programs, one that focused on training the mentally ill in landscaping and gardening and the other involving volunteers to rehabilitate urban green spaces from the Citadel Park through engagement of the local community in educational environmental activities.

2. The training of the persons with mental health problems was done in partnership with the landscaping company Rompeisaj and involved courses for 14 people, prepared to work in gardening activities: some trainees practiced at the green house, others practiced in open-air works in the parks and the rest received their professional formation at a do-it-yourself goods hypermarket.

3. The activity of rehabilitation of the park engaged graduates and students from all high schools in the city, which under the guidance of an architect in the city hall and the environmental education officer planted propagating material. Location of trees, shrubs and flowers was projected theoretically (with models made on paper) and then placed in the field, designed as a harmonious whole between urban architecture and nature, intended to give new life to the public green space.

4. Although both projects proved successful, the authors hope that the program as it was first conceived could be implemented in the future with multiple benefits for the mentally ill as well as the community to which they belong.

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